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Materially Coming of Age in Modern Orthodox Judaism

Joshua Jacoves

Introduction: At the Shabbat Dinner Table

While sitting at a Shabbat table this October with the Goldberg family, little multicolored cups circled the room, each about three inches tall. Each member of the family took a specific glass, with David, the eldest child, reaching for the orange glass. David's mother, Leah, explained to me that these small, handblown glasses served as their family's Kiddush cups,¹ and each member had their specific glass. In the event a guest joined their Sabbath meal, they designated a light blue cup for the individual, the one I received that night. After the glasses made their rounds, Leah asked David why he didn't grab his "adult" Kiddush cup — an ornate silver, jewel encrusted, "traditional" style cup— which dwarfed the colored cups the rest of us had. Leah then explained that the silver cup was given to David soon after he made his Bar Mitzvah, denoting his transition into adulthood in the Jewish community. The silver cup



he was gifted nearly matched the one used in the shul *Figure 1: Multicolored Set of Kiddush Cups* during services and can easily be identified as a ritual cup due to its shiny, metallic material and particular shape - a flat base with a smooth, tapered handle extending to an open cup. David, in response to Leah's questioning, explained that he felt "more comfortable with my orange cup, it's the one that matches what my sister's use".² Although David was an "adult" by the standards of his community, he still felt more comfortable using the cup that tied him to his childhood.

This example from my fieldwork is one of many that challenges Van Gennep's theory on "Rites of Passage". Van Gennep argues that rites of coming of age serve to "change place of state, social position and age"³, as they are "all that of transition marked by (crossing) the limen."⁴ ⁵ Van Gennep here argues that all rites of passage are thresholds that one crosses, and by crossing through a rite, the actor serves to fully transition into another state or social position. He further explains, "transitions from group to group... come to be made up of a succession of stages marked by rites."⁶ Gennep emphasizes that these rites are illustrative of the transitions from one stage to the next. However, through material examples like



Figure 2: "Traditional" Style Kiddush Cup

David's Kiddush cups, I propose that in Modern Orthodox Judaism, these rites of passage are not simply thresholds that one must cross, but instead, they mark socially collective points of transition. Additionally, these materials used to perform coming of age rites (such as the Bar Mitzvah) serve to mark the start of this transition from one level of social status to another. Further, they also serve to hold a community's collective memory of these rites across time and space.

Coupled with this framework of thought for ritual coming of ages is the idea for the bifurcation of puberty into two categories, physiological and social. Physiological puberty refers to the physical changes that occur in most human bodies that lead to sexual maturity via the development of sexual organs that allow for reproduction.⁷ Social puberty refers to one's social status in the community as they come of age; that is, adults see them as equals. While physiological puberty is tied to age, social puberty occurs most often at times set by the community and can be tied to any number of behaviors. In parts of lowland Ireland, the first-born male child is not considered an adult until his father dies and he inherits land, resulting in a child undergoing

physiologic puberty much younger than social puberty in most cases.⁸ In the case of Orthodox Judaism, one socially becomes an ‘adult’ when they go through their Bar / Bat Mitzvah. This ritual usually happens right before one enters physiological puberty. Throughout this paper, materials like David’s Kiddush cup will illustrate how and why puberty is defined along these two axioms.

Returning to David’s Kiddush cup, it is important to emphasize the times where he does prefer to use his more ‘traditional’ cup. While publicly David returns to using his orange glass, privately, he is quite proud to use his ornate Bar Mitzvah cup. This split from private to public performance seems to then fall in line with David’s mention of comfortability. While going through puberty, it may be easier to ‘push’ the boundaries and expand his ritual life to include that of a cup akin to what his father and grandfather might use. Yet, in the public eye, David is still uncomfortable pushing the boundaries of his childhood expression and returns to an object of comfort – the orange glass. For an outsider, this set of monochromatic cups means very little. To David and his family, however, these cups hold the collective memory of years of Friday night dinners, including memories of not only the wine that filled them but the emotions, laughs, and power of the dinners that surrounded them. It only makes sense that David holds such a connection to the simple cup, as its power has grown over time by weekly ritual use. He is in a sense ‘fed’ the cup with memory and power for 13 years, and while the new cup might appear to be more traditional and ornate, its essence lacks the power the simple cup holds, by proxy of it being new, sterile, and void of time and memory.

Crossing the Boundary of Age: The Orange Kippah

David's story is not alone in showing material significance through the Bar Mitzvah. As soon as I stepped foot into the Shul, on the morning of Jonathan's Bar Mitzvah, I was handed a bright orange kippah⁹, adorned with a black and silver braided trim that ran across the bottom of the skull cap. I was then respectfully asked to replace the kippah I was currently wearing with the new one, so all the men in the Shul¹⁰ would be "visually here, representing and celebrating Jonathan in his Bar Mitzvah."¹¹ As everyone filed into the sanctuary, Jonathan stood proudly, adorning his bright orange



Figure 3: Jonathan's Orange Kippah

kippah and overlooking the crowd wearing ones that matched his. In the Shul, everyone usually wears the same colors: black, blue, and grey. These colors tie back to rabbinic explanations of modesty.¹² Young boys, on the other hand, are able to express themselves in more vivacious ways due to their age. They also wear kippot¹³ in all colors, or ones with images like firetrucks, Star Wars characters, or Disney princes. In speaking with Jonathan after his Bar Mitzvah, he explained why he chose this unique color: "I wanted something that crossed the line slightly from what was 'traditional' but would still be appropriate for shul."

As Jonathan alludes to, appropriateness in shul, was that of modest dress that does not bring too much attention to oneself. In choosing the bright orange color, Jonathan made a small statement of 'breaking out' of the mold of what is considered 'normal'. His Bar Mitzvah kippah draws the line between those worn by young children and by adults—standard in style and construction, but with a color that would be more prevalent on kids' kippot. In the four months after Jonathan's Bar Mitzvah, he wore his bright orange kippah daily, at every service. But with time, he switched to a more 'appropriate' kippah, as he put it, which had more 'traditional' colors. Similarly to David's kiddush cup, as Jonathan went through social puberty, he slowly transitioned from his ties

to childhood to those of adulthood. Jonathan, unlike David, marked this transition quite brightly, with the slow transition from children's kippah, to the transitory orange kippah, to finally, the dark blue and black kippah that adorned his head. Again, this is an example of how rites of passage that deal with coming of age are not simply gates from one age group to another, but the beginning of adolescents' social pubescent processes.

Wearing your Age: The Tallis Gadol

When walking into shul for any service or ritual, the garments worn by most men are an easy way to identify social standing in the community. Prior to their Bar Mitzvah, boys often wear a kippah and plain clothe and incorporate a small, fringed garment underneath.¹⁴ After their Bar Mitzvah, men adorn a long-woven shawl-like garment called the Tallis Gadol.¹⁵ This fringed article of clothing is always draped over one's shoulders and will sometimes cover one's head before a Shacharit¹⁶ service.¹⁷ The garment signifies the user is of adult status in the community and is accordingly asked to follow the Halakah¹⁸ commandment that requires covering oneself during prayer.

The Tallis Gadol itself is a construction of multiple meanings. In its simplest form, it is a fringed shawl woven out of wool or linen. It is primarily white, which indexes in one form the importance of the tallis. The object is seen as being one of a kind 'for the user, as they will often only own one, and are supposed to take great care of the nearly sacred object. Therefore, one can easily identify if someone's tallis is being improperly kept, as any dirt or stain will be visible on the stark background. Additionally, there are often decorative bands of color that wrap the tallis, often in black, blue, and gold. The blue, which extends down to a single blue thread in a fringe, symbolizes Judaism's history. To that end, prior to accurate time keeping, one knew the right time

to wear the tallis and pray by holding the fringes of the garment up to the sky; when the blue fringe was distinguishable from the others, they knew it was the correct time to pray.

The tzitzit¹⁹ are also utilized through ritual. During certain sequences of prayer, like the Amidah²⁰, the tzitzit are gathered by the user and passed between hands, or kissed, which is done in “affection for the mitzvah²¹.”²² This is materially significant because in Orthodox Judaism, other than the tzitzit, only ritual objects that are perceived as blessed are kissed. After touching the Torah, an individual kisses their hand or whatever garment touched the Torah, showing that there is some sacred part of the Torah that is transferred via touch, a concept akin to Frazer’s “law of contagion of magic.”²³ Therefore, the material importance of the tallis itself is clear, as the ritual one preforms whilst wearing it is only conducted under unique circumstances.

When it comes to visual markers of age in the Orthodox sense, the Tallis Gadol is chief among all symbols. Its presence on an individual directly categorizes a male individual as an adult. The tallis also carries major significance when one adorns themselves with it; they, by proxy of being considered an adult, are therefore seen as a ritually important member of the community. A representative example of the tallis’ transformative power is the Minyan. In order to perform a vast majority of these Orthodox services, a Minyan²⁴ must be present. By going through a Bar Mitzvah and adorning oneself with a tallis, the individual becomes eligible to be recognized as a Minyan. He is then fully actualized as a ritual equal, by proxy of his age and ability to now wear the ritual garment. In talking to David, a recent Bar Mitzvah, he noted that “I finally feel like an active participant in the weekly services. Before I simply came to shul, but now I can show up, be counted, and feel as though I am an equal participant. When I wear my Tallis I feel connected to those before me, and like every other adult guy in the shul.”²⁵ David’s connection is represented through his choice of Tallis, which mirrors the style and construction of his father – a white wool

garment with a solitary black stripe running down the side, adorned with white tassels. For David, his Tallis marks him as an adult in the community, but also creates a new personal sense of identity as he comes of age.

‘Too Cool For Shul’: The Landscape of the Hills

In addition to the constructed objects used in conjunction with and around the Bar Mitsvah, it is also important to analyze how the landscape of the exterior of the shul plays a role in explaining materially how individuals come of age. The exterior of the shul inhabits four major areas. The west side holds a giant parking lot, the eastward site contains a community garden, the northern side is a major highway, and the southern side contains a large, spacious field. People enter and exit through the southern side, so they interact with the field by proxy of interacting with the shul. The field itself consists of a mainly flat area, with a few trees spread throughout, but, among the flat is one hill, approximately 3-4 feet



Figure 4: The Shul Hill

sloped upwards with one tree on top. This hill, particularly, has engaged the imagination of children for as long as anyone can remember.

In talking to members who have been attending the shul since they themselves were children, Barbara mentioned, “ah yes, the Temple hill. I remember leaving Sabbath services early as a kid and playing capture the flag with my friends. We spent a lot of time up there, and now, it’s nice to see kids of this generation interacting in the same way as I once did.”²⁶ Here, Barbara refers to a common occurrence during the week. Saturday – the Sabbath – is when a vast majority of shul families attend services. The service runs from 10 am to roughly noon, but after, on nice days, everyone flocks outside to the hill to sit, catch up, and for children, play.

Interaction with and within this physical space breaks down into two major areas, which corresponds to one's age. Children, for the most part, interact with the landscape through a lens of play; they run, tag, roll, and construct fantastic games that keep them busy for hours. While this colorful world of imagination is experienced by the children, adults interact with mainly each other, usually relaxing on the lower field. The adults will pick blades of grass or gently extract a flower from the ground, but their interaction with the landscape is more reserved compared to the children. This chasm between the activities of the children and adults on the Shul lends room for the "Bar Mitzvah Boys."

The "Bar Mitzvah Boys" are a group of 12 to 13-year-old shul members. Ever since they turned 11, these boys have used tis name in their self-described "secret society". Their membership consists of their leader, David (13), Jonathan (13), Robert (12), and Jacob (12). These four have grown up together, living only one or two streets apart. When I started my fieldwork at the shul, they were all a year younger and on any given Saturday afternoon could be seen playing on the hill with their younger siblings or peers, interacting almost exclusively with other children, and ignoring their parents. But their interaction changed overnight once David, the eldest, became a Bar Mitzvah. Once David turned 13, he was an 'adult' in the eyes of his community, particularly his peers. His interaction with the landscape became that of his parents – sitting, talking, and ignoring the pleas of their younger siblings to join in play. In the eyes of David, he saw himself, "as an adult, and that means I should act like one."²⁷ With that, David as he comes of age, found a new peer group, namely the Shul adults, to resemble as he interacted with the landscape. In turn, the rest of the Bar Mitzvah Boys became the Bar Mitzvah Men, effectively ending the chapter of their old interactions with the field and its hill. Through this transition, from that of play to that of adult conversation, the Bar Mitzvah boys show how as they all slowly go through the process that

is social puberty, their interaction with the landscape itself changes dramatically over a short period of time.

Commodification of Conversion: Coming Into Age

While the phrase “coming of age” is most often used to describe pubescent social rites²⁸, another much less common form of “coming of age” can be seen through one’s conversion to Orthodox Judaism. Converts to the faith are extremely rare and Judaism does not actively recruit individuals, as Judaism is seen as being something one is “born with”. Often times, people are turned away. For example, Ella, a convert I frequently interviewed described her experience: “I was turned away by four Rabbis before I was even offered the chance to take classes.”²⁹ Similarly, Catherine, another convert mentioned, “For me, I had to go to three different shuls before I was accepted into a conversion class.”³⁰ The difficulty of conversion creates a so-called “coming of age rite of passage”. This rite is one of separation in leaving one’s prior religion, one of transition in changing the life ways of the individual from one religion to another, and one of joining, in being accepted into a new religion. This transition does not come easy and can be seen through the materials of conversion.

Often times, a convert starts off with a blank slate, and will lack the ritual objects needed for everyday life in Orthodox Judaism. As Ella put it, “it’s substantial (the cost), I had to go out and buy two sets of dishes³¹, mezzuzot³² for every door, a hanukkiah³³, candle sticks³⁴, a kiddush cup, a Challah knife³⁵, and more³⁶.” These objects for the most part all carry ritual and family significance. In a household of Jewish individuals, a



Figure 5: Set of Shabbat Candle Sticks

vast majority of these objects are passed down or purchased to mark coming of age rites: a Kiddush cup and candle sticks for one’s Bar Mitzvah, mezzuzot and dishes as housewarming gifts, and a

hanukkiyah as a family heirloom. But, as a convert, Ella had no tie to a Jewish family by birth, and thus had to seek out costly items to participate properly.

With this, a convert oftentimes has a direct association between the cost of these objects and their importance. Both Ella and Catherine have all of their Judaica proudly displayed throughout their house, as Catherine mentioned, “I feel as though by displaying these objects I can prove to everyone my Jewishness.”³⁷ Contrastingly, of the 12 households in the community containing no converts that I have visited, a majority of ritual items, especially ones only used on the Sabbath or other holidays (i.e., candle sticks, kiddush cups, hanukkiyah, and challah knives) are often stored out of sight. These objects then hold two separate meanings for a convert: one is a purely ritual item, and the other (and perhaps the more important meaning) is that of a direct material tie to a sense of Jewishness that they do not get through their families. By displaying these objects, one is in essence, ‘proving’ to whoever enters the household that they are in fact Jewish. Through these materials, conversion is marked quite similarly to that of more ‘traditional’ coming of age rites, like the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Clearly, these material objects index more than the crossing of a threshold, as they convey valuable social meanings and implications to both the individual and the broader community that they fall into.

Conclusion

Whether it be through David’s Kiddush cup, Jonathan’s orange kippah, the tallis Gadol, or the landscape itself, coming of age in an Orthodox Jewish setting can be told through its materials and the meanings users ascribe onto them. Through these examples, I have shown how one does not simply ‘come of age’ after going through a specific ritual, as Arnold Van Gennep argued, but instead that individuals begin a larger process of coming of age when they go through rituals like the Bar Mitzvah. Additionally, through Ella and Catherine’s stories it is evident that one’s ‘coming

of age' is not only through the lens of social / physiological puberty, but also through a cultural meaning of achieving a higher relative status in the community. By focusing on the stories and connections these objects hold, one can see how these rituals, interactions, and people themselves do not just shape the material world, but instead that the material world helps in fact, shape them. I would like to end with a quote from Jonathan, that he said after stepping down from the bimah³⁸ after the Musaf³⁹ service which highlights the impact that objects hold over his coming of age: "Before I stepped up to the bimah I didn't know what I would feel, but, after putting on my dad's tallis, and putting on my Bar Mitzvah kippah, I felt a sense of connection, like I know my dad did this same thing years ago, and my zadie⁴⁰ before that." Materials shape the process and rituals that create the meaning in life. Jonathan will continue to feel that connection every time he dons that tallis and continues to 'come of age'.

¹ Kiddush is the ritual blessing over wine done before a Sabbath meal. The wine is poured into specific cups and a blessing is said while holding the cup.

² Personal interview

³ Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 23.

⁴ Latin for “threshold”

⁵ Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 27.

⁶ Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 35.

⁷ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "puberty." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, August 28, 2019.

<https://www.britannica.com/science/puberty>.

⁸ Conrad Arensberg, *Family and Community in Ireland*, (Harvard University Press), 1930.

⁹ Hebrew, the skull cap worn by most Orthodox Jewish males

¹⁰ Hebrew for synagogue

¹¹ Personal interview

¹² Michael Lipka, “What different styles of head coverings say about Israeli Jewish men,” Pew Research Center, April 20, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/20/what-different-styles-of-head-coverings-say-about-israeli-jewish-men/>.

¹³ Hebrew, plural of kippah

¹⁴ The “Tallit Catan” or small tallis is the garment some Orthodox men wear under their clothes due to a biblical commandment

¹⁵ Hebrew for large tallis

¹⁶ Hebrew for morning prayer service

¹⁷ Some observant Orthodox Jews cover their heads during a section of the morning service

¹⁸ Hebrew for Jewish Law, or the set of commandments individuals are asked to follow

¹⁹ Hebrew for the fringes that hang off each corner of the tallis

²⁰ Hebrew for the “Great Prayer”. A long series of prayers recited at most synagogue services

²¹ Hebrew for a good deed done from religious duty

²² “Is There an Obligation to Kiss the Tzitzit? Responsa in a Moment: Vol. 13, No. 3,” The Schechter Institutes, April 5, 2019, <https://schechter.edu/is-there-an-obligation-to-kiss-the-tzitzit-responsa-in-a-moment-vol-13-no-3/>.

²³ James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, (Macmillan and Co.), 1890.

²⁴ Hebrew for the ten men required to start most Orthodox rituals and services

²⁵ Personal interview

²⁶ Personal interview

²⁷ Personal interview

²⁸ See Van Gennep, Victor Turner, Terrance Turner

²⁹ Personal Interview

³⁰ Personal Interview

³¹ To keep a Kosher house, Jews have two sets of dishes. One for ‘meat meals’, the other for ‘dairy meals’

³² Hebrew, the plural of ‘Mezzuzah’ small door adornments that are placed on each doorway in a Jewish home

³³ The nine-pronged menorah used on Hanukkah

³⁴ Two candle sticks are used during Shabbat and other holidays

³⁵ A specific knife is used to cut Challah bread on the Sabbath

³⁶ Personal interview

³⁷ Personal interview

³⁸ Hebrew for the raised platform service leaders conduct a service from

³⁹ Hebrew for the additional service conducted on the Sabbath morning

⁴⁰ Yiddish for Grandpa

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