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Breaking the Glass: New Tendencies in the Ritual Practice of Modern Jewish Orthodox and Alternative Weddings

Ana Prashizky

Sociological Institute for Community Studies, Bar-Ilan University, and Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Ashkelon Academic College

Abstract
This article explores changes in the traditional ritual of glass-breaking, which takes place at a wide range of orthodox and alternative wedding ceremonies in contemporary Israel. The study is based on anthropological “situational analysis” of religious symbols that examines meanings attached to changing contexts and situations of their carriers. Six general tendencies in the alteration of glass-breaking symbolism are considered: return to the roots; eradication; aesthetization; challenge to the patriarchal nature of the act; politicization, and translation into individual or universal meanings. These changes reflect multiple broader transformations in Israeli society, such as attempts to increase gender equality, cultural contest between religious and secular sectors of society, Jewish renewal movement, expanding individualization, protests from both sides of the political map, and nascent fundamentalism. Perhaps the most interesting finding of this research is that these social trends seem to affect all types of wedding rituals and all social groups included in this study, even if not in the same way or to the same extent. Performance of alternative ritual actions is taking place not only in new alternative weddings, but also in orthodox weddings.

Introduction
Breaking the glass became one of the pivotal features of a Jewish wedding (Goldberg, 2003). The traditional explanation of this custom is reminding the couple and guests of the Temple’s destruction, accompanied with the verse from the Psalms (137:5-6) recited by the groom: "If I forget You, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget [its dexterity]. Let my tongue cleave to my palate if I will not remember you; if I will not bring Jerusalem to mind during my greatest joy.” Then he steps on the glass to break it.

Like many other ritual symbols, glass-breaking has more than one fixed and unequivocal meaning. Its meaning has evolved over centuries, in different social contexts and among different social groups. Actually, ritual symbols can clearly be seen as condensed and multi-vocal (Turner, 1974; Douglas, 1970). As Goldberg (1998) mentioned in his article on glass-breaking, the huge popularity of this ritual reflects its ability to entail a variety of interpretations in terms of social processes, popular and rabbinical beliefs, and sexual allusions.

In modern Israeli society, Jewish life-cycle rituals are now characterized by a rich variety of styles and modes. Some of them challenge the Orthodox Jewish ritual and
give rise to a whole array of new, alternative forms of ritual. Contemporary Jewish weddings display a variety of ritual actions connected to glass-breaking, such as blowing up a balloon or breaking a clock; re-assembling the glass; breaking the glass by bride instead of groom; breaking together a fluorescent; playing the sound of breaking the glass; declamation using different phrases instead of the traditional verse from Psalms; breaking a second glass in memory of deportation from Gush Katif in Gaza accompanied by spreading some sand from Gush Katif or ash from the Tomb of Joseph on groom’s head.

All these examples indicate changes and innovations of the traditional custom. Thus the goal of this article is to examine the current dynamics of glass-breaking ritual at different types of orthodox and alternative wedding ceremonies in Israel and to identify central tendencies in this field. The article offers an anthropological “situational analysis” (Deshen, 1997a) of religious symbols reflecting changing situations among the people who carry them. The article will outline six general tendencies in renewal of the glass-breaking symbol: return to the roots, eradication, aesthetization, a challenge to the patriarchal nature of the act, politicization, and translation into individual or universal meanings, while emphasizing broader social tendencies of Israeli society.

Orthodox and alternative rituals in contemporary Israel

The pivotal lifecycle events such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death are accompanied by Jewish rites of passage: circumcision/zeved habat, bar/bat-mitzvah, wedding, and mourning ritual. Jewish life cycle rituals have been changing substantially over the centuries; current wedding rituals too comprise an array of various styles and modes. Some of these new, alternative forms of ritual challenge the monopoly of legal validity that the Orthodox Jewish wedding ritual has acquired since the establishment of the State. Because the State officially recognizes only the Jewish Orthodox ritual, every Jewish ritual deviating from the Orthodox form is denied recognition from the Rabbinate and Interior Ministry of Israel. These types of non-Orthodox rituals are presented in this study as “alternative” weddings that challenge and criticize the Orthodox pattern or alter some of its main components. Alternative wedding rituals in Israel is a complicated phenomena, which has at least six social sources: progressive Judaism as reformist movement; “return to the Jewish bookshelf” among secular Israelis also known as Jewish renewal movement; a civic tendency as it comes to expression in performance of civil marriages by “New Family” organization; New Age movements involved in performance of spiritual and mystical weddings; the kibbutz movement; and homo-lesbian movement. The article mainly examines the former three types of alternative weddings but also relates to the rest. Additional developments include varied innovations of traditional symbols in the framework of orthodox rituals.

Israeli popular media features a proliferation of books (Weiss-Goldman and Brandes, 1996; Filz, 1999; Ihnold, 2007) and web-sites2 that advertise and promote a freedom

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of choice between orthodox and alternative wedding rituals. They offer a variety of services by organizations and individuals who perform weddings. From time to time, radio and television programs are produced, and newspaper articles are written on this subject, arousing many controversies. In Israeli society wedding choices bring up dilemmas that reflect on wider social and political conflicts, such as relations between religion and the state, religious coercion and freedom of choice, collective and personal identity. Some of the major organizations and individuals performing alternative Jewish weddings in Israel are: Reformist and Conservative movements, “Institute of Jewish Secular Rites”; “Portal of Jewish Secular Rites”; secular Batei Midrash such as, “Oranim” and “Alma”; “New Family” organization; celebrities, such as Avri Gilad and Yair Lapid; writers, such as Beeri Zimmerman and Dorit Zilberman; Knesset and municipal officials, such as Shulamit Aloni and Ron Levental; and also shamans and kabbalists, such as Rabbi Ehud Ezrahi. They represent a variety of goals and features but the common denominator of all is creation and guidance of alternative weddings.

This discussion will focus on the customs and innovations in one component of the Jewish wedding ritual: breaking the glass, as performed in orthodox Hupa and alternative weddings by different groups of Israeli society.

**Anthropological analysis of symbols**

Symbols are vehicles for the transmission of meaning. According to semiotics, a symbol is related to its object only in consequence of a mental association, and depends upon a habit (Peirce, 1933). There is no direct natural and automatic relation between the two components of symbol: signifier – form of the word, phrase or object and the signified – mental concept and meaning connected to signifier. Thus, symbol is conventional or arbitrary (Peirce, 1933; de Saussure, 1960). It is standing for another and transmitting meaning by cultural convention, when one studies its meanings from cultural practice, such as ritual. From the beginnings of the discipline, one of the primary concerns of anthropologists was analysis of symbols within a ritual context (Malinowski, 1922; Radcliffe-Brown, 1964). While in the framework of functional structuralism scholars closely link symbols to social order, theorists, called symbolists and culturalists, emphasize instead the autonomy and language-like nature of symbols. They began to ask what ritual symbols mean and what their interpretations are (Bell, 1997).

According to famous symbolic-cultural anthropologist, Turner (1967), symbols are the smallest units of ritual and must be examined within the frame of it. Ritual symbols are condensate and “multi-vocal” representing a variety of meanings derived from different social contexts. For example, in rituals of African tribe Ndembu, three colors of black, red and white are very common, representing multiple meanings, such as the male and female spheres, social organization of a lineages, etc.

Douglas (1970) argued that, perception and interpretation of symbols and of ritualism, as heightened appreciation of symbolic action, is socially determined. The more social boundaries are defined, the more ritual is valued, and conversely, in loosely structured social groups with weak social boundaries symbolic performance has low

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http://www.reform.org.il/LifeCycle/marriage.htm
About free choice of marriage:
http://www.freemarriage.org.il
value. In the first case, the symbols are condensed; in the second one they become diffused. Good example of a diffused symbol is motto “Enough to occupation” of Israeli protest movement “Women in Black” (Helman and Rappaport, 1997). This movement has neither clear hierarchy nor an accepted platform; as a result its central symbol is minimalist and open to varied individual interpretations. Some Israeli anthropologists and sociologists explored different rituals accepted among secular public in relation to traditional Jewish symbols (Shoked and Deshen, 1977; Rubin, 1988; Deshen, 1997b; 1999; Abramovitch, 1993; Ashkenazi, 1993; Azaryahu, 2002; Don-Yehia and Liebman, 1984). Continuing the study of this phenomenon, this article contributes to understanding of interpretations and variations in Jewish traditional symbols between Israeli secular and religious sectors.

**Methodology**

This article is part of a larger research project (Prashizky, 2006) - a comparative study of orthodox and alternative wedding rituals in Israel. It is based on qualitative analysis of 43 semi-structured in-depth interviews with couples from different sectors of the Israeli society who were married according to Orthodox or alternative wedding rituals. The brides and grooms who were married in Orthodox rituals belong to the Vizhnits Hassidism group (3 interviews), modern-Orthodox group (11 interviews), and secular group (10 interviews). The couples who were wed in alternative rituals could be split into two groups: secular couples who got married in a Reform wedding ritual (9 interviews), and those who chose to be wed in a variety of other ways: through the “Institute of Jewish Secular Rites”\(^3\), “New Family” organization\(^4\), Israeli writer Dorit Zilberman’s group “Priest of Love”\(^5\), the pop-culture celebrity Avri Gilad\(^6\), and friends of the couple (10 interviews altogether). Additionally I also observed and taped tens of ritual weddings over a period of four years (2001-2004). The article conducts an anthropological “situational analysis” (Deshen, 1997a; 1997b; 1999; Goldberg, 1998; Shoked and Deshen, 1977) of religious symbols, examining symbols in relation to changing situations of the people who carry them. As Goldberg (2003:148) mentioned:

> ...today's anthropologists resist the notion that we can know the "true meaning" of this or any other custom. Rather, they claim, customs have various meanings for different members of a society or for the same members of that society on different occasions. The best an analyst can do is to specify the diverse situations in which a custom comes into play and record them in detail, along with the reactions to and comments upon the custom.

According to this approach, I will describe and analyze different ritual actions and their meanings, referring to the symbol of glass-breaking among different groups of Israeli society. The central research questions posed by the article are: What are the traditional meanings of the symbol? How and why some practitioners change the meaning that they attribute to the symbol? How do these religious changes relate to specific life situations? I will start from the interpretations of glass-breaking ritual in Jewish traditional sources and then turn to the changes taking place today in different

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\(^3\) [http://www.tekes.co.il](http://www.tekes.co.il)

\(^4\) [http://www.newfamily.org.il](http://www.newfamily.org.il)

\(^5\) [http://www.tkasim.org.il](http://www.tkasim.org.il)

\(^6\) [http://www.tkasim.org.il](http://www.tkasim.org.il)
orthodox and alternative weddings ceremonies, as most alternative rituals refer to the orthodox ritual even while changing its elements.

**Traditional symbolism of breaking the glass**

A scholar looking into the explanations of glass-breaking in Jewish traditional sources (religious laws of wedding ceremony) cannot help wondering about broad variance of interpretations. I will mention some of the more widely accepted meanings of the symbol as suggested by different Jewish commentators or as existing in the frame of different Jewish community’s customs. As was already said, today the most known interpretation of breaking the glass at Jewish weddings is as a sign of mourning for destroyed Temple and Jerusalem – “to bring Jerusalem to mind during my greatest joy” (Adler, 1994). This interpretation receives validity from the verse from Psalms (137:5): “If I forget You, O Jerusalem” that accompanies the performance of the breaking in wedding performances of many groups of Israeli society. There are various customs of that ritual act connected to the distinction between the two cups of wine drunk in the wedding ceremony, one in the *kiddushin* phase (engagement) and the other as part of the *nesuin* (marriage) phase. The first custom is Ashkenazi custom and is common at Haredy weddings, including breaking the cup of engagement phase, after the *Kiddushin*, during the fist part of *Hupa*. The second custom is Mizrahi custom and common both at secular and national-religious (modern-orthodox) sectors’ weddings, and includes breaking the glass of marriage phase at the end of the ceremony (but today the breaking is of another glass and not the one of the marriage phase). The custom to break the glass of engagement and not of marriage is explained by the fact that this last cup of wine finishes the act of uniting the married couple. It is not appropriate to destroy the cup symbolizing marriage connection between wife and husband, but the cup of temporary engagement stage (Sshiperling, 1999:411; Medini, 1960:2480). As Goldberg (1998; 2003) shows, rabbinical explanation of breaking the glass in terms of mourning for the Temple is relatively recent, as that interpretation of the custom is known only from the fourteenth century in Ashkenaz. For his argument, this rabbinical interpretation was supplying “Jewish veneer” or “judaizing” universal processes, which were symbolized by this ritual act. He claimed that breaking a glass as part of the wedding ceremony is not mentioned in early rabbinic literature, but when the practice became established, later authorities linked it to a Talmudic precedent. The Babylonian Talmud (Brahot: 30-31a) describes two events of glass-breaking that took place during wedding festivities, when groom’s father noticed that the rabbis were too merry, he brought a precious cup and broke it before them, making them sad. Both stories appear during a discussion of the appropriate attitude to be maintained during prayer, which cites a phrase from Psalms 2:11, "rejoice with trembling," indicating complex and contradictory emotions of joy and fear.

So until now we see that glass-breaking symbolizes sorrow for destroyed Temple and also the fear of man in this world – the fact that it is forbidden to be too merry and frivolous. Another interesting interpretation appears in commentaries of Maharam Rotenberg (Ben Zadok, 1974), who claimed that all wedding customs originated from the revelation on Mt. Sinai, when God “was married” to people of Israel. So breaking the glass during the wedding symbolizes breaking of Tables of the Covenant in Mt. Sinai. According to another explanation “as it is possible to fix broken glass, there is “repair” for destroyed Temple, and God will redeem people of Israel” (Zakai, 1988:59). This time breaking the glass symbolizes future redemption of Israel. One
ritual act at the same time symbolizes the sorrow for destroyed Temple and also the hope for its future reconstruction. Goldberg emphasized that in Jewish tradition, remembrance of the destroyed Temple is typically intertwined with the hope of its rebuilding. This combination of desolation and redemption appears in the interpretations given to the breaking-glass ritual.

Goldberg has noted another intriguing interpretation of the custom. He relies on Gladstein-Kestenberg analysis discussing the sexual symbolism of the glass-breaking. In Babylonian Talmud (Ketubbot: 16b) we found a practice of passing a cup of wine in front of a bride, and another example of passing a cask of wine before the bride, the cask’s shape hinting at the bride’s virginity: a closed cask for a virgin and an open one for a non-virgin. This action dramatizes a direct link between virginity and a vessel used at a wedding. According to Gladstein-Kestenberg, in the wedding ceremonies performed in fifteenth-century Germany used two different kinds of vessels to recite the blessing over wine. The association of wedding glass-breaking and the end of virginity also appears in other guises in Jewish tradition. In late medieval Central Europe, a wedding wine glass was thrown forcefully against a synagogue wall, leaving a red spot. The stain on the wall may visually hint at another aspect of marital union, proving the virginity of a bride by showing a blood-stained sheet.

Goldberg points out another meaning of the custom reflecting beliefs about demons. The purpose of the act was to drive away harmful demons from the new couple. This interpretation is found in Jewish sources, quoted in the book of “Customs and their Origins” (Shperling, 1999:412), asserting that the aim of breaking the glass at Hupa is protection against evil eye. There are plenty of additional traditional interpretations of the custom. Symbolism has a central place in the frame of many Jewish customs (Sperber, 1995). Various symbolic interpretations of glass smashing demonstrate dressing up the ritual act with symbolic meanings from sexual, national, folk and universal spheres.

It should be mentioned that in Zionist sector it is accepted to accompany this ritual act with sad song of “If I forget You, O Jerusalem” which is sang by all the public. Until recently it used to be the only melody which is, in Rabbi Melamed (2004) words, “dramatic” and “expresses the tremendous glory of the oath”, “like the hymn during which everyone is stand to attention and repeats his oath with tears in his eyes.” The new melody was written by Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach and is gentler and less dramatic, expresses yearning but doesn’t bring tears to participants eyes (Ibid.).

Modifications of glass-breaking at Jewish Orthodox and alternative weddings

1. Return to the roots
This tendency is often found in the Modern Orthodox sector, though it is not exclusive to it. In these weddings, the celebration starts immediately after the glass smashing, with merry music playing and all guest coming to the Hupa to greet the newlyweds, to hug and kiss them. Some interviewees perceived this situation as controversial because of the too rapid transition from sadness and mourning about the destroyed Temple to joy and celebration. As a result, some couples adopted different ritual solutions to keep an appropriate sad atmosphere during glass-breaking and immediately after it. In other words, they tried to preserve the original meaning of the
ritual or even to return to its lost roots (as they understand the original traditional interpretation of the custom) – remembering the destroyed Temple. Their “inventions” included, for example, accompaniment of this ritual act and its aftermath with sad melody or song, or breaking some valuable object like a clock instead of a simple, cheap glass. These changes intended to create a really sad and mourning atmosphere. The following quote is from the interview with a young bride from the Modern Orthodox sector:

After glass-breaking, in the end of the ceremony, the guests would usually applaud and the wedding party begins. It was important to me that it would not happen that way in my wedding, because just a moment before the groom said: “If I forget You, O Jerusalem.” We wanted to prevent a sudden eruption of joy and to make this moment more serious, so we asked the band to play a sad melody.

In this case, the need for setting a sad musical tone ensued from the feeling that the symbol fails to function effectively and does not send the right message. The melody acted as a supportive instrument for the symbolic message of glass-smashing.

The wedding of Yael and Erel Segal, the description of which was published on the Internet, presents a more radical case. The groom manages the website “Mekoriot baMizvot” (originality of mitzvoth) which offers explanations of original meanings of Jewish religious laws – mizvot, without rabbinical mediation. His special wedding, arranged in a public park without hiring of commercial services, can be defined as alternative. The music was played by guest musicians; the food was brought by guests too. Perhaps the most important were fundamental changes in the wedding ritual as such, including traditional benediction words, the Ktuba wordings and so on, in order to perform an original Jewish wedding as in days of Bible and Talmud. Among other changes, the groom did not break the glass but scattered ashes on his head. As is explained on the web-page about their wedding, he abandoned the breaking-glass custom because today it ceased to transmit the custom’s original meaning:

Mourning about Jerusalem: after the destruction of the First Temple, exiled Jews took a vow (Psalms, 137: 5-6) If I forget You, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget [its dexterity]. Let my tongue cleave to my palate if I will not remember you; if I will not bring Jerusalem to mind during my greatest joy. In Babylonian Talmud (Baba Batra: 60s) the verse: if I will not bring Jerusalem to mind was translated into smearing ashes on the groom’s forehead... In Babylonian Talmud (Brahot: 30-31a) Sages performed other mourning acts during weddings: Mar, son of Ravina, when he noticed that the rabbis acted too merry at his son’s wedding, brought out a very expensive cup and smashed it to make them sad. Thus, in Talmudic time there was no accepted custom of glass-breaking at weddings; Sages broke a dish unexpectedly in order to reduce joy and laughter, as it is forbidden to be too merry and frivolous in this world. Rambam (Laws of fast 5, 13) and the Shulchan Aruch (the Jewish legal code) mentioned the custom of smearing the ashes on forehead as Temple-memorizing custom, but did not mention the glass-breaking custom. Despite that, most Jewish communities (especially in Europe) adopted this custom. However, today’s glass-breaking is an aberration, and Rabbi

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7 http://www.tora.us.fm/erelsgl/xtuna/index.html
8 http://www.tora.us.fm/tryg/index.html
Ben-Zion Meir Hai Uziel (the first Sephardic chief rabbi of Israel) called it “a show-off aimed at proving the groom’s masculinity.” He opined: “This is no good at all, and opposite of the rule. In its present form, this custom is superficial and should be abolished”... At our times, the glass-breaking custom enhances the joy and joking instead of causing sadness, absolutely contrary to the original purpose of Talmudic Rabbis! ... In our wedding... we did not break the glass, but placed ashes on our heads and by this we brought Jerusalem to mind during our greatest joy, according to Talmudic interpretation. To be on the safe side, we brought a clock that could be broken if the guests became too joyful. But it didn’t happen and it wasn’t necessary to break anything.

Today the moment of glass-breaking became the pivot of joy during the Hupa ceremony, the one when the groom demonstrates his masculinity. In contrast, Erel Segal wanted to return to the original reason of the custom and to perform it as described in Talmud. He skipped the glass-breaking act and only placed ashes on his head. He also planned to use additional accessory – a clock, in order to transmit sad and mourning atmosphere by its breaking. It should be noted that it seems that Erel Segal is Baal Tshuva. In these two cases, playing a sad melody and breaking the clock are supposed to transmit the lost message of the symbol that is not functioning in appropriate way.

2. Eradication

An act of eradication means that the symbol is separated from the range of existential experiences to which it has been traditionally applied. This happens when the believer ceases to express belief in a particular ritual or stops to perform the ritual action that a living relationship with the symbol implies: the symbol thus loses relevance to experience (Deshe, 1997:346). The “return to the roots” phenomenon and eradication phenomenon are the two opposites. In the first case, the believer is performing or even abandoning a traditional custom out of a fundamentalist attitude, in order to keep what he thinks is the original meaning of the symbolic act. In the second case, the practitioner refrains from a ritual action or ceases to express belief via a particular act, or in other words, he simply abandons the symbol because of its lack of relevance. In some cases of eradication people continue to perform a traditional ritual without identifying themselves with it. Dan, who is secular but got married according to orthodox tradition, demonstrates the irrelevance of remembering Jerusalem:

I personally think that all the issue of the Temple destruction memory is obsolete. But because the religion insists on it, nothing can be done. I am wondering at the people who can cry about the destruction that happened two thousand years ago and they have no personal connection to. I can’t identify with it.

Dan expressed attitude of a secular citizen who is forced to participate in a religious ritual according to Israeli civil law. The typical argument of many secular couples is that Jerusalem city has been rebuilt and is now alive, so why mourn its earlier destruction? This argument shows the loss of the messianic belief. A similar case can be found in Deshe’s (1997:540) analysis of celebration of Passover Seder in Israeli secular sector: “For secular Israelis, the Jerusalem city is the modern city they know, and it seems ridiculous to proclaim hope which had been long realized.” Due to irrelevance of remembering Jerusalem’s destruction for many secular Israelis, some of
them simply change or abolish the custom at alternative weddings. Yet, cases of absolute eradication of the glass-breaking symbol at alternative weddings are relative rare. They are mostly found at certain New-Age style, civil and individual ceremonies – the ones without direct Judaic connection. Weddings with a stronger connection to Judaism, such as rituals in Reform or Jewish Renewal movements, glass-breaking remains the key symbol of Jewish weddings, appearing either in its traditional or new forms.

In this research, I found three examples of the eradication phenomenon in the frame of alternative weddings where there was no breaking of the glass or any object at all. Two cases are alternative weddings of Israeli secular couples: the first one was guided by Dorit Zilberman’s ”Priest of Love” and second one was arranged by the couple themselves, took place in the desert over three days, and was conducted by two close friends of the couple. Both couples said in the interview that they cannot identify with the Jewish religion generally and with the glass-breaking custom particularly. They claimed not to see the connection between that act and their wedding and interpret it as meaningless. Irit Rosenblum, the founder and chairperson of “New Family” organization, which organizes alternative civic marriages, also claimed that there is no glass-breaking during their weddings:

*We are not breaking the glass. And if we do, we are not saying: “If I forget You, O Jerusalem.” In my opinion it is embarrassing to include religious elements in the wedding ritual of people who choose not to be connected to religion.*

In the Jewish tradition, glass-smashing act symbolizes at least two important events of Jewish history: breaking the Tables of the Covenant during giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai and the Temple destruction. The concomitant verse orders to remember and not to forget and proclaims self-mutilation as penalty for forgetting. Thus, breaking the glass operates as a vector of Jewish collective memory. Couples choosing not to recite that verse and not to break the glass or any object at all, choose to forget. Metaphorically they erase Jewish collective memory carried in that ritual act. In this sense, the controversy around glass-breaking custom resonates with the struggle for the definition of Jewish identity and collective memory in contemporary Israel. The tradition-based collective memory lacks both meaning and significance for some secular groups in Israeli society. As a result, some alternative ritual performers try to distance themselves from traditional memory and initiate what can be called intentional “amnesia” (Ram, 1998). Ram claims, that cultural struggle is for a new definition of collective identity between two trends: post-Zionism that is civic (seeking for equality of rights, country for all citizens without discrimination of different races and nations, in the frame of Israel’s 1967 frontiers), universal and global, and between neo-Zionism which is particular, ethnical, Jewish, fundamentalist (Ram, 2006). Thus, the above-cited examples of eradication express the spirit of post-Zionism by enacting “amnesia” reflecting the irrelevance of Jewish national collective memory to some more radical secular sectors in Israel.

3. Aesthetization

Aesthetization is a direct consequence of the previous tendency of irrelevance of mourning for destroyed Temple in Jerusalem. Aestheticism caused change of religious ritual symbol to esthetic or entertaining sign indicating the end of the wedding ritual and the beginning of the party. Taking place at some types of alternative weddings, this is accomplished by playing the sound of breaking the glass, balloon explosion or
opening of champagne bottle, instead of actual glass-breaking. Yet, examples of esthetic innovations are also found in the scripts of some orthodox wedding rituals. During Jewish orthodox weddings, the glass-breaking symbol, in addition to its many religious loadings, serves as a sign indicating the end of the event’s ritual part. The difference between orthodox and alternative weddings is that in the latter anesthetization of glass-breaking comes to the fore as the dominant message, especially when fortified by the expanansion of this meaning. The following examples indicate the contested issues of tradition and innovation. A couple married in Reform ritual decided to break the glass without reciting the verse from Psalms:

*He: I really don’t want to say the verse: “If I forget You, O Jerusalem, let my right hand go numb.” I have no problem forgetting Jerusalem. I am no big fan of this city at all. But it is fun to break the glass. It is cool. I think this act has meaning: when the groom steps on the glass to break it people do not think of it as symbol of mourning for Jerusalem, even if it is an orthodox wedding. He breaks the glass and the guests shout “Mazal Tov!”... This act simply completesthe ritual.

*She: This act is kind of an accessory, just a way to close the ritual part.*

Iftah Shiloni, the director of Institute of Secular Rituals, gave similar explanation of the glass-breaking symbol:

*Todays Jerusalem became a religious symbol. Secular Jews do not visit Jerusalem. There is a religious war on-going in Jerusalem... I am actually glad that the Temple with a strong centralist control of the priests had been destroyed. I am not mourning for Temple destruction. But, regardless of that, glass-breaking is beautiful symbol. It symbolizes the end of the wedding ritual and the beginning of the party... So we choose this symbol. Others maybe will suggest other interpretations.*

These typical examples demonstrate how departure from traditional symbols of Jewish collective memory transforms glass-breaking into an aesthetic procedural accessory. Yet perhaps most vivid and telling examples of aesthetization process include a DJ playing the sound of glass-breaking or opening the bottle of champagne, instead of actual glass-breaking by groom at the end of the *Hupa*. This creative solution is common at alternative weddings performed by Dorit Zilberman. In these cases, a musical fragment or an entertaining trick has replaced the symbolic religious act.

The final example of aesthetization process is the most original one. At the wedding of secular partners Rina and Dan conducted in the frame of “New Family” organization, the bride blew up a balloon in the end of the wedding ritual. Rina explained her performance by her wish to replace the traditional act:

*We did not want to break the glass. So I said, let’s find something that makes noise. I suggested pinching a balloon and Dan agreed. We held it together and I blew it up. And when Irit Rosenblum said: “And now we are blowing up the world.” I punched the balloon and music played and everyone kissed and drank champagne.

-Why did you choose a balloon?

I wanted to produce a loud, sharp sound. In the Jewish tradition, glass-breaking is a sign of mourning for the destroyed Temple, but it is also making a boom. So I thought how to reconstruct the noise of breaking,
how to express the finale of the wedding ritual. I thought that blowing up of balloon will make enough noise.

As in the previous examples, the breaking is only an accessory. A condensed symbol (Douglas, 1970) of glass-breaking was replaced by a new, diffusive symbol. A religious symbol bearing various intense textual interpretations has been transformed into a thin symbol with a non-specific meaning given to individual interpretations without restrictions of tradition. Individual interpretation creates “minimalist and economizing symbols” (Helman and Rappaport, 1997). When commonly shared symbols are abolished or their interpretation becomes fluid and subjective, ritual events themselves become “customized” and thin. One can notice a clear physical and semantic contrast between glass-breaking and balloon-blowing. The glass is physically and semantically heavy and transmits religious, national, folk and sexual meanings, while the balloon is light and filled with air.

4. A challenge to the patriarchal nature of the act

The patriarchal character of the glass-breaking ritual act is apparent. A man, not a woman performs the act and recites the famous verse about Jerusalem. Thus, a role in transmitting of collective Jewish memory is granted only to man. Moreover, according to popular belief, this act tests groom’s masculinity: the ability to shatter the glass with one hit is interpreted as his "strength" and a sign of "virility." Despite the above-cited rabbinical criticism, many Israelis (including rabbis) adopted this popular interpretation. Thus, a rabbi officiating at a secular couple’s orthodox wedding said to the groom who failed to shatter the glass from the first and second hits: “Eyal, I am telling you as man to man, the third time you must succeed, do break the glass already.”

All parts of Jewish wedding express patriarchal order – the groom betroths the bride committed to him in Ktuba, places a ring on her finger, proclaims “You are consecrated to me,” and in the end also breaks the glass. Women and men of different sectors of Israeli society keep challenging in different ways the patriarchal nature of the act. In many alternative ceremonies, such as Reform and Jewish Renewal weddings, sometimes the bride breaks a second glass – or even the one the groom was supposed to break, or declares the verse along with or instead of the groom. Such ritual solutions are very common and aim to create equality between woman and man in the arena of public wedding. It is notable that voices of criticism are heard also in orthodox weddings of secular and even Modern Orthodox Israelis. In the following example the bride speaks about her wish to break a second glass along with the groom during Hupa and rabbi’s refusal to grant her wish. The couple belongs to a liberal segment of Modern Orthodox movement (not Yeshiva students).

At weddings in our sector, the groom recites “If I forget You, O Jerusalem” and breaks the glass. I think this custom is too patriarchal... The man steps on a glass to break it with force. I also want a connection with Jerusalem... I asked our rabbi if I can break the glass too. And rabbi told me that Jewish religious law does not prohibit this, that a problem is more social: people will not accept the fact that a woman performs this male act. He told me that bride’s shoes are gentler than man’s and that it is too bad if I will be hurt. So I abandoned the idea. We decided that the groom is not going to say the verse alone but all the guests will sing it together. So it will not be only a male declaration but more public and social one, that everyone can take part in it.

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This bride wanted to perform mutual and equal Kiddushin by betrothing the groom, but the rabbi denied her this action at public arena of Huppa. The arguments put forward by the rabbi to convince the bride not to break the glass are not religious but social and even stereotypical ones – it is inappropriate for such a gentle creature to perform a physical task with possible risk of damaging her shoe or foot. The problem was solved by public singing of the verse. Bride found this solution satisfying because it made possible for the women in the audience to join the declaration of loyalty to Jerusalem.

As a result of criticism, at many orthodox weddings of secular Jews groom and bride say together the traditional verse, after which the groom breaks the glass alone. Some rabbis permit mutual recital but not the mutual action of breaking. While criticism on glass-breaking custom is voiced regarding both orthodox and alternative weddings, usually the orthodox ritual performers are forced to suffice with cosmetic corrections, while alternative rituals performers are free to take more radical steps, such as breaking a second glass by the bride as a sign of gender equality or even her doing it instead of the groom. The critics refer to unequal distribution of power between men and women at Huppa and challenge patriarchal order by performing equal role rituals. Through those changes women acquire some masculine functions and appear as active actors. Generally, alternative wedding rituals often challenge the patriarchal shape of the Orthodoxy in a number of ways: women may act as alternative wedding ritual experts; the act of Kiddushin is performed in tandem; women pronounce the blessings and also function as witnesses. Additional improvements include financial premarital agreements and personalized forms of Ketubah, as well as changes in other customs deemed sexist and patriarchal, such as the breaking of the glass (Prashizky, 2006). Still, not once during my filed work I discovered that patriarchal stereotypes linger also in alternative wedding ceremonies, for instance when brides told me that they avoided hiring a woman as ritual expert and guide, or refrained from breaking a second glass themselves believing that these were not appropriate actions for women.

5. Politicization

Another important tendency is politicization of glass-breaking custom and using it as instrument for political protest. Below, I offer some critical analysis of glass-breaking as a tool for cultural control. In Israel, legal regulation of personal life by rabbinical authorities, including orthodox weddings, function as a central mechanism for the transmission of collective memory and Jewish identity established in the early years of the State by hegemonic Jewish majority in its own interest (Fogiel-Bijaouii, 2003). All Jew wishing to be legally married has to do it according to the Jewish orthodox ritual, including the custom of recalling Jerusalem destruction and breaking the glass. By this action the performers supposedly identify with the Jewish collective and pass collective memory to the next generation. At the same time, Jewish orthodox law generally and wedding rituals in particular is a system of norms and values that subordinate woman to her husband (Ibid.). As we have shown earlier, breaking the glass is a patriarchal custom stressing masculinity of the groom and symbolizing the end of bride’s virginity. These two issues have been challenged at alternative weddings arena.

The alternative wedding rituals field can be seen as arena of struggle for legitimization between different social camps. The main underlying reason for alternative rituals to challenge Orthodox ones is the inseparability of religion and State, rendering only religious weddings legally valid in Israel. Hence, choosing to go
through alternative channels is interpreted as a protest against the law that obligates people to have a religious marriage in order to be a legally married couple. An additional form of protest against the dominance of orthodox ritual is generated by individualization of symbols in alternative rituals. At the same time, this protest is typically a very private one, as many marrying couples wish to avoid ideological clashes and have their wedding as a purely personal event.

I was told about an interesting example of protest at a homo-lesbian wedding, when a couple of gays actually broke a cupboard, symbolizing going out of the closet, and pronounced: "If I forget You, O Tel-Aviv" instead of remembering Jerusalem. In my research of alternative weddings in Israel (Prashizky, 2006), I found a few other cases of replacing Jerusalem by Tel-Aviv. For example, at alternative wedding organized in the frame of Institute of Jewish Secular Rites, the seven blessing included remembering Tel-Aviv instead of Jerusalem:

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\text{May there soon be heard, in the streets of Tel-Aviv and in the port of Jaffa, the sound of joy and the sound of celebration, the voice of a bridegroom and the voice of a bride, the happy shouting of bridegrooms from their weddings and of young men from their feasts of song.}
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The groom Gaby, “a proud resident of Tel-Aviv,” initiated this change, because of his lack of identification with Jerusalem. A high religious symbol of Jerusalem was replaced by actual and material Tel-Aviv city. This replacement is not accidental; it expresses certain confrontation between the two cities: Jerusalem as a citadel of tradition and Judaism against Tel-Aviv as a stronghold of freedom, modernity and today’s Israeli lifestyles. In that sense, Jerusalem as the “high” symbolic place, which is much more than a specific location, is replaced by Tel-Aviv, a “minor” place close to everyday reality (Gurevitz and Eran, 1991).

Politicization of the glass-breaking custom is appearing not only in alternative weddings but also on right flank of political map – at weddings of Modern Orthodox youths, opponents to deportation of Jews from Gush-Katif in Gaza. Some couples from deported families from Gush-Katif use to design their wedding hall – table cloths and serviettes in orange, the color symbolizing resistance to the deportation. There are also two new customs emerging: to place ashes with the sand of Gush-Katif on groom’s head as a sign of remembering the deportation along with destruction of the Temple, and breaking a second glass in the Gush-Katif memory. As was reported in the news, at the wedding of granddaughter of Kiryat Arba’s rabbi Dov Lior, the groom broke a second glass in the memory of Gush-Katif deportation (Rahat, 2005). At the same time it can be seen as an actualization of existing symbolic meanings, enhancing and extending it as can happened throught out Jewish history.

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9 The traditional verse of the blessing is:
You are blessed, Lord our G-d, the sovereign or the world, who created joy and celebration, bridegroom and bride, rejoicing, jubilation, pleasure and delight, love and brotherhood, peace and friendship. May there soon be heard, Lord, our G-d, in the cities of Judea and in the streets of Jerusalem, the sound of joy and the sound of celebration, the voice of a bridegroom and the voice of a bride, the happy shouting of bridegrooms from their weddings and of young men from their feasts of song. You are blessed, Lord, who makes the bridegroom, and the bride rejoice together.

10 It is possible to see examples of these new customs in the website dedicated to Gush-Katif deportation:
6. Translation into individual, universal and other meanings

Berger (1979) claims that one of the central characteristics of modernity is a near-inconceivable expansion of choice in human life. Modern individual lives in a world where picking and choosing become an imperative. According to Berger, modern consciousness is secularized and adopts a strategy of translation, whereby religious references to other worlds are either eliminated or translated into terms referring to this world, the super-empirical is translated into the empirical, the more-than-human into the human (Ibid.: 112). Actually, man can choose a translation of religious symbols appropriate to him personally: individual, universal, or other meaning.

One finds expressions of translation procedure among performers of orthodox and alternative rituals from the secular and even the religious sector. Sometimes, secular couples performing orthodox weddings found it difficult to identify with traditional meaning of the glass-breaking custom and privately translated the symbol to another, more comfortable meaning without change of the accompanying verse. In alternative weddings, performers, who do not identify with the traditional meaning, do change the accompanying words, and by that publicly anchor the new meaning of the symbol. Common to most cases of translation is keeping the traditional glass-breaking act along with attempts to give it a new interpretation. First, I will cite examples from orthodox weddings of secular couples, when the traditional act is privately translated to a new meaning that is closer to their everyday life:

-What do you think about breaking the glass?

She: It is meaningful from Zionist and not from religious side. That Jerusalem is very important city, it is part of the Land of Israel, is part of our home. It refers to Temple destruction, but we did not think about it. I think that we should remember Jerusalem because it is the eternal capital of our country.

He: For us it is not connected to the religious story of the Temple destruction.

This case demonstrates the translation of the Jewish religious symbol to the Zionist meaning that is very common in Israel. Moreover, most sovereign rituals and symbols of the State of Israel are rooted in the Jewish tradition, their basic source and model (Don-Yehia and Liebman, 1984; Azaryahu, 2002). By changing the forms and contents of traditional symbols, they were fitted to the needs of a modern secular state and served as building block of its rituals and holidays.

An additional example is taken from the interview with Daniela, who was born in Jerusalem, left it later and moved to the north of Israel. She interprets the symbol as part of her personal life story and thus meaningful to her:

I had to leave Jerusalem and it is still painful. For me Jerusalem is very important! ...It is not meaningless for me that after two thousand years of exile Jews live in Jerusalem. This is a special and holy place. When we sang together with the groom: “If I forget You, O Jerusalem” before he broke the glass, I felt it in my heart. When I was standing in Northern Israel, and Jerusalem came to my Hupa, it was important to me.

This speaker did not express her lacking identification with the symbol, but rather added her individual perspective to the traditional meaning. Via translation, these performers turned the religious symbol of the high place –“Jerusalem of heavens” – to a material place, the real city of Jerusalem that is central both in Zionist ideology and
in their individual life story. These two examples demonstrate a regular process of re-interpretation occurring all the time during ritual communication, especially at alternative weddings. But sometimes alternative meaning is not found. The first quote is from the interview with Dikla, who chose an alternative ritual guided by her friend. Her decision to perform an alternative wedding was reached after studying in Alma College for Hebrew culture. She spoke of complete absence of identification with the traditional memory of the Temple and looking for new meanings:

_The Jerusalem is a real, existing city and I definitely do not aspire to the Temple’s reconstruction. It is very sad what had happened to the Jews in the past...and may be it is a good idea to remember sad things during moments of joy... Maybe I will think of something sad that I want to remember at that moment: violence in the Middle East or hunger in Africa, but something relevant...Actually hunger in Africa is very sad but not so relevant. Maybe “Workers of all the world unite!”_

At the end, Dikla could not think of a new and relevant wording, and in the wedding the groom broke the glass silently. This, the traditional meaning was preserved, because of lacking public declaration of another meaning. An example of actual translation appears in the case of reformist rabbi Mira Raz, who proposed the new universal meaning of the symbol:

_I am saying to the public at weddings that once we broke a glass for reminding of Jerusalem Temple’s destruction. Today we have the country and Jerusalem city has been built up... So I suggest other meaning, by the term Yerushalem – the perfect city. It is superior Jerusalem... Superior Jerusalem symbolizes the universal unity, the ability of people to unite their souls. As it is in the whole society, so it is in a personal relationship...If we forget our ability to unite in a personal or social relationship, we will loose our power and our life.... They say to me: we do not want to mention Jerusalem, leave us alone. But I explain this interpretation and they accept it._

Rabbi Mira actually translated the meaning of the glass-breaking to a universal one. She uses the ancient name of Jerusalem – _Yerushalem_ (the second part of the world _shalem_ literally means “whole” or “harmonious”). At the weddings she guides, she adds this explanation before the groom (or by groom and bride together) actually breaks the glass. A couple that married with her participation, clearly explained the significance of this translation:

_-The Temple destruction seems relevant to you?_
_He: No. It wasn’t in our wedding. Now I am feeling that it is not relevant to us._
_She: Mira gives it another interpretation...That Jerusalem is like a dream, a dream of how the world should be, how the house should be. For a non-religious person, Jerusalem is a regular city with houses, roads, Herzl Avenue, and the Western Wall. A link between Jerusalem and wedding couple seems unclear. When you say “Jerusalem” without explanation, many people say – how is it connected to us? It is enough to add just one new sentence that explains the connection. And this is what I like in Reformists and Conservatives: they explain everything and do not assume that you understand by yourself, just because you were born Jewish. They take the time to explain._
These quotes point to the advantage of Progressive Judaism movement, as it translates traditional symbols and makes them relevant to secular sector. Other example of creative translation is found at another Reform wedding of Aliel and Pnina by rabbi Naama Kelman. At this wedding, one glass was broken in the traditional way, with the verse: “If I forget You, O Jerusalem.” Another glass, which had been divided into two parts, was put together with recital of verses from Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) (3, 1-8) and the following explanation:

_Everything has an appointed season, and there is a time for every matter under sun. A time to give birth and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot that which is planted. A time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break and a time to build. A time to weep and a time to laugh; a time of wailing and a time of dancing... A time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace._

_This moment of home formation is creation of a whole from fragments, which are looking for its repair. Let the shattering of one glass be evidence of broken pieces around and putting together of another broken glass - the blessing of the repair act, which we are starting now._

In this case, the new act of the second glass reconstruction and its interpretation in the the spirit of Kabala by using terms of breaking and repair, was added to the traditional act. This and the previous example, together demonstrate using of Jewish sources and Jewish spirituality, such as the ancient name of Jerusalem, verses from Kohelet, and terms from Kabala to infuse the symbol with the new content. We conclude, that translation of the traditional symbol, or addition of a new meaning to the existing ones, are not necessarily a result of secularism, as Berger claimed, but can reflect the search for an alternative Jewish spirituality. Examples of translation to personal meanings include such phrases accompanying the glass-breaking: “If I forget You I will not be me” or “Hopefully, we will turn the breaking into growth and creation” (Dabah, 2006) referring to the personal relationship of a wedded couple. It should be mentioned that in orthodox weddings can be found a custom of remembering close relatives who passed away as part of embracing a personal memory on collective arena. The latter example is from the alternative wedding of Shirly and Noam, who were married with guiding of Israeli actor and TV show host Avri Gilad. In the end of the wedding, the groom broke a plate instead of a glass. Avri Gilad accompanied the act by humoristic explanation, which was in line with the general merry spirit of the wedding:

_Instead of a glass we will break a plate, which is much more joyful, to mark the end to bachelorhood with its non-matching plates. It is a hint for the guests, who did not buy a present yet, that a new service will be accepted gratefully._

According to this interpretation, the breaking of the plate symbolizes the end of bachelorhood and beginning of the new social connection - married life, the breaking and making of social ties, which is also symbolized also by breaking the glass (Goldberg, 2003:153). In Jewish rites of passage such as birth, circumcision, marriage and mourning, breaking the glass and tearing the dress symbolize the cutting of from previous stage and irreversibility of these changes (Rubin, 1997:166). In this sense,  

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11 I am grateful to Naama Kelman for providing me this example and for emphasizing the tendency of search for alternative Jewish spirituality.
Avri Gilad did not created a really new symbol but only an innovative variation of the traditional one, which transmits the meaning of breaking and making of social ties.

**Summary**

The changes occurring in the glass-breaking custom highlight many broader transformations in Israeli society, such as changes in women’s status, the struggle between religious and secular sectors (and Jewish renewal movement connected to it), increased individualization, political protests from the left and right camps, and also fundamentalism and return to the original roots of religion. Perhaps the most interesting finding of this research is that these social trends seem to affect all types of wedding rituals and are found in almost all social groups included in this study, even if not in the same way or to the same extent. Without doubt these tendencies are clearest and strongest in the context of “alternative” wedding rituals. Performance of alternative ritual actions is taking place not only in new alternative weddings, but also in orthodox weddings (such as breaking the second glass in memory of deportation from Gush-Katif). They reflect on dynamism, creativity, and modernization of traditional symbols that typify the ritual performances in a modern society. Symbolic changes seen above, such as replacement of the traditional symbol by a new one (clock or balloon instead of glass, breaking by woman instead of man) or infusing it with a new interpretation, need to be accompanied in most cases by “grammatical speech,” using the words of Habermas (1987). Of course rituals can be performed without special explanations, but only in groups whose members know and share most of their meanings. Alternatively, the participants can draw on the assumption that the ritual symbol has an intense meaning implied by tradition. In this case, the ritual action actually becomes “symbolically mediated interaction,” or else it turns into “rational communication” whose basic medium is language and linguistic expressions. Verbal description of symbol’s meaning is superfluous and inadequate in the frame of group which members share its significance (Hoffman, 1988:20). So, in Haredi weddings, the groom breaks the glass without reciting the verse from Psalms or any other explanation: it is unnecessary because the whole spectrum of traditional multi-vocal symbolism inherent to the ritual is self-evident as a part of community agreement. Yet, when traditional symbolism of a wedding ritual is loosing ground, the language and rational explanations step forward as the principal tools of communication. This is why many orthodox rabbis accompany the performance of weddings in the secular sector by detailed explanations of each symbolic component of the ritual and its traditional meanings. In alternative rituals, this process is even more prominent: these events present an opportunity for rational communication of both old and novel symbols. Sometimes instead of canonical blessings, the performers tell “simple” stories about themselves and use understandable everyday language, trying to avoid traditional symbols with vague meanings or replace them by others that are more up-to-date and hence meaningful (Prashizky, forthcoming).
References


(Hebrew).


Bride and groom preparing to break the glasses.
Photo courtesy of Portal of Jewish Secular Rites - http://www.tkasim.org.il

Photo by Michal Kenler, Two brides breaking two glasses at alternative lesbian wedding performed by Sigal Dabah.
Photo courtesy of Portal of Jewish Secular Rites - http://www.tkasim.org.il
Bride betroths the groom at alternative wedding.

Alternative wedding performed by Nardy Grün.
Photo courtesy of Portal of Jewish Secular Rites - http://www.tkasim.org.il