

Returning to the Religion

My Ph.D. dissertation reverberate on the following questions: What kind of Jewish groups, communities are in present in Hungary? What conditions led to the reverting of Jewish traditions in Hungary? What are the steps of optional Jewish rebuilt identity, the ways of returning?

Based on a controversial but significantly not representative survey of ELTE Sociological Ethnic Minority Institute, 20 per cent of Jews born between 1966-1979 seem to be part of a so called “re-turners” group of which ones 10 per cent are strictly religious. The survey demonstrates that the younger generation is more committed to the positive aspects of Judaism and devoutness of Jewish lifestyle compared to those generations experiencing the *Soah* and born after WW II (Kovács 2002:25). The main characteristic of the returnees is, that they keep and celebrate more traditional elements of the Jewish religion than their parents did.

However, my research shows that 100 per cent of the young orthodox generation definitely is *baal teshuva*, namely re-turner (and converted, a category I do not focus on here). Baal teshuva in Hebrew means returnee, or a “born again Jew”. A person who learns his forgotten original traditions starts living according to the Jewish law, the *háláchá*.

My fieldwork was not limited to one synagogue or to a single community but was spread across different synagogues connected to different Jewish directions. These synagogue communities, although they strongly interfere with each other, have diverse opinions about the baal teshuva status, and about whom they consider a baal teshuva.

Stating that religious young Jewish generations in Hungary stand repented and converted people (the last one not covered in this paper), I dare to state that traditional religious lifestyle is chosen as a temporarily lifestyle whereby it is not the question anymore to be born in it.

My studies and interviews brought me to the conclusion that background readings, definitions and explanations focusing on baal teshuvras in Israel and the USA can hardly or not at all be used to explain the Hungarian baal teshuva phenomenon. This is caused not only by historic preliminaries but also by contemporary Jewish social structure, infrastructure and ways of education. In addition, descents in most cases seem to be obscure or mingled and not secondary for Jewish rights at all, so baal teshuva status is problematic in many ways. That is why a *halakhic* mother side heritage Jewish origin should be the only category I made since I have not considered conversion to Judaism but reversion to it. The offspring of mixed families, in which the father side heritage is emphatic, are to *convert* to the religion based on Jewish traditions, are not entitled as baal teshuva. Altered interpretation and practice of Jewish tradition

make baal teshuva status even more problematic, in other words, it is doubtful to call baal teshuva in the same way the ones keeping kashrus and Sabbath and the ones keeping symbolically and occasionally kosher and celebrating only Friday evenings. I do not mean to assert that baal teshuva groups can be differentiated or exactly defined according to being religious or less religious, but I indicated and considered these aspects via the interviews and through my interpretations

It seemed that interviews, baal teshuva macro-structures, terminology, logic of inner-motivation, rational technique revolved around the pattern of romance jargon, rhetoric and motive building structure.

The act of baal teshuva can be perceived as ethnic returning relating to the first step of identification. Religious and ethnic returning could seldom be separated or identified. Since the returnee Baal teshuva status requires an intellectual effort of re-learning the Jewish tradition, the intellectual gesture of re-learning involves a more reflective, critical attitude towards the tradition compared with those who are automatically socialized in this knowledge in their families.

This critical attitude influences traditional interpretations of religious institutions calling themselves authentic. Some institutions try to seclude themselves of exterior confrontation, which consists of raised questions by baal teshuvas. These questions reflect upon answers, customs taken for granted in religious communities and reorganize the formal bequeathing of traditional Jewish institutions, which are to operate in renewed framework. Religious schools and their institutions, such as modern orthodoxy, often include the outside perspective (from where the baal teshuvas are coming from) in their principles, and a modus vivendi which relieve the obstacles dominating in Jewish Diasporas between isolated Jews and the civil lifestyle; like this they foreshadow that both ways of life can be viable. The policy of returners who created modern orthodoxy, suggests that the tradition-passing- discontinuity can be bridged by studying, but on the other hand also reinforces the idea that (as opposed to the traditional, halakhic, essentialist concept of being born in a tradition) the new observant religious Jewish identity is more based on free decision.