

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

**Identity Exploration among Religious  
"Returners" and "Leavers" During  
Emerging Adulthood**

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the identity exploration of non-religious Jews adopting religious observance (“**hozrim betshuva**”) and religious Jews leaving their way of life for secularism (“**yotzim beshe’ela**”), when the transformation takes place during Emerging Adulthood. Specifically, this study focuses on the dissolution and reconstruction of identity amongst young adults who experienced changing community affiliation - from the secular to the religious and vice versa. The study pays special attention to the issues of exploration, gender differences and the way the different cultures of each community influence the process. In recent years there has been increased study of how changes in the Western world have led to the reality that teens experience a longer transformation period to adulthood than they have in the past (Côté, 2000; Arnett, 2000). This process is a critical phase in the lives of young adults, in which they are faced with making major life decisions (Arnett, 2004). A major feature of this process is exploration which is considered the central mechanism in the formation of identity (Flum & Kaplan, 2006).

The purpose of this study was to deepen understanding of identity processes experienced by hozrim betshuva and yotzim beshe’ela, with special focus on identity exploration, community influence and gender differences. The main question raised is whether the two ‘paths’ experienced by young adults undergoing a religious change - from a religious to a secular life and vice versa - are similar to each other or are each a specific phenomenon exclusive to each group. An additional question seeks to determine the different areas and forms of exploration as pertaining to young adult hozrim betshuva and yotzim beshe’ela. The third question examined the different characteristics of the “home” and target” communities and how they influence the process of exploration during religious change. We sought to understand whether differences between hozrim

beteshuvah and yotzim beshe'ela as well as differences between genders exist. An in-depth understanding of the process could shed light on the research topic and on processes experienced by others undergoing an identity change such as changes related to gender orientation or due to immigration.

This study focuses on the Jewish population in Israel, specifically Modern-orthodox young adults, assuming that the inherent stressors that exist between modernism and traditionalism will stimulate conflict and encourage exploration. Israel is considered a Western-modern country, with unique characteristics in relation to integrated cultures and diversity in religious affiliation. These characteristics are expected to influence the exploration process (Cinamon, Rich & Gross-Spector, 2012), specifically pertaining to young adults undergoing religious change. These young adults, who are in the height of self-exploration, are forced to contend with the differences in cultural norms as they exist between communities.

An additional area of our study focuses on gender differences and their effect on the exploration process. Most of the existing studies have found significant differences between the genders during emerging adulthood and in the exploration process (ex. Cinamon, Rich & Gross-Spector, 2012; Mackinnon & Marcia, 2002). However, the studies do not present a unified perspective as to the essence of these differences. The complexity and inconsistency of the findings takes on additional significance as examined in relation to hozrim beteshuvah and yotzim beshe'ela, where the individual transfers from one culture to another, each of which adheres to different value systems and norms in relation to gender role (Doron, 2013).

Sixteen emerging adult Jews participated in the study: four male and four female hozrim beteshuvah and four male and four female yotzim beshe'ela. Data collection was achieved by means of in-depth semi-structured interviews, which were analyzed based on the Narrative Research approach (Creswell, 2003) and influenced by Consensual Qualitative Research (Hill et al., 2005; Rich & Cinamon, 2007). Analysis of findings revealed 4 major issues relevant to the main topics of this study: Way of dress as a symbol of identity; A sense of disappointment with the 'new world'; Relations with the peer group; Rebellion as an integral part of the religious change process.

We found that differences related to way of dress as a symbol of identity were mainly evident among women. Among hozrot beteshuvah considerations regarding way of dress were mainly personal and internal, while among yotzot beshe'ela they were mostly external and influenced by societal factors. One explanation to this might lie in the characteristics of the community; in the religious sector there are clear and relatively exacting rules in regards to the clothing style of women, while less so for men. Another explanation is that women place greater importance on their appearance as an expression and actualization of their identity, as opposed to their male counterparts (Helma, 2012; Guy and Banim, 2000).

An additional issue was a sense of disappointment with the 'new world'. The majority of women expressed some disappointment when acclimating into their new community; female yotzot beshe'ela expressed disappointment with the value system and other characteristics inherent to the secular world. They also displayed a high level of exploration. It is possible that the intensity of the exploration is related to the level of disappointment, since young adults with a high level of

exploration experienced greater disappointment. Among female hozrot betshuvah, the disappointment was found to stem from specific people in the religious community who did not live according to desired standards of religion. These women experienced middle to low levels of exploration. They also expressed feelings of lack of belonging upon acclimation to the new community, which also may be an important factor influencing feelings of disappointment. Conversely the men, with the exception of one, did not express disappointment with their new world. This possibly implies that they have not experienced disappointment, or simply that their satisfaction was less of a significant issue for them. Moreover, it may be that the fact that the interviewer was a woman had a different influence on men and women so that men were reluctant to express disappointment. Another explanation relates to gender personality differences, specifically, men's tendency to experience their feelings less intensely in comparison to women (Fujita, Diener & Sandvik, 1991).

The third phenomenon deals with the relationship with the peer group, and the role it plays during religious change. Among hozrim beteshuvah the peer group did not change, while among yotzim beshe'ela the peer group changed or expanded. Among hozrim betshuvah the process of self-exploration was dependent on the amount of peer support they received; the greater the support the more intense the exploration was found to be. Among yotzim beshe'ela no consistency was found in regards to the intensity of the exploration, raising the possibility that other factors played a greater role. Our perception is that those young adults who changed religious status yet maintained their prior relationships wish to keep the divide between the two worlds to a minimum and strive for a feeling of connection with both worlds. Conversely, those who disconnect from the relationships of their youth appear to strive to create a clear separation between the two worlds.

This motivation seems to be influenced by factors relating to the individual as well as the characteristics of the communities.

The fourth phenomenon focuses on female *yotzot beshe'ela*, where we found that the process was characterized by rebellion and for the most part an intense level of exploration. This was in contrast to men who described their process as gradual and less intense. One explanation to this gender difference is that the young women perceive that the religious community's expectations are severe and inflexible. Gradual leaving of the religious community may cause great discomfort over a long period. It may be that the expression of rebellion afforded them the opportunity to explore the new world, which up until then was deemed impossible to them.

The findings show that the cultural norms of both the "home" and "target" communities influence the process experienced by the emerging adults who undergo religious change. This can be compared to the process experienced by immigrants, who are forced to reestablish their identity and contend with a new system of values and norms (Bendes, Yaakov; Friedman 2000). It is our belief that examination of cultural norms as existing within each community may shed light and clarify the exploration of young adults experiencing religious change, in addition to other factors.

The findings of the study present a complex picture in regards to the parallelism experienced by young adults undergoing religious change, mainly during the exploration process. It seems that in regards to gender, there are within gender similarities in the process of changing from a religious to a secular community, and vice versa; while other factors that characterize the process are exclusive to each group. Additionally, there are some factors in which there seems to be similarity between the groups, yet upon deeper examination we discover differences between the groups.

These findings have theoretical and research implications regarding the process of undergoing religious change, especially to the Jewish population in Israel. These findings may also be significant for populations that have experienced identity change such as immigrants and they highlight the importance of examining each group individually. These issues are especially relevant for educators, religious leaders and parents accompanying youngsters during or at the brink of emerging adulthood. An appreciation and awareness of the process as experienced by these young adults may serve to assist them in guiding the subjects in decision making and effective and thorough exploration.