

Abstract

The present research deals with the role identity of rabbi-educator in the hesder yeshiva (Israeli program that combines religious studies with military service), from the perspective of Erikson's theory of development.

Erikson (1987) held that a person is not born with a developed identity, but rather develops it over one's life. The process of identity development occurs throughout a lifetime, but the critical stage in this process, according to his theory, is adolescence. At this stage, the individual stands at a critical crossroads that demands development of his or her identity. Erikson also presented the challenge that faces individuals during middle adulthood, generativity, or the ability to ensure the existence and successful development of the next generation. Schachter (2018) commented that these two stages of development presented by Erikson – identity and generativity – are embedded in the intergenerational model and are based on interpersonal and intergenerational interaction. Identity does not develop on its own within the person, but rather in interaction with the older (previous) generation. Moreover, the generativity of adults depends on the development and the developmental needs of the young person from the next generation. Therefore, it has been suggested that those involved actively in shaping and mediating the identity of individuals should be called "identity agents." This group shows interest in the younger generation and sets goals as part of its partnership in it.

The *hesder yeshivas* were established in the late 1950s by members of the religious Zionist movement in response to the need for spiritual development and the duty to study Torah along with the requirement to take part in fulfilling the military needs of the state. The purpose of the yeshivas is to train the future generation of Torah students to leave the yeshiva and integrate into society while maintaining a full religious lifestyle. The yeshiva is a total educational institution, which addresses all the needs – material and spiritual – of the students, and the people charged with shaping their personal and religious identity are the rabbi-educators.

For the purpose of the present research, the research participants were rabbi-educators in *hesder yeshivas*. This choice was based on their potential to serve as identity agents, by virtue of their job of helping shape the religious identity of the younger generation, and their unique role identity. Moreover, these yeshiva students are at a critical stage of life (age 19-23) in terms of identity development, known as "emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 2007). At this stage, individuals make important choices that will influence their future lives. To further understand the perceived role of the rabbi-educators, and to understand the process of identity development of which they are part, 12 in-depth interviews were conducted. The interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. Different themes emerged that could help shed light on the perception of this role.

The results of the analysis indicate that the rabbi-educators saw their role as comprised of three main characteristics: ongoing and long-term influence, description of the role as a "pastime" that became a profession, and the religious, value-oriented aspect of this profession. In addition, the rabbi-educators described the yeshiva, which is a total educational institution, in three ways: as paradise, a bubble, and a cave, reflecting their view of the unique atmosphere of the yeshivas, the challenges they present, and concern about the spiritual condition of its graduate. In addition, the rabbi-educators described three generative dilemmas regarding the process of identity development of which they were part. The first was the dilemma between innovation or conservation, that is, the tension between the desire to preserve the method of identity education familiar to the rabbi-teachers and the desire to innovate in their role regarding the changes underway outside the yeshiva as well as intergenerational changes. The second was between total dedication and maintaining boundaries, that is, the tension between a desire to dedicate themselves to a role that is significant and value-oriented and the wish to maintain personal boundaries. The third dilemma was between allowing autonomy and exerting influence, that is, the tension between the desire to ensure the student's autonomy in shaping his personal identity and the desire to play a significant part in this process.

The research contributes to the understanding of how the rabbi-educators perceive their role as identity agents, a mix of the unique characteristics and the generative dilemmas that rabbi-educators are engaged in as part of their role. The study also enables deeper understanding of the yeshiva climate based on the descriptions of the rabbi-educators, as well as insights into the significance of these descriptions in light of the yeshiva being a total educational institution that helps shape identity.