

BENDING, BREAKING, AND ADHERING TO RULES OF CONTEMPORARY JEWISH PRACTICE IN FINLAND

INTRODUCTION

Judaism defines itself through strict rules. [But] you have to see for yourself, how you define the rules.

In these words, 'Joel'—a man in his late forties, who was brought up as a Christian, but later in life converted to Judaism—tentatively formulates his thoughts on religion and rules. At first glance, it may seem paradoxical. On the one hand, rules are central to his way of thinking about Judaism, who he is as a Jew, and what 'doing' Jewish is all about. On the other hand, he adds, you must make an active, personal decision: what do you do with these rules in your own everyday life? 'Hanna', a woman in her thirties, airs a similar train of thought. She was born Jewish, outside of Finland, and considers herself to be fairly observant. However, even if she values rules, she does not feel that a strict adherence to religious rules is the most important thing for her. Rather, the conscious integration and interpretation of particular rules in her own and her family's lifestyle comes out as corner stones in her way of being and doing Jewish. She understands that every Jew has their individual needs, but still, she also feels that rules, to a certain extent, are vital to upholding one's Jewishness: 'No rules whatsoever', equals 'no Jewish identity', she ponders.

We met Joel and Hanna within the frames of a research project examining Jewish everyday life in Finland today. Combining approaches

from the study of religions and Jewish studies, the project¹ strives to shed light on how this small, distinct but peacefully integrated, ethnic, and religious community negotiates its place, on institutional as well as personal levels, in Finland today. It is embedded in a larger majority culture shaped by the Evangelical-Lutheran Church on the one hand, and deep-reaching secularity on the other. The aim is to capture a wide variety of ways to 'do' religion (Avishai 2008). Hence, people with varying attachments to organised Judaism and Jewishness have been approached—people who are deeply engaged, indifferent, critically secular, culturally concerned, or spiritual seekers.

We interviewed 101 persons, and these conversations were further contextualized against the background of participant observation, prior knowledge of, and engagement with the community.² Like Joel and Hanna, many of our interlocutors discussed Jewishness in relation to personal identity processes, wishes and needs, but also to the overarching institutional structures, 'tradition', and the ways of the community. In this article, we approach rules from an ethnographic perspective, examining everyday Jewish life in Finland today guided by the analytical framework of vernacular religion (Bowman and Valk 2012). Leonard N. Primiano describes vernacular religion as 'religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it' (Primiano 1995: 44)³. As stated in the introduction to this special issue, 'religious rules are surely part of everyday

life for millions of people worldwide’, playing a serious part in structuring social life and functioning as ‘moral codes’ for individual life paths. Anthropologists Alessandro Gusman and Henni Alava introduce the term ‘relational rulework’ to describe how rules are worked upon and negotiated, as ideals and aspirations, as part of the complex interactions between individuals, institutions, and religious motivations. (Gusman and Alava, this issue). In this article, we aim to analyse such relational rulework in day-to-day Jewish life in Finland.

In the vernacular religion framework, institutional structures and cultural context are related to individual narratives and nuances, described as ‘self-motivated’ ways of being, knowing, and doing religion (Illman and Czimbalmos 2020; Warburg 2016). In this way, we strive to shed light on the complex ways in which the relationships between freedom and rules take form in our research, how the interviewees relate to religious precepts, and the limits they define for their possibilities, motivation, and commitment to following them. Working with a small, largely secular ethnic and religious minority brings an additional analytical layer to the inquiry. The notion of relational rulework is useful when considering the dynamics of such a Jewish community as it encompasses both the authoritative rulework of designated experts (rabbis) and of the community members themselves. Hence, relational rulework may also take the form of non-observance of religious rules as a deliberate choice (Gusman and Alava, this issue). The vernacular religion approach allows us to engage with the active anthropological view of relational rulework that considers both the public, institutional level of rulework and the local, small group and individual level, where the ‘starting point is rather the everyday moral experience of the participants.’ (Ibid.)⁴

We analyse how our interlocutors bend, break, and adhere to religious rules in their everyday lives. More precisely, we focus on how the rules of food and family life are engaged with, and how the diversity of approaches to rules can be understood by bringing out the nuances of day-to-day Jewish lives. We have selected four persons out of the larger ethnographic sample to use as examples in this article. These narratives represent common profiles and are representative of the diversity found among our research subjects, presented under the pseudonyms Elias, Hanna, Joel, and Sara; they come from different religious and cultural backgrounds, belong to different age groups and represent different attitudes towards Judaism and Jewish religious observance. Two of them grew up in Finnish Jewish families in Finland whereas two have moved to Finland as adults. Three of them were born Jewish, two of them have two Jewish parents, whereas one person has a Jewish mother. Joel converted as an adult as he married a Jew. The Jewish communities in Finland are very small and individuals can easily be identified based on detailed descriptions. Therefore, we have decided not to disclose exact background information on the individuals to safeguard their privacy and anonymity. The stories of these four informants shed light on a fair variety of the attitudes and Jewish lifestyles prevalent in Finland today.⁵

JUDAISM IN FINLAND

The first Jews to settle in Finland without the obligation to undergo conversion to Christianity were the ‘Cantonists’, who arrived in the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland during the first half of the nineteenth century as soldiers serving in the imperial Russian army (Harviainen 1998: 294). As Muir and Tuori point out (2019: 12), most of these Jewish soldiers

originated from Lithuania, northeast Poland and Belarus, the heartlands of Lithuanian Jewish (*Litvak*) culture, which represents the non-Hasidic nature of Jewish Orthodoxy⁶ prevalent in Finland. Due to these historical reasons, non-Orthodox denominations are mostly absent in Finland even today (Czimbalmos and Tuori 2022), and Finnish Judaism has thus taken a somewhat different trajectory than in other Nordic countries (Dencik 2005: 21). Currently, there are two officially registered Jewish congregations in Finland (i.e., under the Finnish Patent and Registration Office, PRH): the Jewish Communities of Helsinki and Turku. According to the latest statistics, the communities have approximately 1100 members in all. In addition, there are many Jews living in Finland who are not registered as members of these congregations.

The research builds on a comprehensive and mixed research material on Finnish Jewry. This includes historical documents and archival material from the National Archives of Finland, the currently operating congregations, as well as private family archives. These materials operate on many levels: from the top-end of the official hierarchy to the very grassroots level of ordinary life (Czimbalmos 2021: 42–46). As mentioned above, the research team has also conducted 101 in-depth interviews with members of the Jewish congregations: men and women between the ages of 18 and 90. The interviews bear witness to great diversity within this small minority: our interlocutors have roots in different parts of the world and speak different mother tongues. They have different views on what is ‘traditionally’ or ‘typically’ Jewish, they follow different customs, and give different meanings to Jewishness (Tuori, Muir and Illman 2022). Hence, the patterns of relational rulework that arise as relevant are complex, deeply embedded in the deliberations and decision of day-to-day life.

JEWISH LAW (HALAKHAH) AND LOCAL TRADITION (MINHAG)

In contrast to the open and reflective relationship to religious rules presented by Joel and Hanna above, Christian apologetics have throughout history promoted the one-sided view of Judaism as a legalistic religion, where the religious rules of law, *halakhab*, are strictly binding, unnegotiable, even enslaving. Such stereotyping has produced not only scholarly misunderstandings and inaccurate interpretations, Jewish studies scholar Mika Ahuvia (2018) asserts; it has also paved the way for anti-semitic violence, hatred, and exclusion (Baum and Samuels 2012; Hedges 2021: 53: 55: 62). The topic of religious rules is complex, tied to ethical and contextual considerations, and it is not always evident what ‘following a rule’ or being ‘strict’ about rules means in religious practice (Clarke, this issue). In this article, we seek to shed light on the colourful array of nuances it contains when researched in a Jewish context.

Religious rules and local traditions have constantly been negotiated and calibrated against one another in Jewish everyday life. *Halakhab* (the word is commonly understood as ‘the path that one walks’) in the broadest meaning of the word encompasses the entire body of the Jewish law, and is indeed often translated as the ‘Jewish law’⁷. Generally, *halakhab* is thought to entail the instructions and rules concerning normative behaviour set forth by the *Torah*, to which other normative laws of Judaism were then added in central collections of scripture: the *Mishnah* (ca. 200 c.e.), the *Tosefta* (ca. 300 c.e.), the *Talmud Yerushalmi* (ca. 400 c.e.), or the *Talmud Bavli* (ca. 600 c.e.). These documents form the statement of the forms of behaviour and realise the norms of belief set forth in the formative age of Judaism (Neusner 2001: XXXIII).

Perhaps the most widely accepted code of Jewish law based on these norms is the *Shulkhan Arukh* ('Prepared Table'), compiled in the 16th century by Rabbi Yosef Karo. It entails prescriptions, rules, and regulations of matters connected to most aspects of one's day-to-day life (Rabinowitz 2007: 529–530). The extent to which a person observes *halakhab* and its regulations may be individual, but it is also defined by and connected to the denomination the person perceives themselves to be part of. Non-Orthodox denominations of Judaism (such as Progressive Judaism) generally argue that the legal codes of Rabbinic Judaism have their limitations, do not solve problems of modern Jewish life and, thus, require modern interpretations (Rayner 1998). This does not imply that they do not follow rules at all, rather that they exercise greater flexibility in their interpretation. Judaism might be thought of as a 'religion of rules', as pointed out above and, to some extent, this is certainly true. In the stricter end of Orthodox Jewish denominations (such as in the case of ultra-Orthodox Jewry), the interpretations and the observance of rules are more rigid—in less strict (Orthodox) denominations, one may adjust rules to one's own lifestyle. Of course, if one does not know a particular rule, one cannot follow it, but many people today, who are well versed in Orthodox Jewish law, consciously choose to mitigate rules in their own lives, as indicated by the anthropological term rulework introduced above. Rabbinic authorities (individual rabbis, rabbinic courts, or legal scholars) and their rulings tend to have a more important role in the lives of observant Jews and their communities—whether this observance means strictly Orthodox or non-Orthodox communities.

Another concept connected to *halakhab* and its interpretation is *minbag*. *Minbagim* (plural of *minbag*) are local or communal

practices of the Jewish law(s). The importance of *minbagim* is known to the sources of the Jewish law. According to the Babylonian Talmud (tractate Bava Metsia 86b), for example, they are of such relevance that even the angels follow them. *Minbagim* are based on halakhic foundations and there are several approaches to them within the Jewish law (see Elon 2007: 265–278). According to several halakhic sources, when a *minbag* contradicts the Jewish law, it is to be abolished (see, e.g., Pri Chadash 496:2:10; Ritva Pesachim 51a; Petach Dvir OC 2:33; Sdei Chemed 40:37). However, some argue that if the *minbag* violates a rabbinic prohibition but is already established, it may be upheld (Pri Chadash 496:2:10). The discussions on *halakhab* and *minbagim* are much more complex and lengthy than can be discussed here. As a general conclusion, however, one can argue that the 'dos and don'ts'—that is, Jewish rulework—are defined both by the *halakhab* and the *minbagim*: the local traditions and customs that are based on religious law, but also local and contextual, spatial, and temporal considerations.

To sum up, both *halakhab* and *minbag* play important roles in Jewish life. To the extent that they reflect the identity of a community, they pertain to its history and set its boundaries. They differentiate the community from other groups and define who can and cannot be included. Concerning local interpretations of the Jewish law and the customs connected to them, Finnish Jewish congregations are in a somewhat peculiar position—similar to that of other diaspora Jewish communities, which are small in numbers. The congregations are nominally Orthodox, but their membership is diverse in terms of religious, national, ethnic, and other backgrounds (Czimbalmos 2021). In fact, most of the congregants do not consider themselves Orthodox. Yet the *minbagim* that are practiced in the Finnish synagogues

are predominantly guided by the Orthodox interpretations of the *halakhab*. Finnish Jews often feel strong connections to their Jewish roots, but adjust their everyday Jewish practices to what they find meaningful and consider possible and suitable in the local context (Vuola 2019). There are various ways to be Jewish: not all of them aligned with a belief in G-d⁸, appreciation or depreciation of certain (local) traditions, or strict adherence to rules—to name only a few (Bayfield 2019; Kellner 2006). One interlocutor, Elias, reflects on whether the more observant, rule-following, congregants are more ‘religious’ than the more lenient ones, or whether maybe, in the end, it is the local *minbagim* (what he calls ‘culture’) that keeps Judaism alive from generation to generation:

I don't know if they're more religious [fi. *uskonnollinen*]. At least, they're not stronger believers [fi. *uskovainen*]. It's also about the knowhow, practical knowledge and knowing the [local] culture. I've been thinking that maybe doing religion can entail two different things [i.e., believing and practicing], that's what this Jewish culture, or way of life, is about. And maybe that's why we're still alive, that Judaism is still alive, that this cultural side is so strong.

RULES AND IDENTITY IN VERNACULAR RELIGION

The negotiation of law and local customs is not unique to Finnish Jewry. In fact, in all the Nordic countries, membership in religious communities is often perceived as a form of ‘national identity’ and ‘belonging without believing’ is rather common (Davie 2007; Day 2011). These issues are also strongly connected to the questions of ‘what is Judaism’, or ‘who is a Jew’, which have occupied academic and

rabbinic scholars alike (see, e.g., Boyarin 2013; DellaPergola and Rebuhn 2018; Kellner 2006; Mehta 2018; Thompson 2013). The Orthodox Jewish law is straightforward in this respect: a Jew is a person whose mother is Jewish, or who converted to Judaism (Finkelstein 2003). The discourses around what and who is considered to be Jewish are much more complex than the halakhic ruling, however. Jewish identity—as other identities—is contextual and situational and thus remains as contested as ever (Diemling and Ray 2016). This also means that the halakhic definitions of Judaism—which are, essentially, defined by religious authorities—may not necessarily reflect individual Jewish (self-)perceptions (Glenn and Sokoloff 2010; Stern 2015):

An updated analysis of the modes of expression of contemporary Jewish identification can neither be bound by normative perceptions nor can it reject them altogether. Instead, it needs to explore the whole cluster of manifestations and opportunities that are observable nowadays among living Jewish persons, local communities, and countrywide populations. (DellaPergola and Staetsky 2021: 8)

Consequently, the approaches to *halakhab* or *minbagim* vary community-to-community, family-to-family and individual-to-individual. Furthermore, perceptions change over time and adjust to circumstances. Therefore, researchers are increasingly employing flexible notions of ‘family’ and focusing on self-ascription in analyses of Jewish family life today (Boyarin 2013: 111–112) Among the interviewees, Elias said he and his wife became more observant when their first child was born. Hanna mentioned that throughout her life, she ‘was

on and off’ the religious lifestyle. Joel started to practice certain Finnish Jewish traditions when his child was born, while not yet being Jewish himself, and Sara said she only practices certain traditions connected to Jewish holidays or festivities—such as her own wedding.

The interviews indicate that the choice to nominally follow Orthodox *halakhab* is embedded in the history of the Finnish Jewish congregations and allows the more observant members to be included. A common perception is that if the communities were not Orthodox, members who live according to stricter rules would not be able or would not feel welcome to attend congregational events in the synagogue. A concrete example is the segregation of the genders along the binary: if all genders would be allowed to sit together, or read from the Torah, the ultra-Orthodox members would not feel welcome to attend the services. However, to cater for everyone’s needs and preferences, the communities allow for ‘small adjustments’ in various aspects of observance (Illman and Czibalmos 2020; Czibalmos 2021; Tuori 2022). When trying to understand the dynamics between *halakhab* and *minbag*, the analytical framework of vernacular religion offers an insightful perspective. This approach takes a broad perspective on everyday religion and acknowledges both the overarching sociocultural power structures and the inner world of individual subjects (Bowman 2014; Bowman and Valk 2012; 2022; Fingerroos et al 2020; Goldstein and Shuman 2012; Illman 2019; Kapaló and Povedák 2021; Primiano 1995; 2012). It is also sensitive to the parallel dimensions of vernacular religion as a self-guided process of learning (Utraiainen 2020).

One example of how this balancing act in practice in Finland is the contested *brit milah*⁹ requirement for minors who seek admission to the congregation and its institutions. Until

2018, circumcision was compulsory for male children to be admitted into the congregational institutions (Czibalmos 2021). In the case of boys who were not Jewish according to the Orthodox *halakhab*, it was performed to prepare them for their conversion¹⁰ that would take place later, prior to their *bar mitzvah*¹¹. This also meant that male children with Jewish mothers who opted not to circumcise their sons were not admitted.¹² This negotiation between a religious ‘rule’ and local ‘tradition’ in the community is rulework in practice; it is particularly interesting as it makes the Orthodox definition of ‘who is a Jew’ subordinate—in a way—to the practice of circumcision. The practice of requiring male children to be circumcised regardless of their halakhic status has now been abandoned, but in its prior form, it signalled the importance of authorities—that is, the relevant rabbinical authorities, including rabbis from other Nordic countries (Czibalmos 2019; 2021). In this case, this local practice overruled specific tenets of the *halakhab*. The protocol from 1973 that sets out the criteria for accepting children from halakhically non-Jewish mothers to the congregation does not explicitly state that halakhically Jewish male children must be circumcised to be admitted. However, according to the recollection of the interlocutors, this praxis most certainly evolved in the community over the years. Sara referred to this particular requirement as ‘blackmailing’:

[Concerning] circumcision, well, never say never, but currently I feel that I don’t see any reason why I would do that [to my son]. Or decide on that without any other reason [than having him admitted to the congregation]. (...) That feels like, it pushes me away from the community. Maybe here, as well, it’s kind of either you do this, or then you are out.

MAKING, BENDING, AND ADHERING TO RULES IN FAMILY LIFE

As indicated above, Jewish identities, lives, and practices are complex and contextual. Over the past decades, a significant body of research has dealt with Jewish identity formation and practices. Many studies focus mainly on individuals: on how their experiences, lives, and practices are shaped by the family circumstances and the context (Pomson and Schnoor 2018: 8–10). Family patterns have changed significantly over the past century among Jews and non-Jews alike, and therefore, it is important to investigate how marriages and marriage patterns impact how family lives and practices are formed. In the Jewish tradition, intermarriages between Jews and non-Jews were generally not considered ideal before the early modern period and they were rare in the Jewish diaspora. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, intermarriages between Jews and people of other faiths became rather common in e.g., Western Europe (Bleich 2015: 3). In contemporary societies, Jewish intermarriages have received much attention both in research and in congregational conversations, spurred by the rising number of intermarriages in most Jewish communities worldwide—with the State of Israel as an exception. Discussions around intermarriages are often connected to conceptualisations of Jewish identity and touch upon questions of assimilation, continuity, and demographics (Hartman and Hartman 2010: 45; Kravel-Tovi 2020: 51–52).

In the Finnish Jewish communities, the situation is similar (Czibalmos 2021). When Finland gained independence in 1917, many legislative reforms were introduced: Finnish Jews gained the right to obtain Finnish citizenship (Torvinen 1989: 10) and the institution of civil

marriage was introduced. This allowed persons belonging to different religious communities to marry, but also allowed persons belonging to the same religious community to marry in a civil ceremony (Czibalmos 2019: 38). This led to growing numbers of intermarriages and non-religious (civil) marriages, also among endogamous¹³ couples. This reflects the increasingly secular worldviews in the Jewish communities, where the local practices and traditions gradually become more important than the halakhic rules that generated them (Kellner 2006: 112–113). In a couple of decades, this led to particular changes on congregational, family, and individual levels (Czibalmos 2019; 2021).

The families who belong to the Jewish congregations of Finland today display a colourful diversity. A broad range of family models featured in our interviews, including various forms of cohabitation or marriage. The number of intermarriages is exceptionally high in the Finnish Jewish congregations (Illman 2019). Due to the spatial limitations of this article, we focus solely on different kinds of marriage patterns, which are differentiated based on (1) the levels of ‘observance’ or ‘religiosity’ reported by the interlocutors, and (2) whether they married in (i.e., married another Jew) or married out (i.e., married a non-Jew). By focusing on the following patterns, hence, we do not claim that other models of family life do not exist.¹⁴ Among the interlocutors foregrounded in this article, the relational rulework relating to Jewish family life unfolds along different trajectories.

HANNA: NO RULES—NO JEWISH IDENTITY

As mentioned in the introduction, Hanna is an observant woman in her late 30s, who was born

Jewish and grew up outside of Finland. She is married to a Jewish partner. She describes how her level of religiosity and observance of religious rules have changed throughout her life. One of her reasons for marrying an observant man was to create a ‘home where the Torah could be an inspiration for the children’. Despite this desire—and despite leading a religious life, which she clearly values—she points out that people have different needs:

I believe a soul of a Jew, a soul of any person, needs spirituality. You cannot live your life without spirituality. You find it in different places. People can find their spirituality in the gym, in yoga, in India, in playing instruments. That’s their spirituality.

While individuals have different needs, Hanna still thinks that rules are important and serve to strengthen one’s Jewish identity to a certain extent. When reflecting on her secular parents-in-law, she directly connects a conscious approach to rules to the strength of one’s Jewish identity: ‘ (...) they [the in-laws] don’t have any rules [they keep] whatsoever. No Jewish identity.’ Therefore, she finds it necessary to teach her children, through the observance of Jewish holidays and by teaching them, what she calls ‘basic morals’ through the weekly Torah portions.¹⁵

Hanna says she cannot see Judaism in an ‘analytical’ way, as she thinks people who become observant or convert to Judaism as adults can. Her flexibility shows in her interpretations of certain rules and traditions. For example, she has chosen not to cover her hair—a practice married Orthodox women often follow in some way. Hanna took this decision together with her husband, who, however, seems to have left the final decision with her. Orit Avishai’s (2008: 422) research shows that it is possible

to maintain an Orthodox identity without observing all the rules, or not observing them in the traditional way. As Hanna’s example shows, it is possible to maintain an Orthodox identity despite not pertaining to all rules along the lines of others’ expectations. As Hanna formulates it: ‘I don’t want to say *Baruch Hashem*¹⁶ all the time (...) I don’t have to say I’m religious all the time. You know, it’s not. It’s inside. It’s not outside.’

ELIAS: TRADITION IS IMPORTANT—RULES ARE NOT

The Finnish Jewish communities went through serious changes during the first half of the twentieth century: congregants became more secular (Muir 2004: 214), the number of civil marriages started to grow, and many Jewish couples opted for marrying solely within the frames of a civil marriage or within both a civil and a religious marriage (Czibalmos 2019: 42–44).

Elias, who was introduced earlier as a secular Cantonist (descendent of the first Jews, who settled in Finland in the 1800s) in his 70s, married his Jewish spouse in a religious ceremony, but describes himself as ‘not too religious’. In his perception, Judaism is a religion, but it also has other dimensions. Perhaps, he ponders, this view stems from his upbringing: he grew up in a family, where most members were Jewish ‘culturally’ but not ‘religiously’. In his childhood family, religiosity was rarely present, but Jewishness was. Elias met his wife at an event organised by *Makkabi*.¹⁷ Before they became seriously involved, he dated a ‘Finnish girl’ (i.e., non-Jewish), but this ‘did not work out’ due to the cultural differences, he maintains.

After the wedding, Elias did not celebrate Jewish holidays for a long time, and his wife often celebrated with her family. Like many other couples, they started to observe the

holidays in their own home when they had their first child—at least for some time. As e.g., Pomson and Schnoor (2018: 9–110) or Czimbalmos (2021: 70–71) point out, it is common in less observant (or secular) Jewish families to celebrate certain holidays less frequently or prominently when the children grow up. Elias’ family does not keep kosher at home; they ‘have no need for that’, he says. Some of their children, however, have grown up to become more observant than their parents and so they adjust their lifestyle to each other when they meet.

Elias considers the cultural aspects of Judaism to be important in his life. As Judaism can be defined culturally, not only religiously, he does not feel the need to keep any rules strictly but regards (local) traditions as the key to his rulework, as he says: ‘the “G-d thing”, and the religiosity can be completely omitted from it.’

JOEL: JUDAISM IS DEFINED BY RULES, BUT THE RULES ARE DEFINED BY YOU

Conversionary in-marriages are fairly common in the Finnish Jewish communities, that is, marriages where the spouses come from different religious traditions, but one of them converts to the partner’s religion before the marriage. However, conversion is a gendered phenomenon in the local communities: most individuals who convert to Judaism when in a romantic relationship with a Jew are women (Czimbalmos 2021). Nevertheless, there are a few men who convert to Judaism after becoming involved with Jewish women.

Joel, who was introduced earlier as a man in his forties, was brought up as a Christian. He met his Jewish wife abroad, and she declared already in the beginning of their relationship that she wanted to bring their children up as

Jews. Joel agreed and says he gradually ‘grew into’ the Jewish practices. Eventually, he opted on converting to Judaism because he did not want his family to be a ‘mishmash’. By the time of his conversion, he had already been ‘living Judaism for years’, he explains: this made the process easier for him.

Joel says he believes in a ‘higher principle’. In his opinion, there are several parallel ideas in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Yet, he finds Judaism and Islam to be the most ‘logical’ because the concept of the Holy Trinity is hard to accept for him. In addition to the connection he makes between religious beliefs and Judaism, he argues that Judaism is also a tradition and a culture. Concerning Jewish practices, he explicitly states that he does not live ‘according to the Talmud or its teachings’—which, as established above, is one of the cornerstones of *halakhab*. Nevertheless, as quoted in the introduction, Joel finds that ‘Judaism defines itself through strict rules’, such as those concerning circumcision, which he regards as an essential part of Judaism. However, he adds: ‘(...) you have to see for yourself, how you define rules.’

SARA: HOW YOU PRACTICE JUDAISM IS A PRIVATE MATTER

Sara is an intermarried woman in her 30s, with Cantonist roots. She is the child of an intermarriage and has not gone to the Jewish school or received a Jewish religious upbringing. She says she only realised later that many traditions—such as eating certain meals—were practiced in her childhood family due to the Jewish connection. When talking about Jewish traditions within her own family, she describes the feeling of wanting to have more, but realising that they ‘don’t have the knowhow’. The combination of not having the ‘knowhow,’

being married to a non-Jew, and being secular, often results in personal interpretations of holidays and celebrations. As an example, she and her husband had their ‘own take on a Jewish wedding’. A Jewish relative married them under the *chuppah* (canopy) following the traditional Jewish protocol, but instead of stomping on the glass, another emblematic part of Jewish weddings, the glass was broken with a hammer.

Jewish traditions are clearly important to Sara, and thus, she would like her potential future children to have connections to them and to have a ‘Jewish cultural identity’. However, she finds circumcision difficult to even think about, saying: ‘...I find myself like secretly hoping that if I ever get a child, that it would never be a boy. So, then I would never, ever have to think about this.’ She discusses the Orthodox interpretation of the *halakhab* that is currently followed in the congregation (e.g., in relation to the segregation of genders) and underlines the importance of private religious practices, which everyone can decide upon for themselves. When reflecting on the supposed prerequisite of circumcision, she summarizes:

(...) people use the argument that ‘if the rules change then they won’t be able to practice their version of Judaism anymore in our community.’ That kind of a situation doesn’t affect them at all! It’s like a private, a more private matter. So, I mean, that doesn’t challenge anything in their version of Judaism either.

ADJUSTMENTS IN FOODWAYS

Another topic of interest when discussing rules and local traditions in the interviews is food. How do Finnish Jews today relate to the dishes that are traditional to Finnish Jewry? Choosing one’s food and everyday meals is

a practice through which identity can be specified. We are what we eat is a well-known saying, valid also when talking about food as a means of identification that includes existential and religious dimensions (Zeller 2012: 109). Encounters with secular society, adaptations, innovation, and preservation have played significant roles in the multi-ethnic formation of Finnish Jewish food culture (Illman 2019). Ashkenazi Jewish food culture was developed in Eastern Europe with slight regional variations and brought to Finland with the first Jewish inhabitants, the Cantonists. The current-day descendants of these families have preserved many traditionally Ashkenazi Jewish foodways, with a Finnish twist. These long-established, customary recipes are similar in many families and are passed down from generation to generation (Roden 1996: 49–51). They are also among the last living links that connect assimilated Finnish Jews to their Orthodox Jewish ancestors from Eastern Europe. Many dishes have preserved their original Yiddish names, such as *gebakte leber* [chopped liver] and *challah* [braided bread].

Besides the 101 interviews, another vital source of information that influenced the interpretation of foodways was the recipes shared with the research team through co-cooking as a form of participant observation. Among the most valuable sources is the collection of family recipes, both published and unpublished, acquired through a campaign initiated in the journal of the Finnish Jewish Community, *Hakehila*, in 2019. With their help, traces of assimilation/adaptation can be detected (Pataricza 2019). Sources of information on foodways also include casual chats with members of the community, encounters in the shop, and the practical dealings around ordering dishes for various board meetings of the community. Rules related to *kashrut* (the dietary prescribed

discipline in Judaism) are regularly discussed in an open WhatsApp chat group, where questions related to ingredients, products, and availability are pondered. The members of the group give answers according to their knowledge and the 'final word' is saved for the rabbi, even if he has a less prominent decision-making role in the life of the Finnish Jewish congregation than in other Orthodox congregations. On the other hand, the exact opposite may also apply: According to Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus (2018), for example, consciously creating traditional Jewish dishes from non-kosher ingredients is also a performance of one's Jewish identity. In Finland, this may be the case on Jewish holidays, when many Jews in Finland aim to prepare traditional Jewish dishes, whether made from kosher ingredients (and using *kosher* utensils) or not. Despite knowingly breaking and bending at least some of the *kosher* rules, the dishes prepared according to old family recipes symbolize belonging to the Jewish nation and the ongoing rulework that forms the backbone of the continuation of traditions.

Eating and preparing food according to the rules of *kasbrut* is a way of identifying as a Jew, even in places like Finland where the implementation can be difficult. As mentioned above, *halakhab* covers all aspects of an observant Jew's life, including foodways, but this vast set of rules are complemented by local customs, *minhagim*. Observant Jews regard foodways as an integral, unquestionable mode of vernacular religion and as one of the most important commandments to obey. At the same time, foodways are an essential part of a daily Jewish lifestyle with a strong connection to tradition and a person's family roots. Many Finnish Jews face challenges when they try to follow at least some basic rules. An example of this would be avoiding eating pork in social situations.

Traditional Jewish dishes have particular importance, modified to the context of the location. An apt example is the popular Ashkenazi Jewish dish *gefilte* fish (fish balls filled into the skin of the fish). According to the Jewish food laws, fish must have visible fins and scales to be regarded as pure and edible (Lev 11:6), but within these limits, any fish can be used. *Gefilte* fish is traditionally prepared from carp or whitefish. However, according to the vernacular Finnish Jewish custom, the dish was prepared of local fish such as bream or pike, a practical geographical adaptation. Today, the dish is sometimes made of salmon, which is also kosher, and which is nowadays often more readily available in Finland than the local fishes.

The relational rulework around food reminds many Jews of their religion every time they eat, because even if they do not follow kosher regulations strictly, many want to make informed choices. Finnish Jews often follow several unofficial modifying rules, prompted by practical circumstances and influence from local culture. Forming and sustaining a Jewish identity through foodways does not necessarily mean observing the rules of *kasbrut*. When crossing boundaries and remodelling inherited traditions, new signposts of Jewishness are erected. Due to assimilation and practical considerations, transgressive eating has become a part of the Jewish tradition, also in Finland, to a modest or significant degree (Kraemer 2009: 145).

In fact, following all rules of *kasbrut* is nearly impossible in Finland. Accessibility to kosher food became difficult in Finland after *shekhita* (kosher slaughter) was banned in 1997 and the only kosher food store closed in 2017. Currently, kosher meat and some basic kosher products are only available in Helsinki and Turku in two large supermarkets. Certain

kosher products can be purchased online. Only a few Finnish products have kosher stamps (*bekhsber*) provided by the Chief rabbi of Finland. Hence, the only way to keep kosher is by checking everything you eat for *treyf* (non-kosher) ingredients and consulting the rabbi if the markings are unclear or incomplete. Under these circumstances, compromises must be made to find a practically feasible way of eating. Our research shows that congregants fall into three major groups according to their approaches to food-related rules in their daily life. The first consists of the very few people who stick to the food rules in a strict way making no exceptions. The second consists of those who consciously strive to eat Jewishly, with varying outcomes. The third, and largest, group do not follow *kashrut* at all. Every household has its own rules, and many try to adapt their foodways according to the local ingredients (Diner 2001: 148). Availability and affordability significantly modify foodways according to the local offering of base ingredients (Cinotto and Hasia 2018: 8–10), such as making *gefilte* fish out of salmon in Finland, as mentioned above, which has absolutely no halakhic ramifications.

Since the twentieth century, with rapid secularisation, a growing rate of intermarriages, and the challenging acquisition of kosher ingredients, the number of kosher consumers has decreased in Finland. Still, many families have kosher-style households and adapt the rules around food according to local customs. Many Jews consume chicken obtained in regular shops, while beef is ordered either from Finnish kosher web shops or from abroad. This is called the ‘K-shop rule’ among Finnish-speaking Jews (*K-kauppa sääntö*), referring to Finland’s most prominent food store chain. According to this unwritten rule, chicken meat is acceptable from the convenience store, but beef must be bought in a kosher shop. The

different standards for chicken and beef in local Finnish-Jewish customs might originate from the circumstance that several generations ago, chicken was commonly slaughtered at home and thus accepted as kosher. Cows, on the other hand, were slaughtered professionally in the presence of a kosher supervisor (*mashgiach*) to ensure that both the animal and its meat met the *kashrut* requirements. Today, of course, both chicken and beef are slaughtered professionally and the grounds for treating them differently have disappeared. Yet, the custom of regarding chicken as a ‘more kosher’ alternative remains.

Several specific unspoken rules still seem valid to most observant Finnish Jews. For example, they systematically separate dairy and meat dishes, a practice with Biblical support practiced among Jews worldwide. Neither pork nor shellfish, both widely regarded as non-kosher, are traditionally eaten at home. Non-kosher meat might, however, be eaten during the summer holiday, in the traditional Finnish summer cottage. At the Jewish holidays, families usually stick to the traditional family recipes and keep kosher more strictly. Ultimately, every Jewish household in Finland has its own food culture and traditions (Pataricza 2019: 76). The daily personal decisions related to foodways include aspects of relational rulework and show the relevance of balancing between *halakhab* and *minbag* in vernacular Judaism. Among our interlocutors, different ways of striking a balance in this relational rulework are described.

HANNA: YOU HAVE TO TRY TO DO IT RIGHT

Hanna’s marriage to another Jew and her dedication to an observant Orthodox Jewish lifestyle naturally affects her choices concerning foodways. She considers keeping kosher a fundamental, indispensable part of her

Jewishness and claims that she does not have to understand the reasons behind all rules to follow them. Even if it is challenging in Finland, one has to at least try to keep them all.

You have to try and keep as much *mitzvot* [commandments] as you can and be nice and [follow] all the rules that, you know, to try to do it right. And even things that you don't understand like *kashrut* and *birkat hamazon* [prayer before consuming certain foods], these are things that come into you when you eat. And remember to say thank you for it.

For Hanna, foodways are as important to Jewish life as prayers, the laws of family purity¹⁸, and studying the Torah. Doing Jewish like this, in her daily life, is what eventually sustains her being Jewish and her Jewish identity:

If you go to *tfilah* [praying in the synagogue], it is Jewish life. And the eating, as I said, kosher is also Jewish life. And *niddah* [menstrual purity] is Jewish life, and learning Tora is Jewish life because it gives you a lot of things that you didn't think about. So Jewish is to try to keep the tradition. I think, like, even if I sometimes don't feel really spiritual, I don't want to continue, I have no right to stop it.

Often, as reflected in the interviews, Jewish food seems to be regarded as a form of tradition. By following the same religious rules, also around food, cohesion is secured within the community (Bahloul 1983: 78). Simultaneously, food represents a continuous transformation and ongoing adaptation to the surrounding majority. For an observant Jewish mother, passing down and upholding a number of rules comes out as a necessary means to ensure continuity.

JOEL: THE ONLY THING I MISS ABOUT PORK IS PROSCIUTTO

Joel, who did not grow up Jewish, describes his fluctuating level of devotion to kosher laws, reflecting temporary concessions. He reports that *halal* (the dietary standard in Islam) meat is sometimes regarded as a valid alternative to kosher among Jews in Finland and describes how the rulework around food has evolved in his close relations:

After I got to know [my Jewish wife], she has always eaten kosher, from the beginning, and then I just ate less and less of things that are not kosher (...) And when we had children, then we decided that we eat only kosher. [The kosher rules we keep], they change all the time. These are fluctuating processes (...) For a while we had really, really kosher, with only kosher meat. Now, at the moment, we buy chicken products from regular stores or from *halal* stores because it's just easier to acquire them there.

Joel has developed his own kosher foodways through a learning process, seeking guidance from fellow members of the community and cookbooks.

Basically, I learned all the traditional dishes from [an older, well respected Cantonist man in the community], whom I assisted a few times when cooking for *Pesach* or *Rosh Hashanah*. (...) Then I bought a lot of cookbooks and prepared meals and checked what worked and what tasted good.

The quote below reveals how Joel negotiates the consumption of non-kosher foods that he used

to enjoy in the past. It highlights what it feels like to adopt and adjust to rules as an adult, after making a decision to convert.

The only thing I miss about pork, which tasted so good that nothing really can replace it, is prosciutto. I haven't seen it *anywhere else*.

ELIAS: 'OUR' KOSHER MEANS THAT

Based on the interviews, few of our interlocutors seem to keep *kosher* fully at home. Rather, they strive to prepare Jewish- and kosher-style food based on family recipes at high holidays. Analysing the vernacular Finnish-Jewish foodway patterns it seems that the dichotomy of kosher (or *kosher*-style) at home, non-kosher out is valid. However, there is an ongoing and visible change in the younger generation (new families with small children), who still negotiate their terms. Often, young couples—where one of the spouses is Jewish and the other is converting—decide to adopt at least some level of observance (DellaPergola and Staetsky 2021: 40). They face several obstacles: for instance, there is no kosher restaurant, so eating out and sticking to the *kasbrut* rules can be done only with compromises (Kupari and Pataricza 2022).

Elias has been married to his Jewish wife for almost 50 years. While the consumption of pork is not acceptable to him, an exception can be made with seafood, which, as mentioned above, is also ruled out by traditional Jewish law. He thinks that—at least in his life—*kosher* adherence correlates with age in an ongoing process of rulework.

We weren't [observant] when we got married, so we felt that we didn't have the need to keep *kosher*. Life was easier maybe.

Yes, we have eaten crabs sometimes and yes, we were the kind of people, (...) I guess it's part of the Jewish culture in Turku, who eat crabs in the summer cottage [even if] it is quite *treyf* [non-kosher]. But then the other things, such as pork and seafood and crustaceans, they are not acceptable [to eat] and kept aside. [Our] *kosher* means that.

As mentioned above, separating meat and milk is an aspect of *kasbrut* that many Jews in Finland uphold today. Elias also describes how his family has chosen to relate to this rule, based on which many observant Jewish households have separate sets of pots, plates, and utensils for meat and dairy dishes and wait a certain number of hours between consuming meat and dairy (Kraemer 2009: 41).

[Previously] we bought chicken and meat from a regular store, and we didn't have double sets of plates [i.e., separate sets for dairy and meat], and, in a way, we thought that certain things are forbidden. Then with age, we became a little stricter. We do not have *kosher* plates and so on, but yes, this kosher issue has come out more. (...) Yes, we know how to balance it, or it has become quite natural.

SARA: THE RECIPES HAVE BEEN TWISTED, YOU ARE ALLOWED TO EXPERIMENT

Sara's interview offers an illuminating example of how forming one's Jewish identity through foodways does not necessarily entail observing the rules of *kasbrut*. Sara's approach to Jewish traditions, how she 'does' them in her own family today, indicates both a continuous tradition and the consequences of changing environments. It also reflects how food history

can give deeper insights into Jewish lives and identifications. Celebrating holidays is important and meaningful, but it can be done in innovative ways, she maintains:

We celebrate *Hanukkah*. So, then we always have the same foods. Well, okay, that's maybe our family's thing [and] unfortunately, it doesn't even fill the kosher criteria. But for us, it's like *our* Jewish tradition.

In Sara's family tradition, this Jewish holiday is celebrated with foods that are not only untraditional, but also regarded as non-kosher, such as seafood.

We begin with oysters. I used to hate oysters, too, but then I used to get some (...) beautiful seafood stuff, when the others were enjoying their oysters.

Also mixing meat and dairy products, another emblematic kosher prohibition, was consciously disregarded in her Jewish family tradition.

Then we had a beef fondue that is made in a broth, so not like the oil version, and then always with some kinds of dipping sauces like certain mayo. But what was always the essence, especially in the '90s, was this kind of *crème fraîche* based sauces. So, there you have the creamy milk product (...)

Because they were not part of a larger Jewish community, Sara thinks that they had the freedom to bend the rules and create their own tradition. Her choice of wording is self-critical, but with a hint of humour, showing how proud she feels of her family tradition.

I guess because we had no other fellow Jews at the table, just our family, so this is our vulgar, our barbaric version of embracing our heritage. But we love it, and we still eat it with the same sauces and everything.

Sara describes her family's foodways as far from traditionally kosher: using prohibited ingredients, such as oysters, and mixing meat and dairy foods. And yet, to her, these traditions strongly support her Jewish identity and convey the importance she attaches to Jewish holidays, even if she is well aware that her family breaks the kosher rules.

These quotes illustrate how profoundly Finnish-Jewish food culture has changed in the past twenty years. Adapting has turned into adopting: the Finnish food culture now dominates over the traditional Ashkenazi Jewish food culture and rules have been negotiated, bent, and broken. Food is still the strongest, and often the only, link to the Ashkenazi roots of the community members, and offers a possibility to relate creatively to these roots. Food is also a way to innovate and to integrate the influences of the surrounding majority culture.

DISCUSSION: RULES AND REFLECTIONS

In this article, we have focused on rules and traditions, *halakhah* and *minhagim*, and the ways they are adhered to, adapted, and renegotiated by members of the two Jewish congregations in Finland. Officially, these congregations follow Orthodox praxis, but the membership is secular, intercultural, and diverse, offering a rich and fruitful context for exploring negotiations between religious rules and local customs. From the vast research material, four narratives were selected as examples, presented under the pseudonyms Elias, Hanna, Joel, and Sara. These

interlocutors personify profiles that are common in the data and representative of the diversity it displays. The members of the Jewish communities of Finland come from different religious and cultural backgrounds, belong to different age groups, and represent different attitudes towards Judaism and Jewish religious observance. They have different views on the Jewish law and on the traditions and local customs that are, more or less, connected to these. The article centred on how the four interlocutors described their decisions, deliberations, and doubts in navigating between religious rules, the *halakhab*, and local customs and traditions, the *minbagim*, in their day-to-day life. Our examples focused on family life and foodways, highlighting complex decision-making processes, which often depend on the influences of everyday life, and surrounding circumstances.

The focus on vernacular religion paved the way for an active anthropological view on where people do different things with and to rules—and rules do different things to people, using the notion of relational rulework (Gusman and Alava, this issue). By paying attention to the narratives, we sought to portray the interaction between individuals and rules as complex and dynamic. This included striving to illuminate and interpret religious rules without the reductive reading of them as rigid structures of non-negotiable and absolute fundamentals. Indeed, religious rules mark boundaries within many Jewish lives, but we have explored these boundaries as spaces for dialogue, identification, and person-making in relation to overarching structures of tradition and community.

Vernacular religion does not constitute a separate, clearly distinguished aspect of people's lives. Rather, it is acted out in various ways as part of everyday life and emerges as relevant in different ways for different individuals in different situations. For some, religious rules structure life in an all-encompassing way,

offering moral guidance, trust, and hope for the future. For others, religious rules are regarded as an aspect of one's culture or history, intertwined with family life, traditions, and foodways in a vague and distant way. As such, this approach also supports a critical dismantling of the category of 'religion' that builds on the perception of traditions as static and monolithic entities separated by clear-cut borders, having set (Protestant) Christianity as the default template for all religions and marginalized localized expressions (Illman and Czibalmos 2020: 172). Here, the vernacular religion approach and the anthropological concept of relational rulework complement each other in a particularly fruitful way: the vernacular approach brings out the complexity of people's relationships to rules addressed by Clarke as 'too common' and 'too interesting to ignore' (Clarke, this issue). By applying this framework to our analysis of religious rules, we could demonstrate the productivity of going beyond the binary view on rules, as either coercive and binding or malleable and purely subjective, pointed to in the introduction of this issue. From a vernacular religion point of view, rules have multiple functions and purposes for different persons and in different contexts. Bending, breaking and adhering to rules often relates to other ambivalent and emotionally laden negotiations of religious, cultural and ethnic belonging, gender or organisation-internal hierarchies (Vuola 2019). Our analysis testifies to a situation where values and conceptions of Jewish identity become more flexible and subjective positions accommodating a broad set of religious, secular, and cultural influences take form (Czibalmos 2021). These findings are in line with recent scholarship that highlights the often contested and re-interpreted nature of Jewish self-designations and practices today (Bayfield 2019: 37). Thus, we suggest 'attending

to rules as related to individuals, communities, and orders—and the relations between them’ (Alava, Clarke and Gusman, this issue) as a fruitful way forward. Exploring rules through ethnographic research reveals how such rules are varyingly negotiated in the everyday lives of ordinary people, whose attachments to organised religion varies from indifference to deep commitment. ‘This is not to say that everyone does with rules whatever she wants, but rather that people reflect on rules, on how best to follow them, and on what it means when rules are not adhered to.’ (Ibid.)

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NOTES

- 1 The research project Boundaries of Jewish Identities in Finland (Minhag Finland) is funded by the Polin Institute for Theological Research, Åbo Akademi University (2018–22). For more information, see: <https://polininstitutet.fi/en/boundaries-of-jewish-identities-in-contemporary-finland-minhag-finland/>
- 2 The interviews were transcribed verbatim and will be archived at the Finnish Literature Society (Suomen Kirjallisuuden Seura). The interview extracts were edited for this article—grammatical mistakes and unnecessary linking words were removed without changing the intended meaning of the quotes.
- 3 While the terms lived, everyday, and vernacular religion are often used interchangeably, there are well-nuanced differences between the three concepts. The term lived religion stems from the sociology of religion and focuses on religious activities that take shape outside organized institutions and the many ways in which religion feeds into personal life narratives. In comparison, vernacular approaches tend to emphasize the characteristically folkloristic aspects of everyday religion, such as narrative structures, local practices, and oral history (Fingerroos et al. 2020, 5–6; Goldstein and Shuman 2012). For a detailed presentation of the vernacular religion approach, see Illman and Czibalmos 2020.
- 4 For a discussion of similar rulework strategies among European Muslims, see Clarke’s article in this issue.
- 5 The quotes from the interviews have been translated into English by the current authors from different source languages. Interviews were made in Finnish, Swedish, English, and a few other European languages, extensively interpolated with Hebrew and Yiddish.
- 6 Orthodox Judaism is the branch of Judaism that adheres most strictly to the tenets of the Jewish law, the *halakhab* (Liebman 2005). Hasidic Jews are a sub-group of ultra-Orthodox Jewry. Hasidism is a movement that emerged in the second half of the 18th century. The religious authority in Hasidic communities is in the hands of a spiritual leader, the *tsaddik* (the “righteous”) (Rubinstein et al. 2007).
- 7 However, the term itself is used in two different ways. It is generally used to signify the normative pre- or proscription that is the end result of a

- legal process by a legal scholar of the Jewish law. In addition, it also entails the process by which legal conclusions are reached (Roth 1986: 1–2).
- 8 Often, publications on Jewish topics leave out the “o” in the word G-d, adhering to the biblical prohibition on obliterating the Name (Exodus 20:7).
 - 9 Circumcision of men.
 - 10 According to previously defined protocols, halakhically non-Jewish children who had a Jewish father and who were to join the Jewish community were converted to Judaism prior to their coming-of-age ceremonies, which take place at twelve years of age for girls, and thirteen years of age for boys.
 - 11 Coming of age ceremony of Jewish boys, at the age of thirteen.
 - 12 Unless the circumcision of the child was not allowed, e.g. due to medical reasons.
 - 13 In this case, “endogamous” refers to marriages where both members of the couples are Jewish.
 - 14 Thus, e.g. marriage “patterns” based on ancestry, such as Sephardi-Ashkenazi couples, are not considered here.
 - 15 It is a custom among religious Jewish communities to read the weekly Torah portion (parashat ha-Shavua) during the morning services on Monday, Thursday, and Saturday.
 - 16 A Hebrew phrase that is usually translated as “Blessed is G-d” or “Thank G-d,” frequently used in speech by observant (orthodox) Jews.
 - 17 *Makkabi* is an international Jewish sports association.
 - 18 The laws of Taharat HaMishpacha (family purity), which regulate coital activity and intimacy among Orthodox Jews.
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