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EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF JEWISH STUDIES (2024) 1–25

European Journal of JEWISH STUDIES

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"The Customs of Our Ancestors Are in Our Hands"

Negotiating Tradition and Change in the Jewish Communities in Finland

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Received 14 February 2022 | Revised 16 November 2023 | Accepted 5 February 2024 | Published online 7 March 2024

Abstract

The Jewish community of Finland represents a continuum of Eastern European Ashkenazic Orthodoxy that survived the Shoah intact. During recent decades there have been significant changes in the demography of the local congregations, and these changes have influenced the religiosity of the members: while secularism and indifference to religion have grown, many members have turned toward stricter observance of Halakhah. This article looks at these changes and how the informants relate themselves to the customs of past generations in their everyday lives by means of an analytic model developed in the study of vernacular religion.

Keywords

Finland – Orthodoxy – customs – vernacular religion – authenticity

1 Introduction

In an interview, a young man likened the recent changes in the customs of the Jewish community in Helsinki to "spitting in the face of your forefathers." He believed that the old customs should be guarded. Using a well-known Hebrew phrase, he said: "*Minhag avoteinu be-yadeinu* [The customs of our ancestors are in our hands]. If our forefathers had certain customs, I try to get the custom back."

This remark is extracted from interviews of Finnish Jews our project conducted in 2019–2020 (see Fig. 1).[1] In the semi-structured interviews, the informants were asked about their family background, religious and culinary traditions, local customs [*minhagim*], and about being Jewish in Finland. Altogether 101 informants (out of the 1300 members in the Jewish congregations), all above the age of 18, were interviewed; 54 were female and 47 were male. A total of 25 percent of the informants were born abroad, showing that over the last three decades the Jewish community in Finland has undergone major demographic changes. New influences and increasing secularization have also contributed to the change or disappearance of many traditional Finnish Jewish customs. At a crossroads, some members opt for increasing adaptations to secular society and some for stricter Orthodoxy.[2] In this article, we analyze how the informants describe this situation by means of a theoretical framework developed in the study of lived religion. We ask: How have the customs changed in the everyday life of Finnish Jews? How do the informants negotiate this change with overarching structures of society, tradition, and institutions? What are their individual adaptations, experiences, and wishes?[3]

1 The interviews were conducted mostly in Finnish, Swedish, and English. To protect the privacy of our informants we have anonymized their identities: sometimes we address the persons simply as informants, sometimes more particularly with age group, gender, and background (Cantonist, Israeli, Russian etc.). All of the sensitive data have been analyzed in accordance with the guidelines of the *Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity* and of the *Åau Board for Research Ethics*. All the interviews will be stored by *Suomen Kirjallisuuden Seura* (Finnish Literature Society).

2 Elina Vuola, "Eletty juutalaisuus. Sukupuoli, uskonto ja kuuluminen suomenjuutalaisten naisten kokemuksissa," in *Eletty uskonto: arjen uskonnollisuudesta ja sen tutkimuksesta*, ed. Elina Vuola (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2020), 50.

3 In other Nordic countries, there have been two recent interview projects: "Negotiating Jewish Identity: Jewish Life in 21st Century Norway," and "Judisk och kvinna. Historiska och intersektionella perspektiv på judiska kvinnors liv och erfarenheter i Sverige under 1900-talet och 2000-talet." The results of the Norwegian project about the Orthodoxy of the congregations reflect our project; see Cora Alexa Døving (ed.), *Jødisk identitet, praksis og minnekultur* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2022). On previous research on the Finnish Jewish community, see Laura

1.1 *The History of the Finnish Jewish Community*

The Jewish community of Finland was founded by Jewish soldiers of the Russian army deployed in the Grand Duchy of Finland (1809–1917). Some of these soldiers were recruited as children and trained in Cantonist schools in Russia. Forcibly recruited as young boys and educated in Cantonist military schools, Jewish soldiers of the Czar's army were deployed in the Grand Duchy of Finland, an autonomous region belonging to Imperial Russia. After their discharge, some soldiers and their families were allowed to stay, founding the first Jewish congregation in Helsinki in 1858. Until the Shoah, Finnish Jews stayed in close contact with their families and networks in Eastern Europe (mainly Lithuania, Belarus, and today's Poland). This Russian military background is a frequently repeated trope in the history of the community. While not all Jewish soldiers stationed in Finland had attended a Cantonist school (and the system was abolished in 1856), all descendants of the pre-war Ashkenazic community are known as the 'Cantonists' even today. The term is emic, and frequently used by the members of the congregation, including the 'newcomers,' to refer to all Ashkenazic members of the Finnish Jewish community who originate from the old Jewish pre-war community. While aware that the appellation is not historically accurate, we use it when referring to the descendants of these Ashkenazic Jews.[4]

Jews residing in the Grand Duchy of Finland lived in fear of deportation back to their homelands in Russia, and their income was restricted to trade of second-hand clothes and goods until they received rights to Finnish citizenship in January 1918, one month after the declaration of the Finnish independence. Despite their insecure status and overt discrimination, upward mobility to middle class and what Laura Ekholm[5] has called the "proverbial 'rags-to-riches' story" were characteristic of the lives of the Finnish Jews, many of whom continued to work in the clothing trade and manufacture.

Finland fought against the Soviet Union as an ally of Nazi Germany during the Continuation War (1941–1944), forcing the Finnish Jews into an ambivalent position. While the community is one of the few Ashkenazic communities that

K. Ekholm et al., "Linguistic, Cultural and History-related Studies on Jews in Finland," *Scandinavian Jewish Studies* 27(1) (2016): 43–57, DOI: https://doi.org/10.30752/nj.67605.

4 Simo Muir, *Yiddish in Helsinki: Study of a Colonial Yiddish Dialect and Culture*. Studia Orientalia 100 (Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 2004); Simo Muir and Riikka Tuori, "'The Golden Chain of Pious Rabbis': The Origin and Development of Finnish Jewish Orthodoxy," *Scandinavian Jewish Studies* 30(1) (2019): 8–34, DOI: https://doi.org/10.30752/nj.77253.

5 Laura Ekholm, "Jews, Second-hand Trade and Upward Economic Mobility: Introducing the Ready-to-Wear Business in Industrializing Helsinki, 1880–1930," *Business History* 61(1) (2019): 73, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/00076791.2018.1546694.

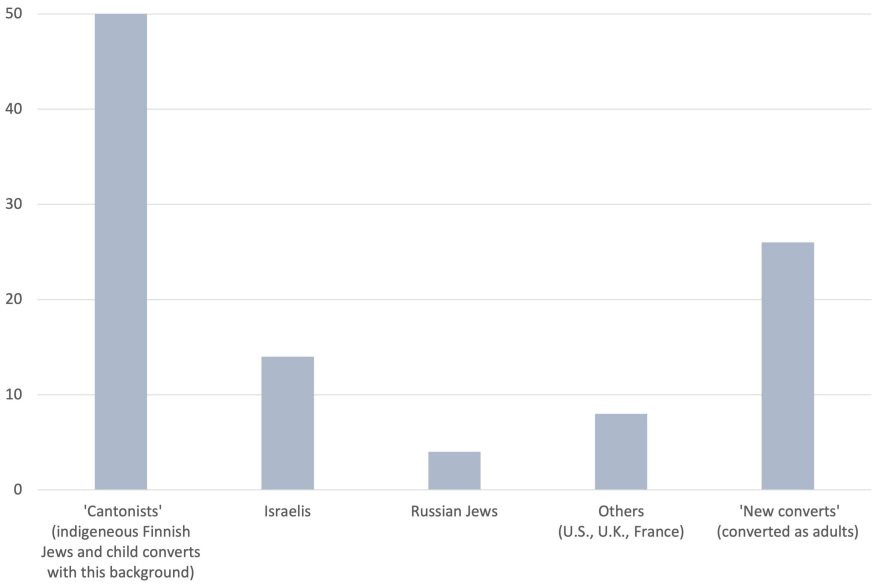

FIGURE 1 Various groups among the 101 interviewees of members of Jewish congregations in Helsinki and Turku: there are c. 1300 members in the two congregations. All informants of the interviews conducted in 2019–2020 were over 18 years old; 54 of them were female and 47 male.
GRAPH CREATED BY THE AUTHORS

was not destroyed in the Holocaust, Finnish Jews lost family members in the Holocaust, lived in fear of deportation to extermination camps, and had an emergency escape plan in case of a possible Nazi coup after peace negotiations with the Soviets. Although Jews with Finnish citizenship were not deported, several Jewish refugees and prisoners-of-war were turned over to the Nazis and murdered.[6]

After the war, the congregation in Helsinki was mostly Cantonist until the 1980s. The demographics of the community have since significantly changed, and members who now actively attend the synagogue are not the Cantonists, but 'newcomers' (typically Israelis from Sephardic or Mizraḥic background, immigrants from the former Soviet countries, and converts). During the 2000s, the community has rapidly become more diverse, and going through the same developments that are presently taking place everywhere in Finnish society.[7]

6 See, e.g., Muir, *Yiddish in Helsinki*.

7 See Riikka Tuori, "Being Jewish in Contemporary Finland: Reflections on Jewishness from Project Minhag Finland," in *Finnishness, Whiteness and Coloniality*, eds. Josephine Hoegaerts

1.2 *The Litvak Heritage*

One of the former rabbis of the Helsinki community, Moshe Edelmann (1938–2021), has noted that the Cantonist soldiers passed down the Finnish Jewish prayer order from generation to generation.[8] The Jewish communities in Helsinki and Turku represent a rare continuum of East European Litvak Judaism;[9] one of our informants describes the Finnish Jewish communities as a 'time capsule' that has preserved the life of Jewish communities destroyed in the Shoah or suppressed by Communism. Until the early 1980s, all rabbis in Finland were trained in European seminars, and the local prayer leaders represented traditional East European Judaism.

The reminiscences of the religious observance of past generations, especially of those born and raised between the two world wars, are unanimous. A Cantonist man in his seventies defines his parents as 'non-religious' but nevertheless 'traditional' (see Fig. 2). He recalls how his grandfather, who came to Finland as a soldier, went to the synagogue every day, wore traditional Jewish clothing, and had a beard. Similarly, an informant in his late twenties relates that the members born before the war, who were the most active congregants in the 1990s and 2000s, would drive a car on the Shabbat and eat non-kosher food but also possessed a basic knowledge of Judaism and knew how to perform in a traditional Ashkenazic synagogue. Only one of the older informants recounts that his mother, born in the 1920s, had strictly observed Shabbat and *kashrut*. Despite this relaxed observance, social control used to be strong, as one informant in his seventies puts it: "There were very clear borders of what one was allowed to do and say." For instance, attitudes towards intermarriages remained negative long after the war despite their prevalence.[10] One woman who had married a non-Jew in the early 1980s relates that some of her relatives refused to attend her wedding.

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et al. (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2022), 239–264, DOI: https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-17-10.

8 Moshe Edelmann, *The Traditional Order of Synagogue Service in the Jewish Community of Helsinki* (Helsinki: unpublished, 2001).

9 See more in Muir and Tuori, "The Golden Chain of Pious Rabbis."

10 On the development and the rise of intermarriage in the Helsinki Jewish community, see Mercédesz Czimbalmos, *Intermarriage, Conversion, and Jewish Identity in Contemporary Finland* (PhD diss., Åbo Akademi, 2021). For similar developments in Sweden, see Lars Dencik, "Kosher and the Christmas Tree: On Marriages between Jews and Non-Jews in Sweden, Finland, and Norway," in *Jewish Intermarriage around the World*, eds. S. Reinharz and S. DellaPergola (London: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 75–87, DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203787991-5.

FIGURE 2 'Cantonist' men praying in the minyan room of the Helsinki synagogue in 1988
PHOTO BY NISSE ANDERSSON (FINNISH JEWISH ARCHIVES, NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF FINLAND), USED COURTESY OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF HELSINKI

Many older informants recall the importance of parents and grandparents in the transmission of the Cantonist and Litvak traditions and religious practice.[11] Characteristic of this process, according to a man born in the 1940s, was to unquestioningly "do as your father has done." The Jewish Coeducational School in Helsinki and an afternoon *ḥeder* in Turku have also played an important role in the transmission of the local minhagim. Here too, though, older informants claim that they received little knowledge about why things were done the way they were.

11 Vuola ("Eletty juutalaisuus," 52) notes that grandparents are constantly mentioned in the interviews of Finnish Jewish women as important transmitters of tradition, which is exceptional in the European context. As Finnish Jews were not murdered during the Shoah, this generational chain remained intact.

1.3 *Religiosity and the Demography of the Finnish Jewish Community*

While Jewish congregations in Finland are formally Orthodox, there is a 'cognitive dissonance'—as one of the informants puts it—between the Orthodoxy of the synagogues and most of their members, who are secularized, mirroring the surrounding Nordic society with its low religiosity.[12] This gap has been widening: as we will show, the secular are becoming more secular, while the observant members of the community, who were always in a minority, are becoming more observant. We have detected among our informants three groups with conflicting interests: the secularized and typically intermarried *Cantonists*, the observant *new Orthodox*[13] (including the newly religious from various backgrounds and Orthodox Jews who have moved to Finland as adults), and the *new converts*, who have converted to Judaism without any familial background in Judaism. The two latter groups are typically committed to the Orthodox way of life and are actively involved in the religious functions of the community. Still, representatives of the first group, the *Cantonists*, continue to hold positions of power in Jewish associations and the board of the community.

Our division reflects the significant changes in the demographics of the Finnish Jewish community: in the 1960s the congregations consisted mostly of the Ashkenazic 'Cantonists' and their (increasingly Finnish, often converted) partners. In the 1970s and 1980s several Israelis, many of them from a Sephardic background, joined the community after marrying Finns. After 1991, several Jewish families arrived from the former Soviet countries. Finally, over the last two decades the number of converts from non-Jewish backgrounds has risen.

The *Cantonists* typically straddle nostalgia for the Ashkenazic synagogue services of the past and embrace Finnish liberal values. Several informants describe the Cantonists as 'missing' from the synagogue. A minyan with a Cantonist majority is now a rare sight, with most active attendants either Israelis or new 'Finnish converts.' A Cantonist man in his eighties claimed that the absence of Cantonists is due to the secularizing trends but also to the fact that the non-Jewish spouses of the Cantonists no longer convert to Judaism.[14]

12 See more in Teemu Taira et al., "The Nordic and Baltic Countries," in *The Cambridge History of Atheism*, eds. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 898–917, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108562324.049.

13 Orthodoxy includes a variety of orientations from Ḥaredi/Ultra-Orthodox to Modern Orthodox; see Benjamin Brown, "Orthodox Judaism," in *The Blackwell Companion to Judaism*, eds. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publisher, 2003), 311–333. Most of them are represented among the group we call the 'New Orthodox' among the Finnish Jewish community.

14 This may reflect changing gender roles: it is no longer self-evident that a non-Jewish woman marrying a Jewish man will convert. Men converted only rarely; see Mercédesz

According to him, this reflects the decline of religiosity in Nordic societies: many see Judaism more as a marker of their cultural identity and ethnicity.[15] Other Cantonists confirmed that many elements of strict Orthodoxy are not suitable for living in modern Finnish society.

New Orthodox is a broad appellation for a recently emerged stratum of members who maintain Orthodox traditions in their personal lives.[16] Their backgrounds are varied: some are young(ish) Cantonists who have rediscovered their Jewish identity in the Orthodox framework (Heb. *baʿalei teshuvah*). Some have married Finnish Jews and moved to Finland as adults while holding on to the Orthodox way of life. Some have turned toward Jewish tradition through the influence of the Finnish branch of Chabad Lubavitch,[17] or through the religious Zionist Orthodoxy offered by Bnei Akiva emissaries recently employed by the Helsinki congregation. The Orthodoxy for the new Orthodox "involves not only a system of belief and religious observance but also a set of cultural practices":[18] speech patterns peppered with Yiddish and Hebrew words, shared world-views, and heightened emphasis on Jewish education. A few Finnish new Orthodox have even attended a yeshivah or seminary abroad.

New converts have joined the community without any previous Jewish family background. Many of them are Finns with Christian background, and their numbers have risen during the last decade. Some of them have converted in Finland either under Rabbi Moshe Edelmann or, since 2012, under the latest Chief Rabbi. Some have converted abroad in a Reform or a Conservative framework (in the U.S., the U.K., or Germany).[19] Some of the latter have later had an additional Orthodox conversion either in Finland or abroad. A few new converts are couples, who have decided to go through the conversion process together (see Fig. 3).

Czimbalmos, "Laws, Doctrines and Practice: A Study of Intermarriages and the Ways They Challenged the Jewish Community of Helsinki from 1930 to 1970," *Scandinavian Jewish Studies* 30(1) (2019): 44, DOI: https://doi.org/10.30752/nj.77260.

15 This is discussed also by Vuola, "Eletty juutalaisuus," 41.

16 This turn towards 'the right,' to observant Judaism, is a common phenomenon in Western Jewish communities discussed, e.g., by Haim Soloveitchik, "Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy," *Tradition* 28(4) (1994): 64–130.

17 A married couple representing Chabad arrived in Finland in 2003 and have now offered Chabad activities in Helsinki for two decades; for more, see Mercédesz Czimbalmos and Riikka Tuori, "Chabad on Ice: Jewish Encounters with Fundamentalism in Finland," *Approaching Religion* 12(2) (2022): 38–58, DOI: https://doi.org/10.30664/ar.112800.

18 Sarah Bunin Benor, *Becoming Frum: How Newcomers Learn the Language and Culture of Orthodox Judaism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

19 Reform and Conservative Jews are accepted as members in the Helsinki and Turku congregations.

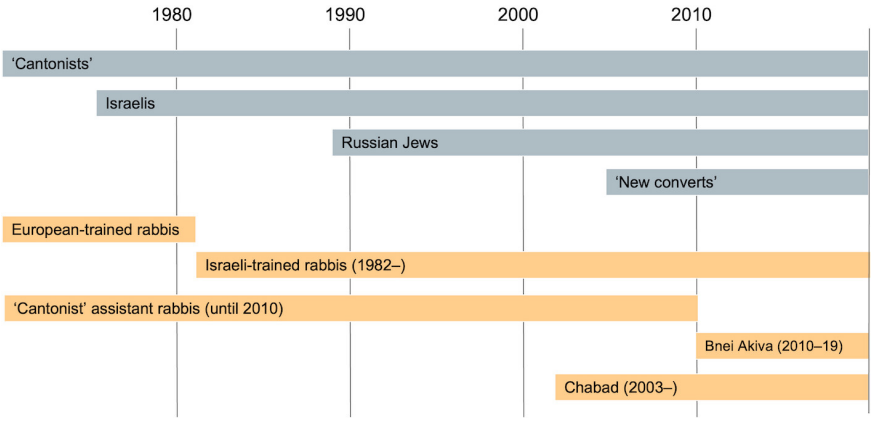

FIGURE 3 Demographic changes and the religious workers in the Jewish community of Helsinki between 1970–2020, as reflected by the informants; see Muir and Tuori, "The Golden Chain of Pious Rabbis"
GRAPH CREATED BY THE AUTHORS

1.4 *Being, Knowing, Doing in Lived Religion*

We study the narratives of 'Cantonists,' 'new Orthodox,' and 'new converts' by means of an analytical model,[20] developed in the study of lived religion.[21] This model examines everyday lived religion in an ongoing dialogue between three interdependent modalities of 'being,' 'knowing,' and 'doing.' In the modality of *being*, the focus is on the changing processes of identification in the traditional and modern forms of religiosity, and within personally modified

20 Ruth Illman, "Researching Vernacular Judaism: Reflections on Theory and Method," *Nordisk judaistik/Scandinavian Jewish Studies* 30(1) (2019): 91–108, DOI: https://doi.org/10.30752/nj.77287; Ruth lllman and Mercédesz Czimbalmos, "Knowing, Being, and Doing Religion," *Temenos* 56(2) (2020): 171–191, DOI: https://doi.org/10.33356/temenos.97275. A similar model has also been used by Warburg in her quantitative survey on the Baha'i in Denmark; see Margit Warburg, *Citizens of the World: A History and Sociology of the Baha'is from a Globalisation Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

21 Vernacular religion is a term first developed by Primiano as the study of "religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it"; see Leonard N. Primiano, "Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife," *Western Folklore* 54(1) (1995): 44, DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/1499910. On the study of lived religion among Finnish Jews, see Illman, "Researching Vernacular Judaism." See also Robert Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion," in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 3–21; Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Marion Bowman and Ülo Valk (eds.), *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012), 1–22.

practices. Diverse identities with their gendered, religious, ethnic, and cultural dimensions are in constant interaction in the daily lives of individuals. *Knowing* entails acquaintance with certain key theological 'truths,' which an individual must master in order to belong to a community and to be accepted by it. This modality is further deepened by the presence of emotions and embodied practices. The modality of *doing* includes not just ritual practices but the mundane doings of everyday life, as well as acts that confirm one's belongingness to a community. This modality also fosters religious subjecthood, for example, how a person may choose to act within the historical and traditional framework of their community as well as how they follow its norms.[22]

In our analysis, *Cantonists* represent 'being,' *new Orthodox* 'knowing,' and *new converts* 'doing.' We use this model to illuminate the dynamics and recent developments within the Finnish Jewish community that have not previously been under scrutiny. All three modalities are tied together by the forces of continuity, change, and context, but as we apply the model to our data, one modality has ontological significance for each group.[23] The groups will thus be analyzed in a specific context against the backdrop of the indigenous Cantonist heritage and the change it is challenged by.

2 Life-Cycle Rituals of the Cantonists

Despite changes in the demographics of the Finnish Jewish community, Cantonists have retained their positions of power by 'being' (and being perceived as) the original core members of the community. They do not question their Jewishness and its authenticity:[24] many Cantonists have a strong Jewish identity, and they do not have to be observant in order to prove their Jewishness. In addition to Judaism and Jewish tradition, they strongly identify with the norms of the surrounding society, which often challenge the traditional observance

22 Illman and Czimbalmos, "Knowing, Being, and Doing Religion," 177–179.

23 These groups are intertwined in a myriad of ways, and identity boundaries between both groups and individuals are in constant flux. Gender, age, and life stage also play a role in the variety of their experiences: for example, many of the new Orthodox are *ba'alei teshuvah* from Cantonist families; many Cantonists and new Orthodox are converts, too, although typically they have converted as children; new converts are not only 'doing' and performing their Judaism but have acquired extensive knowledge about Judaism.

24 On the concept of authenticity as an emotion in the study of lived religion, see Zev Eleff, *Authentically Orthodox: A Tradition-Bound Faith in American Life* (Detroit, MI: Wayne University Press, 2020), 1–5, 20–22.

of Jewish law and practice. In this negotiation, they create innovative ways of doing their Judaism, which sometimes differ from traditional Finnish Jewish customs.[25]

Secularized and assimilated, many Cantonists rarely attend synagogue services apart from the major holidays or keep Shabbat, or (strict) kashrut at home. The Cantonists emphasize that they do not actually know Jewish practice that well. However, 'being' Jewish, they inevitably come into contact with religion in life-cycle rituals such as brit milah, bar or bat mitzvah [Jewish coming-of-age ritual], weddings, and funerals. In the next section we analyze how the Cantonists describe their relationship with brit milah and bar/bat mitzvah, which were discussed the most in the interviews, and how they negotiate their multiple identifications with traditional Jewish customs in this context.

2.1 *Brit Milah*

Circumcision has caused many debates in the Finnish Jewish communities partly owing to the high number of intermarriages. Compared to for instance the United States, boys are rarely circumcised as babies in Finland and attitudes generally are negative towards the procedure. Many informants note that their spouses initially felt uncomfortable with circumcising their sons but with time grew accustomed to the idea. Some informants report strong opposition to it from the non-Jewish side of the family. Many of the Cantonist informants consider brit milah as a covenant between God and Abraham, the banning of which would be an act of antisemitism, but others are more reserved and even openly critical.

Attitudes towards circumcision were more lenient a few decades ago. A Cantonist informant born in the 1950s tells that when his children were small in the 1980s, the topic was not discussed or debated, and although his non-Jewish spouse was slightly uneasy, their sons were circumcised. Circumcision was, as he says, "self-evident." A converted woman in her mid-eighties remembers that before their marriage her Cantonist spouse had already required that if they had a son, that he would be circumcised. She thought, circumcision is a Jewish custom, and that she would consent even though she was frightened by the idea. As the children were raised to be Jewish, she became accustomed to

25 On ritual innovations in contemporary Judaism, see Vanessa Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2007); on similar innovations among Finnish Jews, see Illman and Czimbalmos, "Knowing, Being, and Doing Religion," 184–185. On negotiating the challenges of everyday life, see the articles in Simon Bronner (ed.), *Revisioning Ritual: Jewish Traditions in Transition* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011).

it. In some families, the attitude towards circumcision has remained positive. A woman from a Cantonist background in her mid-twenties said that circumcision had always been important in her family. She sees it as the "first bond between the boy and God." She feels that both ethically and medically "there are more pros than cons."

The interviews indicate that the attitudes towards circumcision today are more varied and in some cases negative. A Cantonist woman in her early fifties said she did not have her son circumcised because for her, religion is more about spirituality and does not require concrete procedures; her son 'being' Jewish is enough for her. She had talked with an Israeli rabbi who had pointed out that brit milah is not a prerequisite for being Jewish, but just one mitzvah among many. For a Cantonist man in his late forties, circumcision is about the physical integrity of the child: "Why cut a healthy child just because it is said in an old textbook or by a silly old man?" He sees circumcision as one of the most challenging issues facing the Jewish community. The atmosphere regarding boys' circumcision (often debated together with girls' circumcision in other cultures) has become increasingly negative, especially in the Scandinavian countries. Two informants born in the 1950s tell that they argued with their non-Jewish relatives over circumcising their sons: the relatives saw circumcision as child molestation and "a crime against boys." Partly for this reason, some informants want to have the brit milah performed as a medical operation in a clinical setting, rather than at home with a surgeon and the rabbi as has been the custom among Finnish Jews. Other informants who identify with the ideas of modern psychology also find circumcision problematic. A Cantonist man in his late sixties relates that he became convinced that circumcision traumatizes babies. When his children were born in the early 1980s, he decided not to circumcise them; as a result, the children were not accepted into the Jewish kindergarten in Helsinki.

Some try to negotiate circumcision with gender equality: a Cantonist informant stresses that not accepting uncircumcised boys in the kindergarten and the school does not promote equality. Children are put into a different position as uncircumcised boys are not given a chance to become acquainted with Judaism like all girls are. Such critical and widespread attitudes toward circumcision have recently forced the Jewish Community of Helsinki to relax its rules concerning boys' admittance to the kindergarten and the Jewish Coeducational School.[26] After years of debating the issue in the Council of the Jewish Community and consulting Orthodox rabbis abroad, circumcision has ceased to be a prerequisite since 2018.

26 Czimbalmos, "Laws, Doctrines and Practice," 9.

Some informants try to consider brit milah from the boy's own perspective, and when the right time or age would be to undergo circumcision. A man from a Russian-Finnish background in his early forties believes that for boys circumcision is obviously a big part of being Jewish: "I think it's a good thing to do when you are a baby, and that not circumcising the boy would actually close many doors from them and I think it's a pity." Also in favor of performing the circumcision on a baby boy is a Cantonist woman in her late fifties, who believes that the uncircumcised boys born in mixed marriages might have a hard time choosing between Christianity and Judaism. Nevertheless, a Cantonist man born in the 1940s believes that the boy should be able to make the decision by himself, and that for someone who is uncircumcised the congregation should not categorically stop him from joining the community: "We can't afford to be that strict." Nevertheless, he sees that ideally, by the age of bar mitzvah these boys should be circumcised.

2.2 *Bar and Bat Mitzvah*

Bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies are popular among the otherwise secularized Cantonist informants. Men of all ages share memories of the ritual and training for it, and most Cantonist women under the age of 55 have had a bat mitzvah. Cantonist children whose mother is not Jewish and especially those who attend the Jewish school typically convert prior to the ceremony. Bar/bat mitzvah is a gendered ritual that reminds the liberal-oriented Cantonists of perceived inequalities in Orthodoxy. Customs surrounding the relatively recent bat mitzvah ceremony, in particular, have changed from a long liberal phase of girls singing the Psalms on the bimah, in the synagogue back to the Orthodox separation between the sexes in the 2010s.

Several male Cantonist informants born before the mid-1960s describe their bar mitzvah training as practically oriented. They had learned a haftarah, but none of the boys would read the entire parashah. They were taught 'the basics' about the *'aliyah le-torah* [call to go up to the bimah] for a part of Torah reading, and how to wear *tefillin*, but not the wider contexts and meaning of the texts. With time, the effort and time put into the ceremony has diminished. Many boys have settled for reciting only the Torah prayers during the weekdays in the minyan room, a smaller room for prayers in the synagogue building. One Cantonist man told that his son who was born in the 1990s did not want a big ceremony: "He went one morning to the minyan and read the Torah prayers, which is the minimum to bar mitzvah so to say, and that was that." Another informant told us that her son who had his bar mitzvah in the early 2000s, "learned his entire portion of the haftarah, which is not often done here anymore."

Bat mitzvah rituals for girls were launched in Finland in the late 1970s, and their popularity steadily grew in the 1980s.[27] As is typical in Orthodox communities, aliyah is not an option for women. In the interviews, Cantonist women vaguely remember their study materials: two or three Psalms in Hebrew, or *Ani ma'amin* [I believe] prayer. A Cantonist woman in her mid-thirties says that she learned "songs and readings" by heart and enjoyed being part of an important ritual but had forgotten what the words meant. The bat mitzvah girls went up to the bimah to recite the Psalms, which was defined by one Cantonist woman in her late twenties as a unique combination of "modern and traditional elements." After 2010, with the hiring of the Israeli Bnei Akiva emissaries in 2010, this Finnish Jewish bat mitzvah custom was put to an end, and now girls give a speech, not on the bimah, but from the speaker's podium at the front of the synagogue or in the auditorium of the Jewish school. Whereas most of the Cantonist informants were used to girls performing on the bimah, some foreign-born informants remember finding it strange to witness girls giving talks on the bimah when it was still possible.

A few female informants have mixed feelings about the gendered aspects of the ritual, for example, a Cantonist woman born in the 1950s tells how she was not allowed to enter the minyan room during their sons' practice for his bar mitzvah in Helsinki. She felt that this was disrespectful and "all about form and not substance." A Cantonist woman in her late thirties says that losing the ability to roam freely in the synagogue after her bat mitzvah had felt unfair and alienating. Another Cantonist woman in her twenties tells how she decided to skip the ritual altogether as her *bobe*, grandmother, had never had one: the tradition came to Finland "only forty years ago," and "it is more important to boys than to girls."

In the interviews of the Cantonists, life-cycle rituals, like brit milah and bar and bat mitzvah are emphasized because they represent (occasionally the only) contact they have with 'doing' Judaism. For these informants, life-cycle rituals emerge as their major conduit in 'being' Jewish in a secularized society. Modern secular values and ethics challenge these rituals, especially in the case of the circumcision of boys, and some members in the community have become more critical towards the practice. In the case of the 'knowing' and 'doing' of bar mitzvah, there has been a tendency to reduce the ritual to the

27 This seems to reflect the development in global Jewish communities; on the swift adaptation of the bat mitzvah in Orthodox communities from the 1970s onwards in the U.S., see Eleff, *Authentically Orthodox*, 59–61.

'bare minimum,' and on the other hand, many members of the community want to restore the right for the girls to perform their bat mitzvah in the male-dominated sphere.

3 The New Orthodox Challenging the Tradition

The *new Orthodox*, which in our analysis represent the modality of 'knowing,' are *baʿalei teshuvah* from Cantonist families or foreign-born, recently joined members of the community. They are active synagogue-goers and highly invested in 'knowing' Judaism, sometimes even imposing their knowledge on others. They often search for a halakhic background for old Cantonist minhagim that challenge them. For them, "[p]erformance is no longer, as in a traditional society, replication of what one has seen, but implementation of what one knows."[28] 'Knowing' in the study of lived religion does not only refer to abstract knowledge about Judaism, but also to its embodied practice. People 'know' their tradition "through the body, emotions, experiences, practises."[29] The new Orthodox informants incline towards stricter observance, for example, in kashrut and *ṭaharat ha-mishpaḥah*. Over the past twenty years, two international Orthodox organizations, the American Chabad Lubavitch and the Israeli Bnei Akiva, have spearheaded the turn toward stringency in Finnish Orthodoxy. These organizations represent different traditions and ways of knowing Judaism that have challenged the Ashkenazic-Cantonist traditions. In the next section we analyze how our informants describe the turn towards stricter Orthodoxy and how they negotiate this change with the old Finnish Jewish tradition, especially in the context of synagogue practices.

3.1 *New Orthodoxy: Knowing Tradition, Pursuing Authenticity*

A division between the strictly Orthodox and the traditionalist-secular has taken place among the members of Helsinki's Jewish community over the last twenty years and has become one of its biggest changes. A Cantonist man in his seventies relates that the congregation used to be more liberal, but that people

28 Soloveitchik, "Rupture and Reconstruction," 72. As we will see below, this has caused friction among the Cantonist members of the community; Soloveitchik aptly continues: "For many of those raised in the old order, the result is baffling, at times infuriating, as they discover that habits of a lifetime no longer suffice. Increasingly, they sense that their religious past, not to speak of that of their parents and teachers, is being implicitly challenged, and, on occasion, not just implicitly." Ibid., 73.

29 Illman and Czimbalmos, "Knowing, Being, and Doing Religion," 178.

coming 'from outside' steered the congregation towards stricter Orthodoxy. The outsiders referred to are mainly Israelis, but there are also *ba'alei teshuvah* from among Cantonist ranks as well as new converts. A Cantonist woman born in the late 1950s points out that many young families are among 'the blacks' [Yid. *shvartse*],[30] as many Cantonists call the new Orthodox. An observant woman who arrived in Helsinki in the late 2010s with her husband, estimates that the number of religious people who observe kashrut and Shabbat has since grown. This, while the Cantonists are almost entirely absent from weekday minyanim and regular Shabbat services. Even during the high holidays, the synagogue is rarely as full as it used to be up until the 1990s.

Since the arrival in the 2010s of the Israeli Bnei Akiva, an Israeli-trained Orthodox rabbi, and a growing number of observant congregants, changes toward stricter Orthodoxy have taken place in the community.[31] On the premises of the synagogue, school, and community center, only *pat Yisrael* and *chalav Yisrael* products are permitted,[32] while previously most products were allowed. Also, during conversion, if a boy or a man has been circumcised as a child, he will need to undergo *tippat dam*, where the penis is pricked with an insulin pen; earlier, circumcision without additional rituals was deemed sufficient. With the growing number of observant women, the local mikveh has been renovated under the supervision of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. As women attend the Kiddush after the Shabbat service and the weekly minyanim more actively, a mobile *meḥitzah* has been introduced to the minyan room. Women have also requested more instruction about observance, especially regarding Shabbat and kashrut. According to one Cantonist man born in the 1950s, previous nonissues such as the serving of wine by Jews alone, and banning the tearing of toilet paper during Shabbat have gained prominence.

Besides introducing stricter minhagim, the new Orthodox are challenging existing customs and how the Cantonist 'know' the Halakhah. The interviews were conducted against the backdrop of an ongoing dispute about the order of the rise to read the Torah on the bimah. Traditionally in Helsinki, the first reading was given to a Kohen, then to a Levite, and then to the rest, the Israelites. If there was no Kohen, which was often the case in Finland, the first reading

30 The Yiddish word *shvartse* and its Finnish equivalent *mustat* in this context refer to the black suits and hats worn by Ḥaredi men.

31 As mentioned above, this reflects wider Jewish international trends: Soloveitchik has noted that there is a general trend towards stringency in Judaism "in both lay and rabbinic circles." Soloveitchik, "Rupture and Reconstruction," 72.

32 *Pat Yisrael* applies to baked goods for which a rabbinical supervisor has participated in the baking process; *cholav Yisrael* applies to milk or derivative products for which a rabbinical supervisor has continuously supervised the milking process.

would be given to a Levite, and subsequent readings to the rest. However, this Helsinki minhag is not a common practice and, as one of the new Orthodox informants claims, even non-halakhic: if there is no Kohen, the first reading should go to the Israelite.[33] A convert in his fifties comments on the Helsinki custom: "It has just always been passed from one *gabe* to the next. Is it a tradition or a misunderstanding? It's hard to tell." The new Orthodox seem to lack the emotional attachment that the Cantonists have to the "customs of their ancestors." For some, the old tradition appears to be unnecessary "peer pressure from the dead," as a new Orthodox woman in her early twenties puts it. Here, the different ways of 'knowing' Judaism—the vernacular and the halakhic—collide.[34]

Many Cantonist informants oppose the trend toward stricter observance as interfering with the old customs, and the social control that the new Orthodox yield in the community. According to a congregant in his late thirties, the young do not come to the synagogue anymore because it is "too religious." Another informant had heard a Cantonist woman complain that pat Yisrael was "killing [her] Judaism." Some informants express positive views: a convert in her late fifties sees the future of the community in the active and observant new members. And a Cantonist *baʿal teshuvah* in his late thirties claims that Orthodoxy is more sustainable than the loosely observant Reform or Conservative Judaism.

3.2 *Israelis: Introducing New Customs*

Over the past two decades, Israelis have become increasingly visible and influential in the Jewish community of Helsinki. The Israelis are a diverse group, including many with Sephardic backgrounds. Some Cantonist informants express prejudice against non-Ashkenazic Israelis, claiming that their behavior is not European. Others note that Israelis settling in Finland tend to become more religious. An Israeli woman explains that in Israel religion is institutionalized and she would fight against it, taking on liberal and democratic values, but in Finland, she worries about religion losing its place in society. An Israeli man in his thirties says that he wants to show himself as a Jew in Finland more than in Israel. In contrast, an Israeli in his late fifties with an Ashkenazic background says that many Israelis avoid the community because they equate it with reli-

33 On modern halakhic debates on the order of *ʿaliyah le-torah*, see Ari Z. Zivotofsky, "What's the Truth about … Giving a Levi the First Aliyah?," *Jewish Action*, Summer 2014, https://jewishaction.com/religion/jewish-law/whats-truth-giving-levi-first-aliyah/, accessed 10 November 2023.

34 See Illman and Czimbalmos, "Knowing, Being, and Doing Religion," 17.

giosity. Some informants estimate that over a hundred Israeli families living in Finland have never joined the community.

The growing number of Israelis has started to challenge the Ashkenazic *nusaḥ* of the synagogue. Some Ashkenazic melodies have been replaced with Sephardic ones, with the contribution of Bnei Akiva. An element from the Sephardic prayer order, the liturgical poem *El nora ʻalilah*, has been adopted at the beginning of the *neʻilah*.[35] This *piyyuṭ* is sung by an Israeli congregant and is accompanied by other men. Adding this emotive song to the liturgy has been significant to the Sephardic members of the community. Occasionally, an Israeli man with Yemenite heritage has been allowed to read parts of the Torah in Yemenite style. Some Israeli congregants, especially those who have moved to Finland recently, observe Sephardic customs alongside the Ashkenazic nusaḥ. For instance, an informant in his forties has noticed that when the kaddish starts, those who are sitting remain seated and those who stand remain standing (according to the Ashkenazic custom everyone is expected to stand). He considers it a deliberate demonstration that the person follows Sephardic minhagim. The informant has also noticed that Israelis, who are occasionally better acquainted with liturgy and halakhic sources, often question the local minhagim.

Many see the Israeli influence on religious and communal life as a positive development. For instance, a Cantonist woman in her fifties maintains that the Israeli 'newcomers' have revived the synagogue services because they know the synagogue order better than the Cantonists. Others are more reserved or oppose changes in the old Cantonist traditions. A Cantonist man in his late thirties relates that when he was the gabbai of the synagogue, he was very adamant about keeping the Ashkenazic nusaḥ intact. Some Sephardic Israelis find this difficult: an Israeli woman says that she does not feel at home in an Ashkenazic synagogue: "It's completely different! I don't know, the *niggunim*, the this, the that, everything was really weird." The cognitive, embodied, and sensory ways she 'knows' from her own heritage are in conflict with the local tradition. According to a convert in her fifties, some Israelis have even left the congregation because they felt that their needs have not been taken into account.

35 Adding *El nora ʻalilah* to the Yom Kippur service has been a general trend in Ashkenazic communities and has even been included in Ashkenazic prayer books; see Eric L. Friedland, "Sephardic Influences on the American Jewish Liturgy," *Shofar* 11(1) (1992): 12–21, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/sho.1992.0073.

3.3 *Bnei Akiva Tipping the Balance: Change and Resistance*

After the retirement of the deputy rabbi in 2002 and the Ashkenazic cantor in 2010, there was a vacuum in the religious education offered by the Helsinki community. At the same time, Chabad was attracting community members to its events. To fill the vacuum, in 2010, the Helsinki community decided to employ emissaries of the Israeli religious Zionist youth organization Bnei Akiva.

Many informants describe the Bnei Akiva emissaries as agents of a surprisingly rapid change, especially for the liturgical traditions of the community. One Cantonist informant remembers how the previous cantor always sang the local repertoire in Ashkenazic style and how after his retirement, the Bnei Akiva emissary from Israel "changed all the melodies." This represents a clash in different ways of 'knowing' traditions. Several Cantonist informants in their seventies maintain that because of these new melodies, they feel alienated when visiting the synagogue. One of them describes the synagogue services as 'exuberant,' a strange departure from the solemn Finnish-Ashkenazic services. Another older Cantonist man living abroad disapprovingly identifies the new music as popular Carlebach melodies.[36] Younger informants are more positive: a Cantonist informant in his late thirties notes that older Cantonists themselves have not kept up the old Finnish tradition. Several younger, new Orthodox informants are content with the increase of music, singing, and more open expression of emotions in the synagogue. Many of them were already familiar with the Bnei Akiva melodies through their transnational connections.

While Bnei Akiva was active in removing the bat mitzvah girls from the bimah following the Modern Orthodox line, the emissaries also made some of the local, male-dominated celebrations more family-oriented. In the early 2010s, the emissaries introduced an innovation whereby the Torah scroll on Simchat Torah and the scroll of Esther on Purim were carried up to the women's section in the synagogue. According to one female informant, this created a scandal and fierce opposition among "the local older gents," and hence the innovation was discontinued. A young observant man says that the opponents are not themselves religious, but, rather, emotionally connected to the old Finnish Jewish synagogue customs.

36 On Shlomo Carlebach and his influence on liturgy, see Eliyahu Schleifer, "Current Trends of Liturgical Music in the Ashkenazi Synagogue," *The World of Music* 37(1) (1995): 59–72; Sam Weiss, "Carlebach, Neo-Hasidic Music and Liturgical Practice," *Journal of Synagogue Music* 34 (2009): 55–75.

Before Bnei Akiva, the Helsinki congregation had always followed the Ashkenazic custom, whereby the Torah is read on the bimah while the ḥazzan recites prayers by the *ʿamud* [lectern] in the front. In 2010, the Bnei Akiva emissary began to pray on the bimah following Sephardic custom. Active new Orthodox informants, one from a Cantonist background, recently decided to reintroduce the original Ashkenazic custom. This return to local tradition caused confusion among active synagogue-goers, mostly new Orthodox members and converts, who probably had a shallower emotional connection with Ashkenazic minhagim. New melodies taught by Bnei Akiva to school children have swiftly taken root: a young observant informant had recently sung songs with melodies from his childhood in the 1990s, but none of the children recognized them.

For almost a decade, Bnei Akiva introduced Israeli innovations to a number of local customs. Their actions stirred up dismay, especially among older Cantonists, as well as opposition from a few observant members who wanted to retain the original Finnish-Jewish "customs of the ancestors." For a few informants in their early twenties, Bnei Akiva has also become a significant influencer in bolstering their Jewish identity. One young informant, however, was highly critical of Bnei Akiva's methods and felt that their strong Modern Orthodox line was not a good match for a community with so many non-observant members. In 2019, the community ended its contract with Bnei Akiva and, instead, hired a new deputy rabbi of Finnish background and a Litvak yeshivah education.

4 New Converts—Which Traditions Will They Follow?

The boundaries between converts and non-converts are fluid: many Cantonist informants, for example, converted as children. In what follows, the focus is on those informants who have converted with no prior family background in Judaism, although several have married a Jew before, during, or after converting. Recently, the number of such converts has risen significantly. New converts of Finnish Christian background, alongside the new Orthodox, have become more visible than Cantonists during the synagogue services. They have also become more vocal in the administration of the congregations, although power still rests in the hands of those of Cantonist heritage. This significant change has occurred over the last decade and must be viewed as a phenomenon specific to Finland.[37]

37 The prominence of new converts has also been noticed by Vuola, "Eletty juutalaisuus," 50.

The tendency to be more observant than those born Jewish is typical for converts.[38] In the interviews, the new converts often emphasize their observance of Halakhah: they are 'doing' Judaism in order to 'become' Jewish. Yet they constantly face suspicion over the validity of their Judaism. For us, new converts represent the modality of 'doing' religion, which "is more than 'being' religious: it is a project of 'becoming' through practice."[39] Obviously, they also work hard to 'know' Judaism during the process of conversion. However, the converts who were interviewed were typically the most active in the congregation, whereas after conversion a significant number of converts drop out of the community.[40] In what follows, we concentrate on how new converts describe their conversion process, their religiosity at home, and observance of Jewish customs (Shabbat, daily prayers, kashrut), and how they identify themselves.

4.1 *Denomination and* Giyur

Several informants had initially converted in a non-Orthodox framework because they had been denied conversion by the local chief rabbi who retired in 2012. Later on, some went through additional *giyurim*, the last one typically in an Orthodox framework. A male convert in his fifties, for example, had converted to Reform Judaism in the early 2000s, but had an Orthodox conversion in Helsinki under the new rabbi with a more lenient attitude towards conversion. He had already been circumcised during his first conversion, but for the Orthodox conversion he underwent the pinprick ritual. The informant points out that he went through the Reform conversion only for the lack of alternatives, and that he had observed Orthodox Halakhah the whole time. The fact that several informants have undergone multiple conversion processes—some as many as three—may reflect their concern for being perceived as 'authentically' Jewish in an Orthodox congregation, perhaps also under pressure from the actively Orthodox element of the Finnish Jewish community. In addition, the discovery of a biological connection seems to be an important source of validation. Several converts relate that they have uncovered an unexpected Jewish connection, typically during or after conversion: a hidden Jewish identity of a family member or results of a DNA test pointing to Jewish ancestry.

38 In the case of *ba'alei teshuvah*, Benor in her *Becoming Frum* calls this *hyper-accommodation*: "Many BTs [ba'alei teshuvah] take on cultural practices with great enthusiasm, sometimes even going beyond the norms of FFBs [*frum* from birth] ..."

39 Illman and Czimbalmos, "Knowing, Being, and Doing Religion," 180.

40 Kira Zaitsev, *Conversion to Judaism: Finnish Gerim on Giyur and Jewishness* (MA thesis, University of Helsinki, 2019).

Since the arrival of the new rabbi in 2012, the conversion process in Finland has become more open, and many informants pursued conversion only after his appointment. Recent converts describe their giyurim in Helsinki as speedy. A young female convert describes having contacted the Helsinki congregation, informing them of her interest in converting. She then attended the rabbi's weekly classes for a year and a half. The final stages, which she called "the actual conversion," included interviews in Helsinki, personal essays, meetings abroad with a *bet din*, and an immersion in the mikveh. The same woman describes Cantonists, Israelis, and converts as 'cliques,' and practically all the people she knows are also converts, most of them very active in the congregation. She finds the active presence of converts to be a unique Finnish phenomenon compared to Jewish congregations she has visited elsewhere.

Another female convert notes that converts no longer face the exclusion in the community that they once had. One male convert, however, had encountered some doubt by Cantonists about the presence of converts in the synagogue. On the other hand, some of the Cantonist informants are very positive about the new salience of the converts. One said that the life of the congregation will wither if the congregation responded negatively to conversions.

4.2 *Observance among Converts*

A Cantonist man in his early seventies notes that most of the converts he knows have a charismatic Christian background,[41] which makes them "very religious, and in a strict way." He adds that despite their low numbers, they wield a great deal of influence on the community. One informant estimates that most of the twenty-five persons who attend synagogue services are either Israelis or converts. A female convert in her twenties told us that she observes Shabbat and kashrut and prays three times a day, and a male convert in his early forties told us that he prays daily and attends the weekday minyanim and synagogue services every Shabbat.

Some of the interviewed converts are less strict in their observance. A convert in her mid-fifties, who considers herself Modern Orthodox and prays daily, says that she visits the synagogue once a month but travels there by bus, adding that "quite a few here do so." A convert in his fifties puts on tefillin daily, keeps kosher, and attends the synagogue services regularly, but drives to the synagogue on Shabbat. A convert in his mid-forties says that his work makes it

41 As opposed to the Finnish mainstream Lutheranism, which is usually highly secularized. This seems to be a common phenomenon among the Finnish converts; see Zaitsev, *Conversion to Judaism*.

challenging to attend the synagogue services regularly, but he attends the Shabbat morning services once in two months. A strictly observant convert points out that most converts do not attend the Monday and Thursday prayers. These examples show that some of the converts adapt their 'doing' according to the norms of the Cantonist members of the community.

Some converts have created their own ways of 'doing' Judaism. A woman in her early fifties, who defines herself as neither secular nor strictly religious explains that instead of visiting the synagogue on Shabbat she reads the weekly Torah portion in translation at home. She aims thereby to achieve a "deeper understanding of the whole text," which she can grasp. Another convert maintains that she does not need the synagogue or the congregation to 'do' her Judaism. She creates her own customs: "I sing through certain texts and because I just love the singing. It's not the traditional melodies or anything like that. I just let it come out." For both informants it was more important to find a meaningful way to practice their Judaism than to comply with expected norms.

4.3 *Negotiating Ashkenazic and Sephardic Customs*

Even though most of the converts have converted in the framework of Ashkenazic Orthodoxy and live in Helsinki, historically the home of an Eastern European Ashkenazic community, they tend to adopt Sephardic customs or combine them with local Ashkenazic traditions. A convert explains: "We have converted in an Ashkenazic community under the leadership of an Ashkenazic rabbi, so that we should be following these traditions, but [...] our family tradition is Sephardic." For instance, he has asked for permission to use Sephardic tefillin, and with his wife, who has also converted, they cut the challah according to a Sephardic custom. However, he reads the Kabbalat Shabbat according to the Helsinki minhag because there is more singing, which he enjoys. Their preference for Sephardic customs is connected with their commitment to Zionism and Israel. They frequently visit a Sephardic congregation in Israel, which they call their "second home." During their stays they have learned how to 'do' Judaism in daily life.

The inclination towards Sephardic customs among converts is most clearly demonstrated through festivals and foodways, probably due to rising popularity of Israeli Jewish markers and Zionism.[42] For instance, one convert celebrates Jewish holidays with a mix of both Ashkenazic and Sephardic customs. Another

42 About the role of Israel and varied responses to it among Jews worldwide, see Adam S. Ferziger, "Israelization and Lived Religion: Conflicting Accounts of Contemporary Judaism," *Contemporary Jewry* 40 (2020): 403–430, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s12397-020-09324-4

convert, in her early forties, says that although her non-Finnish husband comes from an Ashkenazic background, they make Sephardic dishes at home. She expressed distaste for Ashkenazic food, especially gefilte fish, a staple of Cantonist cuisine.[43] Adopting Sephardic cuisine may go beyond taste and concern Halakhah. A convert in her mid-fifties relates that they follow Sephardic cuisine especially during Passover, when they eat *kitniyot* [grains and seeds], which are not eaten among Ashkenazim, including Cantonist families.

Other than the converts that have married into Cantonist families over the years, only a minority of the new converts adopt Ashkenazic customs exclusively, and most of these persons lean towards Chabad. A convert in his forties relates that his first contact with Judaism was through Chabad and that he has remained close with them ever since, studying Talmud with the Chabad rabbi. The informant wears a black hat and tzitzit and has *peyes*. A convert in her late forties, who also attends Chabad events, relates that she has adopted many Ḥasidic Ashkenazic customs she feels are authentic: the traditional dress code, foods, and lighting two candles during Havdalah.

5 Conclusions

The interviews show that the Cantonists are highly secularized and their contacts with everyday Judaism have become shallower. Many of them disagree with Orthodoxy and gender segregation but foster an emotional connection to Cantonist Ashkenazic traditions. 'Being' Jewish is an important part of their identity, and they do not feel the need to 'prove' this by actively practicing Judaism. Besides religious festivals, most Cantonists only confront religion during life-cycle rituals. They negotiate the traditional way of celebrating these rituals with the demands of modern life, the norms of society at large, and their multiple identifications. The result is often a bare minimum of individual practice.

The new Orthodox among the Finnish Jewish informants come from various backgrounds. For the past two decades, the new Orthodox have introduced stricter observance of Shabbat and kashrut to the Finnish Jewish community. Deeply invested in knowing Jewish sources, they seek rabbinic support for local customs and challenge some of the old liturgical traditions. The Israeli Bnei Akiva, although Modern Orthodox and a promoter of Zionism, proved

43 See Dóra Pataricza, "Challahpulla: Where Two Wor(l)ds Meet," *Nordisk judaistik/Scandinavian Jewish Studies* 30(1) (2019), 75–90, at 83–84, DOI: https://doi.org/10.30752/nj.77247; Muir, *Yiddish in Helsinki*, 29.

a challenge as the emissaries, perhaps unwittingly, began to innovate Finnish Ashkenazic-Cantonist traditions. A few active *baʿalei teshuvah* with emotional and often also family connections to the Cantonist past consider these changes problematic. They wish to foster the old customs, bringing back the 'authentic' Orthodoxy of the community.

The new converts are mostly Finns of non-Jewish background who have developed a strong emotional connection to Judaism. They turn towards 'new Orthodoxy' rather than the customs of indigenous Finnish Jews. Some are drawn to Zionism and Israeli Jewish traditions, while others prefer different versions of Ḥaredi Judaism, especially Chabad. By observing Halakhah more strictly than those whose Jewish identities are never questioned, new converts constantly reassert their belonging to an Orthodox community.

With the Helsinki synagogue swiftly losing secularized Cantonist participants, the committed new converts and the observant new Orthodox fill in the void. On a broader level, the interviews show how the Finnish Jewish community in a relatively short period of time has shifted from its homogenous Ashkenazic roots towards a Sephardicized hybrid, mostly due to rising Israeli influences.