

Communicating Identity through Religious Internet Memes\ Aya Yadlin-Segal

It is the well-known “bulletproof” scene from *The Matrix* movie. We see Keanu Reeves in a green hallway, wearing a black trench coat, dark sun-glasses, and a *Kippah*. His hand is stretched out, holding back a stream of hovering candies, instead of machine-gun bullets. The caption above the photo states: “Neo’s Bar-Mitzvah.” This is not a Jewish re-make of *The Matrix*, it is an internet meme shared on the religious Facebook page “[Tweeting Orthodoxies](#),” that playfully presents the custom of throwing candies at the *Bar-Mitzvah* boy after reading the *Haphtarah* on his *Aliyah La-Thorah*. This meme, and many others like it, demonstrates how digital culture provides a group of National Religious Jews with unique opportunities to communicate about and engage in the re-construction of their religious identity.

In this chapter I explored religious-oriented Jewish memes shared on the Facebook page “Tweeting Orthodoxies,” and identified the role they play in the formation of a national-religious group identity. By conducting a close textual analysis of 12 memes shared on this Facebook page over a period of a year, coupled with 8 interviews with the group’s creators and participants, a number of key findings emerged. These findings highlight the interest members of the national-religious community have in humor and in the new abilities online spaces provide them. Memes, as self-produced media content, allow national-religious Facebook users to represent their own world of knowledge and beliefs in a way that is not often found in Israeli mainstream media. Being technologically savvy, members of the national-religious community find memes as a means for self-representation, namely a humoristic one.



["120 years to build an arc? Tell me more about products you have purchased at Ikea"]

The findings also show that the basic structure of the meme as self-constructed media content, enables members of the Jewish national-religious sub-culture with a sphere to represent the cultural layers of their identity (as it experienced in the national-religious educational system, during holydays, or in youth groups for example). The cultural layer of identity was marked in the interviews as highly integral to the national-religious group, a layer that was mostly over shadowed thus far by the political aspects associated with the group. This finding stresses an overall cultural maturing process the national-religious community underwent during the last decade. Lastly, this article highlights the unique connection between the online and the offline environments, fostered by internet memes. By adopting the structure of the internet visual meme, national-religious media outlets (such as the synagogue pamphlet) were able to communicate religious humor that keeps religion relevant and up-to-date in the online era.



["Oops, wrong house"]

The memes shared via the “Tweeting Orthodoxies” Facebook page reflect a dialog between popular culture and religion, as well as between offline and online environments. This dialog shows that Judaism functions as an interpretive framework that does not necessarily exclude religious Jewish people from contemporary popular discourses. On the contrary, the Jewish religion as reflected in the interviews and in the analyzed internet memes, constitute a perspective for understanding popular and digital culture. This dialogue is demonstrated by memes that use religion to unfold possible meanings of cultural artifact, and popular culture to demonstrate an actual millennia-old history of the Jewish religion.