

Significance of Prenuptial Rituals as Ethnic Definitional Ceremonies among Immigrants

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Abstract

This article adopts the paradigm that claims the non-disappearance of the ritual and ritual changes in modern and postmodern society. A wedding is an event in which a group of people speaks to itself and about itself. Images of the social structure and cultural content, of couplehood, family and personal and group identity surface through this cultural act. Weddings and their customs thus comprise a window through which the social values of a group can be observed, be it a modern or a traditional society. The anthropological study of the prenuptial rituals of immigrants from Georgia to Israel, and my experience with the ethnic pride of the celebrators, most of them young, lead me to conclude that these rituals serve as collective ethnic definitional ceremonies for them, where crossing between ethnicity, culture and identity takes place. The new ritual tradition in Israel fulfills an important role in the identity of the youths of this community and in the solidarity of the Georgian family and community. Tradition was processed anew and interpreted through the renewed ritual patterns, and became intertwined with modernity. A process of syncretism was thus created.

Keywords

Identity, Georgian, Definitional Ceremony, Syncretism, Wedding

1. Introduction

This article will examine the place and significance of prenuptial rituals of immigrants from Georgia in Israel as an ethnic definitional ceremony. Ritual study is one of the major issues in anthropology, and scholars have deliberated on the question of its importance and place in society (see at length, Doron, 2006: pp. 13-15). Classical anthropologists such as Taylor (1873), Durkheim (1965 [1922]), Evans-Pritchard (1975) and others, who attributed the ritual mainly to the religious domain, studied the significance of ritual symbols. They discussed the

function of rituals in creating solidarity and in regulating social pressures. In contradistinction, later researchers such as [Leach \(1976\)](#), [Turner \(1967, 1969\)](#), [Douglas \(1973\)](#), [Geertz \(1990\)](#) and others, focused on the hidden significance of ritual symbols. They referred mainly to the relations between symbols and ritual systems in the same culture, and to the manner in which they construct the social activity.

The phenomenon of secularization in the modern and postmodern era, which attempts to limit religion to the private sphere, raises questions regarding the significance of the ritual in today's modern society. Sociologists and anthropologists have developed different theories that attribute the ritual also to secular everyday practices (see at length, [Doron, 2006: pp. 14-20](#); [Prashizky, 2006: pp. 31-40](#); [2014](#)). One paradigm claims a decay of the ritual in modern society. [Habermas \(1987\)](#), for example, claims that collective rituals are disappearing in modern society since they no longer play a role in the life of the rational individual. [Peacock \(1968\)](#) similarly claims that modernity and secularization influenced the rational thinking of the individual and the disappearance of the ritual, and we therefore see political and social conflicts instead of aspects of unity and solidarity. Another paradigm claims the non-disappearance of the ritual and a change in rituality in modern society. The fact that the construction of state rituals as well as the invention of personal ritual has become common in today's society has evoked the need among scholars to create an alternative set of concepts that will help analyze the phenomenon and the coping with this new reality. Their basic assumption is that many rituals, which are not less important than in the traditional society, also exist in industrial, modern and postmodern society.

[Moore and Myerhoff \(1977\)](#) crystallized the concept of a secular ritual within the framework of such thinking. They claim that rituals do not disappear in modern society which is characterized by processes of change and instability. Rather, they change form. They suggest that the secular ritual, like the religious one, is a dramatic event which includes a set of symbolic behaviors with a declarative goal, beyond its immediate meaning. [Bocock \(1974\)](#), [Bell \(1997\)](#), [Cheal \(1988\)](#) and others also claim that the ritual continues to play an important role in modern societies and that this is a new type of ritualism.

In her anthropological work on secular rituals, [Myerhoff \(1982: p. 11\)](#) coined the term "definitional ceremony". This is a group ritual by whose means a group informs itself and the surroundings of its existence and its identity. Myerhoff noted the everyday ways by whose means members of the community "define themselves" in situations in which cultures break up and become disorderly ([Myerhoff, 1982, 1986](#)). For example, during her observations of community life, she defined some of the processes and ways in which the identities of the elderly were constructed through an ongoing process. Myerhoff also discussed the significance of definitional ceremonies for a group of immigrants who lost their families and their connection to their past culture, and their lives were surrounded by a world of "strangers". [Goldstein \(1985: p. 251\)](#) reported that defini-

tional ceremonies meet the need of adult immigrants to feel a connection with the past and supply them with a bridge to the new society. The rituals also position young immigrants in the ethnic context which is accepted within the framework of the current absorbing society.

2. Research Goal and Methodology

In this article I will attempt to adopt the latter paradigm which claims that the ritual and its changes are important in modern society. Based on my work in the anthropological field of prenuptial rituals of immigrants from Georgia in Israel, and my experience with the sense of ethnic pride of the celebrators, most of whom are young, I refer to these texts as collective ethnic definitional ceremonies in which crossing between ethnicity, culture and identity take place (compare Goldstein, 1985). Numerous papers have been written on public definitional ceremonies (for example, Handelman, 1990; Muir, 2005). Following Myerhoff, many papers have also been written on personal definitional ceremonies which are performed by the individual in order to demonstrate his new identity for himself and for the public (see for example, Doron, 2013; Rubin et al., 1994; Rubin, 2004; Rubin, 2009; Rubin & Peer, 1999). However, less attention has been paid to collective definitional ceremonies of immigrants.

A wedding is an event in which a group of people speaks to itself and about itself, and explicitly or implicitly voices things that are found beneath the surface. Images of social structure and cultural content, of couplehood, familiarity and personal and group identities rise to the surface through this cultural performance. In modern society, as in traditional society, weddings and their customs sometimes comprise a window through which deep and hidden social values can be observed (Prashizky, 2006: p. 48, 54). For example, Comb-Schilling (1991) discussed the Muslim-Moroccan henna ritual as symbolically expressing the masculine and feminine identity and social roles of both genders. Sharaby (2006) investigated gender aspects in the henna rituals of Yemenite immigrants in Israel. Goldstein-Gidoni (2001) researched commercialization processes in weddings in Japan in the 1990s and traditional Japanese and modern Western images that are disseminated by manufacturers in the weddings industry in order to serve their own interests. Another example is Prashizky's (2014) study on the manner in which alternative marriage rituals comprise an alternative to the orthodox ritual and undermine it.

This article may contribute to a deeper understanding of the roles and characteristics of the new rituality in the passage from a traditional to a modern society, through an analysis of prenuptial rituals of immigrants from Georgia in Israel. In order to investigate the function that the prenuptial rituals fulfill as definitional ceremonies for the immigrants from Georgia in Israel, I will examine the extent to which forms and contents of their ritual ethnic activity become Israeli, the significance which the immigrants afford to their rituals and how they serve for presenting themselves as an ethnic group, and not as a collection of people who have some common Georgian background.

The focus of this article is therefore on the Georgian ethnic identity which is relocated and redefined, as illustrated so well by Zygmunt Bauman (2000) in his book *Liquid Modernity*. I will use the practice of “marking boundaries” (Lamont & Molnar, 2002), which marks boundaries of belonging, in order to examine the manner in which immigrants from Georgia, and in particular second-generation immigrants, conduct negotiation which labels them as members of the Israeli culture, but also points to the adoption of ethnic experiences out of choice (compare Purkayastha, 2005). That is, how was syncretism created in the ritual conduct that reflects the complexity of their identity.

Syncretism means a mixing and merging of religious and cultural beliefs, customs and practices and the creation of a new tradition (Juergensmeyer & Clark-Roof, 2012; Stewart & Shaw, 1994: pp. 1-26). Processes of religious and cultural syncretism took place during antiquity and in the modern age, where colonial cultures dominated over local cultures. Syncretism comprises an important component also in today’s global age (Juergensmeyer & Clark-Roof, 2012). Syncretism indicates a process of change in the personal or group identity, as well as conformations of this process (Leopold & Jensen, 2004). It can be created following a decision, consciously, but often develops unintentionally (Leopold & Jensen, 2004: p. 3). Syncretism is created in the majority/absorbing society (syncretism from the top), and the result is a compromise, cultural diversity and a change in its (original) cultural repertoire. Cultural and religious merging is created mainly in the lifestyle and rituals of the minority/absorbed groups (syncretism from the bottom), and is regarded as a way of resistance to different forms of dominations, as a sign of cultural existence and as a way for expressing identity (Juergensmeyer & Clark-Roof, 2012; Stewart & Shaw, 1994: pp. 1-26).

The significance of syncretic processes is that culture is not a coherent structure that is successfully passed from generation to generation. Rather, it is a product, at any given moment, of historic and social processes (Stewart, 2004: pp. 274-277). Under situations of immigration such as those which I discuss in this article, the additional significance is that hegemonic customs are not simply absorbed through passive acculturation.

In the present study I used the phenomenological-hermeneutical method which attributes importance to understanding, describing and analyzing a social phenomenon (in this case prenuptial rituals) through people’s subjective experience (Chase, 2005; Tuval-Mashiach & Spector-Marzel, 2010). The research instrument suitable for achieving this goal is the semi-structured in-depth interview (Shkedi, 2003: p. 23). This interview includes structured questions, but the researcher affords the interviewees an opportunity to clarify and express themselves independently. The in-depth interviews afforded me a broad range of insights and knowledge on the phenomenon of syncretism in their prenuptial rituals in Israel, from the 1070s to date. The research included 48 interviews that were conducted between 2013-2015 with men and women from the Georgian community in Israel. Most of the interviewees live in large communities of immigrants from Georgia in Ashdod and in Ashkelon, which are found in the cen-

ter and south of the country.

Of the interviewees, 35 married a Georgian spouse and 13 married a spouse from other ethnic communities. The ages of the interviewees ranged between 22 and 78. About half were born in Israel and the remainder were born in various communities in Georgia. I tried to avoid research bias, and the interviewees are therefore from families that emigrated during the two immigration waves from Georgia, where each had unique characteristics. Nonetheless, I was cognizant of the advantage of the veteran research population that emigrated from Georgia in the 1970s. The experience of this population with the ritual system in their country of origin as well as in Israel and its comparative perspective greatly assisted me in understanding the ritual change that took place over the time axis.

3. Background: Georgian Jews and Their Immigration to Israel

Georgia is a traditional society that opened to modernization in the 19th century. This process was accelerated under the Soviet regime, from the 1920s. The Georgian Jews were deeply connected to Jewish religion and preferred to live in separate neighborhoods, with the synagogue at its center (Ben-Oren, 2000: p. 5; Neistat, 1970: pp. 53-54). The extended family (the “*jalebi*”) was patriarchic and patrilocal, and was characterized by high internal solidarity and dependency relations. Changes began to take place among the Jews from the mid 1920, which originated in the influence of the Russian and Soviet regime, in modernization processes in Georgia in the twentieth century and in urbanization processes which accelerated since the 1960s (Arbel & Magal, 1992: p. 85). However, they continued to preserve their Jewish tradition and the community framework, and their rites of passage played a major role in the preservation of their identity (Information Center, 1981: pp. 1-8; Neistat, 1970: pp. 62-72).

The Georgian Jews had a strong religious and national affinity to the Land of Israel, and they immigrated there in the 19th century and in the early 20th century (David, 1992: p. 73; Neistat, 1970: pp. 38-40). In the late 1920s, the Soviet regime forbade all religious ritual, including the Jewish ritual, with the aim of affording all nationalities a uniform soviet character. Attacks on Jewish religion and education thus increased, Zionist activists were persecuted, and immigration to the Land of Israel ceased (Mikdash-Shmailov, 1996: pp. 113-116).

The pioneers of the struggle for immigration in the 1960s were the Jews of Georgia, and their struggle led to the opening of the gates of the Soviet Union and to the large immigration wave from Georgia in 1971 (Ben-Oren, 2000: pp. 23-26; Neistat, 1970: pp. 119-143). Approximately 30,000 immigrants immigrated to Israel from Georgia from 1967 until the early 1980s (Information Center, 1981: p. 6). They comprised 18% of the immigrants who came from the Soviet Union during that period (Pinsky, 2006: p. 6). The immigration from Georgia was characterized as immigration from religious motives, and as traditional in its organizational patterns (Elam, 1991: pp. 363-364). Most of the immigrants came from rural or semi-urban areas, where the influence of tradition was

strong, and where their unique identity and solidarity were preserved. The heads of the families immigrated with their entire extended family, and the immigration had a collective familial nature (Elam, 1975b: p. 385).

In Israel, the immigrants lived near their relatives, in neighborhoods of peripheral towns in which they were concentrated (Elam, 1980: p. 365; Zamir, 1972: 22-23). They established their own synagogues which afforded a framework for their religious and social activity (Zamir, 1972). Their spiritual leaders lost of their authority, which harmed their ability to bridge between their communities and the absorption institutions (Elam, 1975b: pp. 382-383). Many of the immigrants from Georgia experienced a decrease in their economic standard of living, and the women were forced to go out to work, contrary to the customary norm in Georgia (Elam, 1975b: p. 381, 388). The fact that the family and community lived together enabled the immigrants to conduct their lives according to the patterns that were transcribed from their country of origin. Their absorption was therefore characterized by preservation of tight family relations, traditional customs and strong religious and ethnic identity (Berkowitz et al., 2011; Marcus & Barash, 1981: p. 1). These influenced their withdrawnness towards the absorbing society and their slow inclusion in it (Elam, 1991: p. 364). Pressures to adapt the patterns of the absorbing society and their social rejection also served as a mechanism for the preservation and strengthening of their Georgian identity (Melzer-Geva, in press). Nonetheless, many of the Georgian Jews adapted to the society and processes of change are apparent, particularly among the young, the women and those with a non-religious high-school education (Arbel & Magal, 1992: pp. 85-86; Marcus & Barash, 1981: pp. 71-72).

The second immigration wave of Jews from Georgia began in 1991, upon the declaration of Georgia's independence. Approximately 40,000 immigrated to Israel during the 1990s, out of security and financial distress, and united with their families in Israel. Their social profile differed from that of the immigrants of the 1970s. They came mainly from the large towns of Georgia and some had become assimilated. Many were educated, had free professions or were merchants, and had a middle-high socioeconomic status (Berkowitz et al., 2011). These immigrants were part of the mass immigration of Jews from the Soviet Union that began in 1989 (Pinsky, 2006: p. 6).

A multicultural approach to the absorption of immigrants began in Israel in 1995. However, in practice, non-recognition of the cultural identities of minority groups, including those from Georgia, continues (Abramov, in press; Bram, 2003: p. 191). Dissonance therefore developed among the immigrants. This created different reactions, such as an attempt to win positive recognition (Melzer-Geva, 2012, in press). In most cases, this dissonance increased the withdrawal patterns. Decades after their immigration, many of the immigrants from Georgia did not unburden the cultural load which they brought with them, and their ethnic identity is still alive. They read newspapers and literature in the Georgian language, watch Georgian movies, participate in shows of performers who come from Georgia and listen to broadcasts in the Georgian language.

Many also maintain business, academic and cultural relations with Georgia (Melzer-Geva, *in press*). Such global patterns also appear among immigrants from the Soviet Union and from Ethiopia, who immigrated to Israel in the past decades (Anteby-Yemini, 2003; Remennick, 2002). They reflect a transnational identity which crosses borders and enables immigrants to remain active in both worlds (Levitt, 2001; Portes et al., 2002).

4. Disruption of the Order in the Alliance Rituals in Israel

During the 1970s and 1980s, the immigrants from Georgia preserved their social solidarity in the periphery towns and continued their traditional marriage rituals which reflected patriarchal family norms. They married their children at a young age: the boys at 18 - 20 and the girls at even younger ages: 14 - 17, in order to control their behavior and preserve the family honor (Elam, 1975a: p. 20). Interviewees explained that the Georgian immigrants hurried to marry their children to prevent them from meeting partners from other ethnic communities and so that they would not become involved in Israeli society, which they perceived as excessively liberal.

Alliances between the families usually occurred through a match by a professional matchmaker or by the fathers of the families. Similarly to other traditional patriarchal societies, a “correct” choice of a partner by an authoritative adult was a mean for strengthening the power and interests of the family (Rubin, 2004: p. 74). The youth usually did not resist the match, out of respect for their parents. The descriptions of the interviewees indicate that the match was usually not forced on the boy. However, if the girl refused, her parents usually tried to persuade her or even force their opinion on her, as was customary in Georgia. Moshe told us: “We immigrated in 1970. My parents went to a matchmaker from the community. This was not unusual, this was how good brides from the community were found. You could not simply go up to a girl, it had to be done through the parents. I liked her immediately, so that I was happy. If not, I would not have continued to meet her”. On the other hand, Batia was forced to marry in 1979 when she was 15. She said that her parents prevented her from going out with girlfriends, and when she was 14.5 her father already began to look for a partner for her. After she objected to a match with an older 28-year old man and asked to first finish her studies at school, her father became angry with her and said: “This is your luck. He is a good lad, and this is what we chose for you”. As customary in Georgia, Batia was forced to leave her parents’ house on the eve of the betrothal, and to move into her groom’s parents’ home until her marriage, where she was under their control. They forbade her to continue her schooling, and found work for her in a factory so that she could help with the family’s livelihood. It thus appears that although in Georgia it was not respectable for women to work, reality in Israel obligated this, sometimes through family pressure. The traditional family norms were thus preserved among the immigrants from Georgia, when it was suitable for them, and in any case decisions on the woman’s life and future were not in her hands.

The Georgian immigrants who tended to preserve their culture also objected to their children's marriage with non-Georgian mates. Rachel immigrated to Israel in 1973 and married in 1979 at the age of 18 to a partner whose parents had emigrated from Iraq. She recalled: "We worked together, with his mother and my sister-in-law, in the same place. We met during breaks. My mother was very much against, there was war. My mother was liberal in many things, but in this she was primitive and what people would say was important to her. My brother was very much against. I was suddenly forbidden many things, such as to go out of the flat to the yard, or to stand by the window, but in the end my mother agreed".

Conversations with interviewees and written sources (Arbel & Magal, 1992: p. 115; Zamir, 1972: p. 11) indicate that the order of the alliance process that was customary in Georgia between families was also preserved to a large degree. This process included five stages. From their testimonies I learned that the ritual order in this process, which will be described in brief here, was preserved in the lives of the Jewish communities in Georgia, even though more modern liberal values penetrated them in the late twentieth century:

- Stage one: Handshake (*chalis dakwoora*), a handshake between the fathers after they decided on the match, a kind of preliminary oath on their agreement to the marriage of their children.
- Stage two: Saying the word (*sitkwis gatetana*), meaning publicizing the news among the community that the couple is going to be married.
- Stage three: The agreement (*garigeba*), the stage where the fathers determined the conditions of the marriage agreement between the families: the size of the dowry, which is the property that the bride's family obligates to give her upon her marriage, the couple's housing, the amount of compensation to be paid by a party that will break the agreement, etc.
- Stage four: Exchange of warranties (*dabeweba*), where the agreement between the families received formal validity through an exchange of coins or rings between the fathers.
- Stage five: Betrothal (*nishnoba*), which symbolized the severance of the bride from her father's home and her inclusion in her husband's home.

A weakening of the family and community control has taken place in the Georgian society since the 1990s, following the second immigration wave from Georgia which was characterized by a more liberal social profile, and under the influence of the social norms in Israel. The women's age of marriage rose to 17 - 19 and that of men to 22 - 25. Today, the age of marriage among the Israeli-born Georgians it is even higher, and is similar to that which is customary in the new society. Interviewees explained that youths of the Georgian community today marry after having attained an academic education or a permanent job. They want to be independent and are not always willing to live in their parents' home as in the past. Young men and women of this community are today sometimes not married even at the age of 30 or more.

However, the interviews indicate that the immigrants from Georgia tried to

have their daughters marry as young as possible, in order to preserve their honor and the honor of the family. Shoshana, who married in 1995 according to the norms customary in Georgia, said: "I met my husband through a matchmaker, at the age of 19. We met for a short conversation at my parents' home and liked each other. Since this was the Georgian mentality, I was aware that I need to get married and preferably as soon as possible. I liked the boy and he liked me, so we told our parents that we were interested in continuing the relationship".

The number of families who married their children through traditional matchmaking decreased over time. The youth are freeing themselves of the bonds of their parents and the community and choose partners they meet in the army, at work, during studies and through friends. The Georgian families have internalized the change, among others because they understood that the young marriages that were forced on the couple, especially on the daughter, in the end led to divorce, which was rare in Georgia. However, from the many testimonies I conclude that the future of the Georgian tradition depends on the type of family, and many families that are interested in preserving the Georgian tradition and language continue the tradition of matchmaking by the parents or a matchmaker. They do this in order to prevent their children from marrying someone not from the Georgian community. The education which these families give their children influences them to prefer a member of their own ethnic community.

Dalia, for example, agreed to marry a boy she did not know previously, through matchmaking, at the age of 19. She said that even though her family is modern, her parents attribute great importance to tradition. She met boys from other ethnic communities, but her family made it clear to her from an early age that she must marry a Georgian. After the match, she did not postpone the marriage, because she did not want to serve in the army. Dover Kosaschwili said that his mother began to look for a match for him after he was discharged from the army. He agreed, out of respect for his parents, and not out of a desire to marry. He cynically summarized the matchmaking meetings: "What I found in all of these meetings was that your parents think they are taking you to a Georgian, but when you arrive for the matchmaking, you understand that there are no more Georgians, and the girl is an Israeli. There is no such thing anymore as a Georgian girl. Only the parents still think that there is. In order to be a Georgian, you must live in Georgia" (Mosko, 2001).

However, many young Georgians regard the traditional matchmaking as a "primitive custom", and choose to find a partner regardless of ethnic origin. These youths view themselves more as Israelis than Georgians, and try to become included in Israeli society. These are usually youths from more modern families, who do not pressure them to find a partner from the same community or to rapidly institutionalize the relationship with the partner.

A phenomenon developed in Israel which was not known in Georgia, of mixed marriages. In such marriages, they usually relinquished the marriage customs of the Georgian community, particularly the matchmaking. Distancing from tradition can be seen not only as an outcome of a social encounter in Israel,

but also as a type of gender rebellion which was led, surprisingly, by the mothers. Female interviewees said that they received support from their mothers who claimed that they were forced to marry when they were young, whereas they wanted to continue their schooling. In addition to a sense of having missing out, most of the mothers admitted that they were forced to live their entire lives with men they did not love, but got used to living with. In their opinion marriage should be out of choice and love. Hannah, for example, who married a man of Yemenite origin, said that her parents never tried to match her with boys from their community, because her mother was opposed to her marrying a Georgian man. Sigal explained that in her youth she was forced to marry against her will, and therefore her opinion on the custom of matchmaking is most negative.

An interesting point that arises from the interviewed women who are not married to Georgians is the attraction to the “other”, who is not of their community, and is perceived as a tempting stranger, or as having more positive cultural characteristics than those of members of their ethnic community. Oxana said: “Before I met my husband I had two Georgian boyfriends, both in high school and in the army, but I felt that I wanted to be with a man who is different from the men around me. Perhaps it is because of the look, and the behavior, but something attracted me to the Moroccans. In the end I married one”. Rita, who immigrated to Israel in the 1990s, indicated: “I met enough Georgian men in Israel and they were beginning to bore me. To be with an Israeli-born man was a challenge for me, I learned something new every day”. Ada, who was born in Israel, and whose parents immigrated to Israel in the 1990s, is married to a man of Bokharan origin. She admits that she is very proud to be a Georgian, but chose not to marry a Georgian because “there is much primitiveness in the community, especially with reference to marriage and the custom of matchmaking. The status of the woman in the Georgian community is unacceptable. The exaggerated familiarity and the relations between the adults and the children always seemed strange and harsh to me. I am glad that I had the opportunity to experience something new in Israel”. Other female interviewees stressed that their desire to become included in Israeli society was a consideration that motivated them to marry a partner from another ethnic community, who would serve as a kind of guide to the new society. For example, Sophia, whose parents immigrated in the 1970s, said: “I think that because I married an Israeli, I actually became an Israeli, and very fast. If I had married within the community, I may have remained deep within it”.

Nonetheless, many interviewed women stressed their connection to Georgian culture and indicated that the Georgian identity has a major expression in their homes. Mira, who is married to a Bukharan partner, said: “I admit that I am very proud of being a Georgian. My brother’s four daughters married non-Georgians. I have other female cousins who married men from different ethnic communities. My children feel greater belonging to the community than I do. They learned and speak Georgian, and also respect the customs of the community, as does my husband. At the moment I live within the community. I like the Geor-

gian events, the hospitality, the dignity, the food. I define myself as Israeli-Jewish-Georgian”.

The interviews indicate that a new pattern of alliance between families was shaped since the 1990s, and a change in its ritual order has taken place. Traditional families are aware that flexibility in observance of the Georgian tradition is essential for its continuation in the new social reality. Contrary to Georgia, partners in Israel are free to meet in their homes, or outside the bride’s home, and the match is made in collaboration with the couple and with their consent. After the decision on the match, most of the families today wait until the bride finishes her studies and only then will she marry. These “mollifications” enable the family to act as a framework that still supervises the lives of the youths and the family honor, as is indicated, for example, from Sarah’s description: “We married in 2004. My husband’s aunt met me by chance and introduced us. I was 23 at the time. She gave my phone number to my husband and he called me a few days later. The parents did not intervene at this stage at all. It was all up to us. However, when a couple meet each other through matchmaking or randomly, they know that they must decide within a short time whether this relationship is intended for marriage, or not. After six weeks we decided unanimously that we are suitable. We informed our parents and they set a family meeting in my parents’ home. That evening the parents exchanged coins. Afterwards, a date for the betrothal in my parents’ home was set”.

Sarah’s sayings also reflect the ritual order that was undermined in the process of forming an alliance between the families. It appears that in many families, the first stage—handshake (*chalis dakwoora*), is performed as in Georgia. However, families who are acquainted have relinquished holding a separate ritual for this, and it has been included in the betrothal ritual. The second stage—saying the word (*sitkwis gatetana*), was combined with the first stage, and couples who dated a long time prior to the marriage relinquished it completely. In families that hold the ritual, women also participate, contrary to the custom in Georgia. The third stage—the agreement (*garigeba*), is not customary among all families. The fourth stage—exchange of warranties (*dabewebe*), is performed today as in the past, whether both parties are Georgian or only one.

5. The Betrothal Period: The Power of Family Customs

The betrothal ritual (*nishnoba*), which was the fifth stage in the process of forming an alliance between the families, was a rite of passage that in the past symbolized the beginning of the bride’s disengagement from her father’s home and her move to the home of her husband, lost its original meaning among the youths of the community in Israel, in particular for those who live together prior to marriage. Contrary to the custom in Georgia, the betrothal ritual does not necessarily take place in the home of the bride’s family, but rather in a banquet hall, according to the budget of the bride’s family. A new phenomenon that began in Israel a few years ago is performance of the betrothal ritual in the traditional form in a small family circle in the bride’s home. Afterwards a large party

takes place in a banquet hall, with Israeli and Georgian music and foods. In this manner the betrothal custom is preserved, yet also receives new expression.

Interviewees who married in Israel during different periods indicate that customs of the betrothal ritual disappeared, such as the bride's betrothal ritual, and others underwent transformation. For example, the procession of the groom and his relatives to the home of the bride's parents is not customary in Israel. However, the sugar cone that was in the past carried in the procession, which the groom's parents gave to the bride's parents as a symbol of a happy and sweet life, still holds a central position in Israel. Some original customs are preserved, foremost of which is the exchange of gold or silver coins between the families. The groom's father gives a coin (*nishan*) to the bride, and vice versa, as a symbol for the exchange of children between them, and that from now each father is responsible for the other's child (Arbel & Magal, 1992: p. 117). The coins reflected passage of tradition, since they were preserved in the family and were passed from one generation to the next.

Mixed couples in Israel are strict in observing this custom, even if the bride is not of Georgian origin. Naama told: "When I first heard of the exchange of coins it seemed strange. But when the groom's parents came to my house, we held the ritual and exchange coins, and it seemed nice and it's good that special rituals from the past have been preserved". Dana, who is married to a Moroccan, said that the ritual was held for her, even though it is not customary among Moroccans. Her parents asked to hold it, and the groom's parents were impressed by the ritual and said that it is very special.

In Georgia, after the exchange of the coins, the groom's parents usually tied a white scarf with the coin on the groom's hand, and the bride's parents did the same for their daughter. The parents then tied a scarf to bind between the groom and the bride's hands for several days, symbolizing the bond that was created between them. This custom symbolizes the element of inclusion which characterizes a liminal state, according to Turner's (1967) well-known model. Today, in Israel, families continue this custom, if only for a few minutes in order to take pictures.

It should be indicated that betrothal rituals of couples of Georgian origin take place in Georgian and in Hebrew, but mainly in Georgian. This, because all the participants, including children who were born in Israel, understand the language. One of the characteristics of the inclusion of immigrants in Israel is language, which is especially prominent among the second generation. They are forced to integrate between the two cultures, where a pattern is created in which the language of origin is expressed at home and the new language is expressed outside the home (Olshtain, 1998). Youths of the Georgian community speak the Georgian language, which indicates their strong ethnic connection. The parents impart it to them from infancy, but the children use it only in conversations with their parents. Dover, for example, explained how he uses the Georgian language: "This depends on the situation and on my mental state. If I lie I use Hebrew. If I want to show that I compromise I speak Georgian. It also happens that they

“speak Georgian and I answer in Hebrew” (Mosko, 2001).

In Georgia, when the betrothal ritual was over, the betrothed went with the groom’s family and lived in their home until the marriage. This custom expressed the fact that the betrothed belongs to the groom and his family, and prepared her for merging into her new family. Georgian families in Israel continue this custom, as told, for example, by Naama: “I went back with them and moved into their house. They spoiled me and bought me presents. This was the way to know them better. After three months we set a date for the marriage. We were betrothed for a total of eight months”.

The transition period between the betrothal and the marriage in Georgia, even in modern times, usually lasted several months. During this period the betrothed were forbidden to meet, in order to uphold the family honor. However, traditional families arranged supervised meetings between them and the families. They also exchanged an uneven number gift baskets (*dezwini*), for fear of the evil eye. These exchanges of gifts were among the prominent symbols of the alliance between the families in Georgia, as in other places (Sabar, 2006: p. 194), and symbolized the alliance between them. Mauss (1990 [1922]), who discussed the gift as a universal and ahistoric phenomenon, viewed the gift as a form of exchange, and in his opinion the gift reflects the commitment, customs, social order and social uniqueness of the group.

The interviews showed that these family customs remained strong also after the immigration of the Georgian Jews to Israel. In the 1970s and 1980s the families were strict about a short betrothal period, as in the past. However, with time it lengthened, mainly among liberal couples. The ritual of sending gifts took place in the 1970s and 1980s almost without change, and is common even today, making sure that there is an uneven number of gift baskets. However, since the 1990s, it is customary to hold this ritual as part of the betrothal ritual, apparently in order to save time and expenses. When one of the partners is not Georgian, the ritual arrangement of sending the gifts is not preserved, nor the number of baskets. Sometimes this custom is completely relinquished. Instead, the groom’s family takes the bride shopping on the day after the betrothal.

6. The Month of the Wedding: Georgian and Israeli Customs

6.1. A Piece of Cloth against the Evil Eye

Numerous events and rituals were held during this time period, which were intended to strengthen the relations between the families and the couple and for preparation of the dowry and the gifts. The event that opened the month of preparations that preceded the wedding was the ritual of cutting the dress (*kabas tachra*). This was performed similarly to the ritual of the communities of the Caucasus and Libya (Sabar, 2006: p. 203). Only women were invited to this event. The groom’s mother came with the women of her family to the home of the bride’s parents and brought a piece of cloth for the bride’s wedding dress. She also brought expensive gifts, yeast bread as a symbol for fertility and sugar as a symbol for happiness and prosperity. After she blessed the bride, she made a

cut in the cloth, from which the seamstress continued to sew the dress at a later date (Arbel & Magal, 1992: p. 118; Sabar, 2006: p. 203, as well as testimonies of the interviewees).

The act of cutting symbolized, in the terminology of van Gennepe (1960), the stage of separating the bride from her prior social world. Performance of this act by the groom's mother was significant, and was intended to symbolize the bride's passage to her husband's family. Female interviewees also attributed symbolic significance to this ritual, as can be learned from the descriptions of Aliza, who was born in the town of Kulashi in Georgia: "My aunt placed a piece of the wedding dress's cloth in my pocket and forbade me to take it out until the wedding. She said that this piece of cloth will guard me against the evil eye. I therefore took it everywhere I went, until the wedding". After the ritual, a meal was served to the women, which comprised an opportunity for creating good relations between the families. According to testimonies, there were families who already in the middle of the twentieth century did not hold the dress cutting ritual, and converted it into buying the wedding dress, for reasons of convenience. In the 1970s and 1980s this ritual was held in only few families of immigrants from Georgia in Israel, and the brides used the services of bridal salons. This custom has disappeared, and Georgian brides are no longer familiar with this custom.

6.2. Traditional Invitations

In Georgia it was customary to invite the entire community to the wedding on the Saturday before the wedding. This was performed by sending a loaf of thin round bread (*lawashi*) to each family. Under the influence of modernity, printed invitations to the wedding were sent beginning in the 1950s. These invitations had photographs of the couple as well as decorations of plants, doves and wine bottles. Jewish symbols such as a Star of David or a Torah Scroll, as well as verses from the Torah in Hebrew, were sometimes added (Sabar, 2006: p. 222). These expressed the religious and Zionist connection of the Georgian Jews. Today, Georgians in Israel still send personal invitations, which usually include a photograph of the couple.

6.3. Family Solidarity on the Day of the Ritual Bath (*mikveh*)

According to Georgian Jewish tradition, the bride went to the bathhouse and the ritual bath (*yachalzicha*) on the day before the wedding, at sundown. She was accompanied by women of the family singing, playing music and dancing. The bridesmaid (*hadadiani*), who was a close relative (grandmother, aunt, sister or sister-in-law), headed the procession. This had to be a woman with good fortune in order to ensure the good fortune of the bride (Elam, 1975a: p. 22). She was responsible for preparing the bride for her wedding night and accompanied her in her first steps after the marriage.

The women carried the bride's clothes that were given by the groom's mother inside a fancy scarf (*buchtza*), as well as an embroidered towel that was prepared

for this evening. The bridesmaid filled a silver or copper cup with water from the ritual bath, poured it on the bride's head and blessed her. The women also scattered a mixture of rice, sugar and walnuts over her as a symbol for plentitude (Arbel & Magal, 1992: p. 119). The procession and the ritual in the ritual bath were thus an intimate moment, but the women of the family participated in it in order to transmit the norms of purity customary in the Jewish and Georgian religion and tradition to the bride.

The women returned to the home of the bride's family for a dairy meal. In East Georgia a feast of "eating porridge" (*hapapis tachama*) was held. The main food at this meal was semolina porridge, and the groom and his family were invited. The bridesmaid or the bride's mother spread some on the cheeks of the bride and the groom and blessed them. One of the participants would later jump up and spread some of the porridge on the groom's face. In this joyous pandemonium, everyone tried to spread porridge on each others' faces. The purpose was to gladden the groom and the bride. According to testimonies, in some places separate meals were held in the homes of the groom and of the bride.

From Georgia-born female interviewees it appears that the custom of immersion in the ritual bath and the ritual of eating porridge existed in Georgia also during the twentieth century. These traditional customs were preserved even after their immigration to Israel, with adaptation to the new reality. Brides of the 1970s and 1980s told that the bridesmaid accompanied them to the ritual bath on that evening. One interviewee recalled that the women of the family who accompanied her sang and one woman also played a goblet drum. However, most interviewed women said that the ritual bath ritual was held modestly, almost secretly, perhaps in order to conceal the bride's young age. The ritual of eating the porridge continued only in the bride's home, and the custom of spreading the porridge disappeared in Israel, as it was considered to be non-esthetic.

Today, it appears that since the age of the Georgian brides in Israel is normative, the custom of the ritual bath takes place according to the tradition in Georgia, with some changes. The role of the bridesmaid in the ritual has disappeared, apparently because the bride is older and does not need close guidance. After the ritual, many families hold a large meal, for women only, accompanied by singing, dancing and blessings. It usually takes place in the home of the bride's family, but may also take place in a restaurant. Georgian foods are served, and sometimes also semolina porridge, but the custom of spreading porridge on the feasters' faces no longer exists.

The new ritual tradition in Israel fulfills an important role in the family's solidarity, as can be inferred from the description of 26-year old Dana: "This was the most special and exciting day of my life. I felt that everyone is around me and they all make me happy. We went out, all the women, together to the ritual bath singing and dancing and with sweets. When the immersion ritual ended we returned to my home for a festive dinner. This unifies the family here in Israel".

6.4. Mixing of Cultures in the Henna Ritual

The henna ritual is an important rite of passage for the bride in traditional so-

ciety. Only women participated in this ritual, due to its importance as a feminine liminal rite. Henna is a fragrant bush, with white flowers, which originates in India. It has spread to Asia and North Africa. Henna paste was used for dyeing textiles and skins and was also spread over the body. In addition to its medical and cosmetic properties, henna was attributed with magical attributes. It was believed that the red stains on the skin would protect the couple against lurking dangers and would drive away the evil eye. The changing color of the henna from green (powder) to red (wet henna) symbolizes the transformation that the couple undergoes during the rite of passage of marriage (Sharaby, 2006).

The henna ritual was not customary in all areas of Georgia, and took place in the communities of Akhaltsikhe and Kareli. Compared to the henna rituals of other Jewish communities, the ritual in these regions of Georgia was unique in its structure and its symbolic contents. At midnight on the night before the wedding, a procession arrived at the bride's home. They carried a tray with henna utensils as well as four loaves of bread with lit wax candles in them. One loaf of bread with a candle in it was placed on the bride's head, and her fingernails and toenails were painted. Afterwards, the women spread the henna on their palms. After the ritual the loaf of bread was taken off the bride's head and the women danced before her. In parallel, a feast was held for the men in the groom's home. Before sunrise the celebrators led the bride to the groom's home singing, playing instruments and with candlelight, which symbolized light and happiness in the couple's life. The procession illustrated the inclusion of the bride in her new family, and reflects the last stage, which is the stage of connection, of the rite of passage according to Turner's (1967) model. In the groom's home, the bride was offered bread, butter and honey, and after she dipped her hands in them, she made signs with them on the doorsill as a symbol for economic prosperity and happiness. The groom spread rice over the bride's head and released a white rooster as a symbol for fertility.

The interviews indicate that families who immigrated from communities of Akhaltsikhe and Kareli continue to hold the ritual in Israel, but in a shorter ritual version, only in the home of the bride. Georgian families that were not familiar with the henna ritual in Georgia did not perform it in Israel. Since the 1990s, when marriages between Georgian youths and youths from other communities became more common, they usually adopt the henna ritual of the non-Georgian partner. I found that even when both partners are Georgian, they sometimes adopt the henna ritual of other communities, which were foreign to them. The date of the ritual is not fixed, and it is usually included in the betrothal ritual. This new custom comprises a deviation from the original betrothal ritual, but reflects the values and needs of a modern society to limit rituals in order to save time, money and work days. Contrary to the past, the ritual also does not focus on the bride, but is rather common to both partners and reflects the egalitarian messages in Israel as well as processes of cultural syncretism. For example, Ada told that: "I immigrated to Israel at the age of 19 with my family in 1993. My husband is also Georgian. I married at the age of 26 in 2000. We

adopted the henna ritual of the Moroccan community, even though we are both Georgian. There is an encounter between all ethnic communities, everything is mixed". Haim was 26 when he married a Tunisian woman and said that he and his family became familiar with the henna customs of the Tunisians. However, Georgian and Israeli foods, music and dances were included in the ritual.

6.5. Family Involvement during Exhibition of the Dowry

Exhibition of the dowry (*mezitis agtechera*) was performed about one week before the wedding, or on the noon of the wedding day. Members of the groom's family came to the bride's home together with dignitaries of the community. There the bride's family presented the dowry to them. This included many objects that would serve the couple: clothes, kitchen utensils, linen and towels, a bed and electrical appliances. It also included gifts that the couple received from the bride's family during the betrothal period. After the total value of the dowry was calculated, it was all wrapped in large scarves and was carried to the groom's home. The dowry had contractual-legal significance between the partners, and reflected the social status of the bride's family (Arbel & Magal, 1992: p. 118). The dowry was exhibited in a central place so that relatives, neighbors and members of the community would see the expensive objects and could hear who brought what. This was the chance for the bride's family to boast of the gifts that demonstrated how they were accepted and esteemed by their relatives. Since everyone wanted to make an impression and to gain a reputation in the extended family and the community, the gifts were numerous and expensive.

Interviewees said that during the 1970s and 1980s, presentation of the dowry in Israel was performed according to this custom, in the home of the bride's parents, in the presence of neighbors and relatives who came "in order to gossip". This custom has continued since the 1990s, but in a more private form, and with a different timing that is compatible with the current needs of the families. Ora, who married a few years ago, told: "This ritual was performed on the same evening as the cutting of the dress. My husband's family came to us for a meal, and my family presented the dowry and my mother wrote down all the items included in the dowry". There are also families who have relinquished the custom of exhibiting the dowry and take the couple shopping to buy the things they need for their home.

The interviews repeatedly raise the concern and the exaggerated preparation of the Georgian family to help the couple financially. The families begin collecting items for the bride's dowry from a young age, and before her wedding the parents carry the financial commitment to ensure the couple's welfare. Recruitment of the Georgian family reflects family patterns of help and solidarity, but also over-involvement and control, which restrict the couple's independence. For example, Yosef said: "The help of our parents, and our families, they gather for the couple and do everything so that they will succeed, especially financially. We were young, so most of the decisions were made by our parents. They organized everything and we had only to come to the wedding. We received huge

amounts of gifts”. Dana indicated: “My family’s preparations were great. The truth is that we were not asked anything. Our parents concluded all the details. We were really young. They cared for everything financially. I think that they are still returning the loan they took for the wedding. They bought a lot of things, even a house”.

Youths criticized these cultural norms, which embarrass the families of partners who are not Georgian. Edna said: “Preparation from my side was great. The difference between the two families—my Georgian and his Ashkenazi—was very apparent. Again and again I asked them not to exaggerate, not to buy. This did not help. My parents supported us then and still support us today, even when it is not needed”. David indicated: “In my Georgian family, they spoke only of the wedding. Yamit’s family, who is of Yemenite origin, simply tried to keep up all the time. This involvement is both good and bad. On the one hand they did give us help and support, which we still receive. On the other hand, there is a kind of lack of understanding of a party that is different. Yamit’s family helped as much as they could, but often they simply felt bad”.

6.6. Disappearance of Traditional Dress

On the evening before the wedding, the groom’s parents customarily sent messengers to the bride’s home with a tray of sweets, yeast cakes as a symbol for fertility and white items of clothing. One of the women carried a plate of cooked rice with raisins, symbol for a sweet and fertile life. The bride’s family sent clothes, cakes and a bottle of wine to the groom’s family.

On the day of the wedding, supervised by the bridesmaid, the bride was dressed in a magnificent wedding gown that was sewn for her. Happily married women with many children dressed her, so that they would bring good luck and fertility to the bride. They sang songs for her and danced, in order to entertain her. The groom was accompanied by his best man, who was his godfather, usually his father’s father, or his father’s brother, to the bath house. A man with good fortune was chosen as best man to ensure the groom’s good fortune (Elam, 1975a: p. 22). When they returned from the bath house, the best man and one of the brothers dressed the groom in special fancy clothes that were sewn for him (Arbel & Magal, 1992: p. 119).

As European influences penetrated Georgia, so did European dress. As a result, the custom that obligates the bride to wear white and a bridal veil began to spread during the 1920s. During the 1930s, a crown with a pattern of different colored flowers made of wax and metal wires (*gwigwini*) was added to the veil. The crown was prepared by a special seamstress and the women of the family and girlfriends customarily borrowed it from each other. It was customary to decorate the groom’s lapel with a flower (*goliswardi*) made of metal wire and wax, similar to that of his bride. Over time, the traditional Georgian dress all but disappeared, and can be seen mainly in the Georgian dances (Arbel & Magal, 1992: p. 80).

6.7. The Procession as a Rite of Passage

The procession was an important motif in the marriage rituals of the Georgian Jews, similarly to other Jewish communities (Sabar, 2006: p. 233). The procession that took place in a neutral public space illustrates the significance of the wedding as a rite of passage for the couple (Rubin, 2004: pp. 28-30).

In the afternoon hours, the groom, his best man, members of his family and his friends left his home in a procession to the home of the bride's parents. The procession was led by musicians playing instruments and the escorts carried lit candles, sang and danced before the groom. When the entourage reached the home of the bride's parents, they sent a messenger boy who announced their coming and was given a gift from the bride's family. When the groom and his entourage reached the door, it was slammed in their faces. They were allowed into the house only after negotiation and payment of a symbolic fee to the bride's brother (David, 1992; Elam, 1975a: pp. 20-23). This playful game was a ritual expression of the strangeness of the groom and his family, since in Georgia relatives customarily entered each other's homes without knocking. This game was also intended to show the family's difficulty of separating from their daughter. The giving of money illustrates its importance as a clear mean for creating social relations.

The custom of the procession was preserved among Jewish families in Georgia, also during the 20th century. When the distance between the homes of the couple was large, the groom and his entourage went to the home of the bride, or to the place where the wedding was held, in a car convoy. If they lived nearby, the procession was on foot. Yossi, who married in Tbilisi, recalled: "For the wedding, my father rented a large house in the town of Tbilisi near the street where we lived. We made our way to the rented house accompanied by the parents and the many guests, where my procession to the wedding was headed by musicians who played Hebrew songs, according to my request: "*Hava Nagila*," and "*Hevenu Shalom Aleichem*". This was a magnificent sight, the likes of which the Christian neighbors had never seen. It was very exciting".

The procession to the home of the bride's parents, for performing the marriage ritual (*hupah*), was preserved in Israel in the early 1970s and was accompanied by musicians. However, the gradual displacement of the marriage ritual from the bride's home to a banquet hall depleted the procession of its functional meaning as a rite of passage and led to its gradual abolishment. Maor, who immigrated to Israel with his family in 1972, explained: "I think that the procession is very beautiful and romantic. However, when we married we did not do this, because here in Israel it would have been weird, and we as young people did not want to appear different".

7. Conclusion

This article adopts the paradigm that claims an importance of the ritual and its changes in modern society. A wedding is an event in which a group of people speaks to itself and about itself, and through this cultural performance images of

the social structure and cultural content, of couplehood, familiarity and personal and group identity are raised to the surface. The anthropological work I performed on the prenuptial rites of immigrants from Georgia in Israel, where I experienced the ethnic pride of the celebrators, most of them young, shows that these rites serve as collective ethnic definitional ceremonies, in which immigrants from Georgia, especially the youth, reposition and redefine their identity. Crossing between ethnicity, culture and identity thus exist in these rituals.

The Georgian Jews who immigrated to Israel in the first wave, in the 1970s, came mainly from rural areas. Their family and community concentration in Israel contributed to the preservation of tight family bonds, strong ethnic identity and closure towards the absorbing society which was expressed in the avoidance of mixed marriages and in the preservation of the Georgian language. Their negative stigmatization and their disappointment in the absorbing society that rejected their culture served as a catalyst for strengthening their unique identity. The interviews indicate that during the 1970s and 1980s, the immigrants from Georgia continued the traditional prenuptial customs that reflected the validity of the patriarchal family norms. They married their children at a young age, and the alliance between the families was carried out within the Georgian community through a matchmaker or by the fathers of the family, and the youths accepted these social norms. The ritual order of the process of alliance between the families that was customary in Georgia was also preserved to a great extent.

Since the 1990s, following the second immigration wave from Georgia which was characterized by a more open social profile, and following influences of the social norms in Israel, the age of marriage increased, the number of families that married their children through matchmaking decreased, and a new pattern of alliance between the families was shaped. Furthermore, many young Georgian choose a partner from other ethnic communities in order to become included in Israeli society. Nonetheless, many families continue the matchmaking tradition and hold the traditional betrothal ritual. Indeed, some of the customs disappeared from this ritual and others underwent transformation, but original customs were preserved among couples, even when the bride is not Georgian. For example, the ritual of exchanging gold or silver coins between the families, which symbolizes the transfer of tradition. The custom of the ritual bath is also performed, with some changes. Georgian families also celebrate the henna ritual, albeit in a shortened ritual form, and adopt henna ritual customs of other ethnic communities.

From the findings I conclude that the new ritual tradition in Israel fulfills an important role in the identity of the youths of the community and in the solidarity of the Georgian community. In this renewed ritual pattern, tradition received new processing and interpretation and became integrated with modernity, and a process of syncretism was created in it. This process shows that immigrants from Georgia, and in particular members of the second generation, conduct negotiation over their ethnic identity which symbolizes them as members of Israeli so-

ciety, but indicates to a great extent on the adoption of ethnic experiences out of choice (compare Purkayastha, 2005). I further found variations of syncretism in the reshaped Georgian ritual in Israel, which stresses the multiple social positions and adjustment paths of immigrants (Zhou, 1997).

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