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Media Practices of Russian-Speaking Orthodox Jews: Women's Groups and Rabbis' Blogs on Facebook and Instagram

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This article focuses on the media practices of Russian-speaking Orthodox Jews seeking patterns of observance relevant to secular modernity. The author applies the conceptual framework of "communicative figurations" to describe the process of everyday Torah observance in post-Soviet countries, Israel, the United States, and Western Europe. Empirical research on media repertoires reveals that members of post-Soviet Orthodox communities use Facebook and Instagram to maintain closed women's groups and rabbis' blogs focused on observance. Women's groups frame everyday observance in terms of modesty, family purity, the kosher home, and the like. Personal rabbis' blogs introduce practices of "digital Judaism" that include Torah lessons, the daily page of the Talmud, question and answer exchanges, and so forth. Content-based textual analyses uncover thematic intersections, the circulation of stories, and reciprocal hyperlinks between both types of groups. The media practices of women's groups and rabbis' blogs link the local Russian-speaking Jewish communities with a transnational Orthodox constellation.

Keywords: Russian-speaking Jews, Orthodox Jews, communicative figuration, closed Facebook groups for Orthodox Jewish women, rabbis' blogs, Facebook, Instagram, digital Judaism.

One of the key issues among Orthodox Jewish communities is the problem of observing the commandments of the Torah in secular societies. Post-Soviet Orthodox Jews also contribute to the discourses on this topic, as they rebuild their communities anew

after periods of religious persecution or an existence of enforced dissidence and opposition to the ideological system.

Contemporary Orthodox Jews identify themselves by their association with the practices of specific communities, guided in their worldview by authoritative rabbis. These communities shape values and identities and monitor the conformity of the lifestyle of "the observant" to the doctrinal provisions of the written tradition. In the era of globalization, these practices have a distinct transnational dimension. As applied to post-Soviet Orthodox Jews, this means the assimilation and reworking of models of instruction in tradition and community life gleaned from foreign, Russian-speaking yeshivas in Israel, the United States, and Western Europe. The institutionalization of post-Soviet communities of Orthodox Judaism began in the 1990s amid the "revival of organized Jewish life" (Khanin 2008, 57–8) and resulted in the emergence of a new sociocultural model of the reproduction of Judaism in a modern secular society.[1]

Most of the Chabad and Lithuanian post-Soviet communities were established with the support of Israeli, American, and European Orthodox enclaves of the Jewish diaspora (Ostrovskaya 2018). In their current existence, they are in regular contact with these enclaves; this includes guest visits and long-term stays of foreign rabbis and mentors in Russia and CIS countries, the supervision of educational practices by yeshivas in Israel, the United States, England, and elsewhere, the training of Jewish immigrants from post-Soviet countries in Israeli Orthodox yeshivas, and participation in shabbatons and workshops arranged by Russian-speaking Orthodox organizations in Israel and the United States for learning the practices of observance. Everyday communications of the members of the new Jewish communities intertwine with many of the practices of religious, Russian-speaking enclaves of the Jewish Diaspora. The Internet and new media technologies serve as key intermediaries of communication about the tradition of daily observance of the commandments of the Torah.

1. Targeted study of post-Soviet communities of Orthodox Jews began only in the 2000s. To date, there have been only a small number of uncoordinated studies of observant Jewish communities in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Odessa. Among them are the works of G. S. Zelenina, articles in the special issue "Iudaizm posle SSSR: staroe i novoe, religioznoe i natsional'noe" ["Judaism after the USSR: Old and New, Religious and National"] of the journal Gosudarstvo, religiia, tserkov' v Rossii i za rubezhom (2015), (see http://www.religion.ranepa.ru/ru/taxonomy/term/1708), the works of N. O. Arkin, and articles by E. A. Ostrovskaya (for the titles of some of the works of these authors see the "References" section).

Israeli and American communities of immigrants from the former Soviet Union played a significant role in creating the digital dimension of Russophone Orthodox Judaism. Through their efforts, yeshivas and kolels were created for Jews who "returned to tradition" (*ba'alei teshuvah*) and wanted to become observant. They developed specialized websites and kosher mobile apps and started conducting online trainings and webinars. The media environment of Russian-speaking Orthodox Jews they constructed gave post-Soviet *ba'alei teshuvah* access to individual online training and direct contact with authoritative rabbis from non-CIS countries. Along with the new opportunities offered by digital Russian-language Judaism, however, the question of its relevance among post-Soviet observant Jews arose.

In this article, I wish to highlight the results of my study of post-Soviet Orthodox Jews and their diasporic patterns of the reproduction of tradition. The investigation focuses on the media practices through which Russian-speaking Orthodox Jews form a modern model of everyday observance of the Torah commandments. How popular and relevant are the digital practices of Judaism and the specialized media offered by foreign mentors? What role do new media and opportunities for social network communications play in the social construction of the contemporary version of Orthodox observance of the commandments? Are Russian-speaking Orthodox Jews included in the broad context of modernity, or, on the contrary, do they create and strengthen the boundaries of a cultural "ghetto"? The answers to these questions can be obtained only through empirical research on the digital communications of Russophone Orthodox Jews. One of the difficult obstacles along the way is the choice of a methodology adequate to resolve these questions.

Research methodology

The study of the digitization and mediatization of religions is a relatively new development in sociological research. This is largely due to the balancing of articles and monographs between descriptions of the digital dimension of religions and attempts to establish concepts. The most discussed are Stig Hjarvard's theory of mediatized religion and Heidi Campbell's approach to the religious-social shaping of media technologies. Sociological articles about the digital practices of a particular religion usually contain an overview of the conceptual theses of these authors. The choice in favor of Hjarvard's theory or Campbell's approach depends directly on the formulation of the re-

search problem and the focus of the inquiry. Most studies that focus on examining the role of religions in the public space and their media forms tend to draw on Hjarvard's theory. Interest in specific religious communities' strategies of Internet and media usage, however, leads to the interdisciplinary field of "digital religion" and the Campbell approach (Campbell 2010).

One should note that Campbell herself has authored articles on the digital practices of Orthodox Jews, and her approach[2] has played a significant role in consolidating the uncoordinated efforts of researchers of modern Judaism.[3] This approach brought together a group of scientists who wanted to conduct a comparative study of the processes of digitization in Orthodox and non-Orthodox branches of Judaism.[4] These studies have shown that the nature of the interaction with the Internet and new media depends directly on the assessment of modernity that a particular movement in Judaism espouses. Thus, the ultra-Orthodox communities of Israel and the United States believe that modernity is fraught with secularization and the destruction of Judaism. They view the Internet and new media as modernity's offshoot, dangerous and harmful to the traditions and foundations of the community. A vivid illustration of this attitude is the ban on using the Internet and mobile phones for non-work purposes. By formatting media technologies to fit their objectives, communities have created a "kosher Internet" and "kosher cell phones" (Rashi 2013; Rosenthal and Ribak 2015). Communities of non-Orthodox branches of Judaism — the Modern Orthodox, Reform Jews, and communities of Conservative and non-denominational Judaism — tend toward a positive acceptance of modernity and its innovations (Abrams 2015). They bring their religious practices into the online format, using media technol-

2. The religious-social shapping of technology approach involves correlating the offline and online communications of a religious community according to four parameters: the history and tradition of the religious community under study; key religious doctrines and patterns that influence the forming of relationships with the Internet and media; formats for the use of new media by the religious community; and community discourse about new media technologies. For a detailed description of the approach, see Campbell 2010a.

3. Sociological interest in the digitization of modern Judaism began in the 2000s. Initially, sociologists focused exclusively on analyzing the digital practices of Israel's fundamentalist ultra-Orthodox communities. The article that initiated discussion of the media practices of Israel's ultra-Orthodox communities appeared in 2005. See Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai, 2005.

4. The results of their joint projects were included in the collective monographs edited by H. Campbell. See Campbell 2013 and Campbell 2015.

ogies to expand the topics of communication and remove community boundaries.

Between these extreme poles — the ultra-Orthodox and the non-Orthodox — lies the position of the communities of Orthodox branches of Judaism in Israel and the United States. They do not oppose the innovations of modernity but strive to preserve the boundaries of traditional identity — reliance on the authority of the rabbis and community consolidation. Thus, their strategies of media technology use have a pragmatic rationale — technology is regarded as a useful resource for drawing non-religious Jews to Judaism (Campbell and Bellar 2015).

As mentioned above, articles employing Campbell's approach contain descriptions of the digital practices of specific communities in various branches of modern Judaism. They focus primarily on comparing offline and online communications within local communities. The problem here is that Campbell's approach omits from consideration the transnational diasporic context of modern observant Jews' communications. And it is precisely in this context that the digital practices, discourses, and media environments of these communities develop.

The extremely popular Hjarvard theory is constructed differently. It concerns the mediatization of religion as the historical process of its progressive secularization. As a result of this process, the media, like certain autonomous social institutions, assume many of the functions of religion (Hjarvard 2008, 10). Hjarvard's formulations have formed the basis for several projects on the mediatization of religions in Scandinavian countries. A significant contribution of these projects, among others, was the conceptual revision of the institutional theory of the mediatization of religion (see, for example, Lied 2012). The well-known Swedish sociologist of religion Mia Lövheim has openly criticized this revision. She holds that this approach does not give access to the individual digital practices of religious actors and the religious media they create. In her view, one must consider the mediatization of religion as a two-way process in which religion is formatted by the logic of various media, but also itself transforms these media to construct its own meanings. According to Lövheim, the approach that allows one to look at the mediatization of religion in this way is Andreas Hepp's version of the social-constructivist approach (Lövheim 2014, 565).

The starting point of Hepp's constructions is the sum of the tenets of the social-constructivist approach. Here, mediatization is understood as a historically and culturally determined meta-process of societal change, occurring in all spheres of social life, including reli-

gion. This process transpires in three waves — mechanization, electrification, and digitization. During the digitization wave, mediatization reaches such a depth of penetration into the sociocultural environment that an unprecedented interweaving of actors, media technologies, and social practices takes place. In other words, social practices never previously related to media become media practices (Hepp 2020, 5–6, 11, 85).

In grappling with the methodology of studying the "deep mediatization" stage of society, Hepp proposes the concept of communicative figurations (Hepp 2020, 103–5). According to Hepp, communicative figurations are the "patterns of processes of communicative interweaving that exist" due to various media and have distinct "'thematic framing' that orients communicative action"; in and through communicative figurations, people construct sociocultural worlds that are symbolically significant to them (Hepp 2014, 88). Each such figuration has four "features": forms of communication, media ensembles, a constellation of actors, and a thematic framing (Hepp 2014, 89–90). With the term "forms of communication" Hepp signifies "'communicative actions' or 'practices', which develop into more complex patterns (patterns of communicative networking or discourses, for example)" (Hepp 2014, 89). Media ensembles form an environment through which the communicative figuration of a particular social sphere (religious, political, economic, etc.) is realized. He emphasizes that deep mediatization is characterized by multiple media, or a diverse media environment. Hepp interprets media ensembles as subsets of a media environment that are employed by a collective or an organization (Hepp 2020, 89–90). A constellation of actors is a network of interconnected individuals who communicate with each other and can be formed by individual actors, collectives, or organizations. Each figuration has only one constellation of actors that perceive themselves as part of it. The thematic framing provides a reference point for the meaningful interaction of the actors and also serves as the meaning of the figuration (Hepp and Hasebrink 2014, 260–62).

Hepp developed an algorithm for the empirical study of communicative figurations in collaboration with Uwe Hasebrink (Hasebrink and Hepp 2016). Among the numerous media introduced by the wave of deep mediatization, they propose to distinguish between those that mediate the practices of an individual and those that see frequent use in the media practices of the social sphere. Thus, it makes sense to begin an investigation by identifying individual media repertoires, which can be remarkably diverse in their composition. The individu-

al is included in the figuration of different social spheres through different media. Individual media repertoires discovered through interviews allow the researcher to take the next step — to conduct surveys concerning the subjective meanings that an individual attaches to the use of specific media. This will necessarily bring the sociologist to the level of a figuration, inasmuch as subjective meanings are constructed in the communicative practices of a constellation of actors. Hepp and Hasebrink propose conducting the study of the figuration's media ensemble through interviews about the purposes of using specific media in the practices of the figuration on topics relevant to the figuration (Hasebrink and Hepp 2016, 7–15).

The formulation of Hepp and Hasebrink seems to me very productive in two respects. It contains not only an algorithm for studying a figuration, but also a methodology for determining its boundaries. In an empirical study, the boundaries of a communicative figuration can be narrowed to the scale of a group or digital collective or expanded to the scale of the media practices of a social field or system (see Hepp and Hasebrink 2018, 23–4). In the context of my study of Orthodox diaspora communities, the opportunity to enter the field through the study of individual media repertoires permits the identification of those media practices that involve individuals in the communicative networks and discourses of the figuration of Russian-speaking Orthodox Jews. These networks and discourses are not tightly bound to the communications and boundaries of the local community; rather they take shape through the media practices of members of Orthodox communities in various countries, in which enclaves of the Jewish diaspora exist.

Subject boundaries, research stages, methods

The study of the media practices of Russian-speaking Orthodox Jews was a continuation of my research on the Lithuanian, Chabad, and Hasidic communities of St. Petersburg, Minsk, and Kyiv, conducted in the years 2015–2018 (see, for example, Ostrovskaya 2016; Ostrovskaya 2017). My initial interest focused on the religious identity and everyday practices of post-Soviet Orthodox Jews. As the collection of biographical interviews progressed,[5] it became increasingly clear that the vast majority of respondents came from Jewish families who did not keep the commandments and were unfamiliar with the Jewish (*evre-*

5. For a detailed consideration of the use of biographical narrative and different types of samples from the environment of observant Jews, see Ostrovskaya 2016a.

iskii)/Judaic (*iudeiskii*) way of life. The revival of Jewish life initiated in the 1990s soon revealed that the present generation had lost connection with previous patterns of reproducing tradition and community life. The decision to become observant has always led respondents to the need to learn how to be observant. It was in interviews with Orthodox Jews that I first became familiar with the concept of the "minimum of observance." Most respondents stated that the model of observance may vary in different communities, but that there is a minimum set of doctrines and practices that are mandatory. Among these are dietary and behavioral restrictions (*kashrut*), the commandments of the Sabbath (*Shabbat*), the regulations for Jewish holidays, circumcision (*bris*) and thrice-daily prayer in the synagogue for men, a Jewish wedding (*chuppah*), a Jewish home, the rules of family purity, the prescriptions of modesty for women, and the visit to the *mikvah* (ritual bath) for married women. The minimum of observance is the primary object of study and practical assimilation at the stage of returning to tradition.[6] Even for the observant with fifteen to twenty years of experience, however, the halakhic aspects of the minimum of observance remain the object of the most intense interest.

During study of the daily reproduction of the "minimum of religious practices" in post-Soviet Orthodox communities, I encountered the specific involvement of modern media in the communications of the observant. For example, the messaging app WhatsApp was regularly mentioned in connection with an account of men's and women's closed chatrooms, to which only members of a particular community have access. Male respondents from Lithuanian and Chabad communities used WhatsApp to organize, discuss, and implement Torah and Talmud study sessions. Women's chats on WhatsApp covered procuring kosher foods, the donation of clothing and other items, meetings of women's clubs at synagogues, the problems of a Jewish daycare or school in the community, and the like.

In interviews women respondents from the Lithuanian and Chabad branches invariably mentioned Facebook and Instagram. Explaining to me the regulations of female modesty, the respondents showed a wig, a *kisui rosh* (head covering), which is used in everyday life. They also stressed the difficulty of finding kosher head coverings and proper clothing in regular stores. They acquired these obligatory items of women's observance through Instagram and WhatsApp. To my ques-

6. For more detail on the minimum of religious practices in the daily life of Orthodox Jewish communities, see Ostrovskaya 2018, 238–39.

tions seeking to clarify how to learn about the rules and "kosher-ness" of items, the respondents recounted discussions in women's groups and blogs on social networks. Later, at their own initiative they included me in closed women's groups on Facebook. This allowed me to observe the groups over a three-year span, revealing communicative interweaving, practices, media, and actors from different countries and Orthodox communities.

In 2019, following the Hepp and Hasebrink algorithm, I conducted a targeted study of individual media repertoires and their communicative meanings. At this stage, I completed forty online interviews with members of the Lithuanian, Hasidic, and Chabad communities of St. Petersburg, Minsk, and Kyiv. The sample included those involved in Orthodox community life in these cities and those with authority in their milieu due to the strictness of their observance of the commandments or their status in their community. I conducted interviews via Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp and asked respondents questions regarding their use of the Internet and new media. At this stage of the study, recurring responses were recorded about media mediating communications in communities and diaspora networks, religious media, and the names of popular groups and blogs on social networks. I supplemented the study of the pragmatics of media use with expert interviews with community site administrators, which addressed the issues of the target audience of sites and social network pages and their content and relevance to the implementation of the everyday practices of observance.

"Jewish blogs about Judaism" on Facebook and Instagram were the principal discovery at this stage.[7] The sample for analysis included those named in all interviews without exception. Thematic hyperlinks to these blogs in women's closed groups served as a separate criterion. I conducted an expert interview with each of the bloggers about their attitudes toward the Internet and new media, the practices of digital Judaism, the target audience, and the topics of the blog. Textual analysis of posts from women's groups and rabbinic blogs supplemented this part of the study.[8] The key units of analysis were the topics cov-

7. Upon initial acquaintance with the information in these accounts, I noticed that the descriptive "bio" had the words "blogger" or "personal blog." In the text of the article, I call them "bloggers."

8. The method of textual analysis has proven itself in the research on digital religious practices. Textual analysis involves the interpretation as text of all online communicative content of a blog or group (for example, images, icons, videos, audio, movies, music, and so forth). In addition, it makes possible the exploration of the thematic, visual, and rhetorical content of a blog or group. For a detailed discussion of the specifics of

ered by posts in the groups and blogs for the period 2016–2019, the main media practices, and hyperlinks.

Publication of the research results in the form of an article involves attention to the ethical element. It should be noted that all respondents, without exception, knew that I was conducting a sociological study with the prospect of writing and publishing a text. I obtained the bloggers' permission to include their names in the text and transcripts of quotations from their interviews were agreed upon.

The media repertoires and media ensembles of Russian-speaking Orthodox Jews

An online survey and expert interviews conducted in 2019 revealed the ranking of all media according to the degree of popularity or lack thereof in the daily observance of tradition. The individual media repertoires of the observant are extremely diverse. Respondents gave examples of sites for ordering goods, foodstuffs, clothing, passenger and airline tickets, books, and more. They noted that they have user accounts on various social networks and use mobile applications and software for correspondence and online conferences with family members and friends from their community, as well as with relatives living abroad. Answers to questions about the frequency and purpose of using specific media, however, indicated that mainly WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram were popular in matters of observance.

All respondents without exception named specialized Jewish sites created by Israeli and American Orthodox yeshivas. Respondents of the Chabad persuasion included chabad.org, ru.chabad.org,[9] and jeps.ru in a list of popular sites. Respondents from the Lithuanian branch named the sites toldot.ru,[10] istok.ru, evrey.com, and beerot.ru. These

employing the "textual analysis" method in the sociological examination of online religious communications, see Tsuria et al. 2017.

9. The works of the Israeli sociologist Oren Golan contain an analysis of the creation and developmental dynamics of the site chabad.org, which was launched in 1993 with the blessing of the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe. Currently, chabad.org is the largest Jewish religious digital resource, providing a digital library, online Torah lessons, a calendar, blogs, "Jewish television," and more. For more information, see Golan 2013.

10. The digital resources of Lithuanian Russian-speaking Jewry have not been subjected to scientific study. According to the self-description on the site toldot.ru, it was established in 2002 for the broad media promotion of the activities of a large Israeli yeshiva of the Lithuanian branch, Toldos Yeshurun. This organization was founded in Israel in 2000 by the most famous Russian-speaking rabbi of the Lithuanian tradition, Yitzchak Zilber. The main goal of its activities is the return of secular Jews from the former USSR to

sites were characterized as intended primarily for "beginners on their way to Jewish life" and as reference tools for more experienced observant Jews. From interview to interview, respondents stressed that they use primarily the digital libraries of these sites and read selectively the opinions of well-known rabbis on certain aspects of observance or articles on the practices of the Jewish calendar.

In expert interviews, administrators of community sites gave the same list of sites and emphasized that "discussions and debates were brought onto social networks." To quote a representative of the PR department of the Chabad St. Petersburg Jewish Community at the Grand Choral Synagogue:

> Before, our community site was more interactive in terms of comments. Now all this is done on social networks. We have a communications committee — people can address questions to community leaders, but basically for certain questions we have established communication channels; people know where to raise their questions: this is mainly the social networks Facebook and VK [VKontakte], [and] also Instagram.

The opinion expressed in the above quotation about conducting discussions on social networks coincides completely with the responses from the online survey. Respondents from different cities emphasized that the discussion of day-to-day observance practices takes place mainly on Facebook and Instagram. One should note that in the replies of female respondents, the names of closed women's groups and the accounts of rabbi bloggers on Facebook predominated. The replies of male respondents identified the names and public pages of rabbi bloggers on both Facebook and Instagram.

The women's section of communications on observance

The media practices of women's groups occur primarily on Facebook. During the years 2015–2016, former female respondents took the initiative to include me in three Facebook groups: "The World of the Jewish Mother," "Shop Shok," and "Kosher Recipes." Each of them is a closed women's group for Orthodox Jewish women belonging to local communities of the Lithuanian, Chabad, and Hasidic movements in

the tradition of observance. For further details, see https://toldot.ru/general/toldotyeshurun/.

different countries. One of the first tasks of the online analysis of these groups was to establish the thematic framing of their communications.

The creator-administrator of the "Shop Shok" group set its thematic frame in the "information" section. The main topic of all the discussions of the group consists of the possibilities and ways of combining the trends of modern fashion in clothing, cosmetics, and cosmetology with the requirements of kosher modesty (*tzniut* or *tznius*) for women. The communications of participants in the "The World of the Jewish Mother" group initially focused on interpreting the application of the Jewish tradition of motherhood and child rearing to solving the problems and difficulties of nursing women, the halakhic component of questions about childhood and adolescence, and marital relations. In both groups, participants could post, upload their photos, videos, and announcements, express opinions, and suggest new topics. The groups' administrators specified no restrictions.

A strict ban by the administrator of the "Kosher Recipes" group on posting on topics irrelevant to the discussion of kosher food and cuisine has regulated the group's communications since its creation in 2014. As a result, the group has not undergone any changes during the five years of its existence. All communications concerned the topics of the kosher status of particular food items, the kosher table, and recipes for dishes for Shabbat and the Jewish holidays. The main media practices included posts with questions about cooking methods, stories about recipes, and videos with procedures for preparing the baked goods and dishes of both everyday and holiday cuisine.

One can determine the constellation of actors in the female branch of the Russophone Orthodox Jewish figuration through the results of interviews with group administrators and through analysis of membership composition, posts, and comments in each of the groups. Observant Jewish women from Russian Chabad communities created some of the first groups. Selective sampling of participants' personal data showed that their geographic location is quite diverse.[11] The groups regularly featured posts and comments from participants living in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, the United States, Israel, and Western Europe.

11. Only a selective sampling was possible, since in some groups the number of participants from different countries amounts to thousands. As of December 2019, the group "Kosher Recipes" brought together 3,836 participants, Shop Shok — 2,342, "The World of the Jewish Mother" — 2,362, "A Fashionable View of Modesty" — 950, and "Stylish Spirituality" — 1,029.

Textual analysis of the groups has shown that over the course of four years, their media practices diversified significantly, the thematic frame blurred, and the composition of their administrative cohorts and active membership changed. Thus, the communications of the group "The World of the Jewish Mother," created by three Chabad women in 2013, amounted at first mainly to infrequent posted announcements and questions about children's films, books, clothing, and the like. In the period 2016–2019, its administrators changed, and the thematic frame expanded to include discussion of the halakhic component of marital relations, the kosher status of cosmetics on certain days of the Jewish calendar, questions about the kosher composition of dishes, approved and disapproved cosmetic procedures, fashion trends and purchased outfits, and the political agenda of everyday Israeli life. The repertoire of media practices also varied — an increasing number of posts appeared retelling the stories from lessons by *rabanits* [*rabanit* or *rabbanit*, the female relative of a rabbi, sometimes also an instructor herself; more rarely, an ordained female rabbi — Translator] posted on YouTube channels.

The "Shop Shok" group led in the years 2015–2016 in terms of the number of subscribers and the intensity of discussions in the comments. As its creators and participants explained to me, at the start everyone wanted to share their "new outfits, manicures, hairstyle, makeup, [and] opinions about beauty products," to ask questions and receive advice in this area. This topic seemed new, attractive, and brought together a digital collective of Russian-speaking Orthodox Jewish women from different countries. In the discussions, the members cited the opinions of Chabad and Lithuanian rabbis on the use of cosmetics, options for head coverings, and so on. Gradually, however, the discussions dwindled, displaced by photos of a new dress, a new manicure, and makeup. In the group, conflicts and disagreements among the participants about the types of clothing that were permissible or unacceptable became more frequent. Subsequently, communications began to appear that strayed from the topics of the group. Participants from different countries posted announcements about chats they created in WhatsApp with the goal of selling or buying wigs and *kisui rosh*, advertising excursions in Israel, and finding partners for shopping together in a particular city in Israel.

In 2016, some of the active members left the group "Shop Shok" when the main "St. Petersburg it-girl"[12] of the Chabad community created a new group, "A Fashionable View of Modesty." The group brought together Orthodox Jewish women professionally engaged in the creation and distribution of the obligatory trappings of female modesty. The group's communications centered around advertisements of the sale of kosher head coverings (wigs, turbans, men's kippahs), matchmaking (*shidukh* or *shidekh*) for unmarried men, kosher confectionery products made to order, and so on. The group's photo album presented a portfolio of Russian-speaking kosher fashion designers, owners of kosher clothing salons, and kosher cafes and showrooms in cities of various post-Soviet countries.

In 2019, most of the participants known to me personally or by correspondence left the groups "Shop Shok" and "A Fashionable View of Modesty." In interviews, they noted that the topic of combining tzniut and contemporary fashion still interested them, but they stopped discussing it in these groups. A Hasidic respondent commented on her departure from the group as follows: "Earlier, I was interested in almost all the posts, but now shoes combined with dresses, outfits of various peoples, works of art without comments. [You] can also see this spam in the feed even without this group." Wanting to participate in discussions about observance, they joined the newly established closed group "Stylish Spirituality." Unlike its predecessors, the group was formed by an Orthodox Jewish woman from the Lithuanian branch. Observant Russian-speaking Jewish women from different countries and branches joined the group. At first, the group's main media practice was the discussion of topics of women's tzniut with insights from religious experts. Posts on matters of women's modesty were accompanied by hyperlinks to religious sites and online broadcasts of talks by well-known Lithuanian female mentors (*rabanits*). Subsequently, however, the range of topics expanded with discussion of the weekly chapter of the Torah for women, kosher food and clothing, Jewish holidays, and so forth.

Hyperlinks in the groups held special interest, with the prospect of establishing a media ensemble of the figuration of Russophone Orthodox Jews. Links appeared only after the thematic profile of each group

12. "The main St. Petersburg it-girl" is the designation I took from interviews with observant-fashionistas in St. Petersburg. By this title, they mean a young woman from the core of the Chabad community at the Choral Synagogue whose style is accepted as a reference point in matters of kosher fashion.

was clearly drawn. The most frequent links included links to the specialized sites toldot.ru and ru.chabad.org and to rabbis' personal blogs. For example, in the group "The World of the Jewish Mother" in the years 2018–2019, hyperlinks appeared to closed chatrooms in WhatsApp. Participants from the Lithuanian movement regularly posted hyperlinks to online talks, articles, and video lessons by Chava Kuperman, a well-known ultra-Orthodox rabanit.[13] The topics of these links ranged from online Torah lessons for women conducted in secret WhatsApp chatrooms, to articles on various aspects of women's observance on the site toldot.ru, to explanations of cooking recipes on Jewish YouTube channels. According to my observations, the links to the audio recordings of Chava Kuperman and her webinars received by the group in a secret chatroom were broadcast further using WhatsApp to many in the Chabad, Lithuanian, and Hasidic communities.

An analysis of the posts in women's closed groups has shown that heated discussions were usually accompanied by hyperlinks to texts and statements in men's rabbinical blogs on Facebook. These links appeared in connection with discussion of the compatibility of new products of modern fashion and cosmetology with the requirements of female modesty, intimate relations between spouses, and life before and after returning to tradition. I will give an example from a discussion in the group "A Fashionable View of Modesty" on the question of the permissibility of eyelash extensions from a halakhic perspective:

> Uri Superfin also wrote that it is possible. Our magnetic lashes really aroused the rabbinic minds))) But I have long been tormented by a question about Rav Volokhov. Why is he perceived by many almost as a *posek* [halakhic decisor]? I am sometimes shocked by what issues people resolve with him on the Internet without reference to the tradition of their community. I never even heard of him except on FB [Facebook]. Enlighten me, [someone] who knows.

This quotation includes the names of two frequently cited Lithuanian rabbis, Uri Superfin and Mikhael Volokhov, hyperlinks to whose blogs

13. In the Russian-speaking observant environment, Chava Kuperman is the most well-known rabanit of the ultra-Orthodox Lithuanian movement. She is the daughter of Rav Yitzchak Zilber, the founder of the Russian-speaking ultra-Orthodox community and the Toldos Yeshurun organization. Chava Kuperman's brother, Rav Ben Tzion Zilber, is the spiritual director of the site toldot.ru. Her lectures, talks, and articles are posted on most Russian-language Lithuanian sites for the observant and on Jewish channels of the YouTube platform. For more information concerning her, see https://toldot.ru/HavaKuperman.html.

appeared regularly in the media practices of women's groups. A detailed analysis of the content of blog texts to which the groups' participants refer allows one to draw conclusions about the thematic and semantic connection between the communications of women's groups and men's rabbinical blogs.

Rabbinical blogs: digital practices of Judaism

In all the interviews without exception respondents named Uri Superfin, Yisrael Paripsky, Aba Dovid Abbo, Avigdor Nosikov, and Mikhael Volokhov's group as the authors of the most popular blogs on observance. Each of them has experience working in post-Soviet Orthodox communities and has their own vision of the aspects of rabbinic daily practice that should be strengthened and developed through online communication. In speaking of the media environment of Russophone Jews, they assessed it as extremely meager in comparison with Hebrew-language digital resources. Specialized Russian-language media are limited to a small number of sites of Israeli and American Russian-speaking Orthodox communities and several rabbinic sites. Common to all the interviews was the characterization of the sites as "an educational resource for beginners on their way to Jewish life." Rabbi bloggers stressed that they themselves do not use any of them, preferring online resources in Hebrew. They invite their students in Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian communities to subscribe to their blogs on social networks and provide links to their online Torah lessons. When asked about the purpose of creating a personal blog, the rabbis spoke of their desire to contribute to the Jewish education of Russian-speaking observant individuals. Each interviewee emphasized that Facebook and Instagram are the most popular media for digital interactive discussions of Judaism. They considered the advantage of both platforms to be the ability to reach a wide audience, heterogeneous in its age, gender, geographic location, citizenship, and other characteristics. In addition, both allowed hyperlinks to other Jewish blogs about observance and to other useful resources.

As mentioned above, I discovered personal rabbinic blogs, popular among Orthodox Jews, through targeted interviews about the media repertoires of the observant. Because of this, one of my first steps was a content analysis of the thematic distribution of posts in each of the blogs for the period 2016–2019. The posts were distributed quantitatively according to the following topics: Torah lessons and Talmud

study, everyday life-cycle practices (Shabbat, minyan [quorum for communal worship], prayer, bris, bat/bar mitzvah, chuppah, mikvah, tzniut, and so forth), Jewish holidays, offline community and synagogue, and personal examples of daily observance. The analysis indicated that the communications developed in the blogs mainly concerned halakhic commentaries and reflections on the "minimum of religious practices." The main differences between the blogs under consideration lay in the following areas: the leading topic, the target audience, the choice of one of the platforms as the main platform, and the media image and style of communication with the blog's digital public.

The closed group "A Question for the Rabbi" was created in 2016 by Mikhael Volokhov, the rabbi of the Moscow yeshiva "Torat Chaim" of the Lithuanian movement.[14] Over a period of three years, communications in the group followed the same "questions-and-answers" model on observance topics. Participants posted questions about the conformity with the laws of halakha of a particular act, decision, choice of clothing, preparation of a dish, kosher status of a product, and so on. Rabbi Volokhov's answer was published in the comments to all question posts, accompanied by a discussion or additional comments from those also interested in the topic. A selective sampling of the accounts of active participants indicated that men and women from Russian-speaking communities of various strands of Orthodox Judaism addressed their questions to the group. Hyperlinks to the Lithuanian website toldot.ru and the Russian-language branch of the Chabad site, ru.chabad.org, regularly appeared in the group. Rabbi Volokhov recommended turning to the website of an ultra-Orthodox Lithuanian yeshiva in Israel in all cases when confirmation of his opinion was required or when questions were received concerning kashrut. Hyperlinks to the Chabad site ru.chabad.org were few and appeared in connection with questions about the presence or absence of the digital practice of selling leaven (*hametz* or *chametz*) before Passover.[15]

14. The ultra-Orthodox Russian-language yeshiva "Torat Chaim" in the Moscow suburbs was founded in 1989 with the support of the Israeli ultra-Orthodox organization Toldos Yeshurun. For more information, see Zhurnal Mir Tory, 2010.

15. On the site ru.chabad.org in the section "The practice of Judaism. Jewish holidays-Passover-Chametz," there is an online form that, when completed in advance, makes it possible through the Internet to accomplish the religious practice of removing all leavened products from the home before the celebration of Passover. See https://ru.chabad.org/holidays/passover/sell_chometz_cdo/fbclid/.

Rabbi Uri Superfin was also mentioned in many interviews as a blogging pioneer.[16] For a long time, from 2013 to 2018, he sought a key theme for his digital narrative. Superfin tried various topics — Jewish holidays, the weekly Torah chapter, sketches of daily life in an ultra-Orthodox Israeli town, and so forth. In an interview, Uri Superfin described his motives for creating the blog as follows:

> In 2006, I stopped going to Kyiv to teach, and then I came to LiveJournal. That's where I started, but now it's empty and quiet there. Everyone went to Facebook because there is a reaction and everything is mobile. Facebook gives me everything I need — both immediate feedback and an audience. [. . .] How do I choose topics? There's always a bit of reflection. Naturally, when certain holidays are approaching, I try to reflect on this as a rabbi. This suggests some filler. As a rule, these are little-known things; I do not see the value of writing banalities. I write what is unknown and get a reaction to this from the outside. This is my know-how in the Russian-speaking environment — to give the kinds of things that a person would never know without teaching the Torah professionally.

Monitoring the blog over time showed that Rabbi Uri gradually filled the blog's communications with various media. For example, in the period 2013–2016, he posted audio recordings of lessons on various halakhic topics and Jewish holidays. During the years 2017–2018, he introduced hyperlinks to his articles on weekly Torah chapters published on the site jeps.ru of the St. Petersburg Chabad community at the Grand Choral Synagogue. In 2019, he gave discussions and commentaries on the daily page of the Talmud and consideration of the weekly chapter of the Torah the thematic framing of interaction. The script for these communications developed gradually through the blogger's interaction with his digital collective. In the media practice of the blog, it looked like this: Rabbi Uri would offer a little-known quotation or excerpt from the texts of the Talmud and his detailed commentary, and the blog's digital collective would discuss Rabbi Uri's opinion in the comments. Rabbis of the Chabad and Lithuanian movements, working in Russian, Ukrainian, and Israeli communities, appeared regularly as active participants in these discussions. Most of my former male and female respondents from

16. Rabbi Uri Superfin belongs to the ultra-Orthodox Lithuanian branch of Judaism, lives in Israel, and has experience teaching the tradition in Russian and Ukrainian communities of observant Jews. He also contributes regularly to the Russian-language digital media (journals and websites) of Lithuanian post-Soviet communities.

Chabad, Lithuanian, and Hasidic communities of Russophone Judaism in post-Soviet countries subscribed to the blog and were its active participants.

Among his own media innovations is "Moishfilm" — a visual commentary on the halakhic laws, consisting of a frame selected from popular Soviet comedy films, with a short humorous, but also instructive, caption on the image itself. Here is how he himself explained the pragmatics of this media:

> Moishe — a standard, recognized Jewish name — plus Mosfilm. Soviet films with Jewish seasoning. I wanted to use ready-made images that are well known to the adult viewer, that have *a priori* positive emotions connected with them. And to use these images to popularize the Jewish law, halakha. The rest was a matter of technique: since the Jewish law covers all areas of life without exception, all I had to do was take another image, a frame from an old Soviet film, and think a little about what law is applicable to it. Well, and to make it amusing, is a must.

"Moishfilm" is particularly popular with the female portion of the digital collective of Superfin's blog. In addition, the ladies were actively involved in discussions of posts on the interpretation of aspects of women's observance.

Rabbi Yisrael Paripsky was one of the first to introduce online Torah lessons in the media environment of observant Russian-speaking Jews on Facebook.[17] He initiated discussions of "uncomfortable topics" that were taboo in offline communications of Russophone post-Soviet Jewish communities. These included the following: the competition between Chabad and Lithuanian communities, the intimate side of married life, and the attitude to homosexuality and drugs from the perspective of the Torah. In his expert interview, he stressed that he created two different blogs in order to reach audiences that varied in age, status, and preparedness:

> I have been teaching for fifteen years and to keep in touch with my students, I registered on VK and on FB [Facebook]. From [the years] 2012–2013, I started to have a blog. Usually, in the first lesson, I [would] ask everyone to take out their smartphones and subscribe to all my social

17. Rabbi Yisrael Paripsky belongs to the Lithuanian branch of Judaism. For fifteen years, he worked as a rabbi in the Lithuanian Jewish communities of Moscow, Odessa, and Mogilev.

> networks, and only then [would] I start the lesson. We are in the flow, I need to be in touch with them. So, they [would] listen to the lesson, leave, and that was it. This way I'm there on their Instagram. On Instagram, I have two pages — "Channel 613," a title based on the number of Torah commandments, and a personal [page]. There are things I post on Instagram, there are things [I post] on Facebook. When I worked in Moscow, I taught in various places where they recorded my Torah lessons, and I began to post them with a hashtag on Facebook. I track audience preferences. On Facebook, there are more controversial things, managers and older people are on there, angry after work, they want to criticize someone. The audience on Instagram is younger, likes someone positive. On Channel 613, I did an analysis — there [the audience] is mostly men from twenty-five to thirty-five years old.

The media practices of Paripsky's blogs differed from each other in their thematic frame. The blog on Facebook was aimed at digitizing the religious communications of Russian-speaking Orthodox Jews — Torah lessons, online broadcasts of events in community life, and online explanations of the practices of Jewish holidays. Paripsky directed the second blog, "Channel 613" on Instagram, toward the formation of a unified media environment for Russian-language rabbinical blogs on observance. Along with posts on topics of daily observance, it contained regular extensive quotations (repostings) from the blogs of current rabbis of the Lithuanian and Chabad branches of Russophone Judaism. In addition, Paripsky actively used the hashtags popular with bloggers of various strands of Judaism (*tefillin* [phylacteries], Torah, Judaism, Shabbat, Jews, and others). The hashtag "online synagogue," which he introduced, formed a lively international public page, on which posts in Spanish, Hebrew, and English appeared.

Chabad respondents named Aba Dovid Abbo's blog — "rabbiaba" — in all their interviews without exception.[18] In interviews, bloggers of the Lithuanian movement also described him as enjoying great popularity with Jewish youth of various branches of Orthodox Judaism. Unlike other bloggers, Aba Dovid arranged his narrative in the form of an autobiographical photo diary. Over the course of nine years of

18. Aba Dovid created his blog @rabbiaba in 2011, when he came from Israel to Moscow to study at the Chabad yeshiva "Machon Ran" at the synagogue on Bolshaya Bronnaya Street. [Strictly transliterated according to the modified Library of Congress system (without diacritics), the name of this street reads "Bolshaia Bronnaia." The "-aya" spelling is often encountered in English references to this street, however, and therefore appears here — Translator.]

blogging, he created a digital version of the biographeme of a traditional Chabad rabbi. The photo narrative reflected the religious transformation of a young man, a student of the Moscow Chabad yeshiva, into a mature teacher, the manager of a large project for Jewish teenagers, and the father of a family. The media image chosen by Aba Dovid is that of a charismatic young leader of Russian-speaking Jewish youth embarking on the path of observance. In an interview, he commented on the choice of this particular genre of digital storytelling as follows:

> For me, Instagram is the main platform because on it [people view] mainly visual content, not texts. I believe that it is possible to convey more of value there with a single photo than with a long article . . . I see an incredible resource in social media, everything that I spend time on in my work, what I invest in is the educational process with teenagers. And where else can I build an educational process with them, if not on the Internet? And in fact: who blogs on Instagram? Teenagers!

The specific feature of this blog's communications was the combination of photo narratives with hashtags popular in the media environment of Chabad accounts on observance. On Instagram, these hashtags were used to refer to public pages with digital Torah lessons, talks by Chabad rabbis, and accounts of observant Jews professionally engaged in the production of various kinds of kosher products (jewelry, food, and items of men's and women's kosher fashion).

Avigdor Nosikov's blog is a digital narrative about the daily life of a Russian Orthodox rabbi.[19] In an interview, he stressed that by his personal example, he would like to "demonstrate to young people that [the] observance of Jewish tradition [need] not be a burden, but an exciting way of life." Rabbi Avigdor considered it important to clarify the frame and target audience of his digital narrative:

> I myself created a blog, because it is an opportunity to communicate and give knowledge, information to a large audience, which, well, you cannot bring together in any class [or] synagogue. The main blog is Instagram because it is the most streaming and widely used. My task is

19. Avigdor Nosikov registered an account on Instagram in 2016 under the name @ voronezhrabbi. In that year he moved from Israel to Voronezh, where he received the position of chief rabbi and was entrusted with the Hasidic community there. In connection with this, Rabbi Avigdor considered it necessary "to create the only Russian-language blog by a rabbi on Instagram."

> to arouse interest, sympathy with Jewish values in both Jews and non-Jews who are simply interested. I intentionally hired a person who did not do content but dealt with attracting an audience. The content is always mine. I myself run the blog, the publication takes half an hour [. . .] I set myself the challenge of running this blog primarily not as a rabbi, but as a Jew observing the commandments of the Torah from a Russian non-metropolitan city, who in doing so does not feel disadvantaged and persecuted.

The blog posts included short texts and personal photos. Thematically, Rabbi Avigdor focused his narrative on discussing various aspects of the "minimum of religious practices." Analysis of the blog posts indicated that the main topics were events in community life (chuppah, bar mitzvah, creation of a mikvah, visits of famous rabbis, shabbatons, minyan), Jewish holidays, the weekly chapter of the Torah, the lighting of Shabbat candles, kosher food production, trips to rabbinic conferences and travel, and Russian media interviews with the rabbi. Along with this, he used media practices popular in the youth media environment of Instagram — online video chats with subscribers on issues of everyday observance and flash mobs with prizes in the form of the items and trappings of male and female observance. A distinctive feature of this blog was the expansion of the thematic repertoire through communications about repatriation to Israel and treatment in Israeli clinics. In addition, unlike most rabbi bloggers, Avigdor Nosikov linked his narrative through hyperlinks to women's blogs about the Jewish way of life, repatriation to Israel, kosher fashion, and kosher products on Instagram.

Textual analysis of these blogs and groups over time from 2016 to 2019 has revealed that their authors were pioneers of a sort in introducing practices of digital Judaism, such as "questions and answers," online Torah lessons, online discussions of the daily Talmud page, and rabbinic digital narratives on the commandments and the day-to-day practices of the observant. These practices are widespread in the Hebrew-speaking milieu of Orthodox Judaism, but take place, as a rule, through a wide variety of new media — rabbinic websites, specialized Jewish sites for observance, webcasts, and so on.[20] The blogs considered in this study have made the practices of digital Judaism accessible to Russian-speaking Orthodox Jews in the media environment of

20. For an overview and analysis of the practices of digital Orthodox Judaism, see Katz 2012.

Facebook and Instagram. It is fundamentally important to note that the blogs contain reciprocal hyperlinks. Regular cross-citations and links ensure the circulation of digital stories in blogs on similar topics of male observance and rabbinic commentaries on halakhic matters.

Conclusion

Andreas Hepp's concept of communicative figurations has proven to be a very productive methodological framework permitting the identification of the communicative interweaving among actors involved in the life of Russian-speaking Orthodox Jewish communities in post-Soviet countries, as well as in Israel, the United States, and Western Europe. A communicative network of the figuration of Russian-speaking Orthodox Jews is emerging in the media practices of closed women's groups and rabbinic blogs on Facebook and Instagram. The thematic frame of the communications of the groups and blogs is the "minimum of religious practices." The media practices of the figuration of Russian-speaking Orthodox Judaism also replicate the gender segregation characteristic of offline community practices. The communications of women's closed groups on Facebook are aimed at constructing a frame for the everyday reproduction of the prescriptions for tzniut, family purity, the Jewish home, and so forth. The participants in these groups are observant Jewish women from communities in various countries and branches of Orthodox Judaism. The observation of women's groups in action has shown that over time they transformed either into digital collectives to discuss the topics of women's "minimum of religious practices," or into communities that bring together those who are professionally engaged in producing kosher products for women's observance and interested observant individuals.

Personal rabbinic blogs on Facebook and Instagram concerning observance have introduced into the communication repertoire the practices of digital Judaism, such as Torah lessons, the daily Talmud page, and digital narratives about the doctrinal foundations of Jewish holidays and life-cycle rituals. Each of the bloggers sought to create his own unique media niche in order to attract the target audience to his specific digital narrative. At the same time, one should also note the consolidation of the communicative practices of Russian-speaking rabbi-bloggers working in local communities of various movements in Orthodox Judaism. Hyperlinks, which circulate digital stories about observance in the media environment of Rus-

sian-speaking Orthodox Jews, serve as a necessary component of their communications.

Textual analysis of the media practices of the groups and blogs has revealed the communication links between them: thematic intersections, the circulation of digital stories, and reciprocal hyperlinks. Women's and men's communications about observance link actors of the various branches of Orthodox Judaism into a transnational constellation. The media ensemble of the figuration includes the social networks Facebook and Instagram. Hyperlinks in groups and blogs interweave the media practices of rabbis and rabanits from Israeli and American yeshivas on the YouTube platform and the specialized sites toldot.ru and ru.chabad.org into the communicative networks of the figuration of Russian-speaking Orthodox Jews.

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