

# 'Everyone does Jewish in their own way'

Vernacular practices of intermarried Finnish Jewish women

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Shortly after the Civil Marriage Act took effect in 1917 and the constitutional right to freedom of religion was implemented by the Freedom of Religion Act in 1922, the number of intermarriages started to rise in the Finnish Jewish congregations, affecting both their customs, and the structure of their membership. Initially, intermarried members and their spouses faced rejection in their congregations; however, during the second half of the twenty-first century, the attitudes towards intermarriages and intermarried congregants have changed significantly. Today, a high number of intermarriages is one of the key defining characteristics of Finnish Jewish communities. This article will concentrate on the vernacular practices of intermarried women in the Jewish Community of Helsinki and Turku. The core material of this article consists of semi-structured ethnographic interviews conducted in 2019 and 2020 with members of the two Finnish Jewish communities. The women presented in this study often combine models from different traditions. Instead of abandoning Judaism altogether, they 'do Judaism in their own way' by creating and (re)-inventing traditions they find meaningful for themselves and for their families.

## Introduction

Shortly after the Civil Marriage Act took effect in 1917 and the constitutional right to freedom of religion was implemented by the Freedom of Religion Act in 1922, the number of intermarriages<sup>1</sup> started to rise

in the Finnish Jewish congregations. This phenomenon has come to affect many of the religious practices in the congregations. Throughout the decades, the attitude of the two communities towards intermarriages have changed significantly. Earlier intermarried congregational members not only faced a certain level of rejection from their fellow congregants, but were also restricted in their practices in the synagogue. Today, a high number of intermarriages is one of the key defining characteristics of Finnish Jewish communities. Focusing on women's experiences, this article will concentrate on the everyday lives of intermarried women among Finnish Jewry by analysing semi-

riage' when I refer to officially registered marital unions, in which one of the spouses identified differently than Jewish or belonged to a different religious community than Jewish. I use the term regardless of whether the non-Jewish spouse changed their religious affiliation after becoming involved with their Jewish partner. When I use the term 'conversionary in-marriage', I refer to marital unions in which the non-Jewish spouse converted to Judaism before or after the marriage. When I use the term 'mixed marriage', I refer to marital unions between a Jew and a non-Jew, who both kept their respective memberships of their own communities.

<sup>1</sup> In this article, I use the word 'intermar-

structured ethnographic interviews conducted in 2019 and 2020 with members of the Jewish congregations in Helsinki and Turku. The women presented in this study often combine models from different traditions. Instead of abandoning Judaism altogether, they ‘do Judaism in their own way’ by creating and (re-)inventing traditions they find meaningful for themselves and for their families.

## Background

Finland has often been viewed as one of the world’s most secular countries, even though in 2019, approximately 68.6 per cent of its total population belonged to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF). There are two Jewish communities in Finland – with less than 1500 members, in Helsinki and in Turku, which currently make up approximately 0.02–0.03 per cent of the total Finnish population.<sup>2</sup> Finnish Jewry is one of the oldest, and most integrated minorities of the country. Nevertheless, the group is far from monolithic, and has gone through several changes within recent decades, as the status of the group has shifted and has been influenced by the majority non-Jewish society (Czimbalmos and Pataricza 2019). In the contemporary Finnish Jewish context, the questions of intermarriages and conversions are interconnected. Finnish Jews

2 In addition to the people registered in these two congregations, there are several other Jews – both of Finnish and foreign ancestry – living in the country. Chabad Lubavitch are also present in Finland, officially registered as a non-profit association (Suomen Chabad Lubavitch ry., The Chabad Lubavitch of Finland). Moreover, in the summer of 2019 a new non-profit association Suomen reformijuutalaiset ry (Association of Reform Jews of Finland) was established.

gained the right to receive Finnish citizenship in 1917. Intermarriages and conversionary in-marriages have become a regular occurrence in the Jewish Community of Helsinki<sup>3</sup> since the 1920s, primarily due to the Finnish legislative processes which limited the size of the Jewish marriage market, and a secularization of Finnish society (CMA 1917; UVL267/122; Czimbalmos 2018, 2019; Czimbalmos and Pataricza 2019). From the 1950s, the number of intermarriages in the community<sup>4</sup> exceeded the number of endogamous marriages<sup>5</sup> almost every year (Czimbalmos 2018, 2019). In addition, the Finnish legislative situation also had important impacts on the Jewish congregations. According to the Freedom of Religion Act of 1922, which was in place until 1970, a child was to follow the father’s religious affiliation unless the parents agreed otherwise in a written agreement. In 1969, the law on the freedom of religion was reversed so that, from 1970 onwards, a child was to follow the mother’s religious affiliation unless otherwise decided by the parents (LUM767/1969, 767/1969). This resulted in several legal difficulties which local Jewish communities needed to face (Czimbalmos 2018, 2019). The law was revised again in 2003, from

3 The amount of archival data available on the topic in the Jewish Community of Turku is limited. The Jewish Community of Helsinki is far greater in size and membership than the Turku congregation. Hence, in this article I mainly discuss the matter in the Jewish Community of Helsinki.

4 There is no clear data about numbers of intermarriages in the Jewish Community of Turku.

5 Endogamy is the custom of marrying within a particular social or cultural group in accordance with custom or law. In the current context, it refers to marital relationships that were officiated between people who both belonged to a Jewish community.

which year the child's religion was decided by both parents together. After the age of twelve, the decision is to be made jointly by parents and the child (UVL2003/453).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the *giyur*<sup>7</sup> of the non-Jewish parent – especially in the case of non-Jewish women – is highly encouraged within the community. The number of female converts to Judaism in Finland has traditionally been significantly higher than the number of male converts (NA, Syn. and Vih.; JCH, HrJFH) – making the conversions into a gendered phenomenon in the communities.

The most recent studies that deal with Finnish Jewry were published in *Nordisk judaistik –Scandinavian Jewish Studies* in 2019. The issue includes five articles that approach local Jewry from contemporary perspectives (see Czibalmos 2019; Illman 2019; Muir and Tuori 2019; Pataricza 2019; Vuola 2019). Elina Vuola's contribution (2019) to the journal is the most recent article studying Finnish Jewish women through the approach of intersectionality of gender and minority status. Through the information Vuola derived from qualitative interview material she shows that many of her informants openly questioned and challenged male hierarchy and power use within their communities (*ibid.* p. 72). The latest article that reflected on the effects the growth in the number of intermarriages has had on the Jewish Community of Helsinki from the historical perspective was written by the author of the current article (Czibalmos 2019). Sociologist Lars Dencik distributed a questionnaire entitled 'Questions about Jewish Life' in Sweden, Norway and Finland, in which he also addressed issues of intermarriages, Jewish

identity and Jewish practices. The results of his study show that Finnish Jews are the most open among the three studied communities when it comes to the question of marrying a non-Jew, and that Scandinavian Jews often construct their practices flexibly, fitting them into their own personal Jewish arrangement (Dencik 2009). Nevertheless, there is no scientific contribution that has studied specifically the practices of Jewish intermarried women in Finland before. This article therefore aims to fill a gap in the existing research by contributing to the understanding of practices of intermarried Jewish women, who are members of the Jewish Community of Helsinki or Turku, through an ethnographic approach. Judaism cannot be defined solely as a religion, just as Jews cannot be defined as a religious group only.

Jewish authorities generally oppose the idea of intermarriage. Their argument is primarily based on religious grounds and is connected to the Jewish connection the future offspring may or may not have (see e.g. Hirt *et al.* 2015; Kranz 2016; Diemling and Ray 2016). Nevertheless, their position is connected and intertwined with matters of Jewish identity and boundary maintenance. The subject of Jewish identity, including the question of what constitutes 'Jewishness' and who is a 'Jew', is one of the most challenging issues of modern religious and ethnic group history. One can be Jewish in many ways: based on ancestry, religious affiliation, cultural belonging, etc. (Glenn and Sokoloff 2010: 3). Therefore, my aim in this article is not to engage in discussions about the meanings of Judaism or Jewish identity, but to reflect on what my informants – consciously and sub-consciously – do in order to maintain their (and their children's) connection to Judaism, through studying their practices.

6 For further information on the topic see Czibalmos 2018 and 2019.

7 *Giyur*: conversion to Judaism.

## 'Doing Judaism'

Over the course of the past decades, the concepts of 'lived religion', 'everyday religion' and 'vernacular religion' have become widespread among scholars researching the field as they refer to a focus on religion as it is experienced and practised in the everyday lives of people (Hall 1997; Orsi 1997, 2010; Primiano 1997, 2001, 2012; Ammerman 2007, 2008, 2016; McGuire 2008; Bowman and Valk 2012; Bowman 2014; Illman 2018). The above-mentioned terminology for describing everyday religious experiences are often used in parallel (Illman 2019). Moreover, all of these approaches strive for a 'study of religion-as-lived' (Kupari and Vuola 2020: 10). The concept of 'vernacular religion' is an interdisciplinary approach, which was developed by Leonard N. Primiano. As Primiano suggests, religious belief takes as many forms of traditions as there are individual believers (Primiano 1995: 51). As Primiano describes in his own work, the term 'vernacular', in a sociolinguistic context, can refer to the indigenous dialect or language of a community, and in other contexts may refer to its 'personal' or 'private' aspects, or to aspects that are native, or peculiar to certain localities (*ibid.* p. 42). Vernacular religion is not only "lived religion", it is a social entity made authoritative by everyday believers' repeated choices to connect' (Howard 2011: 7). In the study of religions, vernacular religion refers to how people do religion in relation to their worldview(s) and in relation to the local conditions. Primiano's aim is to focus on everyday practices and individual experiences, together with the historically organized and theologized ones. The theoretical framework of vernacular religion promotes the understanding of continuous interpretation and negotiation, which happens when individuals are affected by any

influences whilst practising their religion (Primiano 2012: 384). Human religiosity always includes a measure of innovation and adaptation; therefore these negotiations and interpretations are best shown in practice (Illman 2019).

Primiano underlines three central concepts in his own research – ambiguity, power, and creativity – that appear when people strive to maintain and adjust their traditions in and to the given conditions. They may integrate the traditions and practices they perceive as meaningful into their everyday lives, and learn, adopt, accept, or even deny some. They can also offer resistance to cultural and social forms of power in a creative manner (Illman 2019; Primiano 2012). Religion in everyday life appears as lived experience that is far from uniform and is often influenced by multifarious factors and considerations and hence it also appears as a performance of one's agency. In the context of gender-traditional religions, doctrinal and textual traditions are often dominated by men (Woodhead 2007a, 2007b). In this context, however, studying women frequently produces the notion of agency, in which women are trying to break free from traditional gender roles, by focusing on instances when they can challenge or change religious practices or even beliefs (Burke 2012: 124–5). The dichotomy of either complying or breaking free from traditional expectations is often false (Avishai 2008, 2016; Avishai *et al.* 2015; Burke 2012). Focusing on practice over beliefs and institutional affiliations allows us to study what it means to be religious differently from the conventional approaches (Aune 2015). The work of Orit Avishai on 'doing religion' (2008) challenges this dichotomy by presenting a semi-conscious, self-authoring way through which women construct their frame of religiosity. She also points out, 'religious conduct [is]

a way of being' as well as the performance of one's identity. Avishai's work highlights that 'doing religion' is highly conscious, and includes a measure of creativity and innovation, which is very much in line with Primiano's theory on vernacular religion. Moreover, Primiano's analytical tool allows for an investigation of power relations within the context. Studying the practices of intermarried women through the prism of these frameworks allows for an observation of the embodied traditions and actions in a more comprehensive manner, including a focus on power relations. The informants of this study are in unusual positions: they are members of Orthodox Jewish congregations and are married to non-Jewish men. Their choice may be an indicator of the small size of the Jewish marriage market, but it also reflects their self-positioning and agency.

### Methodology

In order to obtain in-depth, rich information on the subject matter, I mainly base my research on newly-collected ethnographic materials: semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with members of the Finnish Jewish congregations within the research project 'Boundaries of Jewish Identities in Contemporary Finland' (see the Minhag Finland Project website). The material is of course situational and includes discussions between a scholar and their participants, and thus, should be viewed critically. In addition to my scholarly presence as an interviewer, it was a well-known fact for my informants that I am a member of the Jewish Community of Helsinki. My presence on the field was simultaneously professional and personal (Coffey 1999). The interviews mainly touched upon aspects connected to contemporary Jewish life in Finland, including everyday religious practices, dietary trad-

itions, matters of family life, and feelings of Jewishness. The informants quoted in this article gave their full consent to the study. However, due to the small size of the communities, I decided to alter or leave out certain details that might reveal their identities to preserve the integrity of my informants and of the communities.

### Informants

Due to the time limitations and the framework of the research project, only members of the congregations were interviewed. I chose 15 female informants to interview from the sample of 100. My selection criteria for this study were that the informant is or was married to a person who does not, or did not previously, identify as Jewish. My informants come from a variety of backgrounds. They were all born Jewish, with one exception – Deborah, whose mother converted to Judaism after her birth, hence she went through a childhood conversion. In addition, one informant, Esther, had to go through a *giyur l'chumrah*<sup>8</sup> even though her mother had converted prior to her birth, as the rabbi of her congregation at the time failed to find her mother's conversion certificate and advised her to confirm her Jewish status by a conversion.

My material suggests that as intermarriages have become more common in the local congregations, interfaith families have tried to make compromises to maintain the good relationship with each other and the members of the extended family. The four key domains of practice I identified when studying the material are connected to the identity work and negotiations that took

8 *Giyur l'chumrah*: conversions performed as precautionary measures, when a doubt exists about one's Jewishness (by the Jewish law) or about the validity of his/her conversion.

Table. Four key domains of negotiations.

Name	Birth	Parents and background
Abigail	1980s	Jewish
Adar	1980s	Jewish (mother converted before her birth)
Ariela	1960s	Jewish (mother converted before her birth)
Basya	1980s	Jewish (mother converted before her birth)
Chava	1950s	Jewish
Deborah	1970s	Jewish (mother converted after her birth), childhood conversion
Esther	1960s	Jewish (mother converted before her birth)
Leah	1950s	Jewish
Michal	1960s	Jewish (mother converted before her birth)
Naomi	1960s	Mixed (non-Jewish father)
Tamar	1940s	Jewish
Talia	1980s	Jewish
Yael	1950s	Mixed (non-Jewish father)
Yehudit	1980s	Mixed (non-Jewish father)
Yiska	1960s	Jewish (mother converted before her birth)

place in the narratives of the Jewish women presented in this study, individually and in relation to their non-Jewish spouses. These domains were mainly connected to practices in their own homes and private lives. The crucial aspects of Jewish life that required negotiation among my informants were most often centered around: Jewish holidays and traditions, *kashrut*<sup>9</sup>, formal Jewish education of (future) common children, and *brit milah*<sup>10</sup>. These matters are considered ‘fundamental’ in Finland (and perhaps in many other countries where the Jewish population is rather small) to maintain one’s Jewish identity and practice. The negotiations and attitudes towards these aspects are however not rigid states of mind, but rather fluid approaches; they can

change over time and are highly dependent on the context and the circumstances, on which the aspect of ‘marrying out’ definitely has an effect.

### Jewish holidays and traditions

My informants often indicated to me that ‘Judaism is a way of life’. Jewish traditions and holidays intertwine with all aspects of life. However frequent they may be in the official religious calendar, Jewish holidays can be observed in a variety of ways and some choose to observe only some of them – even in very creative ways. Most of my informants only go to the synagogue during the High Holidays, or *Pesach*, and only incorporate Jewish traditions and practices in their everyday lives – outside of the synagogue. Being such a broad domain, I found a great level of flexibility and creativity – one of the key concepts of Primiano – among the attitudes towards Jewish holidays among my informants. Chava, one of the oldest women I interviewed, compared

9 *Kashrut*: a set of dietary laws dealing with the foods that Jews are permitted to eat and how those foods must be prepared according to the Jewish law.

10 *Brit milah*: circumcision.

her relationship to Jewish traditions and her interest in Judaism to a hobby, stating that for her 'Judaism is important, and for him [her husband], fishing is important'. She had already expressed at the beginning of our conversation the importance in her life of Jewish holidays which – as she said – are kept in a 'traditional way', not on religious grounds. During Shabbat, for example, she usually tries to 'take it easy' in her own way but does not observe Shabbat in the 'orthodox way' (e.g. she uses electric lights and watches television): 'Let's say that I am not a religious Jew, but I am more of a "cultural" one. I like it when we keep Jewish traditions, but for instance if there is something interesting on a Friday evening, I can do something else as well.' The family only celebrates Jewish holidays at home, and Chava's husband shows solidarity towards her and helps her, for instance, in preparing food for bigger holidays, or in cleaning the house for Pesach, 'instead of Christmas cleaning'.

Many of my informants refrained from practising non-Jewish religious traditions in their homes, but most often they did not abstain from taking part in celebrations connected to them with their extended family. Often, they kept the most important holidays of both spouses' traditions at home. Yael, who was the daughter of a mixed marriage herself, described the practices in her childhood home as picking the 'raisins from the bun' (Fi. *rusinat pullasta*): her family consciously chose what they considered to be the best from each tradition. In her first marriage, she 'brought her own family dynamics' to her relationship, which meant that the family celebrated Christmas, and had chocolate Easter eggs at home. Her attitude changed after divorcing her first husband, however: 'I realized that I had to choose who I am. And, so, when my [second] husband married

me ... I said, "We are like a package. The kids and me. It's all or no one." And I said, "I am Jewish. I want to live as Jewishly as I can." Similarly to Yael, Leah also stopped celebrating non-Jewish traditions after her divorce from her husband, and also started celebrating more Jewish traditions 'step by step'. This happened simultaneously with her children starting to attend the Jewish school and 'bringing home' many traditions from there. Starting to 'do Judaism' and learning Jewish traditions and prayers from their children who were attending the Jewish school was described by many women. Abigail called her children 'praying robots' for knowing how to recite certain prayers and blessings better than she herself. Basya, one of the youngest of my informants, told me about the same experience with her own child. Whilst Yael and Leah changed their attitudes to non-Jewish and Jewish practices after separating from their husbands, Basya connected this change to the period right before she married her current husband:

I think in a way I almost tricked him [my husband] a little bit, because when I met him, I just happened to not be very interested in these things. So, he thought he was getting one thing, but then when we got married, suddenly [I started to have] all of these absolutely absurd demands, that are very hard to justify if you don't even personally have faith.

She expressed her desire to have a Jewish(-style) wedding with a *chuppah*<sup>11</sup> and the traditional Jewish wedding blessings, which she contrasted with a church

11 *Chuppah*: a canopy under which a Jewish couple stand during their wedding ceremony.

wedding. She felt the difference, which was hard for her to describe. In the end her husband did agree to her wishes about the wedding, after a lengthy process of justifications in a situation where ‘there is nothing rational’. Later, she agreed on celebrating certain traditions from her husband’s background in their common home, without taking any active role in the organizations. She described her attitude as ‘active avoidance’. As neither her husband nor his family were particularly religious, their holidays were of a cultural nature. Yiska had a solely Jewish upbringing, where she was ‘overdosed’ with Judaism in her life as she was growing up. Her marrying out was sort of a rebellious attitude, from her own perspective. She also emphasized that her husband’s family does not associate any religious content to Christmas, which is the only non-Jewish holiday they celebrate with their extended family. She found it ‘fair’ to accommodate the spouse’s traditions into her own life. Adar said she would be very open to celebrating some of her husband’s Muslim holidays, and teaching their child about them, but – according to her – the husband lacks knowledge, and often the interest, to observe them. Talia and Naomi suggested the same.

### Weddings

Concerning weddings, Basya was not the only one who insisted on having Jewish elements at her wedding: Deborah, Yehudit and Talia all decided to ‘break the glass’. Whereas Deborah and her husband did it ‘traditionally’ by stomping on it, Yehudit and her husband decided to have their very ‘own take’ on a Jewish wedding. Yehudit’s Jewish uncle officiated at the ceremony. When the couple walked by, the celebrating crowd was singing ‘Hava Nagilah’. A homemade *chuppah* and breaking the glass with a sledgehammer (instead of stomping on

it) were the emblematic elements that my informant connected to Judaism at the celebration. The master of the ceremony taught the crowd how to say ‘cheers’ in Hebrew (*l’chayim* ‘to life’), and for the rest of the evening the guests used ‘l’chayim’ instead of the Finnish or Swedish equivalent. Yehudit thought this was a great and useful idea, since her own mother tongue is Swedish, whereas her husband’s is Finnish. This way they could all use the same phrase, instead of switching languages all the time.

Talia and her husband built up their wedding(s) very consciously. The couple had a civil ceremony, a Jewish wedding ceremony officiated by a Jewish family friend combined with a party, and later, another party to celebrate the event with the husbands’ friends and family as well, since they live in a different country. In addition to breaking the glass, the couple had their own interpretation of *sheva brachot*, the seven blessings, which were recited to the couple by friends, who were given the freedom to formulate blessings themselves. Talia was the only one who spoke of seeking for a suitable meaning for the tradition of breaking the glass. She said that the interpretation known to her, the broken glass serving as a reminder of the destruction of the Temple, did not mean ‘much’ to her:

... but then there are other interpretations that I felt actually match me and my husband quite well. And one of them was to remember that even in your happiest occasions, there are still things broken in this world. And you know, this kind of idea of *tikkun olam*<sup>12</sup>, that you can devote yourself to

12 *Tikkun olam*: a concept defined by acts of kindness performed to perfect or repair the world in the Jewish tradition.



fixing what's broken ... for us, that one felt like an interpretation that made a lot of sense.

Most of my informants described the non-Jewish traditions as being 'foreign' to them. This was especially true for women who were born Jewish, or whose mothers converted to Judaism long before their births. Interestingly however, only a few of them indicated that none of the traditions were celebrated in their homes in any way. Many women, such as Yehudit and Yael, said that they lacked knowledge about the practical ways of celebrating certain Jewish holidays. This led them to make up, or want to make up, their own traditions – in a creative, sometimes even ambiguous manner. As Yehudit put it:

I think [having our own traditions] is something that we would like to have more, but it's like we don't have all the know-how either, or when we should do what basically. We talk a lot about that we would love to have our own interpretation of Shabbes, like that we have people over for food many times a week anyway. It would be nice to make it somehow above the ordinary.

Due to the fact that their fathers were non-Jewish, certain Jewish holidays that were traditionally led by men were performed differently in their families. The women (their mothers) did not take the men's 'role' in leading them, as shown in Yael's remark: 'Let's put it like this: Judaism was a social thing, a happy thing, being with people, eating well ... I never learned how to do the things [the religious rituals], how things were done. No. When I asked her, she said "Oh, I don't know."'

Abigail, who received a solely Jewish upbringing, said that she would not

oppose her husband celebrating holidays of his religion, but she does not have time to help with any of the preparations. On some occasions, however, they did try to celebrate Christmas: 'I can't even manage plan my own things and I just don't care about Christmas. And he just doesn't do anything. So, it's okay. So, we just don't do anything.' When she realized that she 'can't really get away from' Judaism and its traditions, her attitude towards other traditions also changed, and she decided to 'just own' her Jewish practices and started to embrace them. She forbade her daughter to join her friend in *virpominen* – the act of refreshment – performed by Finnish children on Palm Sunday, an event that is often considered to be a non-religious part of the Easter traditions.<sup>13</sup>

Ariela, on the other hand, did not mention asking anything particular of her husband, because he already kept Shabbat by the time they got together. He eventually decided to convert to Judaism, but even before his *giyur*, the family only celebrated Jewish holidays, where he took an active role – despite not yet being Jewish himself at the time: 'We kept Shabbat, and that was great. It was nice, that it was somehow emotional, that the father blessed the child, even though he was not even Jewish, but he wanted to be. Maybe it was something that he regretted, that he did not have that in his own childhood.' Ariela said they were never *shomrei Shabbat*<sup>14</sup>, but they did spend the time together, as a family. She

13 During *virpominen*, children go around the neighbourhood with decorated branches, knock at doors, extend well-wishing to the household and receive sweets.

14 The plural of the expression *shomer Shabbat*, which is a person who observes the *mitzvot* (commandments) associated with Shabbat.

also highlighted that her husband had a very important role in making their daughter proud of her Jewishness, supporting her when she was an active member in their community.

### Kashrut

The ways to observe the laws of *kashrut* can be very individual – based on the level of observance and on the available goods. Mostly during the twentieth century, a variety of ‘*kosher style*’ strategies developed among Jews: some will respect traditional *kashrut*, and some will engage in ‘selective *treif*’<sup>15</sup> (Brumberg-Kraus 2018: 123). Many of them consciously create traditional Jewish dishes from non-*kosher* ingredients, which according to Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus (2018) is also a performance of one’s Jewish identity. In any case, the room for negotiation and creativity is almost as broad as in terms of the holidays. Most of my informants said that they do not keep *kosher* in any sort of form. Some of them, Yael for example, mentioned that purchasing *kosher* products is not easy to do in Finland. Basya, who told me ‘some bacon might slip in’, described their household as ‘not *kosher* at all’. Some of them, for example Deborah, have been wondering about why they have so much pork at home:

15 *Treif*: non-*kosher* food. Selective *treif* denotes the practice of approaching the laws of *kashrut* flexibly. Some will maintain a *kosher* home, but eat *treif* out, some will eat *kosher* without a *heksher* (a rabbinical certificate qualifying items that conform to the requirements of the Jewish law), some will eat vegetarian, or *kosher* fish without using formerly *koshered* utensils, some will only eat *kosher* animals without having them slaughtered with appropriate *shechita* (*kosher* slaughter), some will not eat pork out of principle, but do not despise seafood, etc.

I have been thinking that I should have more of those [Jewish] traditions. But then somehow, they were kind of left in the background. But for instance [to keep] more *kosher*, maybe not *kosher*, but that there is no pork. And then I was wondering why we have pork at home. Like, these kinds of things. And I also thought about keeping Shabbat at some point, when the children were small. But then somehow it just didn’t continue.

All my informants said that they refrain from eating pork for example as a filet, but they do purchase certain products (e.g. sausages, or ready-made food) that could contain pork. This practice, Chava, who only buys meat for holidays, addressed as ‘play-*kosher*’ (Fin. *leikkikosher*), indicating that from the perspective of a very observant set-up, their household would by no means be considered *kosher*. Among the Swedish speakers, participating in crayfish parties in the summer (Fi. *rapujuhlat*, Swe. *kräftskiva*) is very common, even though shellfish is not *kosher*.

Only three of my informants, Ariela, Tamar, and Adar, said that they currently keep some sort of *kosher* in their homes. Esther, who specifically said that in her family ‘everyone does Jewish in their own way’, kept a *kosher* household for most of her life, which has changed over time. She eats neither pork nor non-*kosher* seafood – which is a higher level of observance than in the case of many of the other women – but still did not consider her current household *kosher*. Tamar, who earlier tried to make certain dishes out of pork for her husband, asked the rabbi of the Jewish Community of Helsinki at the time to *kasher*<sup>16</sup> their house to which her husband agreed:

16 *Kasher*: to make *kosher*.

I wanted to show them [the children] what a Jewish home should be like. And I still have *kosher*. My husband didn't understand everything, but in the end, he accepted it. And I am grateful to him for the fact that he let me do it that way. *Chaleh*<sup>17</sup>: he waited for that every Shabbes. And he was the one who ate the most.

Adar mentioned that she does not mix meat with dairy and she buys chicken from an ordinary shop for her husband, which she does not eat herself. All other meat brought to their home is either *kosher* from Israel or *halal* from local butcher's shops.

Abigail said that their household is 'probably not that bad on the *kosher* scale, but not on purpose'. Her husband is allergic to shellfish and she is not used to eating pork:

I would never buy pork from the store. That would be weird. But I don't care if my kids eat it. It's fine. I don't really care. My husband hates it. ... so, we don't eat shellfish, because he's [the husband] allergic to them, and I don't like it. So, that's convenient...

Yehudit mentioned several times that traditional Jewish dishes are part of their celebrations of Jewish holidays at home. Her household is not *kosher*, however, they consciously 'do Jewish' when celebrating the Jewish holidays with a mixture of traditional, and not so traditional dishes:

We celebrate Hanukkah, and then we always have the same foods. ... I can say that that's maybe our fam-

ily's thing, unfortunately, it [the family's own tradition] doesn't even fulfill the *kosher*-criteria. But for us, it's like our Jewish tradition. So, we begin with oysters.

Many women indicated that they rarely consume meat at all, which is a decision that is not necessarily connected with the laws of *kashrut per se*, however, rather with ethical considerations.

### Jewish education of (future) offspring

Formal Jewish education, which in the Finnish context means participation in the Jewish day care, kindergarten or primary school, is not easy to negotiate. There isn't a choice of different institutions connected to Jewish communities, or secular Jewish life in Finland. The Jewish Community of Turku does not have any formal institutions connected to it. Jewish day care in Helsinki is run by Chabad Lubavitch, the kindergarten and the primary school by the Jewish Community of Helsinki. Even though enrolment into any of these institutions does not require the families to live in an observant way, they do require the families to adjust their lives to certain patterns. Therefore, the room for negotiation is rather limited: for example, until March 2018, circumcision was required for all boys who entered the Jewish kindergarten or primary school. The decision was very much connected to the question of power projected by the Jewish Community of Helsinki having an impact on the decisions of many families. Another crucial factor that comes into play in the contemporary Finnish-Jewish context is the role of the Swedish language. In Swedish-speaking Jewish families, entering the children into to Finnish-language Jewish school may become an obstacle. Yael said her children

17 *Chaleh*: traditional Jewish braided bread baked for Shabbat.

had their *bnei mitzvot*<sup>18</sup> within the community, but her children never went to the Jewish school because the pupils were educated in Finnish there, rather than the earlier practice of teaching in Swedish in the Jewish school:

To be frank, I see myself as a double minority: I am Swedish-speaking and Jewish. And I wanted to keep both up. And I also feel that the Swedish culture has a lot to give ... or the Finnish-Swedish [*finlandssvensk*] culture. And this in combination with Judaism and Jewish culture, I think it was a really good thing. I did not bond with the Finnish culture at all. The way of living, and communication and value-base. ... Maybe this is one of the big reasons my kids didn't go to the Jewish school. I wanted them to keep up the Swedish language.

Yael has very strong connections to the Swedish-speaking minority of Finland, which is one of the reasons why she decided not to enrol her children in the Jewish school. Otherwise, she might have considered it as an option. She consciously combines Jewish and Finnish-Swedish traditions. Esther, who is also a Swedish speaker, acts differently:

We [the husband and Esther] spoke Swedish at home, and in theory, the children were supposed to go to a Swedish-speaking school, except in our case, where they went to the Jewish school, which was a very big concession from my husband. ... He came to Helsinki [from the countryside, where the majority were Finnish speakers],

where there are five million different Swedish-speaking schools, and finds a Jewish girl, who says that 'Yeah, it's by the way a Finnish-speaking school, because that is the Jewish school.'

Esther mentioned several times that her husband had 'sacrificed his own culture' in order to ensure that their children would have a strong connection to Judaism. Yael was not the only one who used language as one of her arguments against enrolling her child in any of the Jewish community institutions – she also wanted to make sure that her husband's background is not dominated by hers:

I don't think we will put him in Jewish schools and kindergartens, because it is not fair to him [my husband], that it is only about my religion and not his religion ... I guess he will go to an English kindergarten and English school and everything, because it is the common language of the house as well.

Basya, on the other hand, used language as one of the key arguments for the choice of institutions – at least when convincing her husband about the matter. By the time their children reached the age of enrolment in Jewish educational institutions, she says her husband was very open:

I think the wedding was when things kind of surfaced for the first time. ... that was an easy sell, and the Hebrew language was also a key thing I could rationalize when wanting to send her to Jewish day care. I am sure we have very different motivations, but that was not a struggle to convince him.

18 *Bnei mitzvot*: coming of age celebrations.

As for Tamar, the fact that her husband himself went to a school that was small in size probably contributed to him agreeing to enrol their children in the Jewish school:

And he agreed also to the children attending Gan Yeladim [the Jewish kindergarten], and the Jewish school. He grew up in a small town in northern Finland, and in that sense, he knew what it was like when there were not a lot of children or when the school was not big. So, both my children attended the Jewish school, just as I did.

Naomi and Deborah explicitly told their husbands that the Jewish school was essential for ensuring the children's Jewish identity in Finland. Yiska, on the other hand, did not see it as a necessity at all. She agreed on the Jewish upbringing of her children with her husband, who, according to her have a very strong Jewish identity: 'We said that they [the children] will become members of the community, and we'll keep [the traditions] so that the children will have a Jewish identity.'

Abigail had not initially thought about enrolling the children into any formal Jewish educational institution, but had changed her mind as she did not want her children to be raised Roman Catholic – the religion of their father. She agreed with her husband about providing 'some kind of religious background' for their children. Their decision to enrol the children in the Jewish kindergarten and school was more a decision of convenience: both institutions are located in the same premises, which made the family logistics easier to implement. She purposefully did not enrol them into Ganon, the Jewish day care facility, since it was in a different place.

... the things that made it nice in Ganon, like they weren't that important to me, like kosher food, whatever. I don't care at all. So as soon as my youngest was old enough that they could all go [to school and kindergarten] at the same time, then we put them to the Jewish school because then it made sense anyway.

### Brit milah

Many consider circumcision to be one of the most emblematic markers of Jewish identity which – in the Scandinavian context – is not commonly practised among the general public. Perhaps it is the least negotiable domain. There's no compromise: it is either done or not.<sup>19</sup> However, the means of circumcision (e.g. at what age, where it is performed and by whom) can be adjusted. In March 2018, the Jewish Community of Helsinki made a new ruling about the acceptance of non-circumcised children who were born to a Jewish mother into the congregation and its institutions. The community has long struggled with the issue of accepting boys who have not gone through *brit milah*, into the congregation. Some of my informants indicated that they found the earlier criteria unfair: it could mean that a son and a daughter from the same family would not have had the same right to attend the local Jewish educational institutions, as circumcision only concerns boys.

Yiska and Yehudit also underlined this issue. Yiska never wanted to circumcise her

19 The Mishnah (Shabbat 19:6) and the Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh De'ah 266:2) rules on the amount of foreskin that is to be removed from the child for the *brit milah* to be acceptable. This is partially due to the fact, that an unusual challenge to circumcision developed in the Hellenistic period (after 133 BCE).

own son. In her opinion religion is more personal, and there is no need for such a 'concrete act'. She also wanted her son 'to be like' her husband. She even discussed this matter with the rabbi of the time and told him that her status as the mother of the child defines the child's status as Jewish.

Not having children of her own yet, Yehudit only addressed the matter from a hypothetical perspective, highlighting that she would not remain a member of the congregation if the circumcision of her future son – if she should ever have one – was still a requirement:

Never say never, but currently I feel that I don't see any reason why I would do that [the circumcision], or would decide on that without any other reason. And that makes me feel very stressed to think about because it suddenly feels like it is a decision with a domino effect, and I think it is maybe all kinds of pressure. And pressure in a way pushes me away. Like the pressure that I have to be in a certain place in the synagogue. It feels as if it pushed me away from the community. ... Either you do this, or your kid is out, in a way. ... If they kind of don't let my kids in, there is no reason for me being a member anymore.

The regulations of the Jewish school also affected Leah's and her children's lives significantly. Initially, her son was not circumcised, but after Leah divorced her husband and wanted to enrol their children into the Jewish school, she understood that for male children it was compulsory. She had to make a choice. Her son was approximately 12 years old at the time and was reluctant about the procedure, but he essentially agreed to it – complying with the regulations of their community:

And he [the son] said, that he didn't really want to do the circumcision. But then I told him that if the girls [his sisters] go [to the Jewish school] then we also have to go that way. That it is kind of like a must, because we are a family.

Deborah negotiated certain aspects of the children's life with her husband. In her opinion Jewish school was a necessity in Finland in order to preserve the Jewish identity of their children: '... it was fine for him [the husband] that we get them circumcised. And then we made this kind of deal, that I keep my own surname, but the kids will have his, and the given names are Jewish.' Naomi approached the question in a similar way to Deborah: '... I said about the children, I will raise them Jewish, they will have *brith milah* if there's a boy and there will be a *bar mitzvah*. These were like, set. And then he could choose [given] names.'

Esther, who always had a very strong connection with her Jewish roots, never seemed to have considered circumcision to be a problematic question. The discussions with her future husband at the time also went very casually:

He [the future husband] came home after a herring breakfast morning, that happened after the anniversary parties [of student organizations] about 0.0025% drunk to my student apartment, took off his shoes, and I shouted to him: 'Oy, can we get our kids circumcised?'

He agreed to the circumcision and to the Jewish upbringing of their future children and shortly after the discussions the couple got engaged. After their civil wedding ceremony, they celebrated their

marriage within the premises of Esther's congregation. Abigail did not have any problems with the idea of circumcision. When her first son was born, she lived outside of Finland in a place where circumcision was a generally practised procedure, at least at that time – even outside of the Jewish population:

It was still like, quite normal to have your kid circumcised anyway. Like in the hospital, it was still really common. So, it just made sense. I voted for doing it. We would do it, of course, naturally anyway. So, we might as well do it, like with him, with the cantor [who was also a *moheh*<sup>20</sup>] doing it. It just made sense.

With Abigail as the only exception, all informants emphasized that they required the circumcision to be done by a doctor. Talia, who does not have children of her own yet, told me that she can only imagine having a *brith milah* for her future son if it is done in sterile circumstances by a medical professional. Adar was the only one who told me that the doctor performing the *brit milah* for her son was also a *moheh* – which according to her did not cause any issues to her Muslim husband:

He [the husband] was very happy about it. He was very proud, he told everybody about it! They [Muslims] just do it at a later age, but it didn't matter in our case so much. ... He [their son] got a Jewish name and a Muslim name.

Generally, the women who were born before the 1970s did not express any

concerns about the practice; Michal was the only one, who emphasized that it was hard for her husband to agree to it, but he did so eventually. Tamar even mentioned that her husband was the one who held their son while it was done.

## Conclusions

When collecting my material, my aim was to gather a variety of different informants from different ages and backgrounds to explore the vernacular practices of the intermarried Jewish women and their families in the Jewish Community of Helsinki and Turku. In this article, I specifically wanted to focus on Jewish women, who caught my attention because of their unusual positions: being members of an Orthodox Jewish community whilst being married to non-Jewish men and often practising Jewish traditions with a creativity that is rather unheard of in the world of 'Jewish Orthodoxy'. Their husbands came from different religious traditions (e.g. Muslim, Lutheran, Roman Catholic), and often defined themselves as non-religious or atheist. I chose to analyse the ethnographic material from the point of view of vernacular religion, which 'highlights the power of the individual and communities of individuals to create and re-create their own religion' (Primiano 2012: 383). Most of the women in my material did not perceive the traditional Orthodox Jewish *halachah* as authoritative, they 'do Judaism' whilst choosing practices freely and often consciously. The concepts of ambiguity, power and creativity, which Primiano highlights in his theory of vernacular religion, becomes especially visible when the women construct their practices and identities in ways that are traditionally not aligned with Orthodox Jewish approaches. Most of them perceived Judaism as 'a way of life', which resonates with the creativity they applied

20 *Moheh*: circumciser.

when picking up, changing, and even denying certain practices. They operate within a male-dominated institutional context, but have agency in their own houses, within their smaller circles. The social context of their gender-traditional congregations empowers them to establish nuanced and creative forms of religious practice.

The women are often flexible with incorporating other than Jewish traditions in their households, and often change their attitudes over time. Yael initially agreed on having Christian traditions at home, but eventually she made the choice to leave these traditions behind – at least when her children were not yet adults. Similarly, Abigail also tried to incorporate other traditions in her family's life, but she also changed her opinion, partly for the sake of convenience. For Yiska, Yael, Adar and Yehudit, Jewish identity was dissociated from Jewish education, and Yiska was the only one who mentioned that the Jewish school might have strengthened their children's Jewish identity if they had decided to enrol them there. Her son was not circumcised, which at the time was a prerequisite for enrolling a boy in the school. She did not reflect on this matter, other than highlighting that since she is Jewish, her son is also Jewish by *halachah*. Leah, on the other hand, decided to have her son circumcised at a later age, solely in order to enrol him in the Jewish school – together with his sisters. Basya was the only one who framed her decisions in the 'rational-emotional' analogy, saying she was not able to explain why she feels the necessity to have Jewish customs, or to convince her husband to enrol their child(ren) into the Jewish educational institutions.

All of my informants made it clear that their husbands were well aware of their wives' Jewishness; only Basya suggested that her perception of Jewish traditions

changed significantly in the time that passed between her becoming involved with her current husband and their wedding. At first, Jewish traditions did not seem to be important for her, but she decided that she wanted Jewish elements at their wedding, and absolutely refused to marry in a church. The other informants seemed to have already clarified their wishes about the observance of Jewish holidays, *kashrut*, the upbringing of children and even circumcision at the beginning of their relationships – as they themselves were certain about how they felt about them. The husbands of Tamar, Chava, Adar, Michal and Yehudit supported their wives and children even if they did not agree with or understand the Jewish traditions practised in the household. Tamar and Adar were the only ones who wished to keep up certain dietary customs in their households; Tamar being the only one who wished to *kasher* her home.

Adar's husband, who was Muslim, was happy and proud that his son was circumcised – even if it was done according to Jewish traditions by a *mohel*. The husband of Yehudit encouraged her to observe more Jewish traditions and agreed to integrate Jewish elements into their wedding celebration, which took place after a civilian wedding. Yehudit's approach to the congregation – similarly to Yiska's – was particularly critical. They both agreed to using matrilineal descent as a basis for one's Jewishness yet did not agree with the earlier stance of the Jewish Community of Helsinki that *halachically* Jewish boys also needed to be circumcised. This resulted in a multitude of negotiations: in Yiska's case a denial of the practice, and in Yehudit's case a potential resignation from the community membership.

Esther, Ariela and Michal were the only ones who did not express any flexibility



in accommodating any other than Jewish traditions in their households. Their husbands gave up their own traditions entirely and engaged themselves in creating a Jewish home for their families. Esther's husband gave up his desire to enrol his children into a Swedish-speaking school and took a very active role in encouraging their children to have a strong connection to their Jewish roots. Ariela's husband was interested in Judaism before they met, and already engaged himself in Jewish traditions before his official conversion to Judaism, by blessing his children on Shabbat, by encouraging their daughter to connect to her Jewish roots, and by cooking *kosher* meals for the family. He was the only husband in the research material whose engagement eventually resulted in his conversion to Judaism. Out of all the 15 women, Talia seemed to be the only one who consciously sought meaning in Jewish traditions in ways that could be incorporated into her own practices, for example when she decided not only to break the glass at her wedding with her non-Jewish husband, but also consciously to think about its meaning.

Many of these women grew up and socialized in culturally ambiguous homes, and they seem to have constructed the same in their adult lives. None of them described a lack of social qualities or celebrations in their intermarried lives, and they show their agency as Jewish women when creating and observing Jewish traditions in the ways they can fit them into their lives. They are members of Orthodox Jewish communities, where they 'do Judaism' the way that fits their life the best without the need for seeking empowerment, subversion or strategizing, aligned with the frames of Primiano (1995, 2012) and Avishai (2008). Some of them expressed a desire to hold on to more traditions or create their own ones, but many of them seemed to have decided

to make certain adaptations and concessions in order to conveniently fit them into their and their families' lives. Concerning the maintenance of 'Jewishness' in their lives, the informants focused more on Jewish identity than on strictly defined religious practices and traditions of the Orthodox customs of Helsinki and Turku. All women considered Judaism to be an important part of their life, very often highlighting their connections to the cultural aspects of Judaism, rather than to faith or belief. Except for Adar and Michal, none of them believed in G-d<sup>21</sup> at all or were agnostic. This was also projected in their definitions of Judaism, which was often described as 'a way of living', a 'way of life'. Perhaps these were the key factors coming into play when they decided to construct their traditions creatively? They married out, yet remained in, as members of the congregation, conscious of their own Jewishness. They hold on to and create traditions and practices that they find meaningful for themselves. Most women presented in this study, as well as most of the members of the local Jewish communities, understand what Orthodox Jewish practices consist of, yet they do not seek to incorporate them in their lives, and often oppose many of them. Some of them do not only define themselves as Jewish women, but Finnish-Swedish Jewish women, placing them into the position of double minorities in the predominantly Evangelical Lutheran Finnish language society.

Vernacular practices are to be studied in context in order to determine their meanings. Women re-creating or denying Jewish practices represent power, ambiguity and

21 I decided to write G-d without the 'o' instead of spelling the word fully due to the prohibition of erasing G-d's name (Deuteronomy 12:4).

creativity that women apply when performing their own Jewish lives as members of a minority (or more minorities) in contemporary Finland. They confirm, contest, and legitimize the hegemony, as well as offer resistance to manifestations of power (Primiano 2012); for example when deciding not to circumcise their children even though it would be aligned with the expectations of the Jewish society, or when deciding on doing so, even though it is not a commonly practised tradition in Finnish society generally. They ‘negotiate with religious laws and practices as modern, often secular, minority women in a society in which gender equality is often presented as the yardstick of modernity’ (Vuola 2019: 60) – and they do it in their own terms. It is important to highlight, however, that the majority of the domains and practices the informants of this study talked about were connected to spheres in which their congregation has very little, or no, influence. This leaves open the question of ‘how much power do Finnish Jewish women hold within the confines of their own congregation and during its decision-making processes’, which is an issue that should be explored in a further study. Nevertheless, decreasing the amount of pork in Jewish household, using a sledgehammer to break the glass at a wedding, celebrating the civil wedding with a non-Jewish husband in the building of the Jewish community, making ‘deals’ about what names to give to the children, using halal meat when kosher meat is unavailable, or attending crayfish parties, were all examples that show how innovative these women were beyond the publicly, and institutionally recognized forms of their religion. The creativity that each of them applies and the awareness of their own ambiguity are individualistic and indeed attributed to them without a generalization of their congregations. Yet, many of their

approaches in the ‘Orthodox Jewish realm’ appear to be exemplary of their communities, where members indeed ‘do Jewish in their own way’. ■

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1903–19, box 7.

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