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Sanctifying Security: Jewish Approaches to Religious Education in Jerusalem

Isaac Calvert

Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602, USA; isaac_calvert@byu.edu; Tel.: +1-408-896-6065

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Abstract: While Schmitt's *Political Theology* paints modern theories of the state as secularized theological concepts, prominent threads of Jewish religious education in 20th century Jerusalem have moved in a different direction, that is, toward the re-sacralization of such secularized theological concepts. Orthodox Jewish schools in Jerusalem, or *yeshivot*, take an orthopractic approach to religious education as informing all aspects of life, rather than a delimited set of doctrines or beliefs. As such, questions of security fall within the purview Jewish religious education. To look more closely at the relationship between orthodox Jewish religious education, sanctity and security, I spent seven months enrolled as a student-observer in three Jerusalem *yeshivot* taking daily field notes, conducting interviews, attending classes, and studying related sacred texts. By examining both Jewish sacred texts and ethnographic data from contemporary Jerusalem *yeshivot*, this article highlights how geo-political ideals of security in modern Jerusalem are being re-sacralized by contemporizing ancient sacred texts and approaching religious education itself as a means of eliciting divine aid in the securitization process for Jewish Jerusalem.

Keywords: Jerusalem; Jewish education; sanctification; religious education; security

1. Introduction

While many of Judaism's theological references to security, warfare, and geo-politics had long since been interpreted in a strictly allegorical sense, with the establishment of the State of Israel, such theology attained a relevance theretofore unaddressed since antiquity (Cohen 2007). The re-introduction of sacred texts into the realm of modern securitization has not only brought the content of those texts into the conversation, but the sacralization those texts imply, as well. While Schmitt's *Political Theology* paints modern theories of the state as secularized theological concepts, contemporary Jewish religious education exhibits a different tendency, that is, toward the re-sacralization of such secularized theological concepts, security not least among them. One of the principle means by which contemporary Orthodox Judaism in Jerusalem sacralize the security of Jerusalem is through the processes of teaching and learning within their religious communities.

Within Judaism's famed corpus of over six hundred commandments, Jewish scripture describes one—the commandment to teach and learn—as *kaneged kulam* (כנגד כולם): equal to all other commandments combined. By “studying, Jews see themselves as performing a holy act” (Holtz 1984, p. 24) whose divinely-ordained realization and links them to God, (Kadushin 1972, p. 213) who is said to teach and learn with them every day (Alexander 2001, p. 5). Inasmuch as teaching and learning are a means of walking in God's ways, (see Deuteronomy 10:12; 28:9) or, in other words, “perform[ing] actions like those God performs”, (Seeskin 1996, pp. 191–203) participating in the process of education is a response to God's invitation to the Jewish people to be holy. In this sense, not only are teaching and learning considered a “sacred” and “holy pursuit” (Steinberg 1947, p. 67), but a pursuit with the power to sanctify those who participate therein (Neusner 2003, pp. xvii–xxii).

This capacity for consecration is among religious Jewish education's most transcendent and defining characteristics. The Hebrew word for "education", *chinuch* (חינוך), is derived from a root that "implies the initial entry of a person or an object into a trade or path that is his destiny". As such, from this etymological perspective, at least, the consecratory power of education extends beyond the human sphere, referring just as much "to the education of a child" as to "the consecration of the altar in the holy temple" (see Rashi's commentary on *Parshat Lech Lecha*). Further, education, or, as *chinuch* (חינוך) is also translated, consecration, implies "the actualization of a potential" (Shapira 1991, p. 4) which, according to Rabbinic tradition, inheres "in all ramifications of existence" (Shapiro 1965, p. 46). Such seeds of holiness remain dormant in all things until they emerge as mankind, through *chinuch* (חינוך), enables these "hallowed phases of reality to achieve their holiness in full" (Shapiro 1965).

One way in which Jewish education, or *chinuch* (חינוך), manifests its consecratory capacity is by playing an instrumental role in security. Broadly interpreted, prominent threads in Rabbinic thought (most notably outlined in the *Nefesh Chaim*), suggest that the continued existence of the entire cosmos depends on mankind's perpetual engagement in the process of *Torah* study. While God is believed to have used *Torah*¹ to create the universe,² "the sustenance of existence by *Torah* is achieved by Israel's study of *Torah*" (Lamm 1989, p. 106). In other words, the continued survival of all things in this world, including "millions of holy, supramundane worlds" is made "conditional upon man's study of *Torah*" (Lamm 1989, p. 106). In this sense, sacred teaching and learning in this Jewish tradition are instrumental in safeguarding the security of all creation on the broadest scale they could illustrate.

"The undoubted truth", wrote Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, "is that if all the world, from one end to the other were—Heaven forefend—void even for one moment of our study of and meditation on *Torah*, then immediately all the upper and lower worlds would be destroyed and revert to chaos and nothingness".³ Many considered the connection between the sanctifying act of teaching and learning and the security of the cosmos as a literal, instrumental relationship, rather than a symbolic gesture rich in meaning. Rabbi Chaim himself took this connection so seriously that he instituted "regular round-the-clock shifts (*mishmarot*) of students engaged in *Torah* study, including Sabbaths and holidays, in order to ensure the uninterrupted study of *Torah*" (Lamm 1989, p. 123) and, by association, the very survival of the universe itself. For those who study in Jerusalem, however, the cosmic security brought about through sacred educational pursuits takes a much more local flavor.

Beyond Jerusalem's general recognition as a holy city across various religious and academic contexts (Dumper 2014), key passages in Judaism's sacred textual tradition⁴ specifically describe Jerusalem as the world's spiritual center⁵, its most beautiful location⁶, the light of the world⁷, the origin of all creation⁸ and the epicenter of the connection between heaven and earth.⁹ And while diverse Jewish communities may approach contemporary issues surrounding Jerusalem differently (e.g., interfaith relations, geopolitics, security, etc.), nearly all share a common understanding of Jerusalem as "uncontroversially and consensually . . . holy" (Dumper 2014, p. 99), and as such worthy of the greatest security they can muster.

Despite the *Talmud*'s description of Jerusalem as a place of almost mystical safety ("a snake or scorpion never injured anyone in Jerusalem"¹⁰, however, both historically and at present, one characteristic of the Holy City that seems capable of eclipsing that holiness is its nagging reputation

¹ *Torah* (תורה) can be translated as a verbal-noun meaning "teaching". It could rightly be interpreted in that sense here.

² *Zohar* II, p. 161a. (*Terumah*); Cf. *Bereshit Rabbah* 1:4 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 2, see other sources further cited in footnote); *Tanhuma* (Buber ed.), *Bereshit* 5; *Mishlei Rabbati*, chp. 9, beg.).

³ *Nefesh HaChaim* 4:11.

⁴ For example, see such central sacred texts as *Mishnah*, *Talmud Bavli*, *Zohar*, etc.

⁵ *Tanchuma Kedushim* 10.

⁶ *Talmud Bavli*, *Kidushin* 49b.

⁷ *Bereshit Rabba* 59.

⁸ *Zohar*, II, 1867, p. 222; III, p. 131.

⁹ *Talmud Bavli*, *Brachot* 27a.

¹⁰ *Talmud Bavli*, *Yoma* 21a.

as a dangerous one. Among “at least 118 separate conflicts in and for Jerusalem during the past four millennia”, (Cline 2004, p. 2) each year on *Tish B’Av*, the Jewish community mourns in remembrance of what they consider the worst among them: the destruction of the Holy City and its temple, first at the hands of the Babylonians in 586 BCE and again in 70 CE by the Romans under Titus. This mournful remembrance is made all the more poignant by rabbinic commentaries that explain why these catastrophes ever took place. Both Rebbi Natan’s commentary¹¹ and *Eichah Rabbah*¹² claim that the cause of Jerusalem’s destruction in both instances as Israel’s abandonment of *Torah* study. Contemporary rabbinic commentary continues to see uninterrupted religious education as crucial to the security of the Jewish people in a markedly literal sense, even claiming that its abandonment was what “brought about the European Holocaust” (Selengut 1994, p. 247).

With both the weight of the cosmos and the safety of the Jewish people resting on their shoulders, it is not small wonder that many orthodox Jewish communities in Jerusalem pursue their studies quite literally as though their lives depended on it. Those within such communities tend to take one of two main approaches to contributing to Jerusalem’s security in this religiously-motivated way. On the one hand, religious-Zionists believe that both *Torah* study and practical military defense are equally necessary parts of Jerusalem’s security. Under Rav Kook in the early 20th century, many religious-Zionists took the stance that “the metaphysical and tangible criteria for Israel’s survival” were “inextricably fused” (Cohen 2012, p. 43). As such, both active participation in religious education as well as military service were not only permissible, but seen as religious obligations for the orthodox community as a whole (Cohen 2007). While this position may not be as extreme as the *haredi* stance outlined below, it still acknowledges the indispensable role of religious education to both the sanctity and security of Jerusalem as a holy place.

The *haredi*, or Ultra-Orthodox, view “maintains that Israel’s security remains absolutely dependent upon God’s will, and hence entirely contingent upon the transcendental forces over which He alone exercises sway” (Cohen 2012, p. 43). As such, the *haredi* contribution to Jerusalem’s security is through *Torah* study alone with the understanding that “diligent study constitutes Israel’s primary lifeline” and that, “by comparison, all conventional agencies of protection must be deemed totally irrelevant” (Cohen 2012, p. 43). In this sense, those who participate in religious education believe that “they contribute as much (if not more) than do soldiers to national survival” (Cohen 2012, p. 44) and that “if the government knew how much [*Torah*] students protect the state’s well-being through their study, it would put guards in the schools, making sure that *Torah* study is never interrupted” (Selengut 1994, p. 245).

This has implications with regard to the dual definition of *chinuch* (חינוך) as both “education” and “consecration”. Rabbi Shach, a prominent voice in *haredi* Jerusalem, posited that the security of the Jewish people in Jerusalem had more to do with *Torah* study than even the land itself. Because Abraham “possessed the *Torah* in Haran (i.e., before entering the Holy Land)”, the Jews “became an everlasting people before [they] had the ‘land of Israel’ or ‘territories’”. This stance suggests that the Holy Land owes both its security and its sanctity in some degree to the religious education realized within its precincts. Rabbi Shach’s idea, namely, that “other than the *Torah* we have no security” (Doron 1988, p. 504) is supported both within the Jewish scriptural canon¹³ and by Peter’s assertion that a holy city owes much of its sanctity to the religious education realized therein (Peters 1986).

In this sense, “based upon passages of rabbinic exegesis whose pedigree stretches back for almost 2000 years” (Cohen 2012, p. 44), the educative and consecratory dimensions of Judaic *chinuch* (חינוך) contribute both to the sanctity of Jerusalem itself as well as the physical security of those who live there. So intertwined are education’s dual capacities for both consecration and securitization that, at least in this *haredi* interpretation of Jerusalem’s sanctity and security, they are hardly distinguishable.

¹¹ *Avot de Rebbi Natan* 1:2.

¹² *Eichah Rabbah* (ed. Buber, 1:20, pp. 92–93).

¹³ *Avot de Rebbi Natan* (1:2) claims that neglecting *Torah* study was the cause of Jerusalem’s destruction, while *Eichah Rabbah* (ed. Buber, 1:20, pp. 92–93) maintains that it was the result of having neglected both the teaching and learning of *Torah*.

This connection between education, sanctity, and security runs deeply through the sacred texts and contemporary rabbinic commentary that inform Jerusalem's orthodox Jewish religious education. While this connection has been the subject of a rich legacy of research, little has been done to illustrate how those who daily participate in Orthodox Jewish religious education today implement and experience it. As such, this paper explores how the unique relationship between sanctity, religious education and security affect Orthodox Jews in contemporary Jerusalem *yeshivot*.

2. Methods

In order to understand how the relationship between sanctity, education, and security in Jerusalem affected the lived experience of *yeshiva* students there, I enrolled as a student-researcher in two orthodox *yeshivot* in Jerusalem. While enrolled over the course of seven months, I attended daily classes from morning until late into the night, studied with various learning partners (*khavrusa*) and conducted dozens of one-on-one interviews with students and rabbis. At the first *yeshiva*, *Merkaz David*, I conducted eight interviews with students and another eight with rabbis. Each lasted approximately one hour and included semi-structured questions about sacred dimensions of *yeshiva* study generally. At *Or Akiva*, I conducted another five student interviews and nine with rabbis. Through daily observation, active participation in the community (Adler and Adler 1987; Fetterman 2010 qualitative interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009), and detailed field notes (Emerson et al. 2011), in short, an ethnographic process, I gained intimate glimpses into the daily life of *yeshiva* students and their teachers. By coming "to understand and be attentive to the feelings of another on their terms" (Mills and Morton 2013), I invited community members to teach me from their point of view (Spradley 2016). As part of my *yeshiva* studies, I also immersed myself in Judaism's sacred texts, studying the Babylonian Talmud, *Tanakh*, *Mishnah*, and other texts in the Jewish canon in their original Hebrew and Aramaic. In gathering fieldwork data, I followed commonly accepted qualitative research standards including member checking, transcript review, prolonged engagement, triangulation of data, progressive subjectivity checks, maintenance of an audit trail, and persistent observation and thick description (Lincoln and Guba 1985). I analyzed interview transcripts and field note journal entries in NVivo, coding them thematically.

My position and role as student-researcher within these *yeshivot* was a delicate balance between Insider and Outsider. As I am not Jewish, I could not become an Insider without converting, which I was clear from the outset was not my intention. At the same time, in order to deeply investigate the community, I needed near-Insider access to lessons, interviews, and other rituals and gatherings. In speaking with *yeshiva* leadership, we addressed this issue by the clothes I wore to daily study. Students and rabbis wore black suits, white shirts and *kippas* to *yeshiva* each day. In order to stand apart so that all students and rabbis would instantly recognize me as a non-student, I wore a blue tweed suit coat, brown trousers and a blue shirt with a tie. This showed, they explained, that I respected the sanctity of the space while also communicating that I was not a traditional student. In order to show that I was welcome in these sacred precincts, however, I was also invited to wear a *kippa*. As a traditional outward symbol of Jewish religiosity, my wearing of the *kippa* showed that I was welcome in the space and was respectful of its sanctity, even though the rest of my costume communicated that I was neither an Insider nor interested in converting to become one. As such, my position was neither Insider nor Outsider, but a blended, welcome participant-observer.

My non-Jewish status was problematic in the initial stages of the study. I approached over 50 *yeshivot* in Jerusalem to propose this study and only three agreed to grant me access. Due to the sanctity of the educative process conducted in these communities, this exclusivity is understandable. However, because I speak Hebrew, have a traditionally Jewish name and am of the proper age (18–30) and gender of traditional *yeshiva* students in these orthodox communities, I was granted preliminary access. Unfortunately, had I been a woman, *yeshiva* leadership informed me, I would simply not have been granted access to these communities at all. By the same token, had I sought to ask these same questions in a more modern, all-female *yeshiva*, I would have encountered the same problem in

reverse and not been granted access to those communities. Because of a strict separation between men and women during prayer and study in these particular orthodox Jewish communities, ethnographic research among them seems to consistently encounter this significant limitation.

After prolonged engagement with the students, I earned the trust of *yeshiva* leadership as I showed no interest or ulterior motive outside that of my primary investigation. My presence in the schools had little influence on the content of lessons or the study practices of students, as my position as student-researcher most closely resembled that of a newcomer to the *yeshiva*. As such, my presence was largely ignored by the rabbis during lessons. Interviews, as a rule, never interrupted the normal schedule of those involved in daily study. In this sense, it was my goal throughout to be as unobtrusive as possible throughout the course of my fieldwork. In this way, I designed my ethnographic fieldwork to have minimal impact on their daily lives of study participants, reducing the potential negative impact of this research project on them.

3. On Jewish Education in Jerusalem

Jerusalemite religious education spans a spectrum from the state-of-the-art facilities of Israel's flagship Hebrew University, to the ascetic lifestyles of Eastern Orthodox monks, to Islamic *madrassas* (مدارس) throughout the Old City and East Jerusalem. Jewish religious education in Jerusalem that departs from an exclusive focus on Talmudic study often has ties to the Jewish Enlightenment, or *haskalah* (הסקלה), in which the idea of teaching more than just *Torah* (תורה) in Jewish schools was introduced.¹⁴ This movement also included Hirsch's *torah im derekh aretz* concept (תורה עם דרך ארץ),¹⁵ which proposed that religious and secular topics could and in some cases should be taught together in a traditionally Jewish educational environment, like the *yeshiva* (ישיבה). At present, education that involves Talmudic and academic topics falls under the auspices of Israel's State Religious Education (SRE), which itself has multifaceted and interrelated religious, modern and nationalistic educational goals for its students.¹⁶

There is, in short, no one model of Jewish education in Jerusalem. There are, instead, many multifaceted Jewish educational movements that shape the aims, methods and structures of Jewish education, to which *yeshivot* (ישיבות) are no exception. Outside of the SRE system are the *Haredim* (חרדים), who both seek to function independent of the State of Israel, and embrace an educational philosophy that tends to either exclude, or at the very least heavily de-emphasize, academic pursuits outside of daily Talmudic study. Apart from being a center for the *Haredim* (חרדים), Jerusalem is also a center for visiting *yeshiva* students from abroad, many of whom come in their gap year for intensive *yeshiva* study.¹⁷ Some Jerusalem *yeshivot* are *kiruv* (קירוב) oriented, inviting *ba'ale tshuva* (בעלי תשובה) to return from secular Judaism back to orthodoxy, orienting traditional Talmudic study toward re-familiarization with traditional Jewish values and worldviews. Many of these institutions can also have separate but related Zionist agendas, inviting visiting students to make *aliyah* (עלייה) and permanently immigrate to the State of Israel. Even more closely related to the State of Israel are *hesder* (חסדר) *yeshivot*, which combine Israel's mandatory military service with Talmudic study within a religious Zionist framework.¹⁸ These few examples serve to illustrate the complex and multifaceted nature of Jerusalem's Jewish education, of which the two communities outlined here are only a small part.

In the course of my ethnographic fieldwork, I studied in three orthodox Jewish religious schools called *yeshivot* (singular, *yeshiva*). The first of these was *Merkaz David*. Located on the border of *Mea Shearim*, one of Jerusalem's most orthodox neighborhoods, it houses nearly 70 male students aged

¹⁴ (Feiner 2002; Schweid 2002).

¹⁵ (Ayalon and Abraham 1998).

¹⁶ (Gross 2002).

¹⁷ (Berger 1997).

¹⁸ (Birnbbaum and Persoff 1989).

20–29. While many of its students had come from abroad to study there for only a year or two, one elite group enrolled for three to four years in a rabbinical ordination program. Nine rabbis taught these young men six days a week (excluding the Jewish Sabbath) from six in the morning until late into the night. Daily study included three to five classes spread throughout the day between which students would read passages from the *Talmud* in pairs or pray together in the *yeshiva's* main hall. As a *Chabad yeshiva*, *Merkaz David* focused on *Chassidic* philosophy, mysticism, and personal piety through prayer and ritual while also emphasizing the central importance of study in Jewish life.

Or Akiva was slightly larger than *Merkaz David*, housing nearly 200 students and over 30 rabbis. Unlike *Merkaz David*, however, *Or Akiva* espoused a Lithuanian approach to Torah study. This meant that lessons focused less on personal piety and prayer and more on the intellectual rigor of cerebral Torah study itself. As such, lessons were more frequent, and rabbis consistently expected a much higher level of textual analysis from their students than at other *yeshivot*. Students at *Or Akiva* also came from more diverse populations, leading many lessons to be conducted in Hebrew, French, Spanish, and English.

4. Results and Discussion

Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, I acted as co-researcher with members of the *yeshiva* community to create ethnographic portraits and vignettes (Mills and Morton 2013). These are intended to provide the reader with an in-depth look at what the relationship between security, education and the sacred looks like in the everyday, lived experiences of students and teachers in contemporary Jerusalem's orthodox Jewish schools. The following three sections each begin with a short narrative that illustrates one dimension of this relationship, followed by a discussion of the implications that follow. The first outlines how those at *Merkaz David* observed Israel's Independence Day by contributing to the very security it celebrated through *Torah* study. The second illustrates the lived experience of studying with the idea that the continued security of Judaism's holiest city, not to mention the sustained existence of the cosmos itself depends upon that study. The third vignette describes an example of a warrior-scholar who contributes to the religious-Zionist vision of Jerusalem's security, that is, both the study and by military action. Each of these examples is intended to illustrate a different dimension of the relationship between religious education, holiness, and security within contemporary Jerusalem's orthodox communities.

The ethnographic vignettes that follow are not meant to establish the validity of the concepts outlined in the introduction regarding the relationship between religion, education and security among certain orthodox Jewish learning communities in Jerusalem. Instead, the vignettes that follow serve as a first step to exploring the lived experience of this dynamic relationship from an emic perspective. To this end, they give readers a preliminary, exploratory glimpse into the role that security plays in daily Torah study within these communities. Future research could address more nuanced dimensions of this relationship through in-depth, qualitative interviews within similar communities. However, the current study serves as a first, introductory step into the ways in which the relationship between security, education, and religion as outlined in sacred texts is manifest in the lived experience and daily practices of these communities.

4.1. *Yom Ha'Atsmaut: Observing Israel's Independence Day*

I awoke later than usual that morning. No buses were running, and I had to walk a little over a mile to arrive at the *yeshiva*. But despite the late start and a long walk, I wasn't worried of missing anything. It was Israel's Independence Day and as I passed row upon row of empty shops and streets, I only assumed I would find the same vacancy at the school when I arrived. The *yeshiva* had been full of students from morning until night since the day I'd arrived and, truth be told, if I hadn't wanted to see what it looked like when empty, I might have stayed home that day. But at the end of a long walk through empty streets, when I finally arrived at the entrance to the main study hall, it was just as full

as if it had been any other day. Not a single student or rabbi I knew was absent from the chorus of studious discussion that greeted me.

As I stood in the entrance hoping to make sense of the situation, I noticed Rabbi Berg place a hand on my shoulder. “Rabbi”, I said, “why is everyone here? It’s a holiday and nearly everyone I know is either still at home or out of town to celebrate. Why are you all studying?” Rabbi Berg looked out at the crowd of students for a moment before he answered. “Some might take a private moment to pray on their own”, he began, “to show their gratitude for the freedom to study as we do each day. But”, he continued, “we study even today just like we would any other day”. He gave me a knowing look, tapped my shoulder again with his hand and walked into the sea of students that filled the room with snatches of prayer and holy argument. Though the empty streets outside that day told another story, in here the sacred burden of *Torah* study lay so heavily on the shoulders of those who bore it that even on a day commemorating a new era for Jewish Jerusalem’s security they remained.

4.2. Education as a Temporal Consecration

Those who studied at *yeshiva* were already enveloped in several layers and dimensions of holiness. Not only were we studying in Jerusalem’s spatial sanctity, but in a temporal dimension of holiness, as well. In our intermediate state as neither outside the community nor yet fully-fledged *Torah* scholars as yet, we studied in a large-scale, transient, liminal state (Turner 1967). This kind of temporal sanctity is at home in the Jewish tradition. For instance, Heschel described how the Jewish people, living for centuries without physical materials with which to build a temple, built instead what he called “a palace in time”, “made of soul, of joy and reticence” to act as “a reminder of adjacency to eternity” (Heschel 1951, p. 14). In this sense, time intentionally set apart for sacred purposes becomes “a paraphrase of [God’s] sanctification” (Heschel 1951, p. 16).

In the case of *yeshiva* students, the sacred purpose to which they had dedicated their time had been outlined in *Torah* already. “And thou shalt teach ... diligently ... when thou sittest in this house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up”.¹⁹ In describing so many different situations in which one must continue to teach and learn, this scriptural passage demands a significant investment of time from its adherents. Inasmuch as students and rabbis dedicated their time to fulfilling this divine injunction in *yeshiva* each day, then, they sanctified that time to a holy purpose. Participating in religious education, in this sense, has a capacity for sanctification.

Again, it was the absence of this temporal sanctification through teaching and learning *Torah*, the sages say, that led to some of the greatest losses of security in the history of the Jewish people. It is significant, then, that these students spent a day set apart for the celebration of Jerusalem’s security to invest their time in *Torah* study as a way to assure that that security might be maintained by their efforts. While ignoring a national holiday might appear on the surface like an insular retrenchment, the motivating disposition behind it is more altruistic. For these students and teachers studied that day not just to maintain the integrity of the universe, but to protect their friends and families living within the precincts of its holiest city, the Eye of the Universe, even Jerusalem itself. This suggests that a primary motivation for religious education among many in Jerusalem’s orthodox Jewish community is linked to the question of security and that part of education’s sanctifying power is that it can contribute meaningfully to that security.

4.3. Rabbi Wichnin: A Matter of Life and Death

I was well into my third week at the *Merkaz David Yeshiva* and most of the students and rabbis had by then grown accustomed to my being among them. It hadn’t been so easy on my first day. Students and teachers who otherwise would have remained entirely engrossed in the voluminous tomes propped up in front of them adjusted their glasses as they cast me second glances. Such had

¹⁹ see Deuteronomy 6:7.

been the first days of my time at *yeshiva*, but all that had changed as I had come to know those who studied with me there after long days and nights at the books. So it came as quite a shock when a rabbi I had never met before walked briskly up to me that day and, shaking a long white finger in my face as though it were a sword, asked, “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

After a brief though rather heated interview, he extended a hand in friendship and asked if I would walk with him. As we walked, though he no longer suspected me of trespassing, his tone lost none of its intensity. “Do you see these men around you?” he asked, gesturing to the hundreds of students seated at desks all around us. I nodded, trying to maintain eye contact with him as we weaved through the narrow labyrinth of rows between students at their desks. He suddenly stopped walking, fixed my gaze in his and said more seriously, “You must know of the sacrifice that goes on here every day.” The sea of sound to which I’d grown accustomed over the past months washed over us as we stood in the middle of the room at the center of this man’s whole world, the epicenter of his tradition’s holiness on earth.

“Everyone here”, he went on, his quiet, scruffy old voice somehow cutting through the chorus of shouts all around us, “everyone is willing to die for this tradition—not just once, but to die each day anew, killing themselves in eighteen hours of grueling study every single day”. He placed a hand under my arm and, gripping it with surprising strength for a man his age, stared at me over his gold-rimmed spectacles. “If that doesn’t make all this sacred”, he said with finality, “I don’t know what would.” We continued to listen to the raucous debates that swirled all around us for a moment longer when, just as suddenly as he had appeared, Rabbi Wichnin released his grip, turned, and was gone. Disappearing into the crowd of students who awaited him, he went back to the sacrifice that made that place sacred—an education that made that place a school, a sanctum and a safety from the world.

4.4. Education as Sacrifice for Security

Key passages of Jewish scripture describe the process of teaching and learning as inherently and inescapably difficult.²⁰ To study *Torah*, the *Talmud* maintains, one must be willing to “submit himself like an ox to the yoke”²¹ or like a sleepless man to his toothache.²² One passage even describes *Torah* study as the arduous process of grinding wheat into one’s flesh and blood so that it might turn into the bread of life (Patterson 2005). Rabbinic tradition tells of a moment when Moses, Judaism’s archetypal teacher, asked Israel if they were aware of how difficult it was for him to learn *Torah* from God at Sinai. “Are you aware”, he asked, “of the pain I suffered for *Torah*’s sake? The toil I put into it? The backbreaking labor I devoted to it?” Then, with in a stunning prophetic pronouncement, he declared, “As I have learned it in pain, so you will learn it in pain.”²³

The difficulty of this process as well as the sacrifice involved therein both contribute significantly to education’s consecratory power. This power, as noted earlier, is seen to sustain the vitality of the universe and the security of the Jewish people within it. Both students and rabbis at this *yeshiva* pursued their studies with a remarkable urgency and diligence, often beginning before dawn and always finishing late into the night. And all during those long hours, studies continued at a fever pitch that made the main study hall seem more like an emergency room than a library. Such sustained, earnest involvement in study suggests that, from the emic perspective of *yeshiva* students and teachers, security’s dependence on that study was much more than symbolic passage among many in the corpus of Jewish scripture. From this perspective, it played an integral role as a significant motivating factor behind their daily routines based on an abiding belief that Jerusalem’s security depends in large part upon the daily efforts of teachers and students to actively study *Torah*. This further suggests that the

²⁰ see *Pirkei Avot* 2:12.

²¹ B. AZ 5b.

²² *Tanhuma B, Mi-ketz*, §16; *Yalkut, Ps.*, §850.

²³ Sif. Deuteronomy, §307.

relationship between the practice of religious education in contemporary Jerusalem and the security of those who live there is not a uniquely theoretical construct, but a dynamic, living relationship in the daily lives of many who live there. One dimension of the lived experience of this relationship is the motivation with which *yeshiva* students and their rabbis engage in the rigors of daily Torah study.

4.5. Rabbi Stein: Wielding the Scroll and the Sword

I only ever met Rabbi Stein on a single occasion during my entire time at his *yeshiva*. He taught only the most advanced classes who were preparing for rabbinic ordination. And though his time was limited, his name was frequently the topic of discussion between classes and at mealtimes among the students, even among those who had never met him. The rarity of his appearance among ordinary students like us only fed his reputation. Only in his mid-40s, he had already read all 517 tractates of the Babylonian Talmud, a feat which many noteworthy *Torah* scholars go their entire lives without ever accomplishing.

He had, so *yeshiva* students whispered, become so well-known for this achievement that he had been even more scarce at the school, spending more and more time responding to invitations to speak to eager students and their rabbis elsewhere around the Holy City. But it wasn't his intellectual prowess alone that made our conversations die when he passed us in the hall. It was that he had accomplished all this after returning home to Jerusalem from years of combat duty in the Israeli military. To the students, Rabbi Stein was more than a teacher, more than a role-model: he was a hero. And in their own way, whether they heard it from him or in the embellished whispers of another, they venerated everything he did and said.

When I finally had the chance to meet with Rabbi Stein, our interview lasted only 5 or 10 min. Yet, despite its brevity, it was one of the most impactful exchanges I was privileged to have with a rabbi during the course of my fieldwork in the Holy City. When we had finished discussing my usual questions on holiness, education and their relationship in the Jewish tradition, he quickly placed his hands on the table set between us, ready to lift himself from his chair to leave. But just then, his hands still resting on the table in front of him, he looked straight at me and asked, "Will there ever be peace?" I looked right back and, before I could respond, listened as he, sighing deeply, continued, "We hit them. They hit us. It goes on and on. Will it ever be enough?" Not knowing what to say, I gave him a sympathetic look and shrugged my shoulders. "Please", he said as tears welled up in his eyes. "Please tell people what you've seen here. Tell the world what we're doing within these walls—what we're doing for peace. Will you do that?" As I nodded, he smiled gratefully and hurried off to another lesson, intent on doing his part for the sanctity and security of the students and the Holy City they inhabited.

4.6. Hero Worship: The Scroll and Sword

Those who taught alongside Rabbi Stein at his *yeshiva* had come from many different backgrounds. Some were *ba'ale t'shuvah*, those who had grown up in non-observant households only to become religious later in life. Others had trained at the finest *yeshivot* in *Mea Shearim*, one of Jerusalem's most ultra-orthodox neighborhoods. Still others were religious Zionists who saw the establishment and continued survival of Israel and Jerusalem as dependent upon God and their own practical efforts. Having grown up in a non-observant home, Rabbi Stein himself was a *ba'al t'shuvah*, which made his completion of the Babylonian Talmud so early in life all the more miraculous in the eyes of his students, many of whom had grown up in non-observant homes themselves, as well.

But most noteworthy of all to his students was Rabbi Stein's involvement in the military. Given the choice between military service and *Torah* study as a way to contribute to Jerusalem's security ("the sword" or "the scroll") (Cohen 1997), all the students at this *yeshiva* had chosen the latter. Far from alienating him from his students, however, Rabbi Stein's decision to do both instilled in his students an even deeper awareness of the importance of Jerusalem's security as well as *Torah* study's contribution to that security. Despite having seen active combat in defense of the Holy Land, Rabbi Stein still considered *Torah* study as a crucial contribution to the defense and security of that land. Had this

role model for the students considered his military contributions to Jerusalem's safety sufficient, the students often considered amongst themselves, he would not have invested, and continue to invest, so much of his life in the pursuit of this alternate, sanctifying means of securing this goal.

That this was what motivated him in his studies became clear in the last moments of our brief interview together. After describing what he considered the continued futility of continued military action, he emphasized how important his work at the *yeshiva* was for the sake of peace and protection. Rather than ask me to tell the world what he had done on the battlefield, he invited me to share what he and his students were doing for peace through study. While the faith of the *haredi* position that study and study alone is sufficient for Jerusalem's security, Rabbi Stein's position emphasizes the instrumental power of religious education in a different light. While maintaining that practical military defense is integral to security, he maintains that such efforts seem futile without intervention from another source. His means of accessing what he believes to be divine aid in this pursuit is religious education. This belief, in turn, is believed to consecrate the concept of security by ascribing to the belief that, without *Torah* study as a means of invoking divine intervention, the fighting for Jerusalem's security would never end. Even from a non-*haredi* perspective, then, the relationship between religious education and security appears instrumental, made contingent on the sanctifying influence of Judaic *chinuch* (חינוך): consecration through education.

5. Conclusions

Seen as “the breath of their nostrils, their greatest joy and the finest portion of their lives” (Montefiore and Loewe 2012), in contemporary Judaism, teaching and learning are seen as a sanctifying practice (Neusner 2003) that links them to God (Kadushin 1972, p. 213), “to Judaism uniquely among religions, the processes of learning are sacred and study a holy pursuit” (Steinberg 1947, p. 67). The sanctity of Jewish education, or *chinuch* (חינוך), is again considered instrumental in that it enables the dormant, inherent sanctity in all things “to achieve their holiness in full” (Shapiro 1965). Part of that consecratory power lies in education's capacity to create security, both on a macrocosmic²⁴ as well as a microcosmic²⁵ level. Simply stated, “other than the *Torah* [the Jewish people] have no security” (Doron 1988, p. 504). This close relationship between religious education and security plays an active role in the daily lives of *Torah* students and teachers in orthodox Jewish learning communities in Jerusalem today. It manifests itself through temporal consecration, personal sacrifice and an abiding belief in the instrumental efficacy of *Torah* study to bring about conditions of divinely-sanctioned security in the universe as well as what they consider its holiest city, Jerusalem.

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²⁴ Nefesh HaChaim 4:11.

²⁵ see Avot de Rabbi Natan 1:2; see also Eichah Rabbah (ed. Buber, 1:20, pp. 92–93).

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