5 Saving the Post-Soviet soul

Religion as therapy in the narratives of Russian-speaking migrant women

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Kathrin Lofton, scholar of contemporary forms of religion, points to the long-standing interconnection between the religious and therapeutic logics:

Psychology and theology do not offer the same gospels. But it may be useful to think about the gospel function within therapeutic discourse – especially as the therapeutic idiom begins to pervade even the most conservative religious cultures. Religion has long existed within, and been diagnosed by, therapeutic culture, just as therapeutic culture has existed within, and been diagnosed by, religions. Once we understand the interconnection of these two categories we can hope to better interpret their ongoing effects and appropriately critique their transformative limits.

(Lofton, 2015: 36)

Embarking from far-reaching historical interrelations between religion and therapy, this chapter aims to examine the contemporary interplay between the two spheres using the particular case of ex-Soviet immigrants.¹ As I will show, these neo-religious subjects simultaneously acquire therapeutic and religious languages through which they perceive themselves and give meaning to their lives. In doing so, they illustrate the constitution of a new type of subjectivity which is at once therapeutic and religious.

Today, the historical correlation between therapy and religion appears in a new form, namely, a therapeutic-religious assemblage emerging alongside the seemingly global triumph of therapeutic culture (Tucker, 2002). The notion of ‘assemblage’ allows us to depict a moment of a contextual and flexible constellation that accompanies the most significant historical processes headed by neo-liberal ethos, religious revival and super-individualization. Recalling Weber’s classical ‘elective affinities’ (Weber, 1958) that created a contextual historical assemblage of Calvinism and capitalism, the religious and therapeutic cultures, many of whose elements are mutually antithetical, also share important similarities. Paradoxically, they even serve to strengthen each other. The incorporation of therapeutic language into the religious mindset and the religious way of life creates the possibility of constituting a type of subjectivity that is, at once, well-functioning self-managing neoliberal and deeply religiously committed.

This newly emerging assemblage is particularly visible among neophytes of the religious ethos and the capitalist spirit. In the case of the ex-Soviet subjects I study, the therapeutic-religious blend is refracted through the characteristics of the post-Soviet cultural condition as well as through the immigrant experience. Hence, in my examination of the manifestations of their therapeutic religiosity, I consider accounts of post-Soviet religiosity and subjectivity as well as the transformation of religion in migration. Both the transformative post-Soviet experience and the experience of migration prompt a reconsideration of the self and encourage the acquisition of new cultural languages. I suggest that the search for 'saving the modern soul' (Illouz, 2008) appears in the narratives of these migrants as 'saving the post-Soviet person'.

Focusing on three rich biographical cases of Russian-speaking immigrant women, I will probe their narratives of personal well-being and happiness gained through the religious way of life and articulated in therapeutic language. In my interpretative encounter with these narratives, I was interested in not only the personal reasons for their religious transformation, but, first and foremost, the cultural resources and languages that made such a transformation possible and that were adopted for articulating the personal meaning of this transformation. As an outcome of the narrative analysis, I suggest a further discussion of the broader meanings of the subjectivity shaped by therapeutic religiosity: How does this subjectivity relate to the therapeutic and neoliberal model of the subject that dominates contemporary culture and research? How is this self-centred therapeutic subject assembled with a religious identity and way of life? And how does the assembled therapeutic religious subjectivity affect the distinction between religious and secular mindsets?

Explaining immigrant religiosity

This analysis emerges from a longitudinal, ethnographic and narrative study that followed the phenomenology of various routes of Russian-speaking religiosity situated in the wider spectrum of religious groups in Israeli society.² The study was conducted in nine communities and study groups, including the Hasidic and Chabad communities in Jerusalem and Beer Sheva, through modern Kabbalah studies to Jewish Christians and Seventh-Day Adventists in Beer Sheva and Russian-Orthodox groups in Haifa. In addition to direct observations in the communities and biographical interviews, an interpretative discourse analysis of the selected media texts closely connected to the religious identities under study was conducted.³ Aiming to clarify the particular local Israeli features of new Russian-immigrant religiosity as well as its global post-Soviet characteristics, the study was enriched by a comparative perspective through research exchanges⁴ and interviewing post-Soviet religious immigrants outside of Israel.

From the very outset of this study, I was puzzled by the question of why mostly irreligious post-Soviet immigrants become religious as part of their relocation experience, and what kind of religiosity they develop. Scholarship on the increasing religiosity that accompanies migration has tended to understand religion as

a tool of repair and stabilization. Following this logic, research on immigrant religiosity in the United States and Europe considers religion as a device of integration, due to the many resources (cultural, social, psychological and economic) that religious institutional frameworks offer to immigrants (Cadge & Ecklund, 2007). Thus, immigrants employ religion as a source of identity, as religion provides symbols, rituals and practices that immigrants can use to affirm or reinvent who they are vis-à-vis the host and the home countries (Yang & Ebaugh, 2001). Moreover, established immigrant communities function as an extended family for their members, symbolically replacing distant relatives (Hagan & Ebaugh, 2003; Warner & Wittner, 1998). This approach stresses the facilitating power of religion in transitional states in general, and considers religion in immigration as a strong device of belonging and well-being (Chen, 2008; Levitt, 2007; Mooney, 2009). Generally speaking, it has described religion as a ‘therapeutic’ device.

The scholarship on Russian immigrant religiosity⁵ in Israel follows similar lines. Their religious transformation is often explained as ‘Israelization’ through religion and seen as a way for Russian speakers in Israel to cope with their doubly questioned Jewishness (Raijman & Pinsky, 2011; Remennick & Prashizky, 2012). Others suggest viewing this multi-variant Russian-immigrant religiosity through the prism of the post-Soviet crisis and the quest for new ideological and spiritual meaning, in the context of the transnational phenomenon of the post-Soviet religious revival (Elias & Lerner, 2016). Presenting the unsettling conditions of civic-political nature as reparable through religion, researchers presuppose the universal psychological character of a religious mindset. The assumption here is that religion, as a way of experiencing the world, stabilizes an unstable condition. As such, the religiosity will intensify in periods of crisis, anomie and transition (generational, family, national, psychological and state). Supplying strength in weakness, it will appear as an answer for traumatic states, whether individual or collective.

In my attempt to account for the religious transformation of Russian speakers in Israel, I have taken a critical stance towards the notion of religiosity as a resource of repair in migration, as I perceived a tendency to over-psychologize both phenomena – religiosity and migration. However, the more I observed the new Russian-speaking religious field in Israel, the more I myself experienced the clear presence of a therapeutic dimension in this immigrant religiosity. I was intrigued by the fact that, in many of my informants’ narratives, their religious experience features a therapeutic aspect reflected in the way they articulate themselves. In their narratives they appear as satisfied, autonomous individuals, making their own choices and carrying within an inner harmony. One hears stories of new religiosity combined with success in managing a normative life, including the tasks of profession and family demands, as well as the organization of emotions and time. In other words, their new religious subjectivity resembles the meanings of a neoliberal, therapeutic individualistic well-being. This intriguing result of my inquiry into accounts of neophyte religiosity confronts us with a therapeutic neoliberal subject. In what follows, I suggest an interpretation of this assemblage of religious and therapeutic languages that emerges in the narratives of immigrant women.

Narratives of well-being through religion

In what follows, I present the interpretation of biographical stories of three religious, Russian-speaking immigrant women. The cases examined here represent voices from the wide and multi-vocal empirical corpus of biographical and thematic narratives that comprise the research data (more than one hundred open-ended and focused interviews). In these three cases, I applied narrative ethnography (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011) – an approach that combines interviewing subjects together with a deep ethnographic knowledge of their everyday life absorbed through personal relationship with them. These cases are representative of the narratives of therapeutic religiosity, and I have chosen to use them as illustrations. First, these women share some structural sociocultural similarities, as they all belong to the first post-Soviet generation, as well as to a wide but distinct sociocultural-educational milieu. Second, the three share a professional orientation, namely, one connected to the social sector and institutions of care. And finally, they have situated themselves within dramatically different religious creeds – Orthodox Judaism, Messianic Christianity and Sunni Islam, adopting related religious cosmologies, lifestyles and everyday practices. Two of these women share a Jewish origin and lived in Israel at the time of the interview, and one lives in Finland and is linked to the Israeli context by the Palestinian origin of her husband. The similarities and differences in their biographies and narratives make the joint analysis highly intriguing. Thus, striving to consider not only the typical features of these narratives but also their exceptional characteristics, I shall present them one by one through focused biographical analysis.

Esther and Diana grew up in central Russian cities – Moscow and St. Petersburg, respectively. Elena was raised in a small town in Estonia with a Russian-speaking majority. They were all brought up among Soviet intelligentsia – academics, teachers and engineers. They all describe their families, as do most Russian immigrants of this generation, as a-religious or anti-religious. Esther and Diana discovered their Jewishness during their teenage years, and the discovery was almost devoid of meaning for them. Elena, for her part, describes an encounter with Russian Orthodox church in post-Soviet Estonia as alienated: ‘I grew up in atmosphere of godlessness (*bezbozie*)’, she says. Esther and Diana came to Israel with a big wave of immigration, while Elena immigrated to Germany as part of her search to study abroad. The three of them are well educated; each earned a master’s degree. Esther and Diana work in the third sector in the area of social support. Elena also dreams about finding work as a cultural broker in the area of immigrant integration in Europe, assisting people to find and fulfil their potential in their new circumstances.

Today, all three women, Esther, Diana and Elena, are deeply religious – on both the levels of doctrinal thought and everyday practice. Esther, a married mother of six, is a member of an ultra-orthodox Chabad community. Diana, who is single, is an active member of a messianic Christian community in Israel. As a type of modern nun, she is celibate for religious reasons and shares a home with two other women from her community. Elena, for her part, is married to a

Palestinian refugee from Gaza; she is Muslim, orthodox and ‘veiled’ (*pokritaia* as she says in Russian), the mother of three boys. All three women have acquired and developed their religiosity in the course of their migration, as part of the cultural transition and reaching adulthood.

As I listened to the stories of these women, I was struck by the statement, made by one after the other, that they were ‘happy’. Their narratives were anchored in terms of achieving well-being, harmony, psychological calmness and even happiness. In what follows, I seek to unpack this happiness in relation to their religiosity, on the one hand, and to the therapeutic ethos and the imperative for happiness, on the other.

In the course of their biographical stories about the discovery of their true religion, all the women interweave the idea of personal choice and the narrative of the search for the inner self, but also serendipitous reasoning. Something important that happened to them by mistake or absolutely accidentally becomes *hashgaha pratit* (Hebrew for personal providence), signalling the presence of God in their private lives. All of the stories feature a traumatic mystical experience marking this very presence.

Consider the following story, in which Esther recounts the death of a schoolmate:

I was asking myself questions about death and why we live at all. I took it very, very hard; I could not function, and my parents were worried about me.

Or Diana, who recalls a severe anxiety attack:

I had a very difficult experience in my teenage condition, I did all kinds of silly things.... I did not look for God, just felt very bad. This one time I could not sleep and went crazy. And thought to myself: I will take this magic book ‘Biblia’...at that time these books were only beginning to appear in people’s houses. So, I started to read it with the attitude that there is no God and that all this is total nonsense, but I finished convinced that God exists and that I am doing things that do not please Him. And I had a strong feeling that I am going to die here and now.

Elena remembers that ‘things’ she could not explain happened to her all the time. For example, at age fifteen, just after her parent’s divorce, she was biking with her brother in the forest and struggling to ride up a steep hill when she felt an invisible hand pushing her from behind:

This was the moment I discovered that there is something [there].

The paradigm of religion as a response to a personal psychological problem or difficult socioeconomic condition appeared in most of the biographical narratives of the Russian-speaking immigrants who became religious just before or after the migration. This was particularly evident in the narratives of single mothers, lonely elders, those who lost their profession in migration, and people who were

challenged by serious illnesses or who went through painful divorces. So, in this sense, Russian immigrants articulated their religious transformation by reproducing the classical narrative of conversion or return to religion, or that of a religious conversion that involved overcoming trauma (Rambo, 1993).

Concomitantly, the religious revival of these women is characterized by its specific post-Soviet appearance. The transformation of their late-Soviet mindset into a religious one can be viewed as resistance to the Soviet indoctrination of atheism or as a smooth adaptation to, or even fulfilment of, the exported Soviet ideological and cultural repertoire. First, the Soviet cultural background made Russian immigrants highly ambivalent towards religiosity. Indeed, historically, while Soviet ideology did strive to create a 'New Man' inspired by materialist and scientific worldviews, on a more symbolic cultural level, the dogmas and beliefs of Marxist–Leninist ideology operated rather like theological and eschatological religious systems (Frouse, 2008; Thrower, 1992; Zilberman, 1977). Similarly, the Soviet code and rituals worked in the everyday life of the Soviet people as almost religious attributes (Yurchak, 2005). Moreover, not all domains of the Soviet way of life were directly and exclusively determined by atheism and anti-religious views (Luehrmann, 2011). This permitted a peculiar translation of Soviet ideas into the prevailing ideas of spirituality (*dukhovnost'* in Russian) and encouraged a permanent quest for 'the meaning of life' rather than for material prosperity and 'work upon oneself' (*rabota nad soboi* in Russian). In this way, the 'religious unconscious' was preserved within the Soviet discourse and experience (Epstein, 1994). Finally, the religious arenas existing at the margins of Soviet ideology and society acquired political and cultural meaning as a counterforce to Soviet collectivistic values. Religion came to be associated with the private sphere and was perceived as embodying resistance to the regime and its indoctrination (Kornblatt, 2004).

Later, the ideological-political but also everyday cultural collapse of the Soviet frame brought about dissolution of limits on religion, and also a moral and ideological vacuum, resulted in a massive post-Soviet religious awakening, described by scholars from the late 1980s as a 'supermarket of religions' (Pelkmans, 2009; Wanner, 2012). Faith, disconnected from any particular religious doctrine and lacking a communal framework, can be seen as a response to official Soviet atheism, promoting what the literature calls post-Soviet inclusive or 'minimal' religion (Epstein, 1999; Sutton, 2006). While in contemporary Russia the mainstream religiosity takes a statist institutional form, this post-Soviet inclusive and universalistic form is manifest today in the religious beliefs and practices found in the broader space of the post-Soviet diaspora, including those in Israel.

Like many other Russian-speaking religious immigrants, Esther, Diana and Elena describe an experience of the post-Soviet 'religious supermarket'; a chaotic assortment of open religious and spiritual trajectories – all of them eclectic and foreign. Diana first came in her search to a synagogue in St. Petersburg, after which she arrived at a Russian-Orthodox church. Then, a friend took her to one of the newly established evangelical communities in the city. It was there that

she later met a messianic figure who became her religious guide. Esther went in a different order – a schoolmate took her to a Russian-Orthodox priest, and only after that did she arrive at the circle of Judaism, join a Jewish school and later find her true place in the Chabad movement. Elena recalls how she tried to become part of Russian-Orthodox life in Estonia but ‘something’ did not accept her there, as she describes. She tells how, in her teenage years, their grandmother took her and her brother to baptize them in the Russian church when they visited her in Latvia. Elena took with her a cross on a silver chain but, just as the priest was supposed to place the cross on her neck, the chain broke and the cross fell to the floor. Alienated, she sought other options. She and her mother became interested in esoteric literature and astrology, but the search continued until she found Islam.

Within the post-Soviet religious trajectories, these three women explored the repertoires of different religious doctrines and shaped their lives in accordance with the demands of ultra-Orthodox Judaism, Messianic Christianity and Islam. In spite of the deep differences between the women, the narrative of their inner harmony is strikingly similar. All tell a therapeutic story. First and foremost, one hears of a journey to discover their true self, of overcoming a personal difficulty, of gaining control of their lives, time and emotions. The narrative of identifying problems (or finding a pathology), probing the unconscious, making connections with past events or even one’s childhood, and summoning the self onto a path of healing and the elimination of suffering is the basic narrative of the therapeutic culture (Cushman, 1995; Illouz, 2007; Furedi, 2004). The organizing theme of personal choice, the ability to manage one’s successes and take responsibility for one’s failures signals the presence of therapeutic neoliberal subjectivity (Rose, 1990, 1996).

That Diana, Esther and Elena speak in terms of ‘autonomous responsible subjects’ concomitantly with becoming religious is, by itself, a result of a transformation that is both post-Soviet and religious. For them, both sets of assumptions – that of a religious mindset as well as the assumptions of modern psychology – are not obvious at all, nor is the more contemporary therapeutic neoliberal pursuit of happiness.

Despite the enthusiastic early phase that psychoanalysis enjoyed in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century (Etkind, 1993), psychoanalysis and post-Freudian psychology never truly shaped Russian and Soviet culture and social relations. The socialist regime, by contrast, critically shaped the Russian emotional style, and obliged the Soviet person not only to think but also to feel in a specific, socialist way (Steinberg & Sobol, 2011). If, in the Russian and Soviet context, the therapeutic narrative – including its language and model of subjectivity – was absent, today, a version of the therapeutic culture that assembles ‘emotional socialism’ and the global therapeutic language has already become evident in post-Soviet Russian articulations of selfhood, emotions and personal relations (Lerner, 2015; Lerner & Zbenovich, 2013; Leykin, 2015; Matza, 2018; Salmenniemi, 2017). In the case of the narratives of the immigrant women, the post-Soviet therapeutic language is also assembled with post-atheist religious beliefs.

Therapeutic cultural logic appears to clash in several important ways with generalized religious ethos: the high value the former ascribes to individual needs and their satisfaction, its basic belief in self-regulating individual autonomy, its distancing from moral judgement while turning guilt and suffering into weaknesses or even pathologies. However, it appears that, in the contemporary assemblage, the discourse of religiosity is undergoing a 'personal development' turn (Heelas, 2009; Tucker, 2002) and the contradictions between modern psychology and religious consciousness are solved on the level of doctrines, theology and in the everyday cosmologies of religious subjects. The assemblage of therapeutic religiosity presents religion as one route towards development and self-management. In what follows, we will see how the religious and the therapeutic logic are assembled in the three cases under study as means to manage the soul and its practice.

Esther: managing spiritual time

Let's begin with Esther's narrative of well-being through management of time. Esther is a busy woman. She has six children, a full-time job and is enrolled in a doctoral programme. She strictly practices an ultra-orthodox version of Judaism in her everyday life while she keeps her family life within the frame of the Chabad community. This is how she describes her current life:

I'm feeling very good... and also proud [of myself]. Every moment we can decide what we do. The choices I made in my life – I'm proud of them all and happy about the process I went through. Of course, everybody makes mistakes, but I think these mistakes only came to teach me all kinds of lessons in life. First of all, I'm a mother of six; I'm very, very glad that I'm a part of such a big family. I am married to a man I love very much, together with a big and happy family. This place of family is very important. Beyond this, I continue to do my research that I love; I believe that it will advance properly... The fact that I'm doing one thing, and another thing and another... suddenly, this puzzle of me is created, and the tower that I want to build and advance (*lekadem*). I hope very much that I will come to that place I want to be in... in peace with myself (*shlema*), connected to myself, giving an education to my children, and my own personal example – I want them very much to see my example in their eyes.

Esther is proud and happy. Narrating on her self – building it, cultivating and developing it, fulfilling it and eventually being happy with it – is central to Esther's religious language and experience. In her 'life world', the value of self-development is linked to both her religious and professional identities. She uses life-coaching terms such as 'taking choices', 'advancing yourself' and 'being true to yourself' and 'fulfilled' simultaneously with Hebrew spiritual concepts, signalling religious metaphysics. In this way, the religious language is psychologized and the therapeutic terms gain religious content.

First, the focusing on the self as a value and its proper management can be found in discourses and practices of many religious movements. The similar discourse of self-management and self-development also dominates some professional sectors and institutions of care that serve as the main carriers of the therapeutic, neoliberal, psycho-managerial logic. Esther is part of this professional milieu; she works as a public relations director in an NGO that assists people in overcoming poverty. I ask Esther to describe the ideology of the organization, which she communicates as part of her job. She tells me that the ultimate principles that stand at the heart of the objectives of this NGO proclaim work of reparation, reducing the evil by investing conscious personal efforts. People are encouraged to push themselves harder, to take themselves out of the misery, to take responsibility for their budget and habits, and to control their life. People learn that Esther identifies herself with this approach. Moreover, Esther herself fulfils this principle in her everyday life while she combines it with religious meanings. She tells me that in no other place has she found what she finds in religion:

Religion tells me how I should fill my time. There is something flat in all rest of reality. So today I am trying to fill in this place for myself. Religion gives content to it, depth.

When I ask her about this ‘depth’, she answers:

Today the big issue in my life is time. I have just very little time, so how should I fill it and manage it? I have a way to evaluate what I do with my time. If I now invested half an hour in my child, I did the maximum in my life to advance myself. Or if I have invested half an hour in studying [...]. Today, I think that my life is very limited in time and in my ability to achieve my objectives, so I should know the correct goals and how to manage the time. Before I go to sleep, I write down the tasks of the next day. I write numbers: one two, three. And within the first I have A, B, C. I know how to manage myself. I know that if 3C will not work, it’s ok. But if I do not plan, it will not happen at all. But how do I know what is important to do? [If I] just go to a coffee shop...I will feel emptiness. I had periods like this, it happened; I felt that I was standing in one place, not advancing what is important to me. And advancing in a spiritual dimension and in my work is most important to me. Now, for me, [whether] to explain to my child about what kinds of trees he sees in the forest or what kinds of animals are in the zoo or, alternatively, his ancestors; of course, I would choose to tell him about Avraham [and the origin of the Jews].

I suggest reading Esther’s story as a therapeutic narrative of self-management, self-empowerment and self-development through the management of time. She employs the logic and the style of life coaching while adapting it to her spiritual religious goals and needs. She learns to manage time well in order to have time to

give her children the basics of their religious knowledge. Hence, in her narrative, the recognizable neoliberal therapeutic discourse is assembled with meanings that derive from the Jewish religious cosmology.

Diana: managing vocation

Diana's story, too, is a narrative of self-fulfilment, with a focus on the search for and investment in her true mission. In Diana's scenario, this investment yields happiness.

Diana tells me her biographical journey, recalling how she coped with a difficult teenage period, and a family crisis that resulted in drug addiction. At that time, she discovered God and her Jewishness, and made peace between the two:

I just felt that God was angry with me and I had to make peace with him.

This harmony Diana found much later, in her mission of serving God in Israel while working for the messianic Jewish-Christian community there. But earlier, as a lost young woman, as she describes herself, she sought salvation everywhere. After one stormy mysterious night with a bible in her hands, Diana first 'ran to a synagogue':

The Chabad rabbi there started to explain to me something about God as a 'remarkable notion'. And I was furious. I already felt that I did not know a lot about God, but I knew that He is not a notion. I wanted to die for him.

At that time, the next natural place to turn was a Russian-Orthodox monastery, and, indeed, that is where she ran: 'I came and told them – please accept me, I want to be a nun!' Later, Diana discovered a young Evangelical community. At some point, her God became her career, and she worked as a missionary in St. Petersburg. This is when Diana began to tell herself and others: 'My parents are Jewish; I am not'. But a speech given by a messianic Jew from Canada living in Israel that came to Diana's community changed all that. Diana discovered her true mission of being a Christian Jew, moved to Israel and devoted her professional and personal life to the service of God:

In my character, I'm a total extremist. For me, it is all or nothing; if you are into something – so, only totally and until the end. That's why I think that everything in my life is part of my faith and colored by it.

Diana established an organization that assists immigrant families in need. To the Israeli state authorities, it is an NGO supporting immigrant single mothers, and for her Christian world it is her 'ministry'. She travels throughout the world, raising money among messianic communities for her ministry, something at which she is highly successful. Diana is in charge of all the activities of the organization, from distributing food to organizing educational activities for children, cultural

events and camps for the young and accompanying her care recipients to state authorities and the courts.

She explained her decision to live without intimate relationships and with no children in theological terms. But she also says:

Actually, I cannot see myself doing what I'm doing with a partner and kids: it's impossible, my mission and work are total for me. I can live only according to God, and not to my husband. I am autonomous and independent, and there is a sort of *Blagodat'* (Grace of God or Happiness).

Diana adopts the value of therapeutic autonomy and self-fulfilment in a remarkable way as she subordinates it to the Holy Spirit and religious mission. In her narrative, the self and the work are inseparable. It is the total investment in them both that results in her well-being.

When I ask about the attitude of her irreligious family to her way of life, she answers:

My father understands me, and he always protects me in front of others. My grandmother always reproaches me because of living alone with no sex and with no option for children. But my father says to her – leave her alone; don't you see that Diana is happy? In fact, when I met my extended family around the table and someone asked: who among us would continue to do what he does if there is no need for money? I was almost the only one to say that I'm absolutely happy with who I am and what I'm doing.

Diana is indeed committed to the task she has built for herself. Like the logic of the organization for helping the poor where Esther works, Diana's work with immigrant single mothers is 'to help them to help themselves'. Her task is to bring them to the point where they become independent subjects and assume personal responsibility for their lives.

'Personal responsibility' is a concept central to the therapeutic discourse, especially in its neoliberal variant of self-managerial discourse. Contemporary critique ties the triumph of the therapeutic logic to the neoliberal economic and cultural regime that promotes the autonomous self-regulating subject taking 'personal responsibility' for his functioning. The personal responsibility for one's choices, for personal failures but also a commitment to achieve well-being, is part of what is discussed in the critical literature as the contemporary 'happiness regime' (Ahmed, 2010; Binkley, 2014). Linked to the economic system and moral normative perceptions anchored in the lifestyle of the professional middle class, the discourse of happiness is developed in particular in certain academic areas (such as positive psychology) and therapeutic professions, and also informs the agenda of organizational counselling and all sorts of life coaching, which translated it into the operational level of recommendations (see Yankellevich in this book). The logic of personal responsibility in the quest for happiness penetrates more spheres of life, becoming visible not only in private domains (parenthood,

marriage or food) but also in the public sphere (educational institutions, collective memory and politics). In the therapeutic discourse, taking responsibility corresponds to neoliberal logic; in Esther's and Diana's narratives, it is assembled with religious logic and appears as a spiritual practice. In Elena's story, which follows, the responsibility also becomes embodied.

Elena: managing femininity

Elena's story of saving the soul is also a narrative of management. She acquired religiosity as a tool to manage her femininity and sexuality. In portraying her immigration, the search for her 'self' and for a life-partner, and of coming consciously to the observance of Islam, she returns time and again to her family story, and especially to her grandmother and her father – who committed 'many sins' in their turbulent sexual and romantic lives. As a growing girl, Elena lacked confidence: 'Nobody looked at me in our town'. It was later in Germany, working as an au pair, that she discovered herself as an attractive young woman. Her experience of immigration was all about discovering the world of interpersonal relationships and relations with men. After a year in Germany she went back to Estonia, but was seeking a way to return to Germany in order to study and settle down. Shortly thereafter, Elena made this move, but freedom in Germany brought new difficulties. She was falling in love, she was fascinated by the relationships she had or fantasized about having, but she also was 'keeping herself', as she says, refraining from sexual relationships. In this period, as a young woman alone facing a new environment, language and culture, and seeking companionship, she found herself in dangerous situations with men. This frightened her, and she became more cautious. The freedom that had attracted her now became a threat:

I understood then how I looked from their point of view. I was dancing at the bar, I'm easy to take, I will follow everyone... My naiveté left me. I see how this lightness and easiness is superficial and deceptive. It was a new period of understanding of myself.

Sometime after that, Elena met her future husband, a young scientist of Palestinian origin. He introduced her to Islam but, as she says, made no attempt to force her to convert or to become observant. She took Islam upon herself slowly, discovering how close its theology was to her mind but also realizing 'how much good it does for her' and her self-feeling. She describes a decision 'to cover' herself (wear a veil on her head) as a meaningful step in her journey:

I've accepted Islam as my religion. And it was clear for me that all that is included in the frames of Islam, I need just to accept, regardless of whether I like it or not. And indeed, after I did it I understood how right it is, that it works. Men stopped talking to me. They stopped looking at me as a woman. Before that, even when I was married, you know how it is... they could say something or sit next to me and start talking [...] Islam is a journey of my

own choice [and now] it gave me... I would not say happiness, but I came to some calmness, for my inner balance. My search has ended. There is a movement, of course, to learn more about my religion. But I do not take wrong decisions anymore [...] I feel pure. I do not attract the gazes of men. I do not interest them anymore.

Elena's calm and rational narrative is organized by the frames of a self-seeking journey and acquiring her sense of being through self-control. It is presented in terms of 'the difficulty', then 'taking the choice' and performing 'the personal responsibility'. In her story, the domain of difficulty is closely linked to femininity and should be understood in relation to gender aspects of the therapeutic culture. The therapeutic narrative has been a crucial tool for female empowerment in the feminist movement. Through this narrative, the movement has created a space and language in which women could expose their experiences, come to terms with their positioning and learn to gain control of their lives (Plant, 2015; see also Perheentupa in this book). In Elena's narrative, this recognizable narrative of women's self-awareness is incorporated in the religious journey and packaged together with the practice of the corporal restrictions prescribed to a Muslim woman. Today, for Elena, being religious and being true to herself means being a woman in control of her body.

From religion as therapy to neoliberal therapeutic religiosity

The narrative accounts show that Esther, Diana and Elena discovered religion alongside learning the therapeutic way of thinking as part of their migration to Israel and Europe. They adopted the therapeutic logic particularly in the frames of their professional occupation in the 'third sector', social-care oriented NGOs, which implement the therapeutic logic in their activities and translate it into their practices. Moreover, the women were exposed to religion when it already spoke the language of psychology. The assembled religious-therapeutic mindset provided them with the resource of self-fulfilment in spiritual terms, but also as functioning normative individuals, women and mothers, and moral persons. Their religiosity appears as a way for up-to-date life-management: management of feelings, time, sexuality, work and family. Thus, the adoption of the assembled religious discourse turned Esther, Diana and Elena into 'successful people'. For them, religion sparked the idea of personal choice, a crucial value in the therapeutic individualist logic. It allowed them to push themselves to go beyond themselves, to change their lives while staying within the strict boundaries of their religious prescriptions. It created an experience of authenticity, freedom and autonomy. In their eyes, religiosity renders them successful, normative 'healthy' and 'proper' subjects. Therefore, in this reading of the post-Soviet religiosity in migration, I argue that the religious and therapeutic discourses merge to produce a neoliberal subject in the narratives of these women.

The reconfiguration of the therapeutic dimension of religious experience into a narrative of flexible, autonomous, self-managing subjectivity requires further

discussion. To start with, the perception of religion as a form of therapy has a long history. Assumptions that shape the understanding of religion as alleviating pain, as providing a remedy, a coping resource, a boost at times of weakness and a recharge at moments of emptiness may be the oldest and most entrenched social thoughts about religion. They are present in theological discourse, embodied in religious healing practices, but are also evident in the scientific and ideological discourse that is critical of religiosity. In the contemporary scholarly domain, this perception dominates psychology, which is preoccupied with measuring the influence of religion on well-being (e.g. Zel & Baumeister, 2013). They consider religion as a universal ‘emotional therapy’ (Asma, 2018). A great deal of psychological research has linked religious affiliation and belief with physical and psychological well-being and demonstrated how religiosity can serve as a resource for people in precarious life conditions (Watts, 2017). The particular area where the therapeutic nature of religiosity is assumed is the study of ‘conversion’, especially a personal dimension of conversion as a repair of traumatic condition (Rambo, 1993). The assumption that increasing religiosity is related to traumatic experiences, crisis or unstable social conditions also might explain why the perception of ‘religion as therapy’ serves as the dominant explanation for immigrant religiosity and the religious transformation of immigrants. Indeed, migration is considered a state that disrupts personal and collective stability. Thus, one can readily see that the aforementioned notion of religiosity in migration as a stabilizing factor and a resource is another manifestation of the ‘religion as therapy’ approach.

Today, however, we are witnessing a new turn in relations between religion and the idea of therapy, as well as between religion and psychology in general. Religion and the new religiosity are one of the most obvious and complex assemblages within the therapeutic turn, one that calls for close examination. Discussing the presence of a new relation between psychology and religion, Frank Furedi (2004) argues that therapeutic culture seems to thrive at times when religion is surpassed in authority and popularity by psychological culture. Recognizing the empowerment of the individual self in ‘therapeutic religion’, James Tucker places this type of religiosity outside the traditional religious institutions and limits its significance (Tucker, 2017). Scholars of religion and spirituality, have noted that mainstream contemporary religion has also adopted the elements of the global therapeutic discourse and uses it to strengthen itself. Kathryn Lofton, who has interpreted the Gospels in the light of therapy, suggests that the two projects have much in common: both contemporary religion and therapeutic gospel are built on a double solicitation – ‘by asking to change your life [...] while suggesting that “your life needs changing”’ (Lofton, 2015: 35). Tanya Luhrmann, in her work on the new intimate relations with God in American Evangelism, discusses the perception of ‘God as therapist’ (Luhrmann, 2012). As an example of a revived therapeutic dimension of mainstream theology, Tatiana Tiaynen-Qadir in this book brings a case of *therapeia* within the sources of Orthodox Christianity. Thus, one way or another, the psychological discourse has become an inseparable part of an emergent therapeutic religiosity. Moreover, it appears that, today, the scholarly

understanding of religiosity as a calming agent actually overlaps with the therapeutic language of the new religiosity itself. Religious subjects and their researchers alike assume the therapeutic logic in the religious logic.

All of the above drives my attempt to develop a critical understanding of religiosity as therapy. I argue that we cannot ignore the therapeutic dimension of the religious experience – but that we ought to change the way we interpret it. Instead of seeking the therapeutic reasons for religious transformation, we should analyze the language of its reasoning to follow the ways in which religiosity is articulated and to reveal its therapeutic rhetoric. Without assuming that religion is adopted as an act of therapy or a resource for repairing and belonging, we can try to understand the ways in which people in general and immigrants in particular acquire therapeutic religion that speaks the language of calmness, belonging and well-being. Thus, the language of contemporary religion, or at least this kind of religion, constitutes a normative proper subject, one who is successful and happy. This outcome is worked out in the new relations between religious ethics, psychological discourse and neoliberal morality.

It would be an overstatement to claim that, today, each and every newly acquired religiosity speaks the therapeutic language. An intersectional combination of social positioning, generation, professional occupation, as well as of gender disposition,⁶ exposes individuals and groups to the language of well-being and to a religious way of life at one and the same time. The intersection of religious agents and consulting institutions, such as nonprofit organizations of social and communal support, forges a new assemblage of therapeutic discourses and institutional practices. In this condition, the difference between the religious and areligious subject indeed becomes blurred, as both types of individual seek well-being and self-development. As in Weber's model of elective affinities, introduced to describe relations between capitalism and Protestantism, the religious and therapeutic cultures, in many respects mutually antithetical, also share some important similarities and paradoxically strengthen each other. In this way, it seems that religion could strengthen (or even create) a neoliberal subject no less than does life coaching or a course of self-development.

However, one might wonder about the nature of the similarity and blurredness that this assemblage produces. Specifically, does it organize all the spheres of private and public life of the religious therapeutic subjects? Where does it limit or fail to keep the *mélange*? The three women whose narratives I have discussed here conduct their lives within clearly demarcated communities and according to clearly delineated rules. Moreover, as actively religious women working with third sector institutions, their everyday lives are committed to the needs of their own community, and to the public good in general. In working on her individual self, each woman strives to achieve not only personal well-being but also to satisfy the imagined transcendental authority and its rule. Hence, the similarity of religious and therapeutic self-discourse does not abrogate the total nature of the religious way of life. Nor does it efface the distinct metaphysical authority that religious subjects follow. In this sense, the therapeutic religious assemblage illustrates the potential for the extension of the psychological

logic to the new communal, public and collective realms. If the critique tends to assume that the therapeutic logic empties the self of its communal and political content and diminishes collective and communal attachments, the examined therapeutic religious assemblage illustrates the potential of the therapeutic culture to cooperate with and augment the authoritative transcendental and communal discourses.

Notes

- 1 The research that provides the basis for this chapter was supported by The Israel Science Foundation (grant number 449\10 and 16\496).
- 2 Surveys conducted in the past decade have shown that nearly one-third of Russian-speaking Israelis define themselves as 'religious', and only about the same number define themselves as 'non-believers', making the percentage of Russian immigrants affiliated with some sort of faith even larger (Remennick & Prashizky, 2012). Similarly, there is strong ethnographic evidence (including my own study) of Russian-speaking immigrants' active participation in local religious communities, both Jewish and Christian.
- 3 Data gathering in the Christian communities was based on observations of about 60 events in messianic communities (meeting groups and churches), in a Russian-Orthodox study group, and in the Seventh Day Adventist Church, as well as on more than 50 interviews with the members of these communities. Our data collection on Russian-Jewish religiosity focused on Orthodox Judaism (Chabad and National-Religious communities), the Kabbala La-am Movement and the Russian-language media.
- 4 For example, the international workshop titled 'New Religiosity in Migration', Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, May 2014.
- 5 Being granted citizenship according to the Israeli law of Jewish return to the Jewish historical homeland, more than 30 percent of Russian-speaking immigrants belong to 'ethnically mixed' families, and many of them cannot be considered Jewish according to the *Halakha* (Jewish religious law, which defines Jewishness largely on the basis of matrilineal descent). The 'Jewish problem' of Russians in Israel also stems from their cultural distance from Jewish religious knowledge and habitus. During the Soviet era, Jews defined their Jewishness in ethnic and not religious terms.
- 6 The gender aspect of the therapeutic religious assemblage should be mentioned particularly, because women constitute the main subject of both the new religiosity and the therapeutic culture. Moreover, they are patently present in third-sector professions.

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