

“ROLLS OF BREAD”

INTERPRETATION OF A CONVERSATION IN A SYNAGOGUE

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Abstract: The world of this study is the religious-ritual sphere of Hungarian Jewish culture. The different Jewish rituals carry certain basic meanings for the members of the given community through the tradition of Jewish culture. These rituals have basic importance for the members of the community as a means of experiencing their culture. This phenomenon becomes a part of a more general process, the cultural change of the present Hungarian Jewish community. The strengthening position of the synagogue in Jewish ritual life has numerous effects on the cultural changes of the Jewish community.

Keywords: participant observation, Jewish ritual life, Jewish community, Jewish feasts, Sabbath Synagogue life

Every anthropologist has to make his own way through the paths of cultural anthropology. The scholar's personality, the characteristics of the field, the tricks that he learned from his masters and predecessors form the way that leads him through a culture different from his own.

However, there is one thing more or less present in all anthropological work: participant observation and the description to be written are based (among others) on the semantical changes experienced in the field, in other words, the observation and comprehension of cultural semiosis. Primary, seemingly “incomprehensible” conversations are included here, in which the members of the target community use interactive signs that need to be decoded in order to understand the “meaning” of communication, its content in the cultural sense.

Similarly, the studies and cautious generalisations derived from them can rely only on the comprehension and interpretation of these conversations.

Therefore the anthropologist's task is “to connect all the analysable details, to form a sociological synthesis of all the relevant features... First of all, one should understand that even seemingly unrelated activities have their meanings” (MALINOWSKI 1972: 50). I recorded the following conversation recently in a Budapest synagogue. By quoting parts of the conversation and thinking them over we can perhaps get closer to the methodology of anthropology and gain an insight into what a description, interpretation of a short occurrence like this can tell us about the culture analysed through searching the background of these and similar signs.

The conversation took place on a morning before the Sabbath. One of the key figures of the ritual life of the synagogue, an elderly and respected man goes over to

the shammes (the person who provides the practical conditions for the ritual life of the synagogue) and inquires about barches.

The answer is not a particularly encouraging one:

“We don’t have any barches left.”

However, Papa Sanyi does not lose his customary good cheer and answers with a shrug:

“It doesn’t matter, I’ll do the kiddush with rolls of bread.”

At this point, a young man in his twenties, who learned the basics of Jewish ritual life from the elderly Baal Torah, as most of his peers have, joins in the conversation,

“But Papa Sanyi, the roll is not hallah, it won’t be kosher to do it like that” – the smile hidden in his eyes and voice reveals that he is teasing the old man.

“One should not force things, to go into such depth” – Papa Sanyi laughs, he obviously understood the joke.

“Of course, when there is no barches, we all do it like this” – the young man answers and all three of them laugh, at the whole conversation...

Before we analyse this cheerful signalling more deeply, it is useful to mention what an observer can immediately deduce from a conversation like this. First of all, one can see that a conversation like this is a line of mutual “tickings” (GEERTZ 1994: 172–177), an exchange of messages. In other words, the essence is not in the recorded sentences, in its cultural world of signs, rather in the meanings hidden behind the words, which are concrete messages for the participants. The main point is that all the participants understood and responded automatically to all of the messages.

Secondly, what can be immediately seen from the conversation is the fact that all of them referred to some kind of obligation to use barches, a Saturday morning ritual of receiving hallah. Therefore, given is a culturally defined normative system that regulates the members with the power of law, and given are the members themselves who draw from the world of the laws differently; what they draw from that world defines their lifestyles, since this is exactly what they refer to in some way, presumably in all of their conversations inside and outside the synagogue.

Through thinking over these facts on the spot, the researcher develops a working hypothesis that can lead to a possible interpretation at the end of the conversation. Naturally, not every hypothesis can match the possible conclusions at the end of an interpretive description (if there are final conclusions at all). The working hypotheses develop inevitably, since this is the only way the observer can find a path through the woods of another culture. However, the working hypotheses can only be successful if we compare them with our previous concepts or ideas; in other words, if we are capable of reformulating our concepts and ideas simultaneously as we understand the heard or seen phenomena of the studied culture, or even of rejecting them and allowing the phenomena experienced to rewrite our study.

My working hypothesis of the quoted conversation was the following:

The main point in studying a present-day Jewish community is that the content of the given culture and the examples of communication with codified tradition (which change with age and region) become comprehensible.

In the present case, through examining the conversation, one can discover the cognitive features of a Hungarian Jewish community of the Millennium. Namely, Papa Sanyi is aware of the fact that barches needs to be taken hallah, in order to make a ritually pure, kosher kiddush, but for him, the kiddush is more important, the emphasis is on the ritual experience itself, and not on the ritually defined purity. His partners in the conversation not only understand him, but even affirm him in with the sentence “we all do it like this, too”.

However, this is not yet the point where the comprehensive, the “thick” description starts (GEERTZ 1994: 170–200). First of all, I need to explain all those “new” words, which I have (deliberately) avoided doing so far. This way the reader will understand the conversation as well, and not only the complicated methodological experiences of the researcher.

Our work starts with the comprehension of the phenomena in the field, but its quality succeeds or fails depending on whether we are able to present the things we have understood to the readers in a readily comprehensible form.

The semiosis of cultural phenomena, including the interpretive description of our conversation, can be divided into three levels.

- Level 1 The ethnographical description of the conversation
- Level 2 “Decoding” the meaning of the experienced phenomena, the “thick” description
- Level 3 Further interpretation of the interpreted phenomena in the light of the given culture’s background, and in the context of its socio-cultural system, since “anthropologists must not forget the society, as the vehicle of the culture” (SÁRKÁNY 1990: 292, cf. BOGLÁR 1995: 44).

In the light of what has been said so far, the analysis of this and similar conversations, is also an example of the method of cultural anthropology.

Before the above-mentioned “levels” help us understand the conversation, it is useful to show what each level can tell us about the phenomenon analysed in a little more detail:

1. The ethnographic description
 - a) The recording of the conversation.
The necessary participant observation, the fieldwork, the anthropologist needs to be “inside” the micro-world of the culture analysed.
 - b) Explaining the expressions used in the communication, making them accessible to everyone, translating them (LEACH 1996: 46).
2. The “thick description”: cultural semiosis (the signals and signs used by the communicating people), the interpretation of “winks”.
3. Imbedding the present communication into its socio-cultural context – into the socio-cultural context of a present-day Hungarian Jewish community – can show the meaning and significance of a conclusion drawn from the analysis of the given communication. (What does the phenomenon examined say about

contemporary Hungarian Jewish culture, to what questions, to what general connections can the decoding of such a communication lead.)

Finally, we can ask what an anthropological micro-analysis can tell us about the Jewish community itself, and whether an anthropologist, through his work, can contribute to general questions, which is not strictly speaking his task.

Let us now examine the communication by following the given steps.

- 1a): the first step of an ethnographical description is given, the conversation is recorded, it is perhaps useful for the reader to go back to it after so many detours;
- 1b): before we go on to explaining the new expressions, it is worth saying a few words about the context of the conversation, about the Sabbath itself.

Sabbath lasts from Friday night to Saturday night according to the time structure of Jewish culture. This is the day God blessed and sanctified when he rested after the Creation that lasted six days (Exodus 20,11). The Jews, according to the Torah laws defining the culture, are obliged to follow God and to abstain from any work that would indicate the control of man over nature, or its active transformation (UNTERMAN 1999: 200).

The Sabbath – in spite of its frequency of repetition every week – is the most important Jewish feast (DOMÁN 1991: 153).

The feast begins with a Friday night ritual, which according to tradition, starts with lighting the candles at home, continues with a religious service in the synagogue and ends with a ritual at home (DONIN 1998: 75). From the point of view of the conversation, this is all we need to know for the moment. Now let us look at the meanings of the Yiddish and Hebrew words.

Barches¹ is the cake which is the essential accessory of meals and rites on the Sabbath and other religious feasts in every Jewish community, including in the Hungarian Jewish community as well. On Friday night, at the second ritual mentioned, this cake is blessed. The ritual is named kiddush, as in the conversation.

Kiddush means to sanctify. It stands for the ritual of the beginning of the Sabbath and other religious holidays.

The kiddush² on Friday night – and the barches playing a role in it – carry certain basic meanings for the members of the community through the tradition of Jewish culture.

It is worth taking a glimpse into the ritual practice and its “message” by examining some elements from the context of the ritual.

The ritual taking place on Friday night starts when the head of the family reads out parts of the Torah (Gen. 2, 1–2) and then blesses the BONA and Sabbath. The

¹ The etymology of the word is still a topic of debate (cf. RÉKAI 1997: 106–110; UJVÁRI 1929: 87).

² Kiddush is held on the next day as well, before lunch, but for our purposes here, presenting a Friday night kiddush is sufficient.

members of the community, however, use this expression for ritual activities following the religious practice on Friday night (LAU 1994: 177).

Kiddush should be celebrated with wine or KOSHER grape juice, but if these cannot be obtained, then one can bless the two barcheses. Two loafs of bread (in Hungary two cakes) are always placed on the Sabbath table. This “double bread” (LAU 1994: 178) enables participants to re-live the Torah experience, when the Jewish people wandered in the desert and the Lord sent every Jew a double amount of MANNA in honour of the Sabbath (and to prevent the Jews from breaking the prohibition on work on the Sabbath) (Exodus 16,22).

In this way, the double meaning as a part of the ritual “messages” of the Sabbath, is deepened for the participants of the kiddush: they experience the Creation and the periods of the Exodus from Egypt (see DONIN 1998: 68–72).

The Sabbath is sanctified through these blessings, followed by the blessing of the cake. Later, the leader of the ritual dips a piece of cake into salt, symbolically referring to the “eternal salt-covenant” between the Jews and God (Leviticus 2,13) and also referring to the grief over the destruction of the temple. (In ancient times salt was sacrificed after all sacrifices in the temple, and this action was continued even after its destruction, since then the home became the temple and the table became the altar.) (See UNTERMAN 1999: 244.)

This is followed by supper, since “the delicious morsels of the Sabbath feast have to be made worthy of the Sabbath” (LAU 1994: 178).

Tradition, however, prescribes that the Sabbath should not be honoured only with meat (namely consuming meat is also a norm!) and other dishes, but also with “intellectual food”. These are the Friday night songs, “zmirot”, and the readings from the Torah between the courses.

This ritual therefore has a basic importance for the members of the community as a means of experiencing their culture. Meditation on the Torah passages read during the ritual and the accessories of the ritual (see the meaning of barches about MANNA) make it possible for the members to experience again the Creation, the Exodus from Egypt, the mythical Torah time structure, and to become absorbed in the cognitive contents of the culture.

This is the reason why the ritual-hallastic³ tradition pays so much attention to making all the elements of the ceremony⁴ KOSHER. And this brings us to the ex-

³ The Hebrew word “halakha”, used as a general term for the Jewish ritual laws, or simply to designate Jewish tradition, means a “passable path”, a “taken path” (cf. LAU 1994: 6). It is the name of the laws found in the Talmud. The laws brought by later legislators also have a halakhical importance. The Written Teaching does not give details of every law, this has to be done by the Oral Teaching (JÓLESZ 1985: 72). The meaning of halakha: “the path that can be taken”; it shows the Jews “how to live” through many thousands of rules. “Jewish religion is a practical religion and it urges the Jews to stick to their values in their every deed. This obligation is derived precisely from the fact that the theoretical and the practical halakha, the theory and the everyday routine are inseparable” (LAU 1994: 6–7).

⁴ The expression “kosher” is used in Jewish tradition mainly to denote food that can be eaten (“pure” food) (JÓLESZ 1985: 100). We find this expression in numerous fields of Jewish culture even when it is not connected to nutrition. KOSHER in a “figurative sense” (RÉKAI 1997: 89) is an adjective used to mean “ritually pure”, “according to the prescriptions”.

pression of hallah, mentioned by the young man when he told Papa Sanyi that the ritual we have just mentioned, kiddush, will not be kosher enough without making the “barches hallah”. The Hebrew hallah (“dough”, “dough sacrifice”) stands for the piece of dough which the person preparing the loaf⁵ must tear off and burn. This activity is also connected to the Torah commandment: “You shall offer up a cake from the first of your ground meal and present it as an offering from the threshing floor” (Numbers 15, 20).

At the time of the Temple the hallah was given to the kohen serving as priest, from the beginning of the Diaspora it has to be thrown into the fire because of the complicated purification laws concerning the kohens. During the time of the Temple, this commandment applied only to Palestine, however, in order to preserve from oblivion the ritual practice (so that it could be incorporated into the law again in the Messianic period with the rebuilding of the Temple), the rabbis made it obligatory for all the generations to come, consequently, for the people living today as well (UJVÁRI 1929: 164).

Although the hallah commandment concerns not only barches, the ceremonial cake is not KOSHER without hallah, in the sense of the ritual norm (RÉKAI 1997: 110). (To avoid later misunderstandings we need to mention that hallah is sometimes used as a synonym for barches, but in the conversation analysed this is not the case.)

This should suffice for a brief ethnographic description. It could be a lot longer of course, since the ancient Jewish culture absorbed so many cultural elements that we would need to swim across an ocean of philological and ethnographic data in order to examine the meaning of the expressions used in communication. From our topic’s viewpoint, it was important to present the above because we need to understand that an anthropologist can only step forward to the next level, to the path of “thick description” when he is sufficiently aware of the world behind the community analysed to understand conversations like this.

2. In my opinion, the next step, the next level, is to make the interaction of the participants more unambiguous, to try to understand who “winked” at who and why, to give a cultural context to the tickings. This kind of representation has a purpose when not only the participants of the conversation, but also we, the outsiders, have something to add to the conversation.

In the first phase of the analysis level, it is worth demonstrating that all the participants understand each other.

Papa Sanyi does not have the barches available at the synagogue, nevertheless, he says it does not matter, “it is not that which is important”.

The third participant, the young man also knows this, that is why he teases the old man, who knows the young man is not to be taken seriously. Finally, the young man reassures the old man in his belief that they understood each other, and this is

⁵ The cake with the obligation of hallah concerns dishes prepared from five types of grains: wheat, barley, rye, oat, spelt (RÉKAI 1997: 410).

how their conversation reaches a consensus about their attitude. They mutually reinforce each other's opinions with the last sentence and smiling: "this is the way we do it as well".

Even the shammes laughing with them – who, in his post as a ritual leader, could be critical of them, since they even smile at the "seriousness" of the ritual purity ("one should not force things") – strengthens the meaning of their communication. The shammes has a fixed role in the conversation, he is a "given" understanding member of the communication, because if everyone paid attention to the kosherness of the ritual, he would not need to sell the kosher barches, since everyone would have acquired it for the kiddush celebrated at home, as was the practice years before.

In the light of what has been said so far, we can conclude that the conversation ended in a shared view and practice of the tradition and in a harmony of cultural cognitive community consensus (with shared laughter).

In the next step of comprehension, the anthropologist can try to further separate the phenomena in relation to the conversation, and to bring light to the above-mentioned "shared attitude and practice", in other words, to the cultural context of the communication.

What draws our attention immediately is the fact that the barches is sold in the synagogue, since this practice differs from earlier practices (a few years before everyone got his kosher raw material for himself). This seemingly unimportant phenomenon points in two directions. The first one is characteristic of the Hungarian Jewish community, namely, that kosher cake (and other food) is reserved for religious ceremonial feasts and does not have such an importance on weekdays. (According to the tradition each and every meal should be kosher.)

On the other hand, we can see – and this has further implications – that the synagogue accepts the aspects of ritual community life outside the synagogue from its members. It creates the conditions for the rites traditionally held at home. This phenomenon becomes a part of a more general process (which is shown in the analysis of other "conversations"), the cultural change of the present Hungarian Jewish community. As a part of this process, the traditionally home rituals are taken to the synagogue. It is not mentioned in our conversation, however, the synagogue becomes the institution organising the ritual life.

Some time ago, on Friday mornings, I escorted Papa Sanyi myself to the kosher bakery in Kazinczy Street, where he took care of the kosherness of kiddush. At the time of the conversation, however, he abandoned the tiring trips of obtaining all the necessary things, consequently, if the synagogue runs out of barches, he takes care of the home ritual in a different way.

The strengthening position of the synagogue in Jewish ritual life (which extends to the public as well as private ritual experience) has numerous effects on the cultural changes mentioned. To connect this to our conversation, the availability of barches in the synagogue helps even those unfamiliar with the labyrinths of the Jewish part of the city to get it (the kosher shops are usually hidden, small places that "untrained" people have difficulty finding) and for those who otherwise do not live

according to the commandments of ritual life. In connection with this, in the synagogue mentioned, there are Friday night community kiddushes where those more familiar with the ritual life demonstrate the ritual practice to those less familiar with it who are trying to learn their culture.

This has a double effect as well, since more and more people celebrate in the synagogue, even those who until now held the ceremonies at home. The essential element is that with this “migration” of Friday night rites a distinctive community KIDDUSH – different in some respects from the traditional one – is developing in some of the Budapest synagogues, including this synagogue (PAPP 2000). These phenomena have cognitive and value contents, and it is also the task of the examination to give an interpretive description.

One of the most important elements of the conversation was Papa Sanyi’s response to the young man’s teasing, according to which the kiddush performed by him will not be ritually appropriate.

“It does not matter, I’ll do it with rolls of bread, you should not force things like that.” The sentences uttered have another implication of cultural change: the experiencing of the rituals is more important than the system of ritual-hallahical prescriptions.

In other words, the performance of the ritual, the experience of its “psychological moment” (MARÓT 1940) becomes more important than the normative “purity” of its conditions.

The tradition is being reappraised. According to my studies, this is one of the most important features of the present Hungarian Jewish culture.

All this reveals two more paths before us. One of them is my working hypothesis from the beginning of this article, which seems to be verified by the things discussed above. I have to emphasise, however, that if I had not been studying and living actively with the given culture for almost two years and if it had not been for numerous phenomena and interpreted interviews that supported my hypothesis I would not have been so confident in my suggestions (PAPP 2000).

The other path shows us that it is impossible to draw clear lines between the levels of methodology, namely the above-mentioned things are as much a part of a socio-cultural interpretation as they are a part of an interpretation of a phenomenon taken out of its cultural context. Just as the life of the examined culture lives on, the anthropologist’s work that “follows” the analysis cannot be static either. The briefly presented “levels” are intended to serve us only as a guide.

3. The socio-cultural context is important from our study’s viewpoint because we can find dozens of anthropological works that define the phenomena experienced as a kind of “present constancy”, they consider it valid only in the given moment, and they forget to examine the given cultures as communities that change historically and are defined sociologically (cf. SÁRKÁNY 2000: 89–101).

Therefore, it is worth examining the Jewish culture as a historically changing culture, which does not mean a “constant” form all the time. Consequently, when analysing the given culture’s socio-cultural context, it is important to search for the inherited contents from the past as well as the sociological reality in which the given

culture exists. The Judaistic, ethnographic background researches are just as important as the relevant works of social history and sociology, since these co-ordinates are able to give explanations for the reasons and meanings of phenomena only when they work together.

The goal of this study is not the presentation of these co-ordinates. However, we can mention that the socio-historical and socio-cultural connections of the above interpretation give a picture of the Hungarian Jewish population's attitude toward their tradition, which arose from the embourgeoisement that began in the 19th century, when a "Reform" trend emerged among the Hungarian Jews. This was a turning point after which numerous changes took place, in some sense a "relaxation", if we take the Orthodox complete preservation of the tradition as the opposite pole.

This turning point triggered new changes in the liturgy of ritual life, in lifestyle, in the perception of the world, in the attachment to Jewishness, in a word, it changed the "Jewish identity". This is what we generally call the "double identity", "Hungarian Jewish identity"⁶.

This cultural-cognitive content changed a great deal under the influence of the tragic happenings of World War II, the communist rule and its atheistic ideology culminating in mass emigration in 1956. Consequently, the connection to tradition was greatly loosened. However, after the change of regime certain revival phenomena could be experienced again (PAPP 2000), which carried values characteristic of both the earlier Reform trend, of the Orthodoxy which is now appearing and those of the Hungarian society of the past few decades.

The revivals that can be heard and experienced – which are by no means what is mentioned as a Renaissance of the Hungarian Jews (PAPP 1999) – already carry the changed ritual-cultural phenomena. To understand them one needs to be aware of the co-ordinates mentioned above. Equally important is the knowledge of the characteristics of the change, which can only be presented through empirical, including anthropological studies (and interpretive descriptions).

This brings us to the last aspect of our scheme of interpretation: What can anthropological analysis say about Judaism (and in this case about Hungarian society) and its research possibilities?

"In the findings of an anthropologist it is their complex specificity and detailed nature that is important. With the help of a lengthy, mainly (but not exclusively) qualitative material gained through an almost obsessively minute fieldwork of a strongly participant nature done in a well defined area, one can give a certain actuality to such gigantic concepts as legitimation, modernisation, integration, with which the social sciences are grappling. In this way, it becomes possible not only to think

⁶ As a consequence of the accelerated Hungarianisation from the middle of the 19th century, and especially after Act 17 of 1867, which redefined the Hungarian Jewish nationality as a religious group (Israelite) and through this supported its integration into the emerging Hungarian bourgeois society (GONDA 1992: 113–119; 319–320). Consequently, for more than a hundred and twenty years a great percentage of Hungarian Jews defined themselves as Israelite Hungarians.

about them realistically and concretely, but also – which is even more important – to deal with them in a creative and imaginative way” (GEERTZ 1994: 191).

The uniqueness and indispensability of anthropology therefore arises from the fact that it connects the historical, philological and macro-scientific findings with the individual micro-worlds examined and in this way they supplement or demonstrate how the observations work in real-life situations.

And just as these disciplines need the anthropologist, the anthropologist needs the perception of these sciences, since it is their results that it can connect to “complex individual characteristics” to be able to derive significant conclusions from “seemingly insignificant, but very densely interrelated facts” (GEERTZ 1994: 96).

The anthropologist’s work that presents unique worlds makes the circle of interdisciplinary sciences complete through the interpretation of their “inner categories” and through thinking together with these worlds.

It is also important how we perceive the object of our study. An important present researcher of Jewish ethnography, Miklós Rékai, for example, thinks it is “difficult to define it...”

The ethnographic scientific terms are difficult to interpret during the study of Jewish culture: “In our case – he writes – to contrast oral and written tradition would be equally unproductive as treating land or any other production means as a ‘differentia specifica’ of this group. I therefore chose the simpler but less exact solution: to consider my study as a study of recent ‘archaica’, the same way as the Hungarian researchers of this topic often do” (RÉKAI 1997: 11).

The study mentioned deals with – among other things – the lifestyle of Jews living in Munkács, with their individual communication concerning the tradition, with the characteristics of the community through interpreting their system of kosher habits. This is why his naming this work an analysis of “living relics” is not easy to understand.

The results presented by this scholar are not “archaica” precisely because they are observable phenomena of people living in the present. They are phenomena that, as parts of the living culture, throw light on the essence and culture of Judaism. (Not to mention the fact that when empirically analysing a Jewish community we find the same living, recognisable sign-meaning systems and therefore a comprehensive culture as when analysing any other culture or community.)

The complex system of Judaism, Jewish culture, is maintained and divided into different historical regions and subcultures through communication with tradition (RÉKAI 1997: 53). The cultural and identity features and interactions are formed by their relation to tradition and by the changes in this relation.

When an anthropologist analyses a Jewish community, he has to know the features of this relational system. However, the connection to codified tradition thousands of years old is alive in every Jewish community, therefore it can be observed as a living phenomenon, a living content.

In my opinion, this “content” is a form of “religious experience”, a contact with the Revelation (SCHOLEM 1995: 54) and its consequence is the Torah commandment

of “khddoshim”⁷, which equally defines and separates the preservation of Jewish holiness (the coherence of “religious” and “ethnic” contents – an inaccurate definition according to our present sociological notions and from the point of view of our topic, but a more comprehensible explanation).

I do not feel that the relatively high percentage of people defining themselves as “of Jewish origin, but atheists” is contradictory, since these individuals and communities refer to “religion” when they define themselves as “atheists” or “not religious”. These self-definitions refer to the tradition as well. (The different communities that call themselves “religious” and along that line “Orthodox”, “Hasidic”, “conservative”, “Reform”, etc. do so in relation to tradition.)

We are “confronted” with different interpretations of the Jewish tradition and with one of the possible lifestyles and value systems when analysing the life of a particular community in the given culture. The task of the anthropologist dealing with Jewish culture is to fit the interpretations of the characteristics, meanings and manifestations of the above into the socio-cultural system of relations and into the complex world of universal Judaism.

It is perhaps obvious from the above why I chose a conversation taking place in a synagogue as a basis for my analysis. The world of my study is the religious-ritual sphere of Hungarian Jewish culture.

I must emphasise – again by referring to the above facts – that this is only one of the possibilities for interpreting Jewish life. Other communities, other dimensions of culture are equally important for understanding our subject. (The Jewish studies workshop of the Cultural Anthropology Institute at the ELTE University, under my supervision, carries out research on such micro-worlds as well.)

In my studies I try to analyse through observing the public ritual life. The reasons for this – besides personal motivation, which plays a part in every anthropologist’s choice of topic – is that through the examination of rites we are able to experience phenomena characteristic of the whole culture, and developing them further we are able to understand numerous other meanings of a culture.

In public rites the rich cultural meanings are concentrated, and – sometimes – are “enlarged”, whereas during “everyday activities” they remain hidden from the “outsider”.

⁷ One of the most important aspects of the Jewish notion of God is that God is holy (kadosh), therefore Jews – because of the commandments given by God – have to be a holy nation (GOLINKIN 1998: 58). The “khddoshim” expression is also a term for a part of a week (Leviticus 19–20); this passage contains the laws of the holy nature of Jewish religion (UJVÁRI 1929: 459).

We find the “khddoshim” commandment in other parts of the Torah as well: “...ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation” (Exodus 19, 6) “...for I am the Lord your God; ye shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and ye shall be holy, for I am holy...” (Leviticus 11, 44). (Cf. Leviticus 19, 2; Exodus 19, 6.)

The meaning of the Semitic word qodesh (Hebrew: kadosh) is “a sacred thing”, “sanctity” and it comes from the root of the verbs “to cut”, “to separate”, therefore it implies a meaning of “separation from the profane” (LÉON-DUFOUR 1972: 1184–1187).

For religious Jews, the notion of separation is also incorporated in the cultural meaning of sanctification: the realisation of the “pure” and sacred as opposed to the “impure”, the profane, the “unholy” through the practice of cultural “separation”.

To use a term borrowed from religious anthropology, we could say it is about “the rite in cultural action” (cf. BOGLÁR 1995: 45).

This is the reason why the processes observed in the complexity of rituals give rise to numerous deductions. These “conclusions” are valid only if the researcher supports each of his working hypotheses with an observation, with conversations and interviews with the members of the community, and with background research. “Results” obtained in this way during rituals can be “re-examined”. This can be shown more clearly through an example.

The scene of my fieldwork was the synagogue in Bethlen Square, in Budapest, where regular meetings with the members of the micro-world formed the above observations. Why is Bethlen Square a “good field”? One of the communities of Jewish culture can be found here, where a relatively large number of people (in comparison to other synagogues in Budapest) experience the ritual Jewish life on a day-to-day basis, without interruptions, continuously. Representatives of every generation can be found, therefore their different characteristics can be analysed as well.

The community defines itself as a non-aligned, “status quo” community⁸ and accordingly, representatives of every class of present Hungarian Jewish society can be found in it, individuals of different identity and attitude to tradition. Conflicts or agreements between people defined by themselves and by the community as “Reform”, “Orthodox”, “Zionist”, “conservative”, “agnostic” reveal much about the features of the living Jewish culture.

The importance of rites lies in the fact that the continuity of ritual life is what brings all these people together and forms them into a community. The “Bethlen Square entity” exists as a consequence of this, and it distinguishes this community from other synagogues in Budapest (which also have their own group identity and a common attitude toward Jewish tradition).

Examining this community we can discover unique readings of the Jewish culture, as for example the role of the religious leader in the life of the community, the attitude of generations with different experiences in the 20th century toward the world and Judaism, the relations between these generations, the processes of “passing on the tradition”, the change in the ritual roles of women, the “circles” of participants in ritual life – which can be defined on the path of their relation to tradition as well – and their connections, conflicts, the Jewish time structure.

Consequently, we can look for possible answers to numerous questions of Hungarian Jewish culture. And the last but not least aspect is that our knowledge of Jewish culture can broaden through presenting the phenomena that cannot be left out from the ethnological level of research.

⁸The word stands for the Bethlen Square entity, in this context a non-aligned community, neither Reform, nor Orthodox. The expression refers to those Israelite religious communities which did not join the Hungarian Jewish Orthodox Organisation, formed in 1871, either at the Universal Jewish State Summit – a turning point in the history of Hungarian Jewry – or later. They stayed in the legal status acquired before the Summit, that is where the expression status quo ante comes from as well (UJVÁRI 1929: 804).

It is important to make this point, because many people argue against the sociological importance of cultural anthropology claiming that it exposes the community analysed to the world. The anthropologist “plays a trick” with the community, what is more, he makes the people studied vulnerable.

In my opinion, ethnic conflicts, stereotypes, hatred (especially here, in Central Eastern Europe) originate above all from the fact that we know nothing about the people who live together with us. The consequence of our ignorance is that we are not equipped with the necessary notions and knowledge to be able to refute the classifications of any extreme political ideology.

The task of the anthropologist – and any other scholar of the humanities – is to bring light into the darkness. The goal and quality of our work can be measured precisely in the struggle against defencelessness. To achieve this we need to accept one more important advice. The advice of an old master of anthropology, which is as follows: “We need to make a connection between the reader and the culture” (MALINOWSKI 1972: 67).

Without this connection we only make the libraries richer; that is why it is necessary to make our works readily understandable.

Living together for a long time, collection of detailed data, ethnographic knowledge and its application during fieldwork, recording the interpretive description on paper or film, general observations and their discussion form the anthropological cake over and over again. The cake that should be made consumable for the awaited feast of mutual knowledge and understanding.

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