



# The challenges and dilemmas of local translators of human rights: The case of disability rights among Jewish ultra-Orthodox communities

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## ABSTRACT

Translators of global liberal human rights ideas into religious conservative communities are intermediaries who occupy a liminal position. They are located at a complex crossroad of incompatible values and norms. This article examines the translators' challenges and dilemmas that stem from this position. The article focuses on translators of human rights of people with disabilities in Jewish ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel as a case study. The article analyzes the translators' questions of identity and belonging, as well as their dilemmas and difficulties when there is a contradiction between the human rights discourse and the ultra-Orthodox discourse. It also illuminates the dilemmas that result from the tension between the state authorities' perspective and the ultra-Orthodox perspective. These dilemmas differ from those discussed in the literature, which are usually related to choosing activist strategies. Furthermore, the findings suggest that, unlike previous studies that have portrayed human rights translators as actors with "double subjectivity" who can flexibly move between the global and the local moral worlds, the translators in this case are deeply entrenched in the local religious world. For them, localization is not merely an instrumental means to legitimize the global human rights principles but, rather, an essential way to settle their conflicting identities and beliefs.

## Introduction

Cultures of human rights are coproduced in the global–local interactions that Anna Tsing conceptualized as "friction": "the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference" (Tsing 2005: 4). Tsing shed light on the dynamic and unexpected aspects of this global–local nexus, where local forces have an enormous impact on the result of the interaction, rather than being passive receivers. They add new genealogies and meanings to the imported liberal ideas and logics. Scholars diverge in their interpretation of the effect of these frictional interactions on the internalization of human rights norms in local settings: "whether local justice initiatives comply with or represent an unsettling departure from international human rights standards" (Hopgood, Snyder, and Vinjamuri 2017: 21).

Often, the result of this frictional process is localization, defined by Acharya (2004: 245) as "the active construction ... of foreign ideas by local actors, which results in the former developing significant congruence with local beliefs and practices." The localizers, translators, or intermediaries play a central role of adaptation, reinterpretation, contextualization, and appropriation of the global human rights norms to local social, cultural and political discourses, practices and

institutions (Speed 2007; Goodale 2009; Orr 2012, 2014; Atalay 2016). However, these actors—who are often located at a complex crossroad of conflicting values, beliefs, and norms—often experience challenges and dilemmas that stem from their liminality.

This article will illuminate these challenges and dilemmas, based on the case of translators of human rights of people with disabilities in Jewish ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) communities in Israel. The article will focus on the translators' questions of identity as people who live in-between different cultures and moral worlds. We will elaborate on their dilemmas and difficulties when there is a contradiction between the human rights principles and the Haredi dominant discourse and practices. We will also discuss the dilemmas that result from the tension and conflict between the state authorities' perspective and the Haredi perspective. We contend that, unlike previous studies that have portrayed human rights localizers as people who can freely and easily move between the global and the local discourses and practices, most of the translators in this case are deeply ingrained in the local religious world and this fact shapes, increases, and deepens their moral, personal, and professional dilemmas and challenges.

## Human rights localization

Social scientists have identified a dynamic process of localization or vernacularization of global human rights norms in domestic communities (e.g., Speed 2007; Zimmermann 2017). Merry and Levitt (2017: 213) defined vernacularization as, “the extraction of ideas and practices from the universal sphere of international organizations, and their translation into ideas and practices that resonate with the values and ways of doing things in local contexts.”

According to Merry (2006a, 2006b), indigenization is the symbolic dimension of vernacularization, referring to changes in meanings, and especially how new ideas are framed and presented in terms of the existing cultural practices, values, and norms. Thus, for example, in the Palestinian context, Asthana (2017) used the concept of “universalism in context” (Ricoeur 1992) to show how universal children's rights norms were refashioned in young people's digital media stories, for example, rejecting the private/public binary dichotomy, in order to conform to cultural identity demands.

There are several classifications for the forms and strategies of translation. Drawing on Tsing's (2005) concept of friction, Björkdahl and Höglund (2013: 297) described six responses to frictional contested global–local encounters: (1) *compliance*, a forced adherence to global (external) norms and practices; (2) *adoption* of global norms and practices at the local level; (3) *adaptation* of global norms and practices to local characteristics; (4) *co-option*, the strategic adoption of the global into the local; (5) *resistance*, the dominance of local characteristics with limited adoption of global norms and practices; and (6) *rejection*, an exclusion of global norms and practices from the local setting.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) often play a decisive role in vernacularization and are commonly perceived as translators of global human rights norms in local settings (Golan and Orr 2012; Orr 2012; Kenyon 2019). Their staff members often serve as intermediaries (Merry 2006a) or cultural brokers (Jijon 2019) who translate international norms and agendas to specific situations of suffering, and reframe the local appeals against injustices in terms of human rights violations (Merry 2006a, 2006b). However, the translation (and mistranslation) can equally entail profound philosophical questions such as ways of being in the world, perceptions of human dignity (Morreira 2016), and variations in gender equality at a conceptual level (Østebø 2015). Translators usually operate in a field of struggle over rights and power, and the “middle” is typically “an asymmetric and tense space” (Flemmer 2018: 530; see also Orr and Golan 2014).

Most of the literature on human rights localization describe the localization's purpose as legitimizing the global human rights discourse when it is introduced to domestic communities, so that it would be easier to incorporate this new imported discourse in local society and politics. A

recent example is Kenyon's (2019) analysis of translation and vernacularization in two human rights-based NGOs in Botswana and South Africa. She depicted "the important role legitimacy plays in the process of localising advocacy terminology" (Kenyon 2019: 1396). And she asserted that, in the process of localization, the localizers use persuasive contextualized arguments to resonate legitimacy. Another case in point is India's courts that promote gender equity. Holmes (2019) contended that these courts pursue resonance by grounding their ruling in terms of socially accepted institutions, such as marriage, and traditional values and goals, such as retaining "the sanctity of the family." Legitimacy and resonance are described as localization's main goal.

Accordingly, as Golan and Orr (2012) pointed out, the localizers are usually seen as people with "dual consciousness" (Gregg 2008: 469) or "double subjectivity" (Merry 2006a: 181), who are capable of easily and flexibly moving between global and local worldviews, logics, values, beliefs, and norms (e.g., Merry and Stern 2005; Stern 2005; Merry 2006a; Gregg 2008). "This work is done by actors who move between the discourses of the localities they work with, taking ideas from one place and redefining them or adapting them to another," wrote Merry (2006b: 39).

Despite the established body of literature on vernacularization, only a few studies have focused on vernacularization of human rights of people with disabilities in local communities. Most studies have analyzed disability rights norms diffusion and policymaking processes on the state level. In the European context, for instance, Vanhala (2015) cast light on how the way that disability activists interpret the "social model of disability" impacts the chances of a disability rights norm to be adopted in a particular state. Vanhala found that the local actors' impact can, in some cases, be more significant than international prompts in accounting for the acceptance of disability rights.

Ingstad (2007: 250) was one of the first scholars to suggest moving beyond seeing disability in one particular isolated cultural setting, and instead exploring the interconnections between global ideas of human rights of people with disabilities and the "possibilities, constraints, and beliefs imposed by the local physical, social, economic, and cultural setting." Mizrachi (2014) examined how Muslim *imams* in Israel translated notions of human rights of people with disabilities for the religious Muslim communities, as part of a project funded by an American organization. The *imams* used a strategy of modular translation, defined as "the selective translation and adjustment of meaning components from one network of meaning into another" (Mizrachi 2012: 198). Mizrachi showed how the *imams* used a decoupling strategy that makes a clear distinction between disability rights' norms of conduct and their underlying liberal justifications. This strategy promoted changes in public attitudes and behavior based on elements from the social model of disability (Oliver 1990) by framing them within the Muslim community's existing cosmology, without jeopardizing this community's local moral world and without arousing its objection. At the same time, however, this decoupling strategy did not allow full inculcation of a thick liberal notion of disability rights within the target community (Mizrachi 2014).

The existing literature on localization has several *lacunae*. First, this literature has usually not focused on the human rights of persons with disabilities, whose inclusion in the framework of international law is relatively new. The localization of disability rights is of particular interest because these rights involve central socio-cultural conceptualizations. As Ginsburg and Rapp (2013: 55) noted, disability challenges "lifelong presumptions of stable identities and normativity" because it is "a category anyone might enter through aging or in a heartbeat." Ginsburg and Rapp argued that the lens of disability can expand and contribute a great deal to the anthropological research on activism and human rights. Ingstad's call for "more research that sees disability and human rights in context" (2007: 255) is still pertinent today. We propose that using the vernacularization theoretical framework in the context of disability rights can shed new light on this framework.

Second, vernacularization studies have tended to neglect key hermeneutic aspects. As Jijon (2019: 143) showed, most studies on the global diffusion of culture have overlooked the cultural

brokers' interpretive work and "how the agents, settings, objects, and strategies are also drenched in culture." Jijon emphasized that studies in this field should pay more attention to interpretation, especially interpretations of globally circulating culture.

Third, research on disability and religion is underdeveloped. Imhoff (2017: 2) provided several manifestations to this *lacuna*, such as the fact that, "[i]n three of the most widely read disability studies readers, together comprising more than 1000 pages, there is no sustained discussion of religion." Considering the immense effect of religion on the lives of numerous people with disabilities, Imhoff called "for scholars of disability to pay attention to the intricacies of religious beliefs, practices, texts, and communities" (2017: 1).

Finally, prior research has not addressed human rights localization in Jewish ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) communities.

### Activists' dilemmas and challenges

According to Kennedy (2004), activists/advocates occupy a liminal position when they represent people outside the political process to those within it. This liminality produces complex dilemmas and challenges for human rights translators. Revealing their moral, professional, and identity dilemmas and challenges allows us to understand the political pressures of vernacularization practices (Flemmer 2018).

Researchers who have explored translators' dilemmas have usually focused on their strategic and professional dilemmas. Through the case of Lebanon, Nagle (2020) examined the strategic dilemmas of LGBTQI activists in postwar divided societies, where they are required to deal with the local sectarian system. These activists can either "upscale" activism by operating in the international arena or "downscale" activism by circumventing formal institutions and working within informal institutions. In Lebanon, the disagreement concerning the appropriate strategy resulted in splits within the LGBTQI movement (Nagle 2020). Another activist dilemma Nagle (2018) identified in Lebanon is the "identity dilemma" (McGarry and Jasper 2015): whether to construct or elide a fixed, unified, public collective identity as a precondition for claiming rights.

Other strategic dilemmas lie at the interface between the human rights movement and state or corporate institutions. In the context of India, for example, Wahl (2017) examined the dilemmas that result from directing framing efforts at state agents who are perceived as potential violators of rights. Pandya and Ron (2017) cast light on the fundraiser's dilemma faced by local human rights organizations in Mumbai. These organizations need the financial support of the city's corporate sector, but this support might undermine their public reputation because the general public views corporates and rights groups as inherently opposed.

Cornwall and Molyneux (2006) described four dilemmas for feminist practice posed by the politics of rights. The first two stem from gaps that may exist between global and local worlds. The first dilemma concerns the potential gap between the politics of rights that is embedded in a liberal discourse, on one hand, and alternative understandings of justice and mechanisms to achieve it, on the other. The second gap is between "the formal existence of rights regimes and the lived realities of most women for whom rights are far from having acquired much substantive meaning in their lives" (2006: 1180). The two other dilemmas concern relationships with other institutions and actors. First, the feminist movement's relationship with the state: What are the conditions under which negotiation with the state is possible, and at what risk? And second, the relationship with people who seek to define women's issues but are indifferent or antagonistic to feminism: Where and how can alliances be made in these circumstances?

The latter issue was elaborated by Klirodotakou (2015), who explained that, for many mainstream actors, women's and girls' rights have become an instrumentalist means to tackle poverty (or alleviate the symptoms thereof) under a neoliberal regime, in a depoliticized way, rather than fundamentally addressing the power imbalance and the root causes of gender inequality. As a

result, “Increasingly women’s rights organisations are facing the dilemma of either adapting to this paradigmatic shift or potentially facing extinction” (Klirodotakou 2015: 55).

Merry and Levitt (2017: 216) pointed to the “resonance dilemma”: “The more extensively a human rights issue is transformed to be concordant with existing cultural frameworks, the more readily it will be adopted but the less likely it is to challenge existing modes of thinking.” Similarly, Gregg (2008: 466) wrote: “The more indigenized a new frame is, the less resistance it will meet; but it meets with less resistance also because indigenization may diminish its capacity to challenge the status quo.”

The case study that is the focus of our research differs from those typically examined in the literature, in four aspects. (1) For the most part, past literature has dealt with human rights activists in general, without giving substantial theoretical consideration to the role of translation and localization and their effects in terms of activists’ dilemmas and challenges. (2) In the current case study, the translators are not necessarily human rights activists but, rather, hold various roles in several types of contexts, for example, in a municipal framework, which makes their work more complex. They must demonstrate loyalty to several different value systems, which frequently are incompatible, if not outright contradictory. (3) In the current case study, many of the translators are no more liberal, “global,” or “Westernized” than either the state authorities or the communities with which they work. Most of the translators are affiliated with the Haredi (Jewish ultra-Orthodox) society, which is considered more conservative and less liberal than the remaining segments of Israeli society. Indeed, the Haredi people for the most part are at the very least suspicious of the human rights discourse, if not entirely opposed to some of its major ideas. (4) In the current study, most of the translation was done in a very local context, which lacks strong bonds with international human rights institutions. Many actors chose to focus on mediating between the state authorities and Haredi communities.

## The Haredi society in Israel

At the end of 2019, some 1,125,000 Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Jews lived in Israel, constituting 12.5 percent of the population (Cahaner and Malach 2019: 11). Haredi Jews are devout and strict adherents to Jewish religious law, which shapes all aspects of their life (Bilu and Witztum 1993). They have unique culture and life values and separate education systems. They have created a “scholarly society” in which the men are immersed in Jewish religious studies. Haredi society is characterized by insular communal life, extensive social control of members’ behavior, family-centered lifestyle, conservatism, sex segregation, special dietary laws, strict dress code, and leadership of prominent rabbis who direct the community in all areas of life.

In the last few years, however, there has been an increasing involvement of the Haredi population in the general Israeli economy, society, and civic affairs. More Haredi people have joined the workforce, and the number of Haredi students enrolled in higher education institutions is rising. Although many tend to view the Haredi society as homogeneous, it is in fact composed of several different communities belonging to different factions that diverge in worldview, lifestyle, religious leadership, economic and political institutions, and custom (Caplan and Stadler 2012; Gal 2015; Cahaner and Malach 2019; Vardi, Orr, and Finkelstein 2019).

The Haredi population is growing rapidly, at 4.2 percent annually, with a fertility rate that stands at more than seven children per woman (Cahaner and Malach 2019: 11, 13). The fact that Haredi families tend to be large, combined with the expectation that Haredi men study at a *yeshiva* (a religious seminary), often leaves it to women to provide for the family as the lone breadwinners with help from child subsidies and subsidies for *yeshiva* students. Furthermore, the salaries of Haredi employees are usually low. This means that many families live in conditions of economic scarcity and poverty (Vardi et al. 2019). Around half of Haredi Jews in Israel live in

poverty (National Insurance Institute of Israel 2019). These conditions increase the urgency of realizing economic and social rights in Haredi society.

Not much has been written about people with disabilities in the Haredi community in general or about their rights in particular. A large portion of the professional literature has been devoted to the study of the issue in the Halakha or Jewish religious law (e.g., Marx 2002; Belser 2011; Lau 2016), rather than to empirical social research. Thus, for example, according to Shulshtain (2016), the existing Halakhic regulations view disability as a phenomenon that includes vulnerability, dependency, and the need for protection, treatment, reciprocal relationships, and mutual assistance.

Zur (2014), who examined the experiences of Haredi families raising a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), noted that the families felt torn between their obligation to provide the child with appropriate Western medical care and their obligation to provide the child with a suitable Haredi education. Haredi parents and rabbis engage in the effort to negotiate between these two obligations and between their reliance on professional medical care and their need to distance themselves from its framework. This tension was also identified in a different study of Haredi parents raising a child with ASD, which found that the parents were forced to mediate between the various authorities, between Halakhic tradition and medicine, and between Halakhic tradition and mysticism (Shaked 2009).

Gershuni (2018a, 2018b) contended that the notion of rights is foreign to the Haredi community in Israel, where the status of people with disabilities is not regulated by means of rights, which is a liberal and individualistic concept. Rather, their status is regulated by the perception that it is the community's duty and responsibility to attend to the needs of persons with disabilities. Gershuni also noted that the community associates disabilities with a negative image, given that the prevailing approaches to disability in Haredi society view the person with a disability as passive and dependent on the benevolence of the community. Lifshitz and Globman (2006), however, identified a positive shift in the Haredi community's attitude toward those who do not fall into the mainstream of the Haredi society. This shift was manifested in terms of stigma reduction and an increased effort to integrate these people into the mainstream. Furthermore, the authors showed that the rabbis supported this shift, despite the fact that it was not a rabbinical initiative but one that grew from the bottom up. Nevertheless, according to the study, Haredi society has not recognized the rights of people with disabilities to autonomy and to independent decision making in regard to their own lives.

## Methodology

This article is based primarily on 28 in-depth, semi-structured, individual interviews with stakeholders who promote rights or provide services to Haredi people with disabilities in areas such as employment, education, housing, and healthcare. These include employees of NGOs, of two municipalities, and of government offices, as well as other activists. Most of these interviewees are Haredi, whereas a few are religious Orthodox Jews or secular Jews who work within Haredi society. The interviewees work with people who have various kinds of disabilities. Several interviewees have disabilities themselves or are parents of children with disabilities.

We interviewed people living or working in two cities that represent a broad spectrum of Haredi groups: Jerusalem, a city where 227,000 Haredi people live (the largest Haredi urban population in Israel), and another, smaller city whose residents are all Haredi.

These interviewees represent all the social actors who serve as translators of human rights discourse regarding Haredi people with disabilities. It should be mentioned, however, that this article is part of a larger study we have conducted regarding people with disabilities in Haredi society in Israel. This study includes dozens of interviews with additional actors, including Haredi people with disabilities, their families, and student volunteers at the rights center for people with



disabilities in Haredi society, which we established five years ago at the Jerusalem College of Technology. Our experience in establishing and working at this center deepened our familiarity with the field and served as essential background for our interviews. Our study team includes Haredi and non-Haredi people, with and without disabilities.

The interviews were recorded, fully transcribed, and analyzed both deductively and inductively, using qualitative content analysis and grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 2014), including an iterative search procedure for expressions and ideas (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). The interviews were anonymized, and the interviewees' names that appear in the following section are pseudonyms.

## Findings

### *Translators' self-definition considering the delegitimized human rights discourse*

Our research participants believed that Judaism aligns with many aspects of human rights and is even the source of some major human rights ideas. At the same time, they felt that the global discourse of human rights, as reflected in UN conventions, for example, is not prevalent in Haredi society. The Haredi thinking often contradicts liberal notions of human rights. It praises conservatism, traditionalism, and social continuity rather than societal change. Key human rights issues such as gender equality and LGBTQ rights are seen as contradicting Haredi social norms. The emphasis on the individual's rights is not always in keeping with the Haredi emphasis on the larger community.

In addition, in recent years the Israeli government, right-wing NGOs, and mainstream media have delegitimized the human rights movement in Israel, particularly those organizations and activists that defend and promote the human rights of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, as well as those that promote the human rights of Palestinian citizens of Israel and other disadvantaged groups (Gordon 2014; Lamarche 2019). Due to this delegitimization, the term "human rights" has a quite negative connotation in Israel (Orr 2016–2017).

All of these factors affected the way in which our interlocutors defined their work and even themselves. On one hand, they recognized the potential contribution of the principles and language of human rights to accomplish their goals. On the other, they were fully aware of the resentment toward this concept in Israeli society in general and in Haredi society in particular. This led them to ask what role human rights should play not only in their work but also in their professional identity and personal identity.

Yotam is a social entrepreneur in the rehabilitation field. Yotam explained that he does not use human rights terms to describe his efforts to integrate Haredi people with mental disabilities into the community. Only when he visited England did he see his work being framed in terms of human rights. Six months after that formative visit, Yotam still refrained from describing himself as a human rights activist, but he did understand what he was losing by not using rights language in his work:

Half a year ago we flew to England to learn about community integration programs. ... The thing that most caught us by surprise is that the most wonderful, most groundbreaking and most revolutionary programs were led, by who? By human rights people.

Yotam explained that in Israel people connect the term "human rights activists" with radical leftists who work for Palestinians. In England, however, individuals like himself who work with disabled people,

are human rights activists. ... That's how they define themselves. I don't define myself as a human rights activist, I define myself as a social entrepreneur working in the field of psychiatric rehabilitation. If I were working in England, I would be a human rights activist, because in some sense the most basic human rights are that a person should live in the community, and I am fighting for people to live in the community, and

not just to live, for them to be integrated in the community; I am a human rights activist. We, because of the whole political situation, I think, don't connect these things to those places, and that is a mistake.

This example illustrates the process by which global human rights discourse is circulating and penetrating Haredi society through nongovernmental change agents. Yotam explained that the widespread application of human rights discourse to the Israeli occupation prevents the term from being more widely used in the field of people with disabilities. Another obstacle Yotam mentioned is the dominance of the discourse of obligations (as opposed to rights) and the discourse of loving-kindness, charity, and compassion in Judaism. After being exposed to the dominant discourse in England, Yotam understood why he could be seen as a human rights activist, but he did not go so far as to define himself in this way.

For the Haredi actors who seek to realize the rights of Haredi people with disabilities, the global human rights discourse is difficult and alienating. Often, they attempt to create a more restricted definition of human rights, so that it does not include those components that contradict their Haredi worldview. An example of this can be found in the conversation we had with the director of a Haredi municipal community center and with the head of the division in charge of realizing the residents' rights, both of whom are Haredi Jews. As the goal of the meeting was to forge professional collaborations, we mentioned our collaborative work with the organization titled "Keshet—Connecting Special Families." The term "special families" refers to families that have a child with special needs or disabilities; however, our interlocutor interpreted this to mean "new families"—that is, families with single-gender parents. It was clear that this interpretation gave her cause for worry and reserve. She did not hide her reticence and made it clear that this topic did not fit into the parameters of the organization's concerns. Later, we learned that this person was the wife of a well-known Haredi rabbi in the neighborhood, and could not afford to risk her reputation as a leader in the community.

This example demonstrates the boundary work that Haredi actors undertake to create a localized conceptualization of human rights, as a result of the contradictions they find between the Haredi discourse and the international human rights discourse. A prominent sign of this type of boundary work is the avoidance of the term "human rights" and the use of the term "realizing rights," which is the accepted turn of phrase in the local Haredi discourse. Nevertheless, boundary work is not a simple task; it creates a range of concerns and dilemmas for translators, who seek to employ the human rights discourse in a careful and informed manner, so as not to risk their status in the Haredi community, as discussed below.

### ***The translators and the Haredi values and norms***

Most of our interlocutors argued that the stigma toward people with disabilities, especially psychiatric or mental disabilities, is stronger in Haredi society than in other sectors in Israel. In this section, we will explain this stigma and the resulting concealment of invisible disabilities, and we will examine the dilemmas and challenges that are related to them.

### ***The view of people with disabilities in Haredi society***

According to our research participants, the higher stigma toward people with disabilities in Haredi society derives from three main factors. First, marriage in Haredi society is done through matchmaking. One person's disability in the family has a large impact on the possibility of finding a suitable match for all of the family members. Rabbi Gorlick, the Haredi director of an NGO that provides services for people with mental disabilities, explained, that in his opinion, the stigma toward the mentally ill is particularly high in the Haredi sector:

In Haredi society, we are first of all a herd society ... and a society that lives in ghettos where everyone knows about the other. That is to say that when a child is born and he suddenly disappears from our lives,



then we ask, “Where has this child disappeared?” If you say that he is in a mental health hospital, the matchmaking for the entire family is over. All of those brothers and sisters will have to get matches—I don’t want to say second-rate matches because that’s not the right word—but they will have to compromise. Because if someone has a mentally ill brother, then this is actually something genetic, and if it’s genetic, maybe it will also affect the children of the same match that we want to make. Which is one hundred percent wrong.

A second reason for the strong stigma is that Haredi society is a closed society that maintains its social boundaries and adheres to strict social norms. Avraham is a Haredi man with a mental disability, an activist who has worked with people with disabilities. In Avraham’s words:

Haredi society is a closed society that needs to guard its boundaries. Oftentimes people with various disabilities don’t fit into these boundaries. ... Oftentimes in the Haredi sector, people who suffer from some cognitive or mental illness do not toe the line and they don’t meet society’s expectations, and so they are defined as a type of deviant.

A third factor that impacts the stigma is the common Haredi idea that there is a reason for anything that happens to a person. Shai, a director in a Haredi organization that provides services for Haredi people with disabilities and their families, explained that this idea has positive aspects; however, “sometimes it can also lead to something a bit more judgmental, where if something happens to you that they see as a bad thing, then maybe you did something, maybe you’re a bad person and maybe they need to stay away from you.”

In Haredi society, many social problems, such as sexual abuse, are perceived as issues that should remain unspoken. Often disabilities, especially mental and cognitive, are also perceived as subjects that should not be discussed. Rivka, a Haredi woman who works in the field of mental health at the Health Ministry, described the difficulty arising from concealment and silence among the families with whom she works, who have a relative coping with a mental disability:

These families experience great loneliness because once the mental illness breaks out there is an automatic thought about matchmaking and what it will do to us, ... so maybe we will hide it, and it’s a bit of an open secret. In other words, it’s a secret that no one talks about but everyone knows. But the feeling, the experience of the family, just at the time when it needs the community, is a sense of closing in, of seclusion, of loneliness.

In recent years there has been a change in discourse and practice around some of the disabilities as a result of work by organizations to reduce stigmatization. A striking example is reducing stigma toward children and people with Down syndrome. However, many mental and cognitive disabilities are still stigmatized, and hideable disabilities are associated with special difficulties and dilemmas for different stakeholders. Consequently, our interlocutors focused first and foremost on mental and cognitive disabilities, and most of the cases and examples they provided and analyzed here refer to these disabilities.

### ***Professional dilemmas related to concealment***

Due to the strong stigmatization and concealment, many people with disabilities and their families face the dilemma of whether and when to expose the disability, in order to avoid stigma or damage matchmaking prospects, and receiving essential services and realizing their economic and social rights. Vered, a municipal social worker, discussed the consequences of concealment on people’s ability to realize their rights:

People with disabilities in the Haredi community are not rushing to be labeled or diagnosed, which is something that can harm future rights, because a lot of times the rights of people with disabilities are determined based on some kind of formalized diagnosis.

Professionals like Vered, as well as NGO activists and other stakeholders, face the dilemma of whether and how to encourage Haredi people with disabilities and their families to challenge the prevailing social norm of concealment in order to help them realize their economic and social

rights and receive the social services they need. These stakeholders usually do not identify with this social norm and are troubled by the ramifications of the practice of “open secret”; some of them are even committed to changing the norm and corresponding practice. At the same time, however, they know that adherence to this social norm has some benefits for their clients in their local community, and they are reluctant to harm their clients socially.

### ***A sense of being different than the norm in Haredi society***

Some of the activists promoting the human rights of people with disabilities live with a constant gap between their worldview and values in the rights field, and those of the Haredi society where they live and work. As a result of this gap, some described feeling different and alienated within the Haredi community. Sarah is a Haredi woman who works for an NGO that promotes the rights of people with disabilities. She shared her feeling of alienation that stems from the gap that she identifies between the stigma toward people with disabilities that prevails in Haredi society and her own values and behavior, which are based on her human rights work. Sarah said:

The truth is that there [in the Haredi community] I really sometimes feel like I’m different. In other words, when I started, I was probably a product of what I heard around me, I don’t know if I was different from society. But over the years ... when I absorbed the concept of rights, I think that today I see people in a much more egalitarian way and I also see their misery much less. Later this affected my behavior. ... It puts me sometimes in a place where I am seen as a little different, and people look at me. I know that I can walk with people with disabilities in the street as an actual friend, but I know that sometimes people look, and it is seen as different. Even when I talk, I talk to people who are certainly less familiar with this field, so I always sound somehow abnormal. Even in my much smaller community.

### ***Tension between translators’ personal position and the rabbinical position and social norms***

Another difficulty Sarah shared cautiously, with great honesty and courage, concerns the gap between her personal perspective and the position of some of the rabbis on the issue of genetic tests and abortions in certain medical conditions. Sarah referred to the rabbinic ruling that certain genetic tests should not be performed, even in cases of increased risk of genetic disease, or that pregnancies should continue in certain medical situations, and this even in cases in which Jewish law does not explicitly require such actions. Sarah emphasized several times that she follows the rabbis’ rulings. She also took no action and said nothing to the parents on this subject. However, she experienced an internal dilemma:

It’s not always just about observing Jewish law and it raises questions mainly regarding the aftermath with the families that are dealing with this. The families are dealing with very serious complex issues because of the ruling that they were given, so it sometimes makes me wonder. So there’s a dilemma there, because clearly I as a religious person know that everything is decreed and everything is God’s will, and he [the rabbi] was an emissary [of God’s will] and that is how it must be. But I do ask, do the rabbis get some kind of training or learn about this topic? Because in any case it’s not exactly the topic they’re most familiar with. ... That is the question that came up for me recently that was complex.

Sarah’s question expresses a certain moral dissonance faced by some of the Haredi and religious activists who adopted worldviews that do not always align with the dominant views in their religious and social community.

In another example, Anat, who works in the welfare department of a Haredi municipality, shared her feelings regarding Haredi women with disabilities who choose to have many children even though it is probable that they will be taken into foster homes:

A woman who is disabled and goes on giving birth again and again because that is what is accepted in this society. And you can’t tell her to “stop.” Even if her mother were to tell her that this is enough, this is the society that she lives in and that is what she believes in and she will continue. And it doesn’t matter how many kids we will give to foster care, she will continue to give birth because that is her purpose. ... But

even a woman who can take care of children, a borderline case, and she has the ability to raise the children, then ok, two children, they give her a live-in assistant, but still she will give birth to more, it does not end, and it becomes more complex.

### ***Mediating between the Haredi public and state institutions***

The organizations and social actors involved in localization and translation operate most of the time as intermediaries between the Haredi public and state institutions. Much of their daily work is dedicated to these mediating efforts, and many of their challenges and dilemmas are related to this mediating role.

### ***Explaining the bureaucratic logic to the clients***

Talia is a municipal social worker in the field of rights realization in a Haredi municipality. She said that even though she has shared interests and a common agenda with the people with whom she works, there are gaps between their worldviews. According to her, Haredi people often do not understand or accept the state's criteria for allocating rights. As part of providing assistance for her clients, Talia tries to "translate" to her clients the rationale for the criteria that the state authorities have determined:

We're talking here about something professional, something with a rationale. Sometimes you need to explain the rationale to people so that they don't just get upset about not getting the rights that they deserve. Sometimes people have a feeling of "of course I deserve it," and I sometimes need to say: There are certain criteria and there is a rationale for these criteria, and then there is a chance that you won't get it.

Talia gave an example of a client who is a "returning resident." A returning resident is an Israeli citizen who moved abroad for several years and has special rights and subsidies offered to him or her upon return to Israel. Talia said that her client "invested a lot of energy into why she hasn't gotten [her subsidy] to this day. And you had to really understand the bureaucracy, that there is a reason, because a 'returning resident' is a specific thing."

For people who act as translators of human rights concepts, the difficulty of clarifying bureaucratic logic (Handelman 2004) for clients is not unique to the Haredi community; it characterizes the work of "translators" of social and economic rights in Israel as a general rule (Orr 2012). Nevertheless, the gap between the Haredi worldview and the state-bureaucratic worldview is often particularly deep and embedded in a separatist ideological lens. Most Haredi people do not accept the Zionist ideology that underlies the existence of the state of Israel. They do not share central elements of Israel's "civil religion" (Liebman and Don-Yehiya 1983), and many of them have a more suspicious standpoint toward state institutions and their constituting logic and values than most non-Haredi Jewish citizens. Consequently, for the intermediaries, translating the state's point of view to Haredi clients is particularly meaningful and challenging.

### ***Changing state institutions' view***

Translation is also done in the other direction: translation of messages from the community to the authorities. Talia explained that there are situations in which a person is not eligible for a certain right according to the state's official criteria, but she nevertheless fights with that person against the bureaucratic logic, drawing on common moral and social logic. She explained:

People really do deserve it and they need to get what they deserve. And sometimes you need to do this struggle together with the people in order to get what they deserve despite the fact that at a glance it might appear that the law says they don't deserve it. But I am fighting the war with them and I say: "It cannot be that they don't deserve it."

Leah, a Haredi woman who works for an NGO that promotes the rights of people with disabilities, harshly criticized the state authorities for not taking Jewish religion and Haredi culture into consideration when treating people with disabilities in Haredi society. She wants to change the authorities' view in this area. As an example, she told of a Haredi couple with Asperger's syndrome who belong to an extremist faction in Jerusalem's Mea Shearim Haredi neighborhood. The welfare authorities tried to take custody of the couple's two girls and put them in foster care or put them up for adoption after the mother refused to send them to a daycare center that she did not consider religiously, culturally, or linguistically suitable (the family spoke Yiddish). When the case made its way to court, the social worker explained to the judge that the girls' education is lacking because the couple hung a Palestinian flag on their door. Leah summarized:

Asperger's is the excuse for taking the kids out of the house. But the real issue is the cultural gap that she is not able to overcome, and she's a social worker in Mea Shearim. Why should Mea Shearim society trust the welfare office enough to go and ask for services after that? ... So here you have all the aspects on one foot. ... Why Haredi society is being defensive, ... why it's hard for them to connect with a value like human rights given that it is value that is seen as external, and why they immediately close up to it. They have good reasons for doing so. They have excellent reasons for doing so.

### ***Adherence to Haredi social norms vs. state institutions***

Staff members in Haredi NGOs that provide services with state funding talked about a difficulty stemming from their special and sensitive location between the Haredi community and state institutions. Reuven works for a Haredi NGO that provides rehabilitation services to Haredi people with mental and emotional disabilities. These services are mostly funded by the Health Ministry's "Rehabilitation Basket." Reuven shared the challenges and dilemmas he has experienced as a result of the obligation to have a dual loyalty: to the norms of the Haredi community and to the norms of the Health Ministry. He gave two examples that illustrate his duty to report certain cases to the authorities that he would normally not have shared outside of the community, had it not been for his commitment to Health Ministry procedures. These are cases that, once reported, usually result in forced hospitalization or involvement of police instead of solving the issue within the Haredi community. Reuven explained his approach to the issue of forced hospitalization:

I am here in an organization that reports to the Rehabilitation Basket. The Rehabilitation Basket is a secular institution. I am committed to the duty to report. I work according to their procedures. ... We do not take a person to be hospitalized in a psychiatric hospital, but we do report if and when a person poses a risk to themselves or others so that they will be examined and hospitalized, even if this is against their will to the extent that they pose a risk.

According to Reuven, psychiatric hospitalization, and certainly forced hospitalization, is an especially difficult experience for Haredi people, much more so than for secular people:

When it comes to hospitalization there is much less trust. ... The Haredi person experiences hospitalization in a much more difficult way. ... They are a minority everywhere, they are controlled, really controlled by secular doctors, who may not respect their opinions or their values. And they may not even understand their story at all. They are in a place where the leisure time activities are secular activities like television, there is no observance of Shabbat, what they do during the day is mainly smoke, or on Shabbat they are trapped and have no prayers because they are in a closed ward of the hospital, no Shabbat meals, so they are often lonely.

Given this state of affairs, Reuven feels that he works to earn the trust of Haredi people with disabilities with whom he works, but at the same time, he cooperates with non-Haredi institutions in which these people have no faith.

Another example Reuven raised concerns reporting on violence, sexual assault, or exploitation, which would necessarily lead to external involvement by the police:

We are working under the duty to report. ... Within the community they do not report. ... If someone turns to a private organization that gives him a service, they would not report on the fact that his father hit him, if he hit him in a context of, for example, trying to bring him to life. ... I am very, very committed to work according to the criteria of that organization [The Rehabilitation Basket] and I cannot solve things within the community, which is what intra-communal organizations are able to do. ... The issue of sexual assault, it is required to report something like that. ... I think that there are cases of less serious sexual assault where things can be solved within the community.

Reuven explained that soon after a police car comes to stop a suspect, the entire community knows about what is happening and, “that’s it, his life is buried.” This dual loyalty, which Reuven described using the word “conflict,” also comprises a source of concern for many of Reuven’s Haredi clients.

## Discussion and conclusion

Our research findings reflect the ramifications of the interactions between the three vertices of the triangle: human rights, the local Haredi community, and the state. The findings included three sections. The first and second sections referred to the tension between the global human rights idea and the local Haredi values and norms. The first section examined the consequences of the human rights/religion tension for the intermediaries’ self-definition and identity and how they use the human rights discourse in their practice, including the boundary work in which they are engaged. The second section further elaborated on the effects of cases of incompatibility between the concept of rights and the Haredi culture—for example, the conflict between the aspiration to realize economic and social rights and the tendency to conceal certain disabilities. Another example is the conflict between egalitarian values and local socio-cultural hierarchies.

With regard to these findings, in contrast to the types of dilemmas discussed in the literature, which are related to choosing activist strategies, in the case of the Haredi society, the dilemmas translators face involve deep questions of identity and belonging and manifest as friction between the global human rights discourse and the particularistic Haredi discourse (Tsing 2005). These translators ask themselves if they should consider themselves “human rights activists.” To what extent do they belong entirely to the Haredi community, and to what extent do the external values they have adopted make them exceptions in their community? To what extent should they criticize the attitudes of their Haredi clients and the rabbis when these do not coincide with their own conceptualization of rights?

The third section analyzed another edge of the triangle: the one between the local Haredi community and the state. This edge relates to the tension and friction between the state institutions, which appear to have a more secular approach, and an enclosed religious community. The findings in the third section can therefore be understood as a case of “contested secularism” (Berg-Sørensen 2016) in which state policies that are influenced by secularism encounter religious culture. We propose, however, that these findings also shed new light on the translation and negotiation of human rights. The state authorities provide an official interpretation of global human rights, which is often reflected in state laws, regulations, and policies. The state’s interpretation does not always align with the local community members’ interpretation and expectations. The research participants constantly had to deal with this gap, translating and mediating between the competing interpretations and views.

This kind of translation and its consequences have been under-researched. Most of the literature that has examined the interrelations between the state and religious communities has focused primarily on the religiosity–secularism axis (e.g., Berg-Sørensen 2016; Mahmood 2016), whereas most of the literature that has studied the vernacularization of human rights has focused on the

translation between the international or transnational level and the local level (e.g., Atalay 2016; Merry and Levitt 2017). The present research illuminates the reciprocal translation of rights between the state and a religious community, explicating the resulting challenges and dilemmas of the intermediaries.

In some cases, the translators adopt the perspective of the clients petitioning to exercise their rights *vis-à-vis* the state authorities, whereas in other cases, they explain to the clients the bureaucratic logic (Handelman 2004) underlying the authorities' decisions regarding their rights. In the latter case, translators are motivated by their belief that making clients aware of this logic will make it easier for them to cope with the authorities. However, frequently the translators also identify with this bureaucratic logic just as much as they identify with the logic and needs motivating their clients. The more complex dilemmas arise in situations in which there is tension between the Haredi social norms and the formal rules of the state authorities—for example, when translators encounter cases of human rights abuse such as cases of violence, sexual assault, or exploitation they are obligated to report to the state authorities, but that are conventionally dealt with within the confines of the community. In such cases, their role as mediators between the state and the community becomes exceptionally fragile, and maintaining loyalty to both frameworks is nearly impossible. In many of these cases, the intermediaries show sympathy for the community but not efforts to translate state concerns into local religious terms. A failure to translate may have potentially problematic repercussions.

The local translators of human rights norms are usually described as people with “double subjectivity” (Merry 2006a: 181) or “dual consciousness” (Gregg 2008: 469) who easily and flexibly move between global and local moral worlds (e.g., Merry and Stern 2005; Merry 2006b). Their power as translators is viewed as stemming from this flexibility (Stern, 2005; Merry, 2006a). Likewise, most of the literature depicts these translators' primary goal as legitimizing the international human rights discourse in local communities by means of localization (e.g., Kenyon 2019; Holmes 2019).

The findings of the current study, for the most part, contradict these underlying assumptions. In the case of the Haredi society, the majority of the translators do not move freely between the two worlds, but are deeply entrenched in the local religious world from which they operate. The main goal of their translations is not to legitimize the outside global discourse; rather, in this case, there is a more complex process, as the translators usually identify with the local conservative values and seek to maintain them, while making use of the international human rights discourse, as well as the state's laws and hegemonic discourse. Their strong sense of commitment to the religious community with which they are affiliated, along with their belief in certain global liberal values that are the foundation of disability rights and their identification with certain state's policies, place these translators in a liminal position between these three worlds that are often incompatible. This position creates dilemmas and unique challenges, which would not have arisen if this were a case of merely instrumental localization. The translators often experience ambivalence and conflict when moving between the different moral worlds, and their translation process entails inconsistencies and gaps.

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