

---

## ***Legitimizing Spiritual Healing: The Right to Folk Medicine in Contemporary South Korea and Israel***

Liora Sarfati  
(Tel Aviv University, Israel)  
[lsarfati@tauex.tau.ac.il](mailto:lsarfati@tauex.tau.ac.il)

In Korea and Israel, many people in hypermodern urban areas believe that illness can occur due to supernatural interventions, be it grudging spirits in Korea, or godly punishment for lack of observance in the Jewish tradition. Improvement of health is believed to be possible through venerating supernatural entities who can enhance personal prosperity. In the perspective of *musok* (Korean shamanism), patients of *shinbyŏng* (spirit possession sickness) can be healed only when they are initiated as *manshin* (shamans) and learn to communicate with the supernatural in self-controlled possession rituals. There are 300,000 practitioners of *musok* listed in their professional organizations, which means millions of clients who view such healing treatments as beneficial. Nevertheless, no such healing is proposed by scientifically trained medical specialists. Similarly, in the case of Jewish spiritual healing practiced through venerating spirits of *tsaddikim* (righteous men), there is no institutional medical legitimization to these widespread healing treatments. Should the perception of sickness and health be extended to include spiritual folk healers within the individual's right for health? Such a suggestion would probably be viewed as a mere provocation by most doctors, but through the anthropological lens, where we value the emic views of our interlocutors and avoid judging phenomenological understandings that unfold within our research field, we should at least consider it without bias.

The three common kinds of healing: by industrially produced chemicals, by medical intervention performed in modern hospitals, by traditional religious healers do not rest on the same cultural base and are not perceived parallel in the hierarchy of accepted healing methods. It is not merely because all modern medical interventions succeed and all traditional healing practices fail; rather, it is related to politics of knowledge production and control of means to maintain what Agamben (1998) calls the 'bare life' of people. Politics of meaning are central in this discourse no less than the need to maintain the bio-survival of societies. As explained by Agamben, in most contemporary hypermodern societies, governing élites decide what to include or exclude from public systems that focus on what Foucault (1979) discusses as essential control of citizens' bodies. This structure became the core of global anxieties during the recent Covid19 pandemic, when governments were criticized extensively for the ways in which they managed citizens' right to health services. During that crisis, traditional spiritual medicine was excluded altogether from the official medical discourse.

Most spiritual healers did not expect to be included in the biomedical frenzy that the pandemic had created. They accepted that being religious, spiritual healing is a private matter, outside the 'legitimate' health system. Folk healing, while legal, is not accepted as legitimate practice in modern medicine; vice-versa, what is legitimate, for example expensive

medications, is not necessarily legal, when prescribed for the doctor's benefiting from the pharmaceutical industry (Pardo 2004). The delegitimization of spiritual healing is a political choice because there is little scientific research that demonstrates folk healing to be ineffective. Most healers are likewise disinterested in checking their methods through scientific measurements, and so their liminality prevails. They continue practicing in the community as *complementary* or *alternative* medicine, terms that inherently state marginality. Paradoxically, as in other cases of rituals and the sacred 'that which is excluded from the community is, in reality, that on which the entire life of the community is founded, and it is assumed by society as the immemorial, yet memorable, past' (McLoughlin 2010: 7). Thus, many kinds of premodern vernacular health care practices have persisted, including religious and spiritual practices.

Practicing religious healing is an attempt to regain control of the otherwise chaotic biologic situation, especially when modern medicine cannot help because the diagnosis is a chronic or terminal illness. The flexibility of vernacular religious healing makes it accessible and enticing even for urbanites who rarely engage in religious practice routinely. When medical doctors assert that they have no cure, even atheistic sceptic people might search for less scientific healing methods. This is when the help of manshin in Korea and tsaddik venerating Rabbis in Israel are most often requested.

I have followed groups of tsaddik venerators in Israel since the late 1990s, and Korean manshin since the mid-2000s. In spite of the Israeli case being a vernacular part of monotheism, while the Korean case reflects polytheism, there are similarities in the ways in which spiritual healing is perceived and practiced. Moreover, the response of institutionalized medicine in both countries is far from supportive, although in both cases folk healers do not demand patients to avoid biomedical treatments. Medical institutions in both countries eye the popularity of spiritual healing with suspicion. A famous Israeli doctor declared, 'folk healers are charlatans, who take advantage of people in their worst of times'. Marginalizing spiritual healers regardless their efforts to be incorporated as complementary to biomedicine has been documented in many other locations, for example, Tuva in Siberia (Van Deusen 2004). There, spiritual healers were condemned for 'superstition', while the main concern had been their unsupervised operation outside state apparatus. Governmental response was harsher in non-democratic societies, such as the USSR and South Korea's 1960-80s dictatorship, because then broad public legitimacy was not viewed as a factor to be considered.

### **Practicing Healing through Lived Religion**

First, let us clarify that not all Koreans or Israelis employ spiritual healers. Most Korean Christians refrain from consulting manshin (some do it in secret), and many ultra-orthodox Israelis refrain from venerating tsaddikim. The legitimacy of these lived religions is a social construct, which like other kinds of legitimized practices are contextually possible, even when criticized extensively (Pardo and Prato 2019).

### *Healing through Blessings from Tsaddikim in Israel*

In the Jewish tradition, health and illness are in God's control. While Judaism is monotheistic, there exists a category of supernatural entities who can mediate between people and God. They are spirits of righteous persons (*tsaddikim*), thought as being 'seated close to the seat of honour' of God, because of their outstanding merit while alive. Tsaddikim graves become pilgrimage sites, featured on amulets and sacred paraphernalia. Many pilgrims told me that by praying near the tsaddik's grave they inform his soul of the specific help needed; for example, easing a particular illness, or conceiving. There are specialized Rabbis who venerate tsaddikim in rituals that are usually performed on auspicious dates, such as the tsaddik's death anniversary (*hillula*). The most famous hillulas in Israel are those of Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yochai (2<sup>nd</sup> century AD), and the Baba Sali (1889-1984 AD). In April 2021, the hillula of Shimon Bar-Yochai, on a forested mountain, was visited by hundred thousand pilgrims. In one of the yards, a large ultra-orthodox group crowded on improvised tribunes to watch their Rabbi sing. Unfortunately, some of the structures collapsed and 45 pilgrims died. In the aftermath of the disaster, most interviewed pilgrims said that next year they will perform the rite again, as if to allow the souls of the victims to continue their pursuit of hillula participation.

On 17 June 2021, I participated in a smaller event, the hillula of Rabbi Shalom Ifargan, in the town Netivot. In sharp contrast with the mass hillula events that I had observed there twenty years earlier, this time there were around a hundred participants. Still, one could observe different levels of religiosity. As I have explained elsewhere (Sarfati 2018), Jews can define themselves on a continuum from ultra-orthodox, through observant, to atheist. In this hillula, there were at least three people seated on wheel chairs, who came in hopes for a healing miracle, and several others, who specifically asked blessings for hospitalized relatives. The online live-streaming of the event, which has become common practice since the Covid19 outbreak, hosted around 4,000 viewers, and the video was shared more than 1,000 times. Within the 4468 comments that were posted during the event, more than half included the words health (*bruit*), or healing (*ripui/refua*).

Before the event, the Rabbi had posted on his Facebook page a video invitation to send personal requests. Among these, many included the specifics of illness or injury. A touching request was sent by Michel Msika saying,

'Respected Rabbi, please bless my granddaughter Shira-Haya, daughter of Keren-Marcel. She was injured very badly on Mt. Hermon 15 months ago and is still not communicating. We hope that she will be up on her feet and communicating with us. Thank you respected Rabbi'.

A request by Nati and Gili Branes read,

'Please, I beg you, pray for my daughter Shira, who had, exactly a year ago today, a terrible car accident and is since then in comma. Please pray for salvation and heavens' pity. With the God's help, a miracle will happen and she will wake healthy in body and soul, Amen'.

Such requests suggest the strong belief of some venerators that the Rabbi can perform miracles.

### *Healing through Possession by Spirits and Gods in Korea*

In the shamanic perspective of Korean vernacular religions, when supernatural entities are venerated properly, they bless the venerators with good health. If they feel neglected or not respected, they might inflict illness. The cosmology of musok does not have a fixed hierarchy. There is no supreme god among the multiple entities venerated. Each person has a unique pantheon, in which ancestors are personal guardians. Natural elements such as a mountain, or star constellation are venerated by all manshin, but not always with the same intensity. Most manshin are female, while most spirits are male. Mythic creatures, such as the dragon king, are expected to behave as their persona in the myths. For example, if they are described as companionate healers, like princess Pari, an abandoned daughter who after many hardships comes back home and cures her dying father, then the manshin can ask them to heal their patients (Pettid 2000). The communication is based on possession-trance, where the supernatural entities descend into the body of the manshin and she conveys their message. This act is called *opening the gate of words* (Bruno 2002).

When there is need for healing, the manshin asks the spirits to check if a supernatural grudge or disharmony had caused the problem. This can be an angry spirit that dwells in the house, or an ancestor who had not received proper ancestor rites. In such cases, the spirits that surround the manshin can help negotiate how to appease the supernatural entity. If the manshin understands the cause of disharmony, she can prescribe the exact act needed to solve the problem. For example, a spirit of the place can say that it is hungry, and ask for offerings of rice and water. An ancestor can ask for a commemoration rite in her death anniversary. A mountain spirit can ask for offerings to be placed on a sacred rock. The symptoms of the disease might require intervention by biomedicine, but the cause for the affliction needs solving in a spiritual manner. If a person ignores the signals that supernatural entities send, for example through an illness, then the condition might get worse, even deadly.

### **The Performative Aspect of Spiritual Healing**

The practices used to heal or enhance health by Rabbis and manshin have structural similarities, but not necessarily similar visual effects. Both Rabbis and manshin offer different scales of rituals, from short individual consultation to full-scale long rituals. While in the monotheistic tradition there is no visual rendering of God, and the tsadikim are portrayed through realistic photographs and paintings, in Korea supernatural entities are painted in exaggerated cartoon-like style. Moreover, the encounters with healers are very different. The Rabbi advises patients to give alms and read biblical verses. He does not claim that he can channel the tsadik's spirit directly through his body at will during the meeting, nor does he deliver the spirits' words, but these sometimes appear in dreams or through interpretation of certain religious texts (Bilu 1997). In contrast, during kut rituals, the manshin assert that the spirits have descended into their bodies (*shin-naerim*) and are available for questioning and petitioning directly.

In both musok and tsaddik veneration there are pilgrimages to sacred places. Tsaddik veneration is mostly performed near remote gravesites in Israel, Morocco or Europe. In Korea, prayer sites are mostly mountains and beaches for spirits of nature. The immense importance of the tsaddik pilgrimage could be witnessed in September 2020 during the hillula of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, who died in 1810 and was buried in Uman, Ukraine. Due to Covid19 precautions, the Ukrainian authorities had closed the borders, but thousands of Jewish pilgrims flew to neighbouring countries in hopes that overland borders would be less supervised. The Ukrainian authorities placed policemen to prevent the pilgrims' infiltration, and so the pilgrims stayed camped a few weeks until deported. In a media interview, Israel Shnor, a pilgrim who was held in Belarus, explained his view on performing pilgrimage in times of global health anxiety saying,

'all the people that you see here, and there are many more that you do not see, never thought not to arrive. With all due respect, we have a tradition of more than two hundred years' (*Ynet* 2020).

In Korea, the dedication of manshin to pilgrimage can be seen on every sacred mountain, through the summer rains and winter ice. Even elderly practitioners climb the steep slopes to pray under a large rock, light incense by a waterfall, or stand praying lengthily in cold ocean winds.

The performative means by which Rabbis and manshin mediate the supernatural powers are similar. In both religious rituals, the healers pray, sing and light candles. They sway and move around the ritual area, talking to the audience, promising success and healing. In such events, there is always food. However, in the Korean case, the food items are viewed as offerings to the spirits, while in the Jewish case they serve as gifts among the human participants. In both Jewish hillula events and Korean kut rituals there are moments of heightened emotions when participants attest that they feel the supernatural interventions within their bodies. Similar feelings were expressed by interviewees in the two different belief systems, 'feeling the hairs on my arms stand on edge', 'feeling warmth inside my chest', 'everything around looks brighter'.

One major difference between the two creeds is that the Korean practice involves possession-trance induced through drumming and dancing; appeasing the supernatural entities is achieved through entertaining them with dangerous acts such as standing on knives, feeding them delicacies and sacrificing animals. In tsaddik rituals, there is no direct reference to possession or trance; rather, the Rabbi delivers his requests to the tsaddik and God without channelling their responses; the veneration gestures do not include sacrificial animals (although these are mentioned in ancient texts); the main acts of worship are prayers, tales from the Old Testament and religious songs. In both Jewish and Korean rituals there is extensive usage of ancient dialects. Not all audience members understand the texts, but ritual organizers and practitioners are expected to master them.

## The Interaction between Folk Healing and Modern Medicine

Tsaddik venerating Rabbis and manshin do not promote spiritual healing as a substitute to biomedicine. They suggest that supernatural interventions expedite the healing process, point to the best medical-care providers and prevent future deterioration. Recently, many manshin and Rabbis have taken Covid19 vaccines, and this was documented in the media to convince the public that vaccines are legitimate and safe. Nevertheless, the common perception of most biomedical staff is that folk healers might prevent the proper treatment of patients. This view prevails regardless the fact that there is no medical research aimed to prove spiritual healing as harmful. The objections rest merely on paradigmatic assessments and hearsays. Spiritual healers accept the authority of modern medicine, while at the same time they openly criticize its shortcoming and relate to it as narrowminded. In a rationalization structure similar to other cases discussed by Pardo and Prato (2019), the healers view their occupation as a performance of personal morality.

The vernacular nature of these traditions allows the healers freedom from institutional supervision. The biopolitics that dictates delegitimization and marginalization of spiritual healing in the medical systems of hypermodern societies has not prevented millions from using it in the urban centres of South Korea and Israel. The contradiction between scientific and vernacular medicine does not exist in the worldview of these contemporary spiritual healers. They are legitimized at the grassroots level and enjoy the cultural and financial support of their many patients.

## References

- Agamben, G. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bilu, Y. 1997. Mechkar Hatarbut Haamamit Beidan Hapost Moderny: Sipur Ishi (A Research of Folk Culture in Postmodern Times: A Personal Story). *Teoria ve Bikoret* (Theory and Criticism), 10: 37-54.
- Bruno, A. L. 2002. *The Gate of Words: Language in the Rituals of Korean Shamans*. Leiden: University of Leiden Press.
- Foucault, M. 1979. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage.
- McLoughlin, D. 2010. The Sacred and the Unspeakable: Giorgio Agamben's Ontological Politics. *Theory & Event*, 13 (1).
- Pardo, I. and G. B. Prato. 2019. Ethnographies of Legitimacy: Methodological and Theoretical Insights. In I. Pardo and G. B. Prato (eds), *Legitimacy: Ethnographic and Theoretical Insights*. New York: Palgrave.
- Pardo, I. 2004. Where it Hurts: An Italian Case of Graded and Stratified Corruption. In I. Pardo (ed.), *Between Morality and the Law: Corruption, Anthropology and Comparative Society*. London: Routledge.
- Pettid, M. J. 2000. Late Chosŏn Society as Reflected in a Shamanistic Narrative: An Analysis of the Pari Kongju Muga. *Korean Studies*, 24: 113-141.

- Sarfati, L. 2018. Vernacular Dialectics: Spiritual Practices of Tsaddik Veneration by Secular Israelis. *Journal of American Folklore*, 131 (520): 181-208.
- Van Deusen, K. 2004. *Singing Story, Healing Drum: Shamans and Storytellers of Turkic Siberia*. Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Ynet*. 2020. Shlosha Shavuot al Hagvul Haukraini Baderech le Uman: Anachnu Mitkarvim le Mashber Humanitary [Three weeks on the Ukrainian border on the way to Uman: we are nearing a humanitarian crisis]. *Ynet Judaism*, 15 September. <https://www.ynet.co.il/judaism/article/HJFjhf0Vw>