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From a Jewish Communist to a Jewish Buddhist: Allen Ginsberg as a Forerunner of a New American Jew

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Abstract: The article examines Allen Ginsberg's cultural and spiritual journeys, and traces the poet's paths as foreshadowing those of many American Jews of the last generation. Ginsberg was a unique individual, whose choices were very different other men of his era. However, it was larger developments in American society that allowed him to take steps that were virtually unthinkable during his parents' generation and were novel and daring in his time as well. In his childhood and adolescence, Ginsberg grew up in a Jewish communist home, which combined socialist outlooks with mild Jewish traditionalism. The poet's move from communism and his search for spirituality started already at Columbia University of the 1940s, and continued throughout his life. Identifying with many of his parents' values and aspirations, Ginsberg wished to transcend beyond his parents' Jewish orbit and actively sought to create an inclusive, tolerant, and permissive society where persons such as himself could live and create at ease. He chose elements from the Christian, Jewish, Native-American, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions, weaving them together into an ever-growing cultural and spiritual quilt. The poet never restricted his choices and freedoms to one all-encompassing system of faith or authority. In Ginsberg's understanding, Buddhism was a universal, non-theistic religion that meshed well with an individualist outlook, and offered personal solace and mindfulness. He and other Jews, who followed his example, have seen no contradiction between practicing Buddhism and Jewish identity and have not sensed any guilt. Their Buddhism has been Western, American, and individualistic in its goals, meshing with other interests and affiliations. In that, Ginsberg served as a model and forerunner to a new kind of Jew, who takes pride in his heritage, but wished to live his life socially, culturally and spiritually in an open and inclusive environment, exploring and enriching herself beyond the Jewish fold. It has become an almost routine Jewish choice, reflecting the values, and aspirations of many in the Jewish community, including those who chose religious venues within the declared framework of the Jewish community.

Keywords: Allen Ginsberg; America; Judaism; American Judaism; beat generation; communism; Buddhism; spirituality; spiritual seekers; poetry; Howl; Kaddish

1. Introduction

One of the most memorable figures of the countercultural movement, of the 1960s–1970s, was a prophet-looking poet with a bird and long hair, singing mantras, reading poetry and calling for non-violence.¹ Many remember Allen Ginsberg's promotion of peace, freedoms to express and experiment, and advocacy of new literary, cultural and spiritual venues. Few have thought about him

¹ (Gitlin 1987; Schultz 1999).

as a forerunner of a new kind of Jew. Most of Ginsberg's cultural, spiritual and political activities took place outside the Jewish fold and the poet hardly practiced Jewish rites or affiliated with Jewish groups. Yet, Ginsberg pioneered a new approach on the part of many Jews. While acknowledging their Jewish identity and heritage, many American Jews have come, in recent decades, to see it as their right to choose and create their own social, cultural, and spiritual territories, where Judaism is one element in a larger amalgam.

In the 1940s–1950s, alongside his studies at Columbia University, his growth as a literary figure of avant-garde poetry, and his public activity for freedom of artistic expressions, Ginsberg began a spiritual pilgrimage that has lasted throughout his life.² Judaism played only a partial role in the poet's spiritual quests. His activities and ideas, from the political to the spiritual, reflected an agenda of inclusivity and multiple experiences. While there were other Jews of his generation who chose similar spiritual paths, for Jews, and non-Jews too, Ginsberg came to epitomize a new model of individual in contemporary society. One who builds his or her life in diverse environments, chooses at ease his or her cultural interests and spiritual pursuits, and creates a freer and more complex identity than modern society had previously allowed.

In order to explore the spiritual choices and venues of Ginsberg, and examine how they reflect new worldviews and major social and cultural changes, one must begin by exploring Ginsberg's upbringing and the agendas that motivated him along the way.

2. A Jewish Strive for the Universal

Ginsberg's personality and life choices as well as his intellectual, political, literary and spiritual pursuits were not typical of persons of his era and background. Most men of his generation turned up very differently than him, led a life far removed from his, and pursued careers and activities with little resemblance to his own. Still, the poet's actions and style had their roots in a particular Jewish American environment, and upbringing.

Ginsburg's parents, Naomi and Louis, were not run-of-the-mill Americans of the 1920s–1940s. Both children of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, they advanced through the public school system and higher education, moving away from the working class world, in which they grew up, into an educated, albeit frugal, middle class standard of living, with Louis working as a teacher, and earning a modest reputation as a poet.³ Looking upon America as potentially a land of promise, Naomi and Louis considered their country to be in dire need of social reform and greater equality. Naomi was a card-carrying communist, who took Allen and his brother to events and summer camps organized by the party. Louis considered himself a socialist and participated in communist activities to accompany his wife. Naomi also advocated nudism and vegetarianism, both utterly eccentric by the standards of the time.⁴

Although theirs was not the usual course for American Jews, the Ginsbergs were not on their own. Tens of thousands of American Jews joined the Communist Party, during the 1920s–1940s, at least for a while.⁵ These included, besides the affiliates of the American Communist Party, thousands of communists, such as Trotskyites, who opposed the Stalinist line. Other, somewhat less radical socialist ideologies were also popular among inter-war American Jews. These included socialist and labor groups, activists of unions, and left-wing Zionists. In fact, within a Jewish population that reached about five million in the early 1940s, hundreds of thousands favored progressive social-oriented activism and policies. The 1920s and 1930s were years of strife and upheaval in Europe with the rise of fascist and Nazi regimes. In America too, those years saw a rise in the activities and rhetoric

² Ginsberg's book *Howl* brought about a ground breaking obscenity trial that became something of an ethos and a symbol. (Shinder 2006; Ginsberg 2010a).

³ Born in White Russia, Naomi Ginsberg grew up in America.

⁴ For an exploration of Allen Ginsberg's family and childhood see (Morgen 2006).

⁵ On Jewish communists during the era, see (Srebrnik 2010).

of white supremacist groups and anti-Jewish sentiments, coupled with the painful economic and emotional effects of the Great Depression and mass unemployment.⁶ More than in other periods, many Jews considered communism to present viable alternatives to unjust and abusive political, social and economic systems. Thousands of young Jewish men, about a decade older than Allen, volunteered to serve in the Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War, in 1936–1938.

While advocating a secular modernist worldview and universal values, Jewish communists organized in their own troops, remaining, in reality, within Jewish social and cultural frameworks.⁷ Most Jewish communists of the 1920s–1930s socialized with secular, mostly communist or socialist Jews like themselves, and married within the fold. Jewish communists even labored to preserve Jewish culture, as they understood it, including Yiddish as the language of the Jewish masses. They published Yiddish periodicals, and established schools and summer camps that taught Yiddish alongside English. For Allen, “Yiddish” would come to signify a constricting parochial Jewish environment from which he would strive to escape. Jewish communists, such as Naomi and Louis Ginsberg, also celebrated Jewish holidays, providing them with new universal meanings and interpretations. Jewish communists maintained Jewish rites of passage. This included *brit* for boys on their eighth day. Allen, like other Jewish boys born to communist parents was circumcised and received a Jewish name, in his case, Israel. Jewish communists firmly insisted on Jewish burials, including religious Jewish rites such as *tahara*, ritual cleansing of the body, and *levaya*, Jewish burial services, complete with the reciting of *kaddish*. This commemorative prayer would have a special meaning for Ginsberg.

While choosing a political line that American society at large deemed unacceptable, for the Ginsbergs and other Jews like them, the ultimate goal was integration, as Jews, into the American mainstream. For many young Jews the Communist Party often served as a stepping-stone along a road that included higher education and intellectual, artistic or professional pursuits. They wished to reform America, in order to find their place in that country.

Ginsberg absorbed his parents’ values and visions. “America I used to be a Communist when I was a kid I am not sorry,” he wrote many years later in “America,” a poem in which he aired his complaints and feelings about his country.⁸ While moving away from the communist world of his parents, and rejecting hierarchical and authoritative structures that communism entailed, Ginsberg sought other means than those of his parents to make American society and culture more inclusive and accepting. He advocated, in different times and venues, an open, tolerant society that transcends tribal and parochial boundaries and offers room to people like himself. Ginsberg would mention communism in his poetry, or, more often, he would refer to the Soviet bloc, mostly in order to show the futility of the global struggle between America and its enemies.

As far removed from his background as Ginsberg would journey, he ultimately remained the child of East European immigrant Jews who were eager to feel completely at home in American society, and his personal agenda was to transcend his original cultural surroundings, which he considered limited and unfulfilling. Likewise, he remained the faithful son of the radical and unconventional Naomi Ginsberg. Following his mother’s footsteps, Ginsberg would demonstrate a large measure of defiance or disregard for mainstream society’s rules and regulations. As a poet and cultural spokesperson, Ginsberg gave voice to his heart and mind in a direct, undiluted manner, even when the content, or style, did not correspond to social conventions.⁹ Unlike his mother, and against many odds, he gained much appreciation in the social circles into which he strived for admission.

⁶ (Dinnerstein 1991).

⁷ A collection of documents pertaining to Jewish communist troops is currently archived at Cornell University. I am thankful to Elissa Sampson Boyarin for sharing the information with me. <https://get.google.com/albumarchive/109009527338097520639/album/AF1QipPyH6wm09hGi42uI-ZS7w-jnNDOGNYCyKYemyJi?source=pwa&authKey=CMPRovWRhtGtiwE>.

⁸ (Ginsberg 1959).

⁹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3cswsg0>.

Remarkably, Ginsberg would come to serve as an icon and leader for a large movement of cultural change, and new spiritual expressions, while remaining unabashedly the neurotic, non-conformist, East-Coast intellectual Jew that he was. The fact that Ginsberg became a spokesperson and hero for people who came from very different backgrounds, some of whom grew up distrusting people such as he, signified a new chapter in American social, cultural, and religious history. A generation earlier, a person like Allen Ginsberg would, almost certainly, been shunned, marginalized and censored.

3. Creating Inclusive Environments

During his undergraduate years at Columbia, Ginsberg began venturing beyond the social circle in which he grew up, mostly attracted to creative, educated ‘on the edge’ characters, regardless of confessional, racial or ethnic origins. His early life experiences, especially his mother’s mental health and eccentricities, brought him to look upon unconventional behaviors as acceptable human traits, and he viewed eccentric, or tormented people as inspiring and righteous.¹⁰ One of his most powerful, as well as acclaimed poems, *Howl*, relates to, and tells the story of friends and acquaintances who had demonstrated erratic behavior, on account of traumas and mental suffering, thus normalizing and legitimizing their personalities, showing and stirring sympathy and compassion for their actions.¹¹ Aiming at the spiritual, Ginsberg added an element of mysticism and holiness to his poetic manifesto, depicting the tormented figures as martyrs.

Most of Ginsberg’s new friends came from upper-middle class white Protestant backgrounds. Many possessed physical, athletic, and social gifts, which provided them with, at least potentially, better standing in society, and more confidence in making social connections than himself.¹² Yet, Ginsberg would soon become the leading figure of a new circle of unconventional artists and writers.¹³ This position was not self-understood. As a rule, Jewish students in the 1940s befriended other Jews, and for many of his new acquaintances Ginsberg was the first Jew with whom they became close. This is remarkable when one considers the fact that Ginsberg was not trying to ‘pass’, by adopting ways and mannerism that were not his own, or fabricating a false background or lineage and changing his name. Such occurrences were abundant among Jews of his generation.¹⁴ His own brother, Eugene, five years his senior and a lawyer, abandoned the name Ginsberg in favor of an all-American name, Eugene Brooks. Eugene married what at that time most people considered to be an all-American woman—blonde and Christian—and raised his family divorced from cultural or ethnic Jewish attributes. Allen chose a different path. While he was at this time uncomfortable with some aspects of his being, such as his sexuality, the young poet did not pretend to be someone he was not, and his openness about himself was striking.¹⁵ Likewise, while he strived to venture out of parochial constraints and obtain recognition as an American poet and not merely a Jewish one, he did not present himself to be someone he was not. His goal was to create what the historian Jacob Katz called a neutral society, in which Jews like himself could work and study as well as love and live with non-Jews as a matter of course.¹⁶ In trying to achieve that goal, his personal life and career proved to be something of a breakthrough.

Ginsberg’s leadership position within the Beat group that would attract national, as well as international, attention would become more evident in the 1950s and reached its full bloom in the 1960s, with Ginsberg laboring actively towards the creation of the movement’s aura.¹⁷ His tolerance of his friends’ weaknesses proved to be a great asset, placing him in a central position within the

¹⁰ Morgen (2006), *I Celebrate Myself*, p. 13.

¹¹ On the poem and its legacy, see (Schumacher 1992, p. 207; Warner 2005).

¹² Taylor, “The Poem and I are Fifty,” in Warner (2005), p. 21.

¹³ *I Celebrate Myself*, numerous pages.

¹⁴ Tobias Wolff’s father was one of many such Jews who ‘crossed’ at that time. See (Wolff 1994).

¹⁵ See, for example, Ginsberg’s letter to Wilhelm Reich of 11 March 1947, in (Ginsberg 2008, pp. 16–17).

¹⁶ Cf. (Katz 1985, p. 195).

¹⁷ (Watson 1995).

emerging group of Beat writers and artists. To begin with, he was the one person on friendly terms with everybody else in his circle of un-Orthodox avant-garde writers, artists, and musicians, serving as a connecting link. At times, he offered refuge in his home, or financial support, to needy friends and colleagues. Ginsberg often recruited fellow writers and artists to appear in different events, including poetry readings, concerts, summer schools at the Buddhist Naropa University, which he helped establish, and series of lectures at Brooklyn College, where he became an instructor.

Ginsberg tirelessly advocated the publication of Jack Kerouac's most known novel *On the Road*.¹⁸ Kerouac, however, did not always reciprocate the love his Jewish friend bestowed on him. The relationship between the two points to a sore element in the otherwise seemingly outstanding acceptance of Ginsberg in many cultural circles in America. Friendly in the early years of their acquaintance, Kerouac, whose book, *On the Road*, came to represent the open and liberated values of the Beat Generation, retreated from the avant-garde style and values of his early life, and made hostile remarks relating to Ginsberg's ethnic origin. Such incidents were reminders of the novelty of the spaces Ginsberg was trying to carve, often successfully, for himself and others in America that only started lifting its social and professional restrictions on Jews and other minorities. In spite of Kerouac's bigotry, Ginsberg named, in 1974, the Naropa School of Disembodied Poetics in memory of his friend.¹⁹

In the late 1960s, Ginsberg assumed a more influential cultural and political role, coming to play a father figure for the large countercultural audiences that came about during that time and adopted many of the Beat generation's values and styles. These ranged from more daring expressions in literature to explorations of new spiritual venues. Ginsberg's choices became more publically significant, with many paying attention to his messages and moves.²⁰

One of Ginsberg's ventures, which he helped finance was the Committee on Poetry, which he founded in 1966. It offered material and legal support to fellow poets and colleagues, as well as cultural rebels such as Timothy Leary, the advocate of LSD, who needed money for his legal battles.²¹ He pronounced Leary "a hero of American consciousness," and "Democratic Buddhist teacher of the uses of LSD in America."²²

Like his friend, the Neo-Hasidic rabbi, and founder of Jewish Renewal, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Ginsberg experimented with Psychedelic drugs. Both Schachter and he advocated the usage of LSD as a means for spiritual and intellectual growth.²³ Schachter and Ginsberg, both spiritual seekers, ready to experiment and eager to expand, also took interest in Asian religions. They chose, however, different paths in their relation to Judaism and Asian religions. Schachter wished to acquire and incorporate Asian spiritual systems into contemporary Judaism in order to invigorate and rejuvenate Judaism. He believed that Jews could learn from Asian devotees how to love God without letting long held bitterness or pain from their history of persecution diminish the enchantment. Ginsberg on the other hand practiced very few Jewish rites and did not wish to combine Judaism with Hinduism or Buddhism. He was an American and a Jew interested in Asian teachings, but not in the reform of Judaism. Still, the paths of these two spiritual seekers would cross a number of times, allowing writers such as Roger Kamenetz to view their choices and opinions through comparative lenses.²⁴

¹⁸ The index in Morgen's biography of Ginsberg, *I Celebrate Myself*, includes a special entry "Ginsberg's promotion of" [Kerouac's writings], referencing to 20 different pages in the biography. Kerouac's biographer, Tom Clark, plays down Ginsberg's contribution, see (Clark 1984).

¹⁹ <https://www.naropa.edu/academics/jks/>.

²⁰ See the transcript of "The Houseboat Summit," February 1967, reprinted in Connors, see (Ginsberg 2010b).

²¹ (Stevens 1987).

²² (Greenfield 2006).

²³ On Ginsberg's thought in this realm, see also (Ginsberg 1968, 2001).

²⁴ (Kamenetz 1994).

4. *Kaddish*, Jewishness and Interaction with the Jewish Community

Ginsberg grew up in a secular communist Jewish home of the 1920s–1930s. Even this seemingly non-religious space left a deep Jewish mark on him. The Beat poet was absent when his mother, Naomi, died and he could not attend her funeral. The few mourners who did participate refrained from reciting the Kaddish, and pained Ginsberg wrote an epic poem, *Kaddish*, in lieu of the Kaddish not recited for his mother. When writing *Kaddish* in 1960, Ginsberg was far from leading a traditional Jewish life and had no affiliation with Jewish religious congregations, or even secular groups. Still, it was important for him to commemorate his mother by reciting, in a literary form, an individualized version of the Jewish traditional prayer recited in honor of family members who died. Ginsberg's *Kaddish* follows the rhythm, but does not repeat the words of the traditional prayer. The mostly Aramaic prayer exalts and affirms the majesty of God in the face of loss and grief, without actually relating to the deceased individual and the specifics of her life. Ginsberg personalized the prayer, tailoring its content to his mother's life experiences, and his impressions of her, while maintaining its powerful effect and its connection to forces beyond the deceased's life.

The poem appealed to many Jews of Ginsberg's generation, who appreciated, in addition to its poetic strength, its personalized commemorative value. Perhaps unwittingly, Ginsberg gave voice to many Jews who considered the traditional Jewish prayer to be too remote and abstract. *Kaddish* was a hit among educated liberal Jews everywhere and could be found, during the 1960s–1980s, on almost every bookshelf of Jews who read American poetry. Without realizing it, Ginsberg opened the way for a number of Jewish writers to place new spiritual meanings on the traditionally recited Kaddish.²⁵

Ginsberg did not act on behalf of the Jewish community, or groups or sections within it. Jews associated with Jewish establishments failed to recognize him as an explorer of new Jewish venues and identities. This included the poet's enemy Norman Podhoretz, who by the 1960s, looked upon Ginsberg as a traitor to the Jewish cause.²⁶ Podhoretz also studied literature at Columbia University, but unlike Ginsberg chose a more mainstream 'respectable' social and cultural line. He did not appreciate the Beat group and his opinion on Ginsberg's friends, who became iconic figures, and the Beat literary achievements, was less than laudatory.²⁷

Amazingly, it was Jack Kerouac, who did not care very much for Jewishness, who recognized his friend's pioneering role in molding a new kind of Jew. Ginsberg's social circle was one of the first of its kind to open up to Jews and look upon them as colleagues, friends and lovers, with little or no stigma attached. Insightfully, Kerouac recognized this avant-garde reality, identifying in Ginsberg's stand within the larger cultural scene a sign of a new phase in the position of Jews within American society, as well as in what it means to be Jewish. He lamented, in Christian terms, the Jewish community's lack of recognition of Ginsberg's role.²⁸ "It's most important for you to realize that . . . the Jews are bound to neglect their own best Ginsberg Jesus, the prophet is without honor . . ." ²⁹

Somewhat surprisingly, a number of Israeli literary figures embraced *Kaddish*, and Ginsberg's work in general. A highly ideological society in the early 1960s, the literary circles endorsed, for the most part, mainstream Zionist outlooks, and most of the cultural elite would have rejected Ginsberg's understanding of the desired place of Jews in society. However, the anti-establishment bohemian left embraced the Beat poet's style and messages wholeheartedly. Dan Omer, a cultural rebel, came up, in 1967, with a compilation of Beat poetry in Hebrew, *Nahama: Shira Beatnikit Americayit (Howl: American Beatnik Poetry)*.³⁰ The book was a hit with late 1960s youth in Israel, some of whom came to admire and

²⁵ For example, (Wieseltier 1998), which explores the history and meaning of the ancient prayer, coupled with the author's experiences during his year of mourning his father; See also (McLoughlin 2006).

²⁶ (Podhoretz 1997, 1999).

²⁷ (Podhoretz 1958).

²⁸ (Kerouac and Ginsberg 1955).

²⁹ Ibid, p. 288.

³⁰ (Omer 1967).

amulet some features of the American counterculture, both in style and in coming to demand greater freedoms of expression. Perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, HaBimah, Israel's national theater, staged a production of a play version of *Kaddish*, with Lea Koenig, one of Israel's noted actors, playing Naomi Ginsberg, and running naked on the stage.³¹ Yotam Reuveni, a journalist and an author, reminisced decades later that in the 1960s Ginsberg served as a source of inspiration for him when he published his daring novel, *In Praise of Day Dreaming*, an unprecedented depiction of homosexual life in Israel.³² Nathan Zach, an avant-garde poet, a cultural *enfant terrible* and an icon of a new anti-mainstream individuality in Israel, translated Ginsberg's poetry into Hebrew, acquainting Israeli audiences with the American poet.³³ He and Ginsberg became close friends. In sum, the left-wing anti-establishment segment of Israeli culture embraced the Beat writer as a means of giving voice to their own yearning for a more open, free and inclusive society.

While searching, and practicing outside the fold, Ginsberg took interest in Jewish mysticism and thought, and related strongly to Jewish history and symbols. When outside of the United States, Ginsberg made efforts to visit sites with Jewish historical meaning.³⁴ He also visited synagogues and participated in Shabbat prayers, for example during his visit to Budapest.³⁵ When meeting the poet and Fascist collaborator Ezra Pound, the Beat poet acted as if he represented the Jewish people, listening to and accepting Pound's apology for his antisemitism before and during World War II.³⁶ He participated in Jewish intellectual debates, such as the argument between Hannah Arendt and Norman Podhoretz in the wake of the Eichmann Trial and Arendt's book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, standing unequivocally on Arendt's side.³⁷ For him, Arendt was an open-minded intellectual who adhered to universal values and not to Jewish parochial sensitivities. Consequently, the relationship between him and Norman Podhoretz deteriorated even further. Podhoretz' aim became more and more defending Jewish causes as he understood them, including, and perhaps especially, the safety of the state of Israel. Ginsberg promoted political justice and freedom of expression with no particular preference for the Jewish state, and did not care much for those whom he believed wished to silence or correct Arendt on account of Jewish tribal agendas.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Ginsberg's attitude towards Israel was different of that of most American Jews of his generation, and was closer to that of his Left-Wing Israeli admirers. He was no Zionist, but rather an advocate of integration of all individuals into a tolerant pluralistic society. In Israel, he saw a reflection of a Jewish parochial milieu, which he had long left behind. His reply, to Gershom Scholem, the leading scholar of Jewish mysticism, and his wife Fania, who asked him, in 1961, about the prospect of building his home in Israel tells it all. "Your great idea is to build a new Bronx here. All my life I've been running away from the Bronx, and here I come to the Jewish state and I find that big idea of the Zionists is to build a giant Bronx here. If I have to go back to the Bronx, I may as well stay in the original one," the poet asserted.³⁸ The Bronx at the time of Ginsberg's meeting with Scholem claimed a Jewish population of about 500,000, and symbolized, for Ginsberg and others, a heavily Jewish ethnic concentration that lacked sophistication and integration, the opposite of the open multi-cultural environment to which the poet aspired.³⁹

³¹ On the staging of *Kaddish* in HaBimah, see (Raz 1972).

³² <https://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/prose/.premium-1.6544609>.

³³ Am Oved published Natan Zach's translation of *Kaddish and Other Poems (1958–1984)* in Hebrew in 1988.

³⁴ For example, Allen Ginsberg's letter to Nicanor Parra, of 20 August 1965, see (Ginsberg 2008, p. 303).

³⁵ I owe thanks to Prof. Michael Silver of the Hebrew University for sharing the information about Ginsberg's visit to the Budapest synagogue with him.

³⁶ (Peck 2017).

³⁷ (Arendt 1963). On the controversy, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/01/books/review/fifty-years-later-why-does-eichmann-in-jerusalem-remain-contentious.html>.

³⁸ On the exchange between Ginsberg and Scholem, see (Scholem 2017; BBC 1994; Shapiro 2005).

³⁹ On New York Jewry at that era, see (Gurock 2012).

5. Ginsberg in Israel

Ginsberg was interested in Israel, its people, thinkers and issues, traveling to that country, and spending two months there in 1961 and then again in 1987–1988. In his first visit, he intended to meet scholars, writers and artists, as well as visit relatives and historical and religious sites. Setting out systematically to prepare his travel, he wrote down his plans meticulously.⁴⁰ He received recommendations, names, and addresses, from friends who had been to Israel and prepared a list of places to visit, including restaurants and bars worth frequenting, as well as thinkers and artists he was curious to meet. The list reads like a Who's Who of Israeli artistic, bohemian and intellectual circles of the early 1960s. This included Dan Ben-Amotz, a popular Israeli lowbrow writer and bohemian figure, and Yigal Tumarkin, a rebellious modernist sculptor. Both artists were *enfant terrible* who lived in the secular, pluralistic and permissive side of Israeli society, protesting against Orthodox Jewish legislation, government encroachment on free speech or human rights, and discrimination against Arab minorities.

The Beat poet and his partner, Peter Orlovsky, settled in the home of a friend, Ethel Broido, in Tel-Aviv.⁴¹ Ethel immigrated from the United States to Palestine, and by 1961 was a veteran American-Israeli, familiar with both cultures. The demography of American immigrants in Israel in the 1940s–1960s had been very different of what it would become in the 1970s–1980s, following the 1967 War and the Messianic resurgence to which it gave rise. Few American Jews immigrated to Israel, the standard of life and the opportunities America offered at the time being so much superior to those of British Palestine or Israel in its first years.⁴² Those who settled in the country were overwhelmingly secular and socialist, favoring the more communal values of the nascent Jewish society. Many of them found their place in the intellectual, professional, or artistic circles of Israel of the time.

Ethel was a translator and editor, which public agencies, such as the World Zionist Organization or Tel-Aviv University, commissioned her work. She was familiar with the Israeli literary establishment, but the Beat Poet was not motivated to meet editors, publishers, or writers associated with the establishment. Ginsberg also met his cousin Irene in Tel-Aviv. Immigrating a number of years earlier, his uncle Abe's daughter taught children with special needs. Meeting family members was important to Ginsberg who sought such blood relations wherever he went.

Using his friend's home as a base, Ginsberg set almost immediately on his intellectual excursions, even before meeting fellow artists. His first encounter was with the theologian and writer Martin Buber in Jerusalem. Ginsberg read Buber's work long before arriving in Israel, and brought books by Buber and Scholem with him, alongside tomes on Indian spirituality. This choice was not accidental. Aspects of Judaism in which Ginsberg took interest were the mystical, Kabbalistic, Hasidic and ethical. His interest in Christianity was very similar, as he admired the medieval mystic St. Francis of Assisi, and William Blake, a nineteenth-century, religiously un-affiliated, English mystical poet and painter. Mysticism was a niche of Judaism, which the ecumenical and integrationist Ginsberg could relate to without a sense of conceding to an ethnic parochial community. Kabbalah fascinated western thinkers since renaissance times and a number of American religious seekers and intellectuals took interest and incorporated Kabbalah into their teachings. This included theosophical leaders such as Henry Steel Alcott and the 'Missouri Platonist' Thomas Moore Johnson. In a 1984 interview with Michael Horovitz for the *Jewish Chronicle*, Ginsberg spoke about his preference in Judaism for a "the bohemian mysticism of Gershom Scholem, Martin Buber, or Isaac Bashevis Singer."⁴³ Perhaps not surprisingly,

⁴⁰ See Ginsberg's notebook and diary in which he spells out his plans, and gathers information he had received from friends. Ginsberg's Personal Papers, Stanford University, Coll M 733, *Notebooks and Journals*, Box 13, Fol. 13 (61-05).

⁴¹ I am indebted to Miki Gurion for sharing information, personal memoirs and a photograph from Ginsberg's stay at her mother's home. Likewise, I would like to thank Liora Herzog, an associate of Ephraim and Gentila Broido on sharing her knowledge and reminiscence.

⁴² On the sociology of American Jews in Israel, see (Antonovsky 1985).

⁴³ (Horowitz 1984). See also, <https://www.pressreader.com/uk/the-jewish-chronicle/20090807/282840777059127>.

Buber and Scholem's works would become popular among Jewish members of the counterculture, many of whom would take interest in the mystical, supernatural, and Hasidic elements of Judaism and connect them with the values and agendas of the counterculture.⁴⁴

Ginsberg related to Kabbalah in his poetry a number of times already before his visit to Israel. In his epic, groundbreaking poem, *Howl*, which Ginsberg completed in 1955, he speaks about "the best minds of my generation . . . Who studies Plotinus Poe St. John of the Cross and bop Kabbalah because the cosmos instinctively vibrated at their feet in Kansas."⁴⁵ Kabbalah appears here as "bop Kabbalah" as a 'cool' contemporary American term or system alongside a Greek philosopher, an American Mystical poet, and an early modern Spanish Christian mystic. The mystical ecumenical message is clear enough.

In "Journal Night Thoughts," a poem Ginsberg wrote a short while before traveling to Israel, and which, like most of Ginsberg's poetry carried strong religious and spiritual imagery, his one Jewish exclamation is:

"Come true again—the Kabbalah sign
in the vomit of the floor" ⁴⁶

With Buber, Ginsberg discussed the possibilities embodied in what Ginsberg and a number of his friends considered mind-expanding and spiritual enabling psychedelic drugs. Coming from a different age and place, the philosopher rejected the notion. Writing a short while after his conversation with Ginsberg, Buber expressed his opinion that LSD experiences were "Holidays not only from the petty I, enmeshed in the machinery of its aims, but also from the person participating in the community of logos and cosmos."⁴⁷

The meeting with Scholem created a more lasting relationship, leaving a mark on both the poet and the scholar. Scholem wrote, "The poet Allen Ginsberg once visited me. A likeable fellow. Genuine. Strange, mad, but genuine. I took a strong liking to him. My wife and I had a very interesting conversation with him." After hearing Ginsberg's comments about the Bronx and Israel, Scholem asked him, "What if you're mistaken?" but then he went on to admit that there was truth in what Ginsberg had asserted.

Scholem, like Buber, held to humanistic universal values, attempting to influence Jewish Israeli culture along those lines.⁴⁸ Both thinkers were members of Brit-Shalom, a pre-1948 group in British Palestine, which promoted the ideal of Arab-Jewish peaceful co-existence in a mutual commonwealth. Ginsberg shared many values with the two thinkers, but held a different understanding of the place of Jews in modern society. His experiences came about in a different cultural, geographic, political and ethnic environment than that of Scholem. The latter had despaired of the integration of Jews into German society⁴⁹ On that basis, Steven Aschheim discovered, Scholem evaded the draft in World War I. Ginsberg represented an outlook on the relationship between individuals and society that was avant-garde even in America, and almost non-existent in Europe and the Middle East.

Ginsberg stayed in touch with Scholem, met him again in Europe, and sought his advice when he wrote one of his epic poems *Plutonian Ode* in 1978.⁵⁰ In writing the poem, Ginsberg utilized gnostic and kabbalist symbols and ideas, in order to protest what he considered the destructiveness of the contemporary scientific military political order.

⁴⁴ (Ariel 2003; Magid 2015). <https://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/between-paradigm-shift-judaism-and-neo-hasidism-the-new-metaphysics-of-jewish-renewal>.

⁴⁵ (Ginsberg 1956).

⁴⁶ (Ginsberg 1984a).

⁴⁷ (Buber 1965).

⁴⁸ (Scholem 1983).

⁴⁹ (Aschheim 2007).

⁵⁰ (Ginsberg 1978).

While Ginsberg appreciated his meetings with thinkers, writers and artists, as well as the sites he visited, his impression of the country as a whole was not enthusiastic. In letters to his father and brother, Ginsberg expressed mixed sentiments. He mentioned that he wept when the boat pulled into Haifa, feeling “old holy land blues.” Spending time in Israel was “like being at vast anarching (sic!) family circle meeting, everybody hospitable.” Some of what he saw reminded him of his childhood “the great thing is that all the old world socialists have made their utopia here—the kibbutz atmosphere is like Camp Nichtgedeiget, [the communist camp in upstate New York, where the Ginsbergs camped when Allen was young].” Yet he lamented, “Arabs here are not treated very well at all, basically an insolvable problem until people forget their differences and identities—which neither Jews nor Arabs are capable of doing.”⁵¹ Ginsberg was thus offering his inclusive vision of society, which was outstanding in the era of the Cold War, when all sides considered nation states the norm. Ginsberg might have also been influenced by the poet and ideologue Yonatan Ratosh, who met and shared with Ginsberg the Cannanite ideal of turning both Arabs and Jews into ‘Hebrews’. A small group of secular artists and writers, the Cannanites advocated the creation of a pluralistic Hebrew nation that would bring together Arabs and Jews, eliminating the differences between them.⁵²

In another letter to his father, he pronounced a harsh opinion on the parochial ethnic atmosphere of the country:

This place is just another small country . . . unless you have a pronounced tendency to be Yiddish, which I don’t—as a matter of fact, I feel a more pronounced tendency to feel at home around Indians and Arabs in Mexico or Tangier, and that oriental atmosphere is disappearing here, to the dismay of many Sabras—and is appearing to be replaced by a polyglot, modern, second rate industrial country.

The choice of “unless you have a pronounced tendency to be *Yiddish*” is not accidental. Ginsberg considered himself Jewish, but rejected Jewish parochial or tribal culture, especially attributes that stood between Jews and the larger society. “Yiddish,” was for him, a sign, an attribute, of the parochial atmosphere against which he militated. Not sensing any contradiction to his aversion to “Yiddish,” Ginsberg loved Jewish New York food, and, until doctors ordered him to stop, consumed such delicacies as matzo ball, borscht and challah on a daily basis.⁵³

Ginsberg wrote one poem during his stay in Israel in 1961, “Galilee Shore.” Like almost all his poetry, it carried some Jewish imagery and even more extensively, Christian symbols. He dwelled on the Christian sites of the Galilee, but not on Jewish sites. However, he mentions the “beard of Martin Buber”, and the “skull faced Gershom Scholem,” following common perceptions of Jewish appearance. Perhaps not accidentally, he doubts the existence of the biblical Solomon, who presumably reigned over a united kingdom of Israel, and built the first Temple in Jerusalem. He invokes, approvingly, Peter and Christ in Cana, welcoming ‘the peacemaker,’ and ending the poem with the New Testament sight of walking on the water. In the poem, Ginsberg also spoke about the “silence between Hebrew and Arabic”, and celebrates the thrill of “the first hashish in the holy land,” cutting a balance between favorable experiences and pessimistic reflections on the future of the country.

Ginsberg noticed the Israeli realities with penetrating eyes. He paid attention to day-to-day life in the country, including the stiff prices of goods and the beginning of a move from a pioneering ethos to consumer society. He resented the concrete grey Soviet architecture that Israeli construction companies and government agencies utilized, rather insensitively, all around the country, including in stone-built Jerusalem. He noticed the small-town Eastern European manners and culture. Astutely, he realized that Israel did not really solve the dilemma of what it meant to be Jewish. Still, he mostly tolerated the

⁵¹ (Ginsberg and Ginsberg 2001).

⁵² On the Cannanites, their ideology and influence, see (Shavit 1987).

⁵³ (Silberman 2017).

new society, demonstrating little enchantment and expressing mild criticism. It was perhaps a fine place for others, but not for him.

From Israel, Ginsberg and Orlovsky sailed, via Djibouti, to India. Ginsberg planned his itinerary in America, adjusting it when buying bargain boat tickets in Israel. Working for ZIM, an Israeli state-sponsored company, his host, Ethel Broido, helped him obtain the tickets. The powerful cultural and spiritual encounters in the Indian sub-continent would soon overshadow the Israeli experience. Ginsberg would come back from India a “Hindu,” as he understood and constructed the term, while Israel, at least to all appearances, would remain just a memory in the back of his mind.

Ginsberg’s evaluation of Israel turned more negative following his visit to the country in 1987–1988. Teddy Kollek, mayor of Jerusalem between 1965 and 1993 and an advocate of united Jerusalem, invited the poet to Mishkenot Shaananim, a center for writers who come for short periods of residence Kollek had established in an historical site facing the city wall. An advocate of art and culture, Kollek also wished to turn his guests into supporters of Israel. However, this time he was not very successful.

Arriving during the First Intifada, twenty years after the 1967 War, Ginsberg paid close attention to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, studying the political views of different segments of the population. By 1987, Ginsberg was a very famous poet and cultural icon and his reception in the country was much more public. Political groups, journalists and writers sought him out, and doors opened readily for him to meet and inquire.⁵⁴

Ginsberg related emotionally to the historical sites in East Jerusalem. As in 1961, there was a duality in his sentiments. He visited the Wailing Wall, and kissed the stones. However, this time his interests and concerns were more political than intellectual. He was not seeking Buber or Scholem, who by that time were deceased, but rather investigated the political realities. He made efforts to meet with Palestinian writers and editors of newspapers, hearing their complaints, and identifying with their plight.⁵⁵ He also met with Israeli journalists, such as Uri Avneri, and politicians, including those from the Israeli right, such as Ehud Olmert.

Shalom Achshav, an Israeli political group that has advocated for greater political sacrifices for the sake of peace treaties, invited him to speak at their rally in Tel Aviv. Ginsberg read a poem he wrote in 1974, just in the wake of the October 1973 Yom Kippur War, “Jaweh and Allah Battle.” In the poem, he placed the Jews and Arabs in the same boat, both destructive in their religious, tribal battles. His opinion, since his visit in 1961 has not changed: to reconcile and make peace, Jews and Arabs need to give up on religious and ethnic triumphalism. No group, its gods, or visions, receives priority.

Both Gods Terrible! Awful Jaweh Allah!
 Both hook-nosed-gods, circumcised.
 Jaweh Allah which unreal?
 Which stronger Illusion?
 Which stronger Army?
 Which gives most frightening command?
 What God maintains egohood in Eden? Which be nameless?
 Which enter Abyss of Light?
 Worlds of Gods, jealous Warriors, Humans, Animals & Flowers,
 Hungry Ghosts, even Hell Beings all die,
 Snack cock and pig eat each other’s tails and perish
 All Jews All Moslems’ll die All Israelies All Arabs 5656(Ginsberg 1988).

Following his visit, Ginsberg gave voice to his anger at what he considered Israeli aggression against Palestinians. Upon returning to America, the poet tried to muster PEN, the association of poets,

⁵⁴ Ginsberg’s journal, Coll. M 733, *Notebooks and Journals*, Box 13, Fol. 13, Green Library, Stanford University.

⁵⁵ On the schedule of Ginsberg’s visit, the people he met, and his impressions, see his journal, Green Library, Stanford University.

to a campaign in favor of the Palestinian cause. In one conversation with Jewish spiritual leaders, including Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Roger Kamenetz, he projected his alienation from what he saw as tribal skirmishes of the Middle East, and what he considered less-than-generous Israeli treatment of the Palestinians. At that time, Ginsberg went as far as to declare himself non-Jewish if being an American Jew meant support for Israeli policies.⁵⁷ In distancing himself from Israel and those who supported it, Ginsberg was a forerunner among the American Jewish intelligentsia, who became disappointed with Israel at the turn of the twenty-first century, at the same time that they have continued to take interest in the country and its issues. His, and others, universal values trumped parochial concerns.

Ginsburg refused to limit himself to Jewish cultural, social or religious venues. Instead, he wove his Jewish identity into a broader, ever-growing, quilt, consisting of numerous cultural, religious, and aesthetic influences, and situated in a pluralistic and inclusive social milieu. In all of these aspects, Ginsberg served as an avant-garde example to a new kind of Jew, who explores and chooses new spiritual homes, or amalgamations of different layers of experience and culture. Famously, he served as a catalyst and symbol for a relatively large number of Jews who have become practitioners of Americanized Asian spiritual groups, or other New Religious Movements, while often maintaining their Jewish identity.

6. Buddhism at the Center of the Quilt

Until 1962, Ginsberg's spiritual interests remained mainly in the Jewish-Christian path. His poetry invokes the Jewish-Christian God time, and time again, albeit transforming and revolutionizing the meaning of righteousness and holiness. "Holy Holy Holy," which accompanies *Howl*, is a good illustration of such deeply religious poetry, which is at the same time defiant, calling for a new understanding of humans, their emotional needs, and their personal rights. Starting during his studies at Columbia University, Ginsberg took interest in Christian spirituality, showing attraction to the mysticism of Francis of Assisi and William Blake. Blake, in particular, influenced Ginsberg and affected his poetry. Writing in a very different time, place, and cultural environment, Blake offered an example of mystical religious poetry and apocalyptic imagery that were, at least in theory, non-theistic. This infatuation did not bring about a change of loyalties or adoption of new communal affiliations. Ginsberg rather added elements of Christian spirituality, English Protestant and Medieval Catholic mysticism, into what would become a growing amalgam of spiritual pursuits. In this regard, Ginsberg was a forerunner of a postmodern religious era, in which individuals pick, choose, and combine their spiritual, cultural, esthetic, and communal interests. A constant pilgrim, Ginsberg, and many who followed in his footsteps, have come to search and select paths, religious affiliations and cultural networks, shifting and re-arranging them along the way, or amalgamating different traditions, practices and identities to suit their spiritual, emotional, and communal needs. Remarkably and tellingly, the religious images and themes in Ginsberg's poetry remained Western, American, Jewish, and Christian, even as he adopted Hindu or Buddhist practices. Deborah Baker suggested that Ginsberg's visit to India was a spiritually transforming journey in his life.⁵⁸ He and his companion, Peter Orlovsky, followed the poet Gary Snyder, and his wife Joanne in visiting India, in 1962, and staying for a few months. In a manner that would become a pattern, Ginsberg did not become a devotee of a particular Hindu deity, or follower of gurus. In fact, he hardly sought Swamis or Holy Men, and, although his experience had a strong spiritual component, his visits to temples were more tours than pilgrimages.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ (Kamenetz 1994, pp. 235–41).

⁵⁸ (Baker 2008). See also, Ginsberg's poetry and letters of the period. (Ginsberg 1984b, pp. 290–322; Ginsberg 2008, pp. 256–87). These include poems and letters from Japan, which was also an important station along the way.

⁵⁹ On visits to temples, see (Ginsberg 1996).

Following his visit to India, Ginsberg advocated Hindu practices, as he understood them. These consisted mostly of non-violence, or pacifism, a teaching or standing that helped build his aura as a prophet for the Vietnam Era generation, as well as the chanting of mantras. Ginsberg was not alone. Impressed by Mohandas Gandhi's presentation of Hinduism as a non-violent tradition, many Westerners in the 1930s–1970s had come to look at the Hindu tradition through Gandhi's lenses. However, merely a few years later, Ginsberg shifted his major spiritual attention to Buddhism. He did not undergo a conversion experience, did not follow any orthodoxy and did not tie himself for a lifetime to one Buddhist school or interpretation. His was a 'tailor it for your needs' Buddhism, alternating between teachers and schools, and choosing elements of the systems that suited him best. Ginsberg however was more systematic about Buddhist practices and affiliations than Hindu ones. He consulted with teachers and carried exercises almost daily. Still, his Buddhist practices notwithstanding, Ginsberg remained intellectually and spiritually independent. He maintained Hindu practices, related to Jewish ethnic and religious symbols, and his poetry continued to reflect Jewish and Christian imagery.⁶⁰ Moreover, while mostly following one school of Buddhism, he also found merit and consulted with masters of other branches of the tradition.

In the early 1970s, Ginsberg became a follower of Chögyam Trungpa (1939–1987), a Tibetan Buddhist meditation master, who studied in England, and moved to the United States in 1970. The charismatic Buddhist leader related to Ginsberg with particular respect as a dear supporter and friend, and although the Beat poet became a devotee, he remained emotionally and spiritually independent of his master.⁶¹ The choice of Trungpa as a spiritual instructor and friend suited Ginsberg, who benefited from the peace and serenity the Buddhist exercises offered, but did not wish to follow a spiritual master on other aspects of his life. Trungpa did not interfere with Ginsberg's choices. For example, he did not wish to curtail Ginsberg's sexual life, or other personal or cultural choices Ginsberg made. Ginsberg's sexuality meshed well with his choice of Buddhism. Many of the leaders of Asian-American New Religious Movements condemned gay and bi-sexual behavior, but Buddhist masters often condoned it.⁶² This placed a number of Buddhist groups on the progressive side of the American religious spectrum, and allowed spiritual seekers, such as Ginsberg, to feel welcomed in such groups, to be themselves openly, and be reassured that their spiritual pursuits went hand in hand with universal values, and their social, political and cultural views. So while Buddhism turned into a central part of Ginsberg's spiritual quilt, it did not overshadow other components of his extensive and varied activities, social engagements, cultural interests and intellectual and spiritual pursuits.

While maintaining his independence, Ginsberg became devoted to Buddhist causes as he saw them. In this respect too, Trungpa was a suitable master for Ginsberg to follow. He was intellectually inclined, and his home and shrine in Boulder, Colorado, became a meeting place for many intellectual members of the counter-culture, who for the most part favored an atmosphere in which they were not asked to give up individual choices or scholarly pursuits. Trungpa was the founder of both Shambala and Naropa University, intellectual and spiritual enterprises to which Ginsberg could relate. Wishing to support his teacher, and Naropa, the university Trungpa founded in 1974, Ginsberg utilized his position within a large circle of avant-garde American writers and established the Jack Kerouac's School for Disembodied Poetics. He recruited and brought over a number of distinguished poets to teach in the program, and raised funds for its finances.⁶³ Amazingly, such instructors, including known poets, were not paid. The school merely provided dormitory space. It took Ginsberg's extensive network of friendships and gifts of persuasion to bring this gallery of accomplished poets to Naropa.

⁶⁰ The multi-faiths effects on the thoughts and practices of Ginsberg came up amazingly in the Chicago Seven Trial (11–12 December 1969), where he was a witness for the defense. Note his answers about his faith practices, (Ginsberg and Carter 2001).

⁶¹ This is depicted in an exchange between Ginsberg and Trungpa, recorded in the documentary (Trungpa 2012).

⁶² On Asian New Religious Movements and sexuality, see (Lewis and Bogdan 2014).

⁶³ On Ginsberg as a leader in Naropa, see (Kashner 2004).

No less important was the aura Ginsberg offered the larger Buddhist-American movement, associating it with the counterculture and with the growing emphasis on individuality and self-fulfillment.

Ginsberg amalgamated his Buddhist practices with the movement of return to nature and the building of agricultural communes.⁶⁴ In this, relatively short lived, experiment, Ginsberg was the initiator, fundraiser (mostly his own income) and community leader. Gordon Ball tells the saga of East Hill Farm, in upstate New York, as a story of both triumph and failure.⁶⁵ Ginsberg wished to create a Buddhist spiritual retreat, among other aims as means of rehabilitation for friends, among them his partner Peter Orlovsky, who were struggling with drugs and addictions. There were other resourceful personalities involved, but the commune was dependent on Allen's leadership and finances for survival, and he was the one capable of navigating between the different characters, offering a sense of unity and purpose. Ginsberg was, however, a very busy poet, performer, lecturer, crusader for free speech, and impresario, as well as an anti-war activist and founder of a center at Naropa, to name only some of his central activities. The East Hill Farm commune was Ginsberg's creation and it died when it became evident that he did not have the time and resources to continue leading and sustaining the place.⁶⁶

7. Conclusions

Ginsberg was a forerunner and set an example for a new era in both Jewish, and non-Jewish, American culture and religion. Although he did not create a new group, or turned himself into a guru, his spiritual pilgrimages served as a model and an inspiration. A number of his friends, including Richard Alpert, aka Ram Das, or Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, the founder of Jewish Renewal, led, specific groups. However, with all their influence they have not epitomized the era in the manner Ginsberg did. It was not merely his prominent involvement with so many aspects of the counterculture, from the political to the literary, that made his religious choices more important. Ginsberg's spiritual path did not focus on one idea or system and was rather eclectic and multi-faceted. In this, his style meshed well with the countercultural norms and suited the spirit of the generation for which Ginsberg served as an icon and a spokesperson. Serving as a symbol for Americans, who joined, in the 1960s–1970s, Western forms of Asian religions, Ginsberg was a forerunner of a growing movement. Buddhism in America attracted at that time larger numbers, mostly of the educated middle classes members of society, who aspired to move beyond their older confessional territories. These included Jews in disproportionate numbers, which was no coincidence. While in East, or South-East Asia, Buddhist groups were often associated with specific ethnic, linguistic, and cultural traditions, its Western proponents, perhaps especially Jews, have viewed their newly acquired faith as representing universal values and as transferring parochial divides. They have often interpreted that faith in almost abstract, non-theistic, terms, relating to it as a non-ethnic philosophical and meditative system. Adopting such an outlook, most Jewish practitioners have viewed Buddhism as a tradition that did not negate their origins and heritage. Jews who joined Buddhist groups were not apostates who have turned their backs on their ancestral tradition, and defected to Christianity, just as for Catholics joining Buddhism their choice was very different of that of Catholics turning to Protestantism. Sociologists of religion, such as Mark Chaves, have pointed out that more than half of adult Americans affiliate with religious groups in which they did not grow up.⁶⁷ Jews, according to some observations, have been at the forefront of spiritual explorations.⁶⁸ However, most Jews have been reluctant to renounce their original identity and wished to mesh with their new religious interests with Jewish self-awareness. In fact, Ginsberg, and others, did not have to think long and hard

⁶⁴ On the movement see (Miller 1999).

⁶⁵ (Ball 2011).

⁶⁶ See also (Morgen 2006, pp. 432–504).

⁶⁷ For example, (Chaves 2017).

⁶⁸ (Ariel 2011).

about the relation between their Jewish identity and their Buddhist practices. The Beat poet certainly viewed the practice of Buddhism as meshing well with his universal values, and his inclusive social and cultural aspirations. He saw it as bringing into completion a long and variegated quilt. In one of his last interviews, Ginsberg summed up his understanding of his true self:

I'm a Buddhist and I think the Buddhists would say there is no real permanent self in any case but there are many appearances of self, so I'm certainly a Beat poet, and I'm certainly Jewish, and I'm certainly gay, and I'm certainly an American, and I'm certainly a practicing meditator, and, I suppose, a part of the counter-culture in America . . . ⁶⁹

By that time, Ginsberg was not alone in asserting a varied and diverse identity. He epitomized a new Jewish self-awareness. Jews had ventured out of their quarters long before Ginsberg's spiritual journey, but there was a new element in the Beat poet's agenda and in that of others among his contemporaries. He did not give up on or ran away from his Jewishness, but rather added numerous layers, creating his own intellectual, cultural, political, and religious niche. In that, he signified a new era in American religion. An era marked by greater freedom to pick-and-choose, move from one community and spiritual system to another, and settle in a spiritual and communal niche of one's choice.⁷⁰

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⁶⁹ <http://ginsbergblog.blogspot.com/2011/11/bbc-face-to-face-interview-1994-asv21.html>.

⁷⁰ (Rambo 1993; Tweed 2006; Albanese 2007).

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