

“Mom’s Voice” and Other Voices: Civil–Military Relations as a Media Ritual

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This article looks at how sonic media rituals are created, performed, and negotiated to understand the ways in which citizens are persuaded to risk their lives in the name of the imagined national community. It does so through an analysis of the representation of civil–military relations on the veteran Israeli radio program *Kola Shel Ima* (“Mom’s Voice”). As shown, the performance of the *Kola Shel Ima* ritual is enabled because of off-air preparations, on-air conversations, and common values shared by ritual participants. Yet, at times various components of the ritual are challenged on-air. On a larger scale, the debate over *Kola Shel Ima* positions it as a ritual of flashing out or, conversely, a ritual of covering up.

Keywords: media rituals, civil–military relations, radio, Israel

“A bare-bones definition of a ritual,” explain Marvin and Ingle (1999), “is a memory-inducing behavior that has the effect of preserving what is indispensable for the group” (p. 129). In modern mass societies, such rituals of self-identification and preservation cannot be executed without the active involvement of the mass media. Hence, a substantial body of scholarship has looked at the formation of mass media rituals shaped as modern “invented traditions” that aim to emphasize belonging to social groups, legitimizing authorities, and disseminating cultural values (Hobsbawm, 1983). The radio, a medium closely identified with the rise of modern nationalism, offered a prime site for the exploration of national media rituals (Cardiff & Scannell, 1991). But is this still the case? Can radio broadcasts still offer relevant invented traditions that propagate communal values across mass national societies? As for the ongoing relevance of the veteran medium in our current lives, we are reminded by Mollgaard (2012) that

There is still no mass medium as ubiquitous as radio. . . . Our houses, cars, public spaces and phones all have receivers and we can now hear radio content online too. . . . In fact, radio has more than survived the critical challenges of the Internet, the

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Date submitted: 2015–09–01

¹ I wish to thank Shiran Goldstein, Danny Kaplan, Tamar Katriel, Noa Lavie, Oren Livio, Rivka Ribak, Eyal Zandberg, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article. I wish to thank Ella Anghel and Lilach Shaham-Katzir for their research assistance and three *Kola Shel Ima* staffers—Ehud Graf, the late Iris Goldman-Kahanovich, and Naomi Rabia—who agreed to share with me their thoughts and insights.

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computer and digital mobile entertainment; it has co-opted them as new platforms to expand its reach even further. (p. xi)

If radio is still alive and well—either on-air or online—what are the mechanisms through which sonic media rituals are (still) being created, performed, and interpreted? How does a radio broadcast construct a current image of ideal-type interrelations between key social institutions and infuse this depiction with emotional potency? How do different participants in a radiophonic media ritual negotiate their roles in it? And how can such a media ritual be interrupted or challenged? This article seeks to answer these questions through an exploration of a media ritual that addresses one of the quintessential components of national ideology: the citizens' army (Mosse, 1991). Thus, this exploration looks at the creation of current media rituals via an investigation of a media ritual that aims to galvanize social cohesiveness when the stakes are the highest—that is, when the nation-state strives to convince its citizens that risking their lives in the name of the (imagined) national community (Anderson, 1996) is a worthy sacrifice.

Specifically, this study explores the ways in which civil-military relations are represented and constructed through a unique media ritual: the Israeli weekly radio program *Kola Shel Ima* ("Mom's Voice"²), which has been aired on the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) radio station Galei Tzahal (IDF Airwaves) every Friday since 1979. The popular program fosters the relations between soldiers and their families in various ways: Parents and other relatives send their regards to their beloved soldiers via the program, the program's broadcaster interviews parents who talk about their children in uniform, and *Kola Shel Ima's* reporters air the voices of soldiers from remote military bases.

The *Kola Shel Ima* media ritual therefore illuminates the significant and ongoing presence of military discourse in the daily lives and consciousness of Israeli (mainly Jewish) citizens. Moreover, the mere existence of such a radio program helps normalize the presence of the military within society's most fundamental building block: *Kola Shel Ima* helps construct compulsory military service as a normative component in the routine existence of Israeli families. The message propagated through the program suggests that such families ought to devote themselves to aiding their sons and daughters in uniform in ways that would best serve the national effort. Hence, the *Kola Shel Ima* media ritual provides a unique opportunity to explore the construction of the dominant positioning of the military in a civilian society; at the same time, this study points to the lingering influence of the private sphere—represented by Israeli families—on security-related public discourse. Finally, the fact that *Kola Shel Ima* is such a meticulously structured media ritual illuminates the strategies through which participants deviate from the ritual's norms: The combination offered in this study—an exploration of aired contents, investigation of behind-the-scenes production memos, and interviews with media professionals involved in the production of *Kola Shel Ima*—helps decipher the ways in which such a media ritual is created, but also challenged and contested.

² All translations from Hebrew are mine; in Hebrew, the word *Ima* connotes both "mother" and "mom." I decided to translate *Kola Shel Ima* as "Mom's Voice" in order to capture the program's intimate and familial premise.

Media Rituals

Social rituals are forms of structured group behavior that construct individual and collective identities and shape human interrelations; they are symbolic instruments through which members of a given community manifest and perform their sense of belonging to the group. Social rituals help establish and reaffirm group hierarchies, and they delineate the differences between accepted and unaccepted social behaviors. Neiger and Roeh (2003) identify four common characteristics of social rituals: *repetitiveness*—rituals can only become significant once they are repeated; *liminality*—rituals exist within a differentiated time, distinct from the routine time surrounding them; *high social significance*—rituals use symbols that emblemize social significance; and finally, rituals are *collective activities*, shared by members of given communities.

Social rituals are characterized by a saturated use of symbols. The heavy reliance on symbols enables a multitude of social actors to take part in such rituals and to interpret these symbols according to their specific worldviews. The ability to take part in social rituals via the infusion of various meanings into these rituals explains why, on such occasions, the sense of social solidarity is intensified (Alexander, 1988). At the same time, social rituals can never be perceived as mere tools of conformity and cohesion (Rothenbuhler, 1998). Therefore, beyond all generalizations, the meaning and significance of specific social rituals, such as the weekly airing of *Kola Shel Ima*, can only be fully comprehended when considering the unique historical context in which the rituals were shaped and the history of their practice (Connerton, 1989).

The exact definition and nature of media rituals are often debated. Most conceptualizations follow the Durkheimian tradition and perceive media rituals as a form of social action; but whereas some scholars focus on the role of the media in representing rituals performed by other social agents (Dayan & Katz, 1992), other scholars emphasize the ritualistic elements that characterize the operation of the media themselves (Couldry, 2003). Scholars are similarly divided over the relative prevalence of media rituals: Some approaches perceive media rituals as exceptional phenomena—interruptions of the routine media flow by meticulously planned media spectacles, or else the intensive coverage and public discussion of events such as terror attacks and disasters (Katz & Liebes, 2007). In contrast, other researchers emphasize routine communication as a ritual in its own right (Carey, 1988).

Kola Shel Ima corresponds with the abovementioned definition of social rituals, given its repetitive and structured nature and its reliance on charged symbols. Although most participants in the ritual—Israeli radio listeners—play the part of a passive audience, *Kola Shel Ima* does feature several carefully chosen audience members (mostly soldiers and parents of soldiers), who assume a more active role in the ritual, as concrete manifestations of the imagined, collective Israeli family. In terms of frequency and magnitude, *Kola Shel Ima* could be considered a “midrange” media ritual: Although it is not as mundane as an hourly or daily newscast, it is not as rare and overtly value-laden as, for example, the annual live broadcasts of state ceremonies marking Israel’s memorial days and Independence Day.

The Social Construction of Military Service in Israel

The centrality of security considerations has characterized the Zionist endeavor since its inception. The cultural and political significance of the various branches of Israel's security establishment, and especially the IDF, has led to the rise of the study of civil-military relations as a prominent realm of academic inquiry, probing topics such as the interrelations between the military and the political establishment (Peri, 2006), the militaristic traits of Israeli culture (Kimmerling, 1993), and the influence of the military on social stratification (Levy, 2013), among others.

Following the 1948 establishment of the State of Israel and the creation of the IDF, military service became, in principle, mandatory for all 18-year-old citizens. In practice, however, the universal conscription law is not enforced on all Israeli citizens: Only Jewish men and women and Druze and Circassian men are actually called to service; therefore, the vast majority of Israel's Muslims (17% of the general population) do not serve in the military. Moreover, among the Jewish population, most religious women and most ultraorthodox religious men are administratively exempt from service. In 2011, approximately 50% of all 18-year-old Israelis were inducted (Rappaport, 2011).

Despite these demographic realities, in large parts of Jewish-Israeli society, military service is still perceived as the fundamental expression of the individual's commitment to the state and thus it delineates the boundaries of the political collective. This view has been supplemented by a body of psychological research into military service as a developmental stage. Many of those studies present a model of Israeli exceptionalism that contrasts the development of Israeli youngsters with that of their global counterparts, with some advantages and some drawbacks, but commonly concealing or toning down the personal and societal implications of the fact that this seemingly natural stage occurs within an organization dedicated to the administration of violence (Livio, 2011, p. 104).

The creation of a seemingly egalitarian citizens' military did not narrow the gaps between Israeli men and women. Nowadays, approximately one third of all new IDF conscripts are women (Sasson-Levy, 2011). And yet, in terms of the gender division of labor, despite some significant advancements made over the past two decades, most combat duties are still carried out by men, whereas most women are positioned in noncombat, low-prestige, often clerical positions wherein women recruits are mostly involved in "doing femininity in the traditional sense of the word" (Sasson-Levy, 2007, p. 500). The IDF is no different from most military organizations in its fundamental affiliation with and promotion of combat masculinity values and norms (Kaplan, 2006). Therefore, the dominance of the IDF as a key socializing agency intensifies the process by which patterns of gender relations experienced by the men and women who serve in the military are later carried into civil society (Herzog, 2004).

At the same time, it is important to note that the IDF gender division of labor interacts with other complex ethnic and class divisions. For instance, a study that probed the experiences of lower class male soldiers serving in "blue-collar" military positions such as drivers and cooks illuminated the variety of ways by which masculine identities are shaped through military service, depending on social class, ethnicity, and military role (Sasson-Levy, 2003). Within this context, the following study explores the way in which

Kola Shel Ima addresses, or rather disregards, issues of gender and class: Does the program illuminate the equalizing or rather stratifying effects of seemingly universal military service?

Mass Media and the Representation of Military–Family Relations

Studies that probe the complex interrelations among Israeli society, the military, and the media have looked at themes such as the development of the laws and norms that regulate the relations between Israeli journalists and the military (Nossek & Limor, 2011) and the presence and absence of critical discourse in the coverage of military operations (Meyers & Rozen, 2014; Neiger, Zandberg, & Meyers, 2010). And yet, most studies investigating the media-related aspects of Israeli civil–military relations have not yet looked at the role of the media in shaping and representing the relations between the Israeli family and the military.

Clearly, *Kola Shel Ima* is not the only cultural arena in which the ideal of the Israeli family's mobilization in support of the military is represented, reproduced, and at times challenged. Among many Israeli families, the enlistment of an 18-year-old son or daughter to the IDF is perceived as a natural coming-of-age ritual, marking the transformation of a teenager into an adult (Livio, 2011). Hence, the educational system, popular culture, and journalism all advance, in different ways and in varying degrees of enthusiasm, the dissemination of the "proper" model of relations among Israelis as individuals, the Israeli family, and the IDF.

Within this context, several studies have looked at how Jewish-Israeli families are mobilized to support and ease the integration of their children in the military through practices such as purchasing equipment and goods (beyond those provided by the IDF) and family weekend visits to remote military camps and posts where soldiers are stationed (Katriel, 1991). Other works have explored the various political reactions of parents to the drafting of their children to the IDF—from intensified parental support of the national, consensual military enterprise (Mazali, 1998), to fervent active opposition to various military activities, or to the overall dominance of the military in Israeli culture (Weinbaum, 2001).

Within the complex cultural apparatus that naturalizes and at times challenges the presence of the military in the lives of Israeli families, the IDF radio station Galei Tzahal plays a unique role. Galei Tzahal was established in 1950 with the purpose of broadcasting programs geared toward soldiers. By doing so, Galei Tzahal joined the already existing pattern of close relations between Hebrew radio and the Zionist endeavor (Penslar, 2003). The station's staff combines soldiers and civilians working together as reporters, news editors, announcers, and so forth. Currently, Galei Tzahal broadcasts various programs to the general public, as well as entertainment and military news magazines for soldiers. In 1993, Galei Tzahal established its offshoot Galgalatz, an easy-listening station airing music and traffic reports. The two military stations are among the three most heavily listened radio stations in Israel (Wertheim, 2014).

The concept of a military-operated radio station is, of course, not unique to Israel. Still, as explained by Soffer (2012), Galei Tzahal differs from the American Forces Network or the British Forces Broadcasting Service in several crucial aspects:

An army station that broadcasts to the civilian population—handling news and political coverage, which includes criticism of the political echelon—is undeniably problematic in the context of a democratic regime. Those unfamiliar with Israel's culture are hard-pressed to understand the very existence of Israeli Army Radio, its great popularity among the public, and its pioneering cultural and democratic legacy. (p. 226)

Throughout the years, various high-ranking military officers and politicians have tried and failed to close Galei Tzahal or privatize the station because of its "civilian" characteristics, charges of its assumed leftist-secular political slant, and the need to fund part of the station's operation costs via the IDF budget (Mann, 2013). Although Galei Tzahal has been accused of reflecting a left-wing, liberal political outlook, it could be argued, conversely, that the station's unique hybrid existence actually supports Israeli militarism, as it legitimizes the presence of the military in the civilian sphere and promotes the military's liberal image (Mautner, 2001).

Research Objectives and Design

The corpus of studied data was composed of 72 *Kola Shel Ima* editions (108 broadcast hours) aired between 2004 and 2015. The focus on these 12 years resulted from several reasons: The longevity of the program made it nearly impossible to systematically study its contents throughout its complete broadcast tenure. This challenge was exacerbated by the lacking condition of the Galei Tzahal archive, which does not carry recordings of *Kola Shel Ima* aired before the early 2000s. Finally, I decided to focus my analysis on this time frame because two current crucial components of the *Kola Shel Ima* formula were introduced in the mid-1990s: Until that time, *Kola Shel Ima* was a studio-based program offering only prerecorded interviews with soldiers' parents. During that period, the program started airing live interviews with soldiers' parents; also, in 1994, *Kola Shel Ima* started airing live "field broadcasts" from military bases, featuring the on-air voices of soldiers.

The first component of the sample consists of programs recorded at random through the years—approximately four programs per year. The second component consists of recorded programs aired on "charged" dates and unique occasions: *Kola Shel Ima*'s anniversary editions, programs aired during major military operations, programs aired before major holidays, and programs aired before Israel's Memorial Day for the Fallen Soldiers. The analysis of these contents was triangulated through the exploration of three additional sources of information: First, with the permission of Galei Tzahal staffers, I gained access to a database of *Kola Shel Ima* production memos and planned lineups that illuminated the program's production decision-making logic. Second, I conducted interviews with several key Galei Tzahal personnel: radio veteran Ehud Graf, who broadcasted *Kola Shel Ima* between 1984 and 1994; the late Iris Goldman-Kahanovich, who was the chief producer and editor of *Kola Shel Ima* between 1994 and 2011; and Naomi Rabia, who has been broadcasting *Kola Shel Ima* since 2013. Third, I tracked media coverage of *Kola Shel Ima* alongside uses of the phrase "*Kola Shel Ima*" in various media texts to understand the ways in which the program is used to publicly discuss civil-military relations in Israel. Finally, having completed the first draft of the article, I asked interviewees Graf and Rabia for their comments on the text as a means of member-checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 314–316).

Analysis

The approach I implemented toward the analysis of *Kola Shel Ima* as a media ritual is anchored in the understanding of communication as a process through which communities share and negotiate information, beliefs, and values (Carey, 1988); it delineates the fact that media products are not created in a vacuum, but rather within interpretive contexts that reflect cultural preferences and offer media professionals metanarratives they use to present and decipher recent occurrences (Bird & Dardenne, 2008). Within this context, it is essential to stress that a cultural school approach does not ignore functionalist or critical aspects in the study of communication, but rather aspires to incorporate them within the interpretive framework: An informed inquiry into the operation of the media as a ritual of meaning-making necessitates consideration of the changing and contrasting functions of the media in society, as well as to the inherent advantages of various political agencies in this interpretive process.

My initial goal was to map the program's fundamental thematic building blocks. To do so, I adopted a narrative inquiry approach (Polkinghorne, 1995), viewing each *Kola Shel Ima* edition as a unique narrative, based on a plot that develops across time and space and features several distinct protagonists. After the major themes and patterns were detected, I could identify changes and variations within the prevailing model; given the structured format of the program, it was especially important to track the presence of challenging and alternative voices in *Kola Shel Ima* and the contexts that facilitated their appearance. Finally, following the fundamentals of the cultural school in communication studies, I aimed to point at the relations between the narratives constructed through *Kola Shel Ima* studied editions and other narratives, extending beyond the program itself. I did so by looking at the use of *Kola Shel Ima* as a discursive trope in other media texts and by relating *Kola Shel Ima* distinct narratives to larger mainstream Jewish-Israeli metanarratives.

Time

In terms of frequency and prevalence, the *Kola Shel Ima* media ritual is an integral part of the Jewish-Israeli weekly routine, as it has been aired on Friday at 11:00 a.m. throughout the past 36 years.³ Within the Jewish-Israeli weekly routine, Friday morning/afternoon provides a temporal bridge between the secular and the holy, that is, between the work week and the sacred Shabbat, which begins Friday afternoon/evening. This scheduling positions the *Kola Shel Ima* media ritual at a liminal intersection, offering a "separation from the everyday flow of activities, involving a passage through a threshold state or *limen* into a ritual world removed from everyday notions of time and space" (Abrahams, 1997, p. ix). The positioning of *Kola Shel Ima* as such a bridging entity helps blur supposedly inherent distinctions between home and the military; this tendency is further amplified when the *Kola Shel Ima* media ritual meshes the "coordinates" of private family time (birthdays, anniversaries) with those of military time (enlistment/discharge dates, military promotion dates) and national religious time (national holidays, days of national mourning).

³ *Kola Shel Ima* was originally aired between 11:00 a.m and noon. In 1994, the program was extended by one hour, and was aired until 1:00 p.m. In 2008, it was returned to its original 11:00 a.m. to noon slot.

Furthermore, *Kola Shel Ima* broadcasters help bridge the gap and possible tension between home and the military through the timelines they construct during interviews with parents of soldiers. The routine format of the interviews features a chronological flow that starts, in some cases, with the military service of the parent, moves onward to the soldier's service, and ends with the soldier's plans once s/he completes the service. This narrative timeline is structured through a back and forth movement between military and family, featured as two complementary entities: The broadcaster often asks the parent about the influence of his/her own service on the offspring's decision regarding the military service. Hence, for instance, the October 21, 2011, edition of *Kola Shel Ima* featured an interview with the father of a soldier who served as an officer in an elite IDF *reconnaissance* unit. His son, a gifted basketball player, could have continued his career in sports while serving in a noncombat IDF position. Yet, the son chose to follow in his father's footsteps and serve in the same elite unit. Following a familiar *Kola Shel Ima* narrative pattern, parts of the conversation focused on the influence of the father's past legacy on his son's current choices. This focus on positive home influences on current military service is complemented by a discussion of the ways in which positive military experiences influence soldiers at home and help direct their route into their future civilian lives.

Space

Social rituals do not only create communal time, they also construct understandings of collective spaces. This goal may be achieved through a ritualistic delineation of the boundaries between holy and secular spaces, or through the creation of an imagined shared space, extending across all the spaces in which participants perform the ritual. *Kola Shel Ima* is aired from Galei Tzahal's studios in Jaffa, at the center of Israel. Yet, I would argue that the program aspires to construct an imagined sonic space that extends beyond the studio and fuses private and public spaces and spheres. The original format of *Kola Shel Ima* relied mostly on phone calls between *Kola Shel Ima*'s broadcasters and soldiers' mothers; these calls were, in most cases, recorded in advance and edited before airing (E. Graf, personal communication, May 4, 2015). As mentioned, since 1994, *Kola Shel Ima*'s formula has changed, with the initiation of field broadcasts in which Galei Tzahal staffers visit soldiers in military bases and remote outposts.

The introduction of field broadcasts and live interviews has shaped *Kola Shel Ima* as a program that takes place simultaneously across three spaces: First, there is the field, which is a public space where soldiers dwell and operate; second, there is the home, a private space where mothers, fathers, and other family members dwell and operate. Finally, the radio studio is positioned in this imagined spatial configuration as a mediating entity, a space that enables the conjunction or reunion between soldiers and their families. The imagined "existence" of the program across these three locations is further stressed in the program's line-up: *Kola Shel Ima* opens with the voices of soldiers in the field welcoming the listeners to the broadcast, and it ends with their voices sending regards to family members and friends back home, which is to say that the imagined scope of the *Kola Shel Ima* space is delimited at the beginning and end of each program. Throughout the broadcast, the narrative focus shifts between live interviews with parents at home talking about their children-soldiers and interviews with soldiers in the field talking about their service and sharing anecdotes. The broadcaster in the studio acts as the master of ceremony: S/he navigates the ritual and enables communication between home and field and between the private and the

public. The essential mediating role of the broadcaster stresses the notion that "home" and "field" are two dichotomous yet complementary entities.

The ritualistic and symbolic nature of this act, by which the broadcaster "enables" the conjunction between "field" and "home," became far more evident with the advancement of media technologies, as explained in an interview with Iris Goldman-Kahanovich, *Kola Shel Ima's* former chief producer and editor:

Kola Shel Ima was supposed to become extinct with the appearance of the cell phone. But this didn't happen . . . the program is no longer about sending regards to the kid who's in the frontlines and hasn't been home for five weeks. It's more about talking about your amazing son, it's about sharing with the world how great he is. And this will never change, even if she [the mother] speaks with him [the soldier] eight times a day . . . it's this need to take pride and to share this parenting experience. This program offers some kind of group therapy for mothers. (I. Goldman-Kahanovich, personal communication, September 25, 2004)

In his discussion of invented traditions, Hobsbawm (1983) explains that "objects or practices are liberated for full symbolic and ritual use when no longer fettered by practical use. The spurs of cavalry officers' dress uniforms are more important for 'tradition' when there are no horses" (p. 4). When *Kola Shel Ima* first aired in 1979, the program actually connected soldiers and family members who were away from one another for long periods of time. In a mobile phone and online era, *Kola Shel Ima's* insistence on continuing the tradition of bringing together "field" and "home" via the mediation of the studio delineates the performative nature of this act: Rather than responding to an actual need, the program now features these on-air segments as demonstrations of ideal-type relations between "home" and "field."

Protagonists

Off-air preparations. The selection of on-air participants who take part in the *Kola Shel Ima* ritual is of course not random. The sample of parents who wish to be interviewed is slanted by the fact that these are parents who contact the program because they want to share the details of their children's military service with a mass audience. On the soldiers' end, the sample of aired voices is structured through a negotiation between the wishes of specific military units, the needs of the IDF, and editorial considerations. Although the majority of IDF soldiers serve in noncombat roles, *Kola Shel Ima* decisively focuses its attention on combat units (N. Rabia, personal communication, June 24, 2015). Moreover, at times the choice of the specific units that are heard on-air is also influenced by the military's need to improve the image of units that are perceived as unattractive by new recruits (A. Benayahu, former Galei Tzahal commander [2001–2007], personal communication, April 6, 2005).

Wolfenden (2012) reminds us that there is no "straight translation from off-air to on. There are modifications needed to the off-air self in order for it to meet the needs of radio presentation and avoid transgressions" (p. 138). The preparatory off-air interviews play an important role in the construction of "proper" on-air parent interviews: As customary in the media industry, the staffers highlight for the

program's broadcaster the main points of interest to be mentioned during the on-air interview: a mother's plan to join her son during an annual race of his infantry brigade, a soldier's unique hobby, and so on. But the construction of the proper interview featuring a "proper parent" goes beyond that: For instance, the staffer finds out whether the parents of the soldier are divorced and instructs the broadcaster whether the other parent ought to be mentioned or avoided on-air. During the preparatory interviews, parents are also asked not to address political issues in the on-air interview (I. Goldman-Kahanovich, personal communication, September 25, 2004). The guiding *Kola Shel Ima* ethos does not view compulsory military service as a political issue, and this view is mostly embraced by the parents. Yet, this theme might at times be alluded to in on-air interviews. For instance, a January 23, 2004, edition of *Kola Shel Ima* featured an interview with a mother who immigrated with her family to Israel from Mexico. The mother talked proudly about her son's combat service, but then added, "Still, it's a pity that's the way we define Israeliness." This brief comment echoes ongoing political and academic criticisms leveled at the overtly dominant role of the military in Israeli civil society (Sheffer & Barak, 2013).

In other cases, despite preparatory guidance, parents address issues that are more clearly defined as "political" by the Jewish-Israeli consensus and thus challenge the program's guiding ethos: The May 20, 2005, edition of *Kola Shel Ima* was aired a few months before the Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip that involved the controversial coerced evacuation of all Jewish settlers living there. The program featured an interview with a mother who lived at the time with her family in one of those settlements. At the end of the interview, the broadcaster asked the customary concluding question, "And what do you wish for Asael [the son]?" to which the mother answered, "Eight of his close friends from our region are together with him in officers' course. I wish that all of them will return in peace, and that they will have a home to return to."

In parallel to the preparatory off-air interviews with parents, *Kola Shel Ima* staffers conduct preparatory visits to the IDF units that will take part in the next broadcast. Just like in the case of the parents' preparatory interviews, soldiers and broadcasters are instructed to stay clear of political issues. For instance, a March 11, 2005, production memo detailed the complex life story of a soldier who is a son of a Palestinian father and a Jewish mother. At the end of the report, a staffer added the following reminder to the broadcaster: "Important!!! Remind him [the interviewee] that soldiers and political views, or attacking the establishment do not go together. Talk with him more about his mixed identity."

On-air representations. The next phase in the process of the construction of *Kola Shel Ima's* main protagonists takes place when the program is actually aired. The term that best encapsulates the role of a proper on-air *Kola Shel Ima* parent is the Hebrew word *de'aga*, which carries a dual meaning as it infers both care and concern. Parents who participate in *Kola Shel Ima* are routinely asked about their *de'aga* toward their son or daughter in uniform: *Kola Shel Ima* parental care is usually manifested through preparation of favorite foods when the soldier comes home for a weekend leave and weekend visits when s/he does not. The concern component of *de'aga* is constantly negotiated on-air. This is because *Kola Shel Ima* parents are expected to support their (in most cases) son's decision to serve in a combat unit, but at the same time they are also naturally concerned about the possible dangers entailed in such service. One mother who discussed her son's oath of enlistment ceremony during an on-air interview depicted this ambivalence vividly:

It was the middle of the winter, and it was freezing. And the soldiers, all they wore were shirts, no coats or sweaters. We were all in coats, and still we were cold. . . . Like all the other parents, we brought with us a box filled with schnitzels and candies. . . . It was a very emotional occasion. It's the first time it really sinks in. The home's responsibility is now supposedly lessened. Now, the State takes over the responsibility for your son's life. (personal communication, July 9, 2004)

Other parents convey a less stoic attitude toward this supposed responsibility exchange between the family and the military/state and openly discuss their fears and concerns. Yet, the parents' on-air *de'aga* does not undermine their overall approval of their offsprings' combat service.

In terms of the parental gendered division of labor, the program's highly recognized name is, of course, *Kola Shel Ima*—"Mom's Voice." And indeed, in its early days, the program featured almost solely mothers who talked about their sons in uniform and often detailed the way in which they took care of their sons' well-being. In recent years, *Kola Shel Ima's* representation of gender roles has somewhat changed because of conscious editorial decisions and because there are nowadays more combat women soldiers and more mothers who have themselves served in the IDF (N. Rabia, personal communication, June 24, 2015). At the same time, the program still reflects ongoing reliance on traditional gender roles. For instance, during the 2006 Second Lebanon war, two parents were interviewed: a mother who at the time had six children serving in the IDF, and a father whose three sons were all serving as Air Force pilots. The mother was asked to explain what it feels like to be paralyzed by consuming *de'aga* [concern]. The father explained that the passing month of war was difficult:

Broadcaster: And this is so frightening.

Father: No, no. All in all, it's not that bad. We believe in them [the sons]. Don't forget I was in the military for many years, and then I served as a police officer. So, you [I] lived in this kind of milieu, so you [I] trust this milieu.

Broadcaster: So, if this protects you, what about your wife?

Father: Oh, for her it's very difficult. It's clear. It's good that there are instant messaging and cell phones. It's very difficult for a mother. . . . There's nothing like mom. The father, it's something else.

Kola Shel Ima's ongoing negotiation of gender roles and perceptions is further manifested in its address of Israel's annual LGBT "pride week." In recent years, the program has marked this event with interviews with gay and lesbian soldiers and with their parents. The June 12, 2015, *Kola Shel Ima* "pride week" edition featured an interview with Nurit, the mother of Sachar, who was born female and is currently serving in the military as a male officer, making him the IDF's first transgender officer. When discussing Sachar's high school years, his mother said she was hesitant about Sachar's service in the IDF "not because we oppose the military. Actually, we are quite a militaristic family. . . . I was afraid he'll get hurt. But he was extremely determined, and he even said that he'll become an officer." Note that the "hurt" mentioned in this quote does not allude to the physical risks involved in military service, but rather to possible reactions of fellow soldiers.

Sachar was inducted to the IDF as a female soldier and is currently going through sex-change surgical procedures. Yet, according to his mother, from the beginning, his (female) commanders were supportive of his wishes to be addressed as a man. Sachar was assigned the military position of a social science diagnostician, who interviews and observes future recruits; traditionally, this is perceived as a female position. One interview anecdote, mentioned in passing, managed to illuminate the tensions between the IDF's professed aspirations to advance gender equality and its long heritage of institutional male chauvinism: As mentioned, according to Nurit's narrative, Sachar's commanders enthusiastically embraced his male identity. Yet, when he completed his training, his commanders apologized that they could not provide him with an IDF social science diagnostician name tag bearing the Hebrew suffix indicating that he is a man; according to the mother, the female commanders explained that male name tags do not exist.⁴ In sum, this analysis demonstrates how the boundaries of the parent interview are constantly outlined and yet negotiated on-air; moreover, even interviews that seem to follow the expected narrative patterns might hint at unsettling realities.

The soldiers' main role within this on-air media ritual is to provide the "feeling of the field." The dominant role of the *Kola Shel Ima* soldier is performed by mostly male, almost always combat soldiers who are visited by *Kola Shel Ima* broadcasters in the field. The visited unit is expected to convey rugged "authenticity" (Goffman, 1959), and thus the soldiers are asked to share with the broadcaster and the audience the unit's amusing folklore tales, chants, and songs. The focus on this kind of field authenticity and its construction is sensed every time the broadcast shifts from the studio to the field: At each transition, as part of their "authenticity work" (Peterson, 2005), the soldiers are expected to produce a lot of joyful noise. When they fail to do so, they are encouraged on-air by *Kola Shel Ima's* field reporters to raise their volume.

Although conveying a notion of field authenticity is a crucial component in the creation of the *Kola Shel Ima* media ritual that contrasts and connects home and field (via the studio), it is not without its risks. Hence, the soldiers' authentic expression of their military experiences needs to be regimented: A 2005 memo titled "What Not to Do On-Air" asked *Kola Shel Ima* field reporters to make sure that the soldiers sang only one verse of their unit's anthem and that they did not reveal any classified military information on-air. Other guidelines include the following:

- Do not share poop and piss stories on-air. No need for stories about how you pee in a tank . . . please save this from the listeners.
- Especially in these tense days, when the friction with the Palestinian population is so great and there are so many problematic stories—make sure to discuss the item [with the soldiers] before you go on-air. It is essential to make sure they do not talk about abusing Palestinians, looting, entering homes of Palestinians . . . delaying pregnant women [at checkpoints] and so on.

⁴ In fact, there are few male social science diagnosticians in the IDF.

Hence “field authenticity” is constructed and curbed by editorial, aesthetic, and political considerations. For the field interviewees to perform their role as “proper soldiers” in the *Kola Shel Ima* ritual, they need to omit some aspects of the current Israeli soldiering experience.

Interruptions, Challenges, and Redresses

The performance of the *Kola Shel Ima* media ritual is enabled because of off-air preparations, on-air conversations, and most important, perceptions and values shared by most ritual participants. And yet, at times, various components of the ritual, or even the ritual in its entirety, are challenged on-air. This might happen because of external circumstances, planned challenges, or simply because of the negotiated nature of the communicative process. In cases of external interruptions, *Kola Shel Ima* staffers have to decide whether to continue the media ritual as planned, to change its tone or contents, or to cancel it altogether. For instance, during the second Intifada (2000–2004), *Kola Shel Ima*’s staff had to decide how to address it in light of the mounting death toll:

Once [before the Intifada], if a soldier was killed, wow, we would consider cancelling the broadcast. But nowadays, it’s not very pleasant to say, but if we would cancel the broadcast, or air a [special] “[terror] attack edition” every time two soldiers are killed—then, I would not have a program. It’s so sad, but that’s the shitty reality we live in. So I’m saying that if the day before [the broadcast] soldiers are killed, and the funerals take place during our airing time, then of course Orly [the broadcaster] will address this in the opening segment, and of course the first few songs will be mellow [English word used], because after all, this is a soldiers’ program. But it will take a really big event for the program to change in a drastic way. (I. Goldman-Kahanovich, personal communication, September 25, 2004)

This conscious decision that “the show must go on” does not mean that *Kola Shel Ima* insulates itself from the possible lethal realities of military service. The program does address these challenging themes, but it does so through the integration of the discussion of sacrifice, sorrow, and grief into the program’s well-established narrative patterns. Hence, through the years, *Kola Shel Ima* broadcasters have conducted dozens of interviews with bereaved parents, especially on the *Kola Shel Ima* edition aired on the Friday preceding Israel’s Memorial Day for the Fallen Soldiers. As discussed, parent interviews mostly follow a chronological flow, starting with the soldier’s childhood and ending with his/her postservice plans. The construction of such a flow constantly negotiates continuation and disjunction: The shifts between teenage life and combat military service and then back to civilian life are significant and often uneasy. *Kola Shel Ima*, alongside other agents of mainstream Israeli-Jewish culture, strives to normalize these major shifts and present them as part of a routine lifespan continuum (Lomsky-Feder & Ben-Ari, 2008). In *Kola Shel Ima*, this is done through such means as emphasizing the parents’ own military service; also, parent interview narratives often emphasize how “proper” parental upbringing leads children to choose “proper” military roles and how positive military experiences help shape caring family members and resourceful citizens.

A bereaved parent interview interrupts this narrative in the most basic sense: There is no continuation in the life story of a fallen soldier. Furthermore, such a charged interview might even undermine the core belief that the fallen soldier's ultimate sacrifice was justified. As mentioned, *Kola Shel Ima's* basic strategy of dealing with such themes is reliance—with necessary adaptations—on existing narrative patterns. This tendency to narrate loss and grief through the use of familiar *Kola Shel Ima* symbolic vocabulary was evident in an on-air interview with Hedva Fisher, the mother of the late staff sergeant Gila'ad Fisher, who was killed in Gaza. The mother talked about her mixed emotions regarding the military service of her younger daughter Reut, who joined the IDF six months after the death of Gila'ad:

It's hard to see a uniform at home, again. I remember the first laundry of [Reut's] uniform that I hung outside. It was hard. It sharpened the absence, the missing-out, the absence of Gila'ad. But at the same time, we were so proud of her for the path she chose, and for the continuation. (*Kola Shel Ima*, January 19, 2007)

Like schnitzels (and other home-cooked dishes), "laundry" is one of the salient signifiers of the care component in the *de'aga* vocabulary of *Kola Shel Ima*: Parents of soldiers (i.e., namely mothers) are expected to perform domestic tasks that manifest their care and reaffirm their affiliation with the ideal of the family that is mobilized in support of its soldier; by extension, the on-air discussion of these acts of familial devotion legitimizes the pivotal role the military plays in Israeli society. But, in this case, the discussion of washing laundry connotes both continuation and disjunction: In this instance, the military uniform reaffirms the ongoing commitment of the family to military service; yet, it also reminds audiences that the concern component of *de'aga* might be materialized in the worst possible way.

Following the discussion of external interruptions and internal challenges that are anchored in *Kola Shel Ima's* own planned line-ups, we reach internal challenges that are inherently unplanned and, thus, are harder to contain. Such challenges occur when *Kola Shel Ima* participants decide to ignore or breach the ritual's conventions. The most extreme breach I found in the studied sample occurred on August 6, 2004: *Kola Shel Ima's* edition opened, as usual, in the field, with the voices of combat soldiers welcoming the audience to their base and to the show. The speaker did so in Arabic (which the broadcaster did not understand), and then switched to Hebrew. The Arab text welcomed the audience to the Beit Lid base of the "army of occupation." The Hebrew text promised, "During the next two hours we will give you the impression that it's a lot of fun serving here. We'll make you think we are really having a ball. Enjoy listening!" This opening undermined the basic conventions of the program and its traditional opening segment: *Kola Shel Ima's* vocabulary does not, of course, acknowledge the term *army of occupation*, and the authenticity expectation assumes that the soldiers are not artificially producing their enthusiasm. This massive breach required a decisive act of repentance; halfway through the broadcast, the commander of the unit apologized at length on-air.

Kola Shel Ima as a Cultural Signifier

Given that *Kola Shel Ima* has been aired throughout the past 36 years on leading media outlets and that it addresses key social institutions in Jewish-Israeli society, it is no surprise that *Kola Shel Ima*

has become, in and of itself, a salient symbol of civil–military relations in Israel. Moreover, the mere phrase *Kola Shel Ima* has become highly identified in Israeli popular discourse. All of this makes the discourse about the program a potent site for a discussion of changing perceptions of family–military relations in Israel.

The program has been covered by Israeli media favorably on its anniversaries. On several other occasions, *Kola Shel Ima* has been mentioned, directly and indirectly, in more critical contexts. The main criticisms leveled against the program focus on questions of authenticity: First, it is argued that *Kola Shel Ima* does not present the actual, authentic experiences of parents of soldiers, or rather that it depicts such realities only partially. Columnist Yael Paz-Melamed (2003) wrote,

Last Friday, I happened to listen to the program [*Kola Shel Ima*], and all the time I was bothered by the question of why me and my friends do not feel or think like the mothers from the program. “Yes, it’s hard,” they hesitantly admit, “there are sleepless nights, but all and all we are proud of the kid and wish him all the very best.” That’s it? That’s everything? We don’t need to be told fairy tales. This is not the entire story, this is only the external façade of this treacly and unrepresentative program. This is not a real mom’s voice, and it’s about time that we’ll get some programs and serious reporting on this difficult topic. (p. B2)

The second, interconnected criticism leveled at the program claims that it is inauthentic in its description of the service experiences of IDF combat soldiers. Satirist Nilly Oshrov (2004) read the following verse entitled *Kola Shel Ima* on a popular radio talk show:

It’s so great kid that you’re back for a weekend leave.
Everything is almost ready.
There’s chicken in the oven, and mushroom lasagna,
and there’s a fresh supply of cookies in the box . . .
And I’ll take care of your filthy socks . . .
That whole occupation thing—it’s dirty business.
Never mind, I’m just joking.
In our family—we don’t talk this way.
No, we don’t teach foul language.
No occupation, no checkpoints, definitely no kill verifications . . .
Your laundry is on your bed, clean and folded
by a mother who loves and cares and asks no questions.

Conclusion

In his analysis of mediatized rituals, Cottle (2006) reminds us that “symbols, emotion, rhetoric and performance are constitutive of human communication (and communicative action) and these remain available for ritual expression across time and place” (p. 413). In this vein, this article has looked at the construction and performance of the *Kola Shel Ima* media ritual, its use of symbols, and the emotions that

this ritual echoes and engenders. Although the program has undergone various changes through the years, its core mission of reaffirming the supposedly symbiotic relations between Israeli families and the Israeli military has endured since *Kola Shel Ima* was first aired in 1979. The fact that thousands of Israeli parents have contacted the program through the years, and are still doing so, illuminates the wide public identification with the ideal-type social models that are constructed on-air by *Kola Shel Ima* participants.

In their exploration of media events, Alexander and Jacobs (1998) argue that such large-scale rituals should not be understood simply as occasions through which hegemonic codes and values are expressed and reaffirmed. Rather, the meanings of such rituals are forged through a process of interaction and competition between groups and individuals in the symbolic public forum of the media. As demonstrated throughout this article, this assertion regarding large-scale "media events" seems to also apply to far more mundane "midrange" media rituals: Although the codes and conventions of the *Kola Shel Ima* media ritual are well established and clearly defined, they are at times negotiated on-air because of changing circumstances and the live participation of broadcasters, parents, soldiers, and others.

In many respects, *Kola Shel Ima* echoes traditional perceptions regarding civil-military relations that have characterized mainstream Jewish-Israeli society in previous decades: the utter importance of military service, and especially combat military service; the assumed "melting pot" qualities of military service and its positive effects on those who serve; and the need of families of soldiers to support their sons and daughters in uniform (Harel, 2013). For instance, debates over topics such as the activities of the IDF in the occupied territories, the lingering internal social effects of the Israeli-Arab conflict, or draft avoidance among various sectors of Israeli society are not extensively addressed in the program. This is exactly why each deviation from the *Kola Shel Ima* formula is so significant: On an empirical level, such divergences point at possible challenges to the prevailing civil-military ethos of mainstream Jewish-Israeli society. On a conceptual level, such deviations illuminate the ways in which firmly structured media rituals could be challenged or even disrupted. Such insights could be carried on toward the study of other media rituals taking place under various circumstances.

On a larger cultural scale that extends beyond the program itself, the debate over *Kola Shel Ima's* authenticity suggests that there are two fundamentally opposing ways of articulating the relations between *Kola Shel Ima* and society at large: The first approach views *Kola Shel Ima* as a ritual of *flashing out*. According to this perception, the program brings to the fore of the public stage in-depth depictions of Israeli parenting and Israeli soldiering; the program's highly structured formula and reoccurring features enable audiences to experience an intimate acquaintance with the intricacies of Israeli family-military interrelations. The second, contrasting approach views *Kola Shel Ima* as a ritual of *covering up*. According to this perception, the main effect of the program is a systematic concealment of the actual realities of Israeli parenting and Israeli soldiering; hence, the true hegemonic nature of family-military interrelations in Israel could only be exposed through deviations from the program's formula or via external critical analysis.

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