



**ELTE**  
EÖTVÖS LORÁND  
UNIVERSITY

*British Association for Jewish Studies Annual Conference 2021*  
*07/07/2021*



*Jewish Theological Seminary*  
*University of Jewish Studies*

# Judaism in Mind

## *Cognitive approaches* *to rituals, to rabbis, and to rebbes*

Tamás Biró

tamas.biro@btk.elte.hu, <http://birot.web.elte.hu/>

*ELTE Eötvös Loránd University*

birot@or-zse.hu, <http://www.or-zse.hu/>

*Jewish Theological Seminary – U. of Jewish Studies*



ELTE  
EÖTVÖS LORÁND  
UNIVERSITY

# Overview



*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*

1. A cognitive science of religion approach to rituals:  
the model of Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley (1990)  
and its linguistic underpinnings
2. Jewish rituals and a revision of the Lawson – McCauley model
3. Ritual dynamics according to McCauley and Lawson (2002):  
rabbis and rebbes.



ELTE  
EÖTVÖS LORÁND  
UNIVERSITY

# Overview



*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*

- 1. A cognitive approach to rituals:  
the model of Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley (1990)  
and its linguistic underpinnings**
2. Jewish rituals and a revision of the Lawson – McCauley model
3. Ritual dynamics according to McCauley and Lawson (2002):  
rabbis and rebbes.

# Lawson and McCauley 1990 (revised): *a model of religious rituals*



*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*

- Cognitive science of religion:

approaches *religious* phenomena as *biological* phenomena,  
*viz.* products of the human mind

*Instead of historical phenomena, social phenomena, etc.*

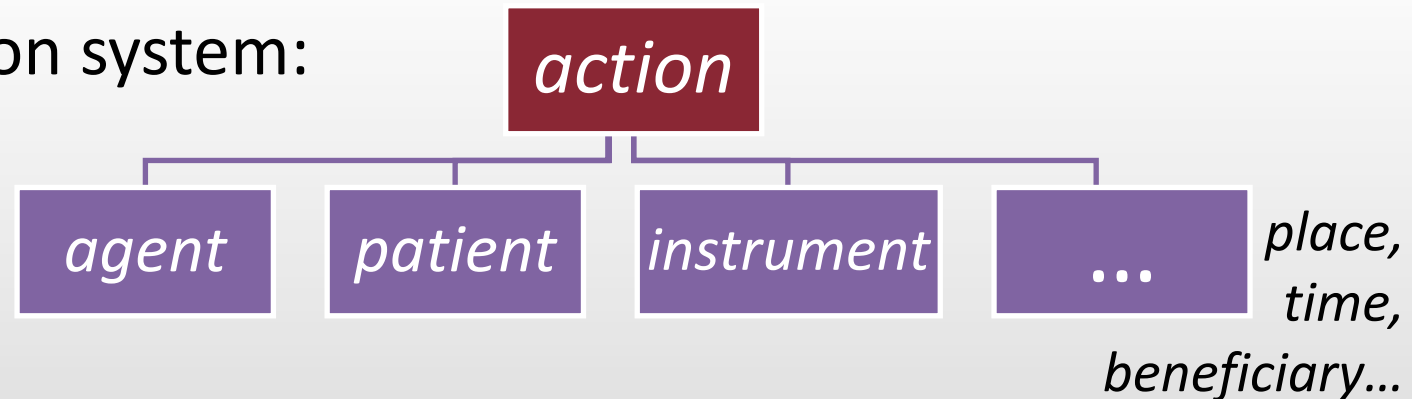
- Religious phenomena = everyday phenomena *with a twist.*
- Rituals = actions *with a twist.*
- Twist here: some culturally postulated superhuman agent is present.

# Lawson and McCauley 1990 (revised): *a model of religious rituals*



*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*

- Cognitive science of religion:
- Rituals = actions *with a twist*.
- Action representation system:



- Twist here: some culturally postulated superhuman agent is present.

# Lawson and McCauley 1990 (revised): *a model of religious rituals*

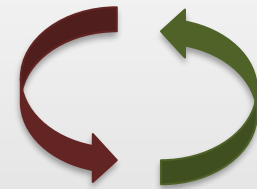


*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*

- Cognitive science of religion – motivation:

- (1) *John broke the window with the hammer.*
- (2) *John broke the window.*
- (3) *The hammer broke the window.*
- (4) *The window was broken.*
- (5) *The window was broken by John.*
- (6) *The window was broken by the hammer.*
- (7) *The window was broken with the hammer.*
- (8) \* *The window was broken with John.*

**Syntactic positions:  
subject, object, etc.**



**Semantic/ thematic roles:  
agent, patient, etc.**



ELTE  
EÖTVÖS LORÁND  
UNIVERSITY

# Lawson and McCauley 1990 (revised): *a model of religious rituals*



*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*

- Cognitive science of religion – motivation:
- Action representation system universally mirrored by human language:
  - Subject  $\approx$  agent: wilful initiator of the action.

— **PSA** : *principle of  
superhuman agency* —

- Object  $\approx$  patient: passive undergoer of action.
- Instrument: contributing to the result of the action without will.
- Etc.

*But in fact, more complex than that...*

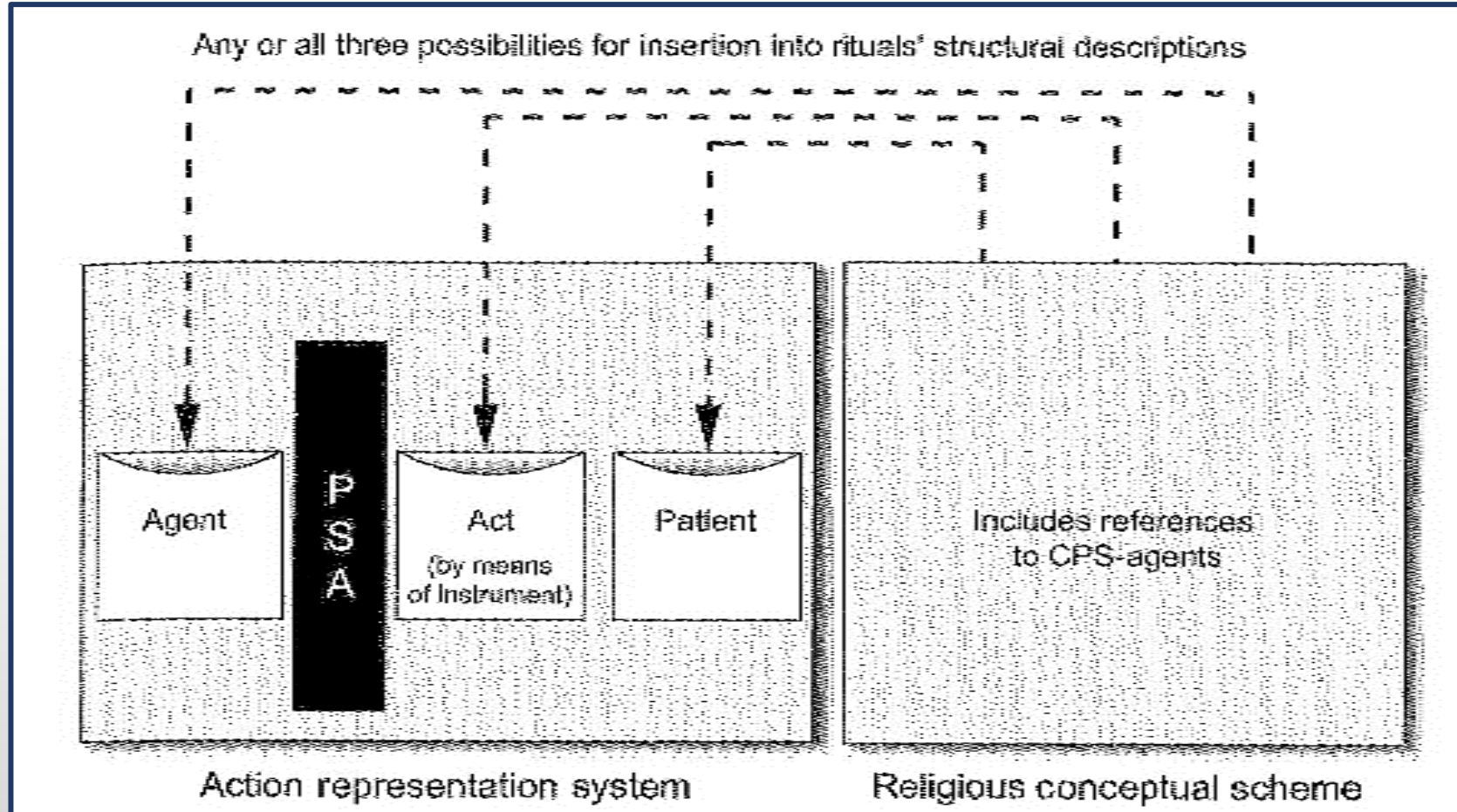


ELTE  
EÖTVÖS LORÁND  
UNIVERSITY

# Lawson and McCauley 1990 (revised): *a model of religious rituals*



*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*



*(McCauley and Lawson 2002, p. 27.)*



# Lawson and McCauley 1990 (revised): *a model of religious rituals*



*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*

- Examples:

*John broke the window with the hammer.*

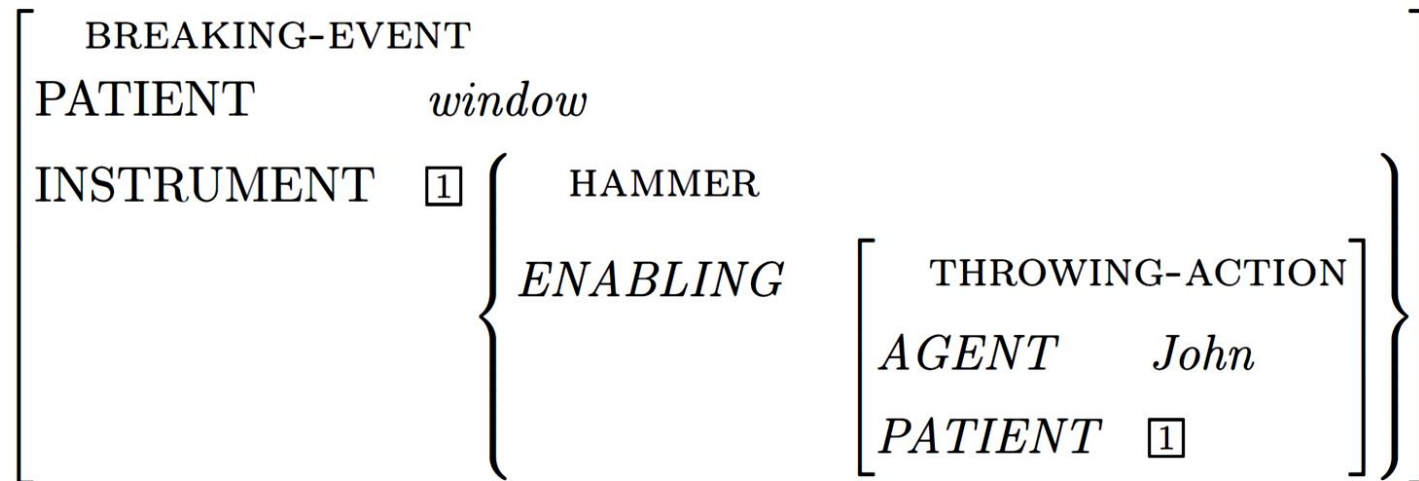
BREAKING EVENT	
AGENT	<i>John</i>
PATIENT	<i>window</i>
INSTRUMENT	<i>hammer</i>

# Lawson and McCauley 1990 (revised): *a model of religious rituals*



*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*

- Examples: a prior, enabling action → agent represented by a proxy  
*A hammer, thrown by John, breaks the window.*



# Lawson and McCauley 1990 (revised): *a model of religious rituals*



*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*

- Examples: ritual = action with a twist

*John feeds the child.*

GIVING-ACTION	
AGENT	<i>John</i>
RECIPIENT	<i>child</i>
PATIENT	<i>food</i>

*John offers food sacrifice  
to the local deity.*

GIVING-ACTION	
AGENT	<i>John</i>
RECIPIENT	<i>local deity</i>
PATIENT	<i>food</i>



ELTE  
EÖTVÖS LORÁND  
UNIVERSITY

# Overview



*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*

1. A cognitive approach to rituals:  
the model of Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley (1990)  
and its linguistic underpinnings
2. **Jewish rituals and a revision of the Lawson – McCauley model**
3. Ritual dynamics according to McCauley and Lawson (2002):  
rabbis and rebbes.

# Lawson and McCauley 1990 (revised): *a model of religious rituals*

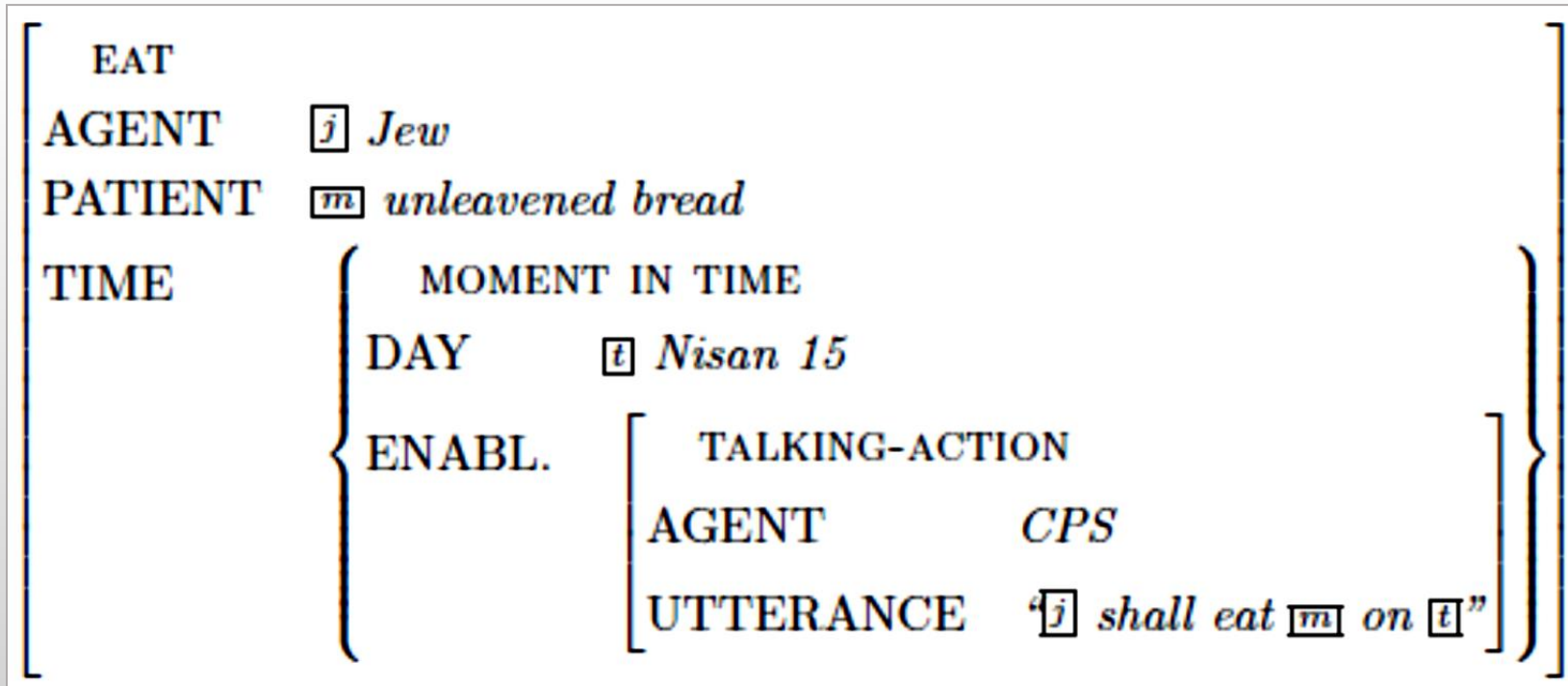


*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*

Biró (2013). 'Is Judaism boring?'

- Examples from Judaism:

*Eating matzah on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Nisan*



Novelties with respect to the  
Lawson – McCauley model:

1. Slot for TIME.
2. Prior enabling narratives.
3. Modalities:  
obligation, prohibition.



# Lawson and McCauley 1990 (revised): *a model of religious rituals*



*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*

- Examples from Judaism:

Biró (2013). 'Is Judaism boring?'

## *Immersion in the mikveh*

IMMERSION							
AGENT	<i>woman or convert</i>						
INSTRUMENT	<table border="0"> <tr> <td>WATER</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>QUANTITY</td> <td><i>40 seah</i></td> </tr> <tr> <td>SOURCE</td> <td><i>natural</i></td> </tr> </table>	WATER		QUANTITY	<i>40 seah</i>	SOURCE	<i>natural</i>
WATER							
QUANTITY	<i>40 seah</i>						
SOURCE	<i>natural</i>						

**Where is the  
superhuman agent?**

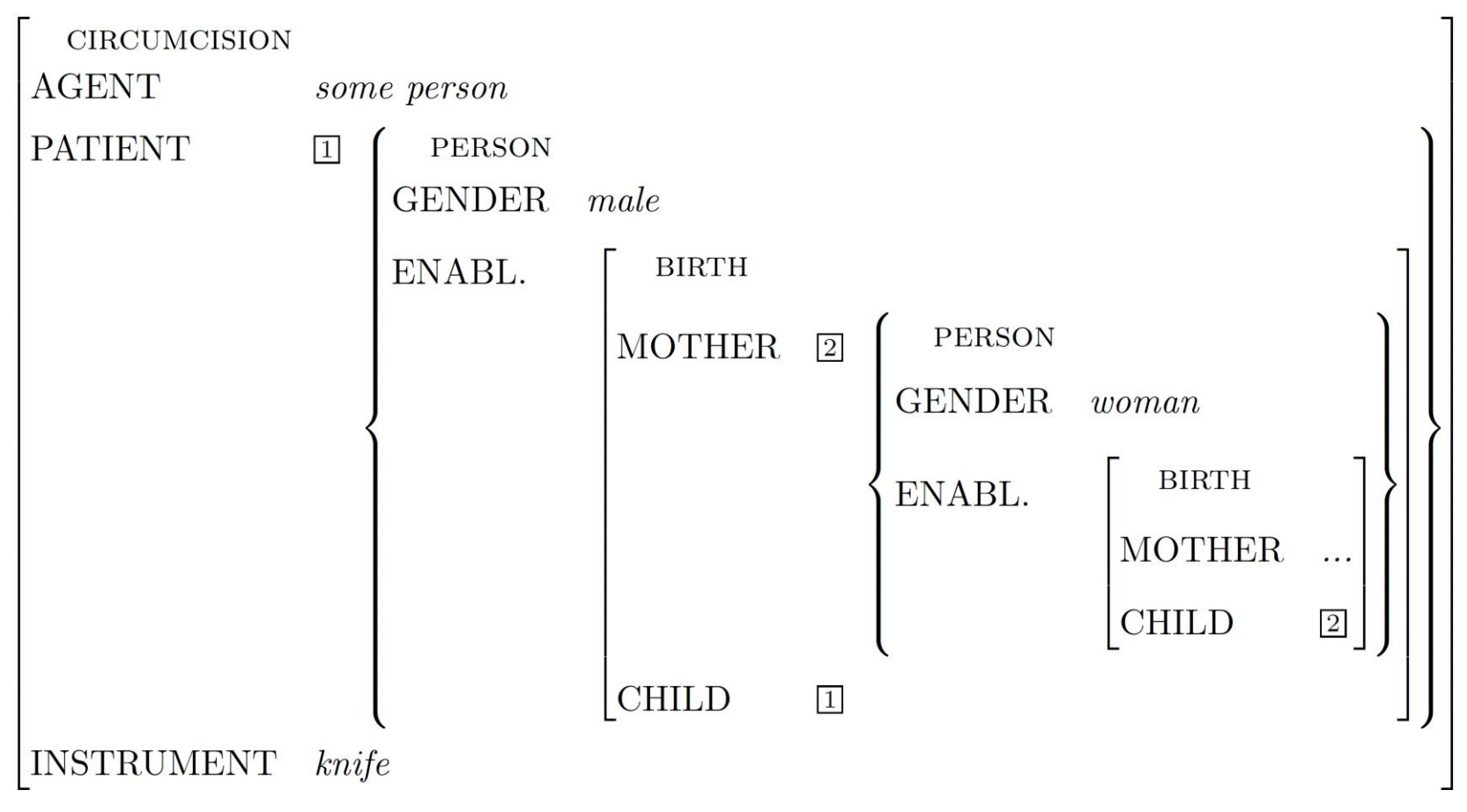
# Lawson and McCauley 1990 (revised): *a model of religious rituals*



*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*

- Examples from Judaism:      *circumcision*

Biró (2013). 'Is Judaism boring?'



**Halakhically correct  
representation**

**Where is the  
superhuman agent?**



ELTE  
EÖTVÖS LORÁND  
UNIVERSITY

# Lawson and McCauley 1990 (revised): *a model of religious rituals*



*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*

(Biró 2013, 'Is Judaism boring?' ; *and elsewhere*)

## Lawson & McCauley 1990 applied to Judaism:

- requires references to time and place,
- requires negations for prohibitions
- requires *enabling states of affairs*  
(instead of / beside *enabling rituals*)
- + prior narratives  
(enabling non-ritualistic past actions)
- ...

Many actions considered as Jewish rituals  
lack a superhuman agent in their structure!





ELTE  
EÖTVÖS LORÁND  
UNIVERSITY

# Overview



*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*

1. A cognitive approach to rituals:  
the model of Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley (1990)  
and its linguistic underpinnings
2. Jewish rituals and a revision of the Lawson – McCauley model
3. **Ritual dynamics according to McCauley and Lawson (2002):  
rabbis and rebbes.**

# Harvey Whitehouse



*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*

## Modes of religiosity:

- Fieldwork on Pomio Kivung in Dadul village  
(a cargo cult in Papua New Guinea)
- Observes a “splinter group outburst”  
with new high-arousal rituals.
- *Doctrinal modes* vs. *imagistic mode.*
- “The Pomio Kivung ritual system is unusual in that it includes *no* special agent rituals.” (McCauley and Lawson 2002: 180)

# McCauley and Lawson 2002



*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*

## Types of rituals:

- Form:

*special agent*



*special patient  
special instrument*

- Sensual pageantry:

*high*



*low*

- Frequency:

*low*



*high*

# McCauley and Lawson 2002



*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*

## Types of rituals:

- Form:

*special agent*



*special patient  
special instrument*

- Sensual pageantry:

*high*



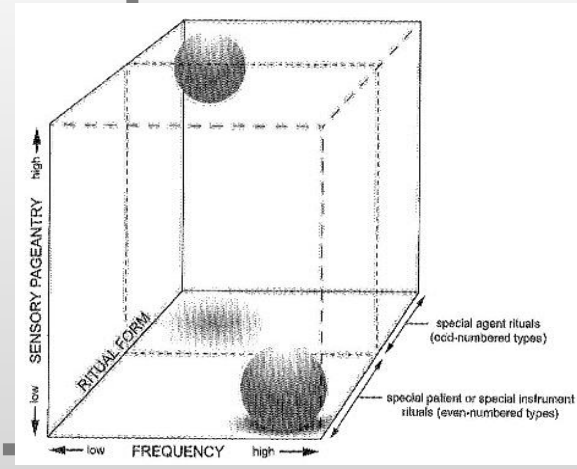
*low*

- Frequency:

*low*



*high*



# McCauley and Lawson 2002



Jewish Theological Seminary  
Jewish Studies

- Comparable amount of both types of rituals: *balanced ritual system*.
- Too frequent high pageantry special agent system: sensual overload.
- Too few sp. agent rituals → „tedium effect” → „splinter group outbursts”.

## Types of ritu

• Form:

*special agent*



*special patient*  
*special instrument*

• Sensual pageantry:

*high*



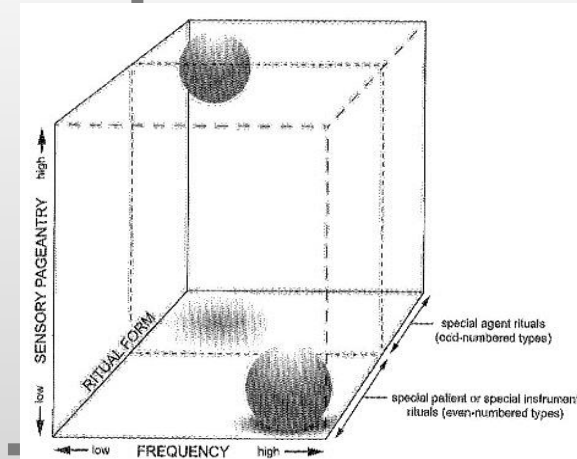
*low*

• Frequency:

*low*



*high*



# Hypothesis



*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*

Judaism lacks a balanced ritual system,

therefore:

- *tedium effects?*
- *splinter groups?*

*Well, yes and no.*

*It is more complicated than that.*

**CRISIS?**

CRISIS?

# “Modes of Judaism”



*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*

- „Theologically (halakhically) correct” Judaism  
*might encode an unbalanced ritual system. Yet,*
- Folk religion  
*compensating for that with other rituals and beliefs.*
- Folk interpretations of Judaism
- “Splinter groups” with charismatic leaders as a “proxy” for the divine  
*introducing new rituals and interpretations.*
- Revising the McCauley – Lawson theory is also an option.

# The hasidic tish:



*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*

- A *high-arousal* and *special-agent* GIVING-EVENT.



GIVING EVENT

AGENT  
RECIPIENT  
PATIENT

*rebbe  
hasid  
food*



Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Boyan\\_tish,\\_Sukkot\\_2009.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Boyan_tish,_Sukkot_2009.jpg)

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%D7%94%D7%A8%D7%91%D7%99\\_%D7%9E%D7%91%D7%95%D7%98%D7%95%D7%A9%D7%90%D7%9F\\_%D7%91%D7%A2%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%9B%D7%AA\\_%D7%94%D7%A9%D7%95%D7%9C%D7%97%D7%9F\\_%D7%94%D7%98%D7%94%D7%95%D7%A8.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%D7%94%D7%A8%D7%91%D7%99_%D7%9E%D7%91%D7%95%D7%98%D7%95%D7%A9%D7%90%D7%9F_%D7%91%D7%A2%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%9B%D7%AA_%D7%94%D7%A9%D7%95%D7%9C%D7%97%D7%9F_%D7%94%D7%98%D7%94%D7%95%D7%A8.jpg)

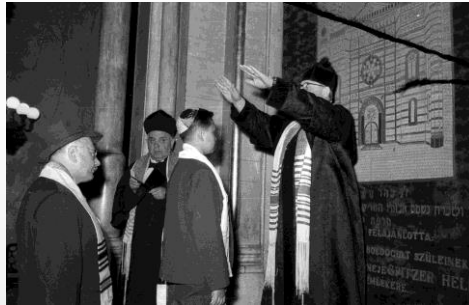


# The changing / re-interpreted role of the contemporary rabbi



*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*

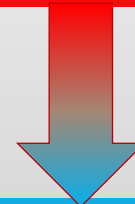
- Is the rabbi a “Jewish priest”?
- Is the rabbi a “Jewish phd”?



- Priestly blessing pronounced by post-war non-orthodox Hungarian rabbis:

- József Schweitzer (1922-2015)
- Alfréd Schöner (1948-)
- István Darvas (1974-)

*special instrument*



*special agent*





ELTE  
EÖTVÖS LORÁND  
UNIVERSITY

# Overview



*Jewish Theological Seminary  
University of Jewish Studies*

1. A cognitive approach to rituals:  
the model of Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley (1990)  
and its linguistic underpinnings
2. Jewish rituals and a revision of the Lawson – McCauley model
3. Ritual dynamics according to McCauley and Lawson (2002):  
rabbis and rebbes.

**The cognitive science of religion opening new ways  
for interpretation in the study of Judaism and its history.**



**ELTE**  
EÖTVÖS LORÁND  
UNIVERSITY

*British Association for Jewish Studies Annual Conference 2021*  
*07/07/2021*



*Jewish Theological Seminary*  
*University of Jewish Studies*

*Thank you for your attention!*

Tamás Biró

tamas.biro@btk.elte.hu, <http://birot.web.elte.hu/>

*ELTE Eötvös Loránd University*

birot@or-zse.hu, <http://www.or-zse.hu/>

*Jewish Theological Seminary – U. of Jewish Studies*