

Meaning in Life at the Crossroads of Personal Processes and Cultural Crisis

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Conceptual Background on Meaning in Life

This chapter takes a broad look at individuals' meaning in life (MIL) at the cross-roads of personal processes and cultural crisis. The quest for meaning is considered a central and unique human motivation. The meaning this book addresses is not the meaning *of* life, or ultimate meaning, which relates to a broad theological issue concerned with the “big questions of life” and universal human concerns. Rather, the book is concerned with MIL, which refers to the personal experience of one's meaning of life. In the words of Viktor Frankl, “what matters is not the meaning in life in general, but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment” (1963, p. 131).

Throughout the history of mankind, people have been extensively preoccupied with existential questions, such as “Why are we here? What is my purpose?” These universal questions deal with the core concern of what it means to be human and have inspired various myths, religions, arts, and philosophies in different cultures around the world and across time and traditions. Answers to these questions are embedded at the heart of human existence and comprise the force that motivates people—from the first question children ask—“Why?”—to make sense of themselves and the world.

A significant well-known theoretical and applied conceptualization of MIL is Viktor Frankl's existential analysis and logotherapy (Frankl, 1966). Frankl (1969) posited that human beings have a “will to meaning,” which he defined as a powerful drive to find significance and meaning in their lives. According to this perspective, human psychology cannot be understood solely in terms of learning history or drives, but essentially through existential concerns such as freedom, meaning, and purpose. He saw the search for MIL as the main motivation for living, and he argued that people can

find meaning even under the most difficult circumstances. Frankl based his model on the notion of nonreductionism as a heuristic principle, implying that each aspect or dimension of a human being—the physiological, the psychological, and the noetic (or spiritual)—represents a layer of properties and functions that interact with each other but nonetheless are ontologically separate and independent of each other (Frankl, 1966). However, each of these is an aspect of what constitutes a human person and therefore none can be discarded or ignored in our quest to truly align psychology with what it means to be human (cf. Russo-Netzer, Schulenberg, & Batthyany, 2016). Several subsequent scholars similarly suggested that people have an inherent need to find MIL (Baumeister, 1991; Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Klinger, 2012; Maslow, 1968).

The existential tradition, traced to Kierkegaard (1843/2016) and Nietzsche (e.g., 1888/2007), has also assumed the existence of an existential need for meaning that relates to the question of how a person can find or create meaning in a seemingly meaningless and random universe. Existential thought refers to several overarching existential universal concerns or “givens,” which include death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. Each of these concerns may reflect a potential source of anxiety for the individual (e.g., Yalom, 1980). The four concerns may evoke death anxiety, freedom anxiety, isolation anxiety, and meaninglessness anxiety (Wong, 2010). A lack of meaning, for example, may lead to boredom, anxiety, and disengagement, described as an existential vacuum (Frankl, 1977). This may be reflected in hopelessness, futility, emptiness, fragmentation of personal identity, mental health problems, depressiveness, and overall adjustment disorders (e.g., Batthyany & Guttman, 2005; Bruce et al., 2011; Damon, 2008). In a similar vein, Becker (1975) and exponents of terror management theory (TMT) have viewed meaning as a fundamental ingredient that buffers existential anxiety and mortality salience (e.g., Grant & Wade-Benzoni, 2009; Landau, Kosloff, & Schmeichel, 2011; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999).

Baumeister and colleagues (1991; Baumeister & Vohs, 2002) suggested that MIL involves four basic needs: purpose, values, a sense of efficacy, and self-worth. According to this conceptualization, *purpose* enables people to find meaning in their life events from their connection to possible future events, mainly goals and fulfillments. *Values* refer to justification for one's past, present, and future actions. *Efficacy* affords people with a sense of being in control and capable of making a difference. *Self-worth* refers to people's need to feel that they are worthwhile. This model of four needs for meaning

has been suggested as a framework for understanding how people make sense of their lives (e.g., Baumeister, 1991; MacKenzie & Baumeister, 2014).

Within current conceptualizations of well-being, MIL has become a central component. Current conceptualizations discuss the distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (e.g., Friedman, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Ryff, Singer, & Dienberg Love, 2004; Waterman, 1993). *Hedonia* involves pursuing happiness, positive affect, life satisfaction, and reduced negative affect (Huta & Waterman, 2014; Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008). *Eudaimonia* supports the idea that well-being is achieved when individuals live in accordance with their “true selves,” which includes experiencing self-actualization, meaning, virtuous purpose, and growth at the individual level (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff et al., 2004; Waterman, 1993) as well as commitment to shared goals and values at the social level (Massimini & Delle Fave, 2000). Although distinct, both theoretically and empirically (e.g., Huta & Ryan, 2010), they are considered to have complementary functions, and both are required for well-being and happiness (Huta, 2016). In line with the purported centrality of eudaimonia to well-being, extensive research has provided evidence that the presence of meaning is beneficial and central to various aspects of well-being and happiness (e.g., Park et al., 2010; Ryff, 1989; Steger, 2012; Steger, Kashdan & Oishi, 2008). Thus, interest in and research on MIL has steadily grown during the past three decades.

Meaning in Life: Current Conceptualization and Research

The current common integrative conceptualization offers a conception of MIL that includes three central dimensions: comprehension, purpose, and mattering (George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016; Steger, 2012). Specifically, MIL “may be defined as the extent to which one’s life is experienced as making sense, as being directed and motivated by valued goals, and as mattering in the world” referring to these three dimensions respectively (George & Park, 2016; p. 2). Based on this conceptual foundation, mounting empirical research in recent decades supports the theoretical and philosophical foundations indicating the centrality of MIL to human experience and underscores its importance as a contributing factor for human flourishing and as a coping mechanism for adjustment to life’s adversities and suffering (e.g., Czekierda et al., 2017; Damon, 2008; Janoff-Bulman & Yopyk, 2004; Linley & Joseph, 2011; Melton & Schulenberg, 2008; Ryff & Singer, 1998;

Steger, 2012; Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009). For example, people high in MIL report more positive future orientations (Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, et al., 2008), hope, and optimism (e.g., Mascaro & Rosen, 2006; Steger & Frazier, 2005; Steger et al., 2006) and enjoy their work more (e.g., Bonebright, Clay, & Ankemann, 2000). They also appear to cope better with life's challenges, demonstrating less avoidance coping and more emotion-focused coping (Edwards & Holden, 2001) as well as less depression (e.g., Mascaro, Rosen, & Morey, 2004) and vulnerability to psychopathology (Debats, 1999). Higher levels of MIL have also been found to be longitudinally associated with preventive behaviors such as physical activity among older individuals (Lampinen et al., 2006).

Recent years have further witnessed a growing sophistication in assessing MIL (e.g., George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016) and new conceptualizations regarding the place of MIL within general models of well-being (Huta & Ryan, 2010; Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002). As part of this surge in research, increased attention has been given to the understanding, assessment, and practice of MIL in numerous arenas and contexts, such as psychotherapy, education, and organizations (e.g., Batthyany & Russo-Netzer, 2014; Hill, 2018; Park & George, 2018; Russo-Netzer et al., 2016; Vos, 2018; Wong, 2014). So, how do we go about pursuing meaning, which is so central in our lives?

The Construction and Sources of Meaning in Life

As discussed earlier, searching for meaning is conceived as fundamental to human life and hence there is a natural motivation (will to meaning) to pursue this important and central human endeavor (e.g., Frankl, 1963). However, other scholars also view the search for meaning as a warning sign that meaning has been lost (e.g., Baumeister, 1991). Empirical research has found that searching for meaning is associated with less life satisfaction (e.g., Park et al., 2010) and greater anxiety, depression, and rumination (e.g., Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan & Lorentz, 2008). Yet studies have also shown that searching for meaning is also associated with positive outcomes such as open mindedness, drive, and absorption (Steger et al., 2006; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan & Lorentz, 2008). It has been suggested that search for meaning may operate as a schema, helping the individual to identify and arrange

information relevant to making accurate meaning-in-life judgments (Steger, Oishi, & Kesebir, 2011).

Furthermore, meaning can be constructed through a process of meaning-making, in particular in the face of challenging life circumstances such as adversity, crisis, and trauma (e.g., Park, 2010; 2013). According to the meaning-making model, perceived discrepancies between appraised meaning of a particular situation and global meaning (i.e., general orienting systems of beliefs and goals) create distress, which generates meaning-making efforts to reduce it. Meaning can also be prioritized as a value in itself. In this sense, prioritizing meaning reflects individual differences in the extent to which meaning is implemented via the decisions individuals make about where to invest effort in the context of everyday life (Russo-Netzer, 2018). Such prioritizing has been found to be connected with happiness, life satisfaction, and gratitude among adults. This suggests that focusing on and prioritizing engagement in activities that are inherently value-congruent may serve as a tangible and concrete mechanism for instilling life with meaning and increasing well-being.

Varied conceptualizations regarding sources of MIL have been offered, and these share commonalities as well divergence. For example, Emmons (1999) identified five such sources: personal strivings, achievement, intimacy, religion/spirituality, and generativity. Wong and Ebersole, respectively, each pointed to somewhat similar factors: a personal meaning profile, achievement, relationships, religion, and self-transcendence (Wong, 1998); and life narratives, life work, relationships, religious beliefs, and service (Ebersole, 1998). Furthermore, across empirical studies, personal relationships have been found to be a central source of meaning (e.g., Debats, 1999; O'Connor & Chamberlain, 2000).

Interestingly, the sources of meaning vary throughout the life span (e.g., Lambert et al., 2010; Prager, 1998; Schnell, 2009) and vary according to demographic factors such as gender and socioeconomic status (e.g., Debats, 1999; Schnell, 2009). Furthermore, meaning has been argued to carry different functions for different individuals, and, in particular, three main broad functions have been suggested: recognition and discerning of signals and patterns in the environment; communication, as part of language and sharing of information; and controlling oneself, which involves self-regulation of emotion and behavior through considering possibilities and cultural expectations (see MacKenzie & Baumeister, 2014).

Despite the burgeoning research and emerging understanding of MIL, its sources, and its contribution to human functioning, knowledge is still to a large extent focused on the individual from a psychological point of view. Yet the experience of meaning and its manifestations may evoke different understandings in different cultures, and sources and processes of MIL are probably moderated by culture (Steger, Kawabata, Shimai & Otake, 2008).

Meaning and Culture

Culture affects individuals through language, norms, symbols, rituals, values, the experience of time, schemas, beliefs, and more. Essentially almost all aspects of meaning-making, from the way we perceive and interpret ourselves and our life circumstances and events, to the way we construct our goals and values or turn to different sources for MIL, are embedded in a sociocultural context. This underscores the interplay between individuals and the sociocultural context in which they live and operate (Baumeister, 2005; Chao & Kesebir, 2013; Chiu & Hong, 2007). The uniquely human search for meaning is shaped and influenced by forces and frameworks embedded in culture, and, in turn, individuals' search for meaning also simultaneously recreates and affects culture (Chao & Kesebir, 2013). The dynamic interplay between meaning and culture is evident when a shared network of meaning is being constructed, distributed, and reconstructed among a collective of interconnected individuals which constitute a given culture (Chiu & Hong, 2007). Culture, thus, represents a framework or a web of meaning and enables individuals to function in a given ecology (Fiske, 2000).

It has been suggested that the interplay between meaning and culture can be characterized broadly through two main perspectives (Chao & Kesebir, 2013): *Comprehensibility* ("small-m-meaning"), and *matterings, significance, or worth* (*capital-M-meaning*). *Comprehensibility* ("small-m-meaning"), emphasizes a feeling of life that "makes sense" and that it represents a coherent whole (George & Park, 2016; Heintzelman & King, 2014; Martela & Steger, 2016). Detecting connections, associations, and regularities in the environment is an adaptive capacity shared by all creatures (e.g., Geary, 2004). For example, a series of laboratory studies found that the feeling of meaning often emerges when reliable patterns exist in environmental stimuli (Heine et al., 2006; Hicks, Schlegel, & King, 2010). It was also found that exposing

people to examples of discrepancy and incoherence in nature or society decreased their sense of purpose in life (Heintzelman, Trent, & King, 2013), as well as their willingness to engage in purposeful pursuits and goal-directed actions (Kay et al., 2014). In this sense, culture plays a critical role in enabling individuals to organize fragmented daily experiences, detect links and patterns, and integrate them into a coherent narrative of self and life (e.g., Chao & Kesebir, 2013; Heine et al., 2006).

The second perspective relates to the dimension of *mattering, significance, or worth (capital-M-meaning)*, which refers to “the degree to which individuals feel that their existence is of significance, importance, and value in the world” (George & Park, 2016, p. 206; see also Martela & Steger, 2016; Mascaro et al., 2004). It relates to ultimate meaning (e.g., Frankl, 1969) and has to do with the “big questions of life” that relate to humans’ universal concerns about the fragility and limitations of life and their value (e.g., Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). In this sense, culture can provide individuals with a moral and value-related compass or framework for such exploration and a connection to entities beyond oneself and beyond one’s daily existence. Individuals’ sense of belonging and individuals’ sense of identity both rely on the interplay of these two aspects of culture to provide individuals with MIL that is strongly embedded in symbolic creations of a specific culture. The two perspectives interact as “small-m-meaning” involves lower level, more concrete everyday connections, such as through language and norms, while “capital-M-meaning” addresses more complex and abstract connections, such as values and beliefs (e.g., values, beliefs about the self and the universe and the place of the self in this universe), both reflecting the importance of the mutual relationships between meaning and culture (e.g., Chao & Kesebir, 2013).

Empirical research has started to examine cultural differences related to MIL. For example, while the search for meaning was found to be negatively related to the presence of meaning among US participants, it was positively related to the presence of meaning among Japanese individuals (Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008). This suggests that the search for meaning may evoke different understandings in different cultures (Steger, Kawabata, Shimai & Otake, 2008). Similarly, individuals in collectivist cultures tend to prioritize goals in their lives that take the larger community into account and are attuned to others, while people in individualist societies tend to emphasize more personal goals and preferences (e.g., King & Watkins, 2012).

Beyond specific cultural differences, the general sociohistorical context that includes worldwide global processes and values also affects the individual search for meaning and the specific MIL that individuals adopt. Such a general cultural context is often referred to as *Zeitgeist* (the spirit or time of an age) and it provides a sociocultural framework for the human and universal questions of MIL in addition to the effects of specific cultures. Such is the current *zeitgeist*—the post-modern context. The current post-modern context has brought with it new challenges for the human quest for meaning. Individuals today operate in an increasingly diverse and dynamic reality, so that life is less predictable than in previous centuries (International Labour Organization, 2016) and hence *comprehensibility* (“*small-m-meaning*”) is more difficult to attain. In addition, processes of cultural and traditional deconstruction and fragmentation are taking place, causing people to experience increased feelings of loneliness, meaninglessness, and alienation (Sperry & Shafranske, 2005) and making the universal human quest for MIL, the *mattering, significance or worth* (*capital-M-meaning*) aspect more flexible, open, and free yet perhaps also more challenging.

The Post-Modern Sociocultural Context

The contemporary pluralist and complex post-modern sociocultural context has challenged existing processes of continuity, socialization, and certainty as well as the transmission of traditional patterns (Buxant, Saroglou, & Tesser, 2010). The post-modern challenge to notions of truth has led to a deep questioning of existing meaning structures including values, moralities, norms, and expectations as well as distinctions between natural and supernatural, science and faith (Toit, 2006). This is characterized by a gradual weakening of traditional structures, increased secularization, and the “disembedding of social institutions” (Giddens, 1991, pp. 16–21). Instead, the post-modern context emphasizes individualism and more specifically reflects a “massive subjective turn” (Taylor, 1991, p. 26) from an externally influenced life to one that is more attuned to a person’s inner experience.

In addition, forces and processes such as industrialization, urbanization, and the decline in the moral authority of religion (Cushman, 1990) have left people more alienated and exposed than before. Against this background,

ontological certainties that rely on cultural meanings have weakened as fundamental structures and are often now “particularized” and “mutable” (Moules, 2000), setting the stage for disengagement, a deconstruction of values, and a loss of meaning. This may create an “empty self” that yearns to compensate for what has been lost (Cushman, 1990) and that hungers for personal meaning, a void that contemporary meaning-making systems are attempting to fill. Individuals are faced with the challenge of personally searching for and constructing their own life meaning with less clear guidance of traditions and modern social structures.

The dismantling of established rules and stable institutions and values, as well as the emphasis on relativism, fragmentation, and self-selection has led to fundamental uncertainties concerning what is right and wrong, real and unreal, good and bad, and meaningful versus meaningless. Conversely, “fast-pace,” “instant,” fluid, and boundless have become dominant motifs in our post-modern discourse. Such fluidity, relativism, and uncertainty rupture individuals’ sense of purpose and value in life and often culminate in a void in individuals’ meaning systems (Crescioni & Baumeister, 2013).

This void may be associated with distress and anxiety but it can also pave the way for changes, transformations, and creativity (Bauman, 1998; Lyon, 2000). This void further propels the people of today to search for meaning in an attempt to address such existential concerns as “Who am I?,” “What is the purpose of my life?,” and “What can make my life worth living?,” “Where can I belong?,” and “Should I belong?” Such searches are reflected in a host of communal as well as personal ways, such as engaging in searching processes within institutional religions, turning to radical movements, engaging in self-led secular processes of spiritual transformation, getting involved in service to society, advocating for sustainability and environmentalism, joining new religious movements, and more. People may also cope with such voids of meaning by escaping through behaviors such as consumerism, substance abuse, or addiction to the fast pace and intensive shower of stimuli (Gur-Zeev, 2010).

In this chapter we suggest that, instead of major overarching cultural schemes, institutions, or narratives for MIL which used to be prominent and dominant, such as religion, contemporary societies offer a large variety of narratives, termed here *master narratives of meaning* that individuals may adopt and adapt to fulfil their need for MIL and have clarity and stability and, specifically, to satisfy their need for comprehension, purpose, and mattering.

Master Narratives of Meaning in a Post-Modern Context

Scholars have suggested that the significant role of the sociocultural context in affecting individuals' functioning is evident in the construction of master narratives, largely defined as "culturally shared stories that guide thoughts, beliefs, values, and behaviors" (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 323). As such, they may serve as frameworks for common ground around cognition, emotion, and actions (Hammack, 2008; McAdams, 2006; McLean & Syed, 2015; Thorne & McLean, 2003) providing guidance and direction for individuals' personal developmental processes as well as social power. McLean and Syed (2015) suggested several core principles that characterize master narratives, such as utility, ubiquity, invisibility, compulsory, and rigidity. In this sense, master narratives are often invisible (they are cast as natural and followed without noticing them), ubiquitous (they permeate many realms in one's life and in society), compulsory (individuals in society are strongly expected to follow them and deviation is often associated with risks), and rigid (resistant to change) and hence exert strong social power on individual lives. Accordingly, master narratives may inform how one's story may unfold (utility); imbue various aspects of society, family life, and institutions (ubiquity); appear natural and rarely noticed by the individual (invisibility); possess an adherence that is anticipated by the members of a given society or culture (compulsory); and demonstrate a resistance to change in order to preserve the current system (rigidity).

A clear example of master narratives is institutionalized religion. Within institutionalized religions, master narratives may be maintained and facilitated through religious rituals and shared activities, beliefs, and traditions (e.g., Pargament & Mahoney, 2009). In such contexts, individuals can often rely on clear structures (e.g., ideologies, practices, coping resources, symbols, and context) and established spiritual agents (e.g., pastors, priests, rabbis, and imams) to foster a sense of coherence and security (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011; Kinnvall, 2004; Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010). These appear to contribute to an individual's sense of control, life purpose, and security, and to positive psychological outcomes and well-being (Emmons, 2005; Park, 2007; Silberman, 2005) as well as coping in challenging and stressful times (Park, 2013; Park, Edmondson, & Hale-Smith, 2013). Furthermore, religions provide a coherent and organized view of life and a set of values, standards, and guidelines for living life in a meaningful and worthy way (Krok, 2014; Spilka et al., 2003), all of which promote a sense

of control, certainty, and efficacy (Park, 2005). By offering an agreed-upon system of beliefs and worldviews that involve guiding global moral meaning systems from birth to death and beyond, as well as knowledgeable authorities, religions provide clear guidelines about what is true and valid as well as how to live one's life.

In the grand sociocultural context of the post-modern era today this situation might be different in master narratives of meaning, including religious ones. Contemporary master narratives of meaning are often not perceived as compulsory and are less rigid and often only partially invisible. Namely, individuals in a given society can identify and notice them and embrace or oppose them. They are not automatically followed, and they may be changed by individuals to suit their own version of the narrative.

Thus in post-modern contexts, predictability, comprehensibility, and stability, which often grant a sense of overarching direction to one's life, may be more difficult to attain (Park et al., 2013). We suggest that in such contexts different kinds of sociocultural master narratives are available and can become "master narratives of meaning" by serving as meaning systems for individuals and groups. Such master narratives are not assumed to be ubiquitous or compulsory, and they are much less invisible and rigid. They serve as optional master narratives of meaning because they offer venues for comprehension, purpose, and mattering—the three common components of MIL. Specifically such master narratives should afford individuals a sense of coherence and the capacity to make sense of their life (i.e., comprehension), provide them a sense of being directed and motivated (i.e., purpose), and a sense of value and significance in the world (i.e., mattering). We suggest that this multiplicity of potential narratives is the case in Israel, which in this volume served as a case study of search for meaning in a post-modern world.

Master Narratives of Meaning in a Post-Modern Context: The Case of Israel

Israel has unique cultural characteristics, in particular the prominence of existential threats resulting in a sense of collective vulnerability, uncertainty, and insecurity, together with dialectic identity and worldviews as part of a multicultural immigrant society (e.g., Ezrachi, 2004).

The Zionist narrative that was taken for granted among most of the Jewish citizens of Israel until the past two or three decades served as a

meta-narrative, an overarching framework and *raison d'être* (i.e., “reason for existence” or overarching purpose) since the late 19th century. However, as described by Abulof (Chapter 9 in this volume) this narrative has been gradually weakened, leading to various alternative narratives which provide a personal and shared sense of meaning. Abulof claims that as such process unfolded “finding ‘an underlying purpose to our existence’ became all that more essential, and harder, as Jews found Zionism to be just one among several options to lead political life in modern times. Jews have created, and cast multiple existential anchors of moral meaning onto the turbulent seas of modernity. . . . In the last generation, we may speak of ‘the transvaluation of Zionism,’ the revaluation of its underpinning moral meaning” (Abulof, Chapter 9). Part of the process included the transition to an individualistic worldview and the deepening of social, cultural, and ideological crises of identity and belonging. Although several concurrent master narratives of meaning existed along with the Zionist meta-narrative, its fragility legitimized the search for alternative sources for meaning.

As the various chapters in this volume suggest, a variety of alternative, often competing, master narratives have surfaced in response to the collapse of the dominant master narrative. These appear to characterize the meaning-making processes of different subgroups within a given multicultural mosaic of the Israeli scene. Here we delineate several central processes in forming or adopting and adapting such alternative master narratives.

1. One direction concerns the *turn to the east and other spiritual-religious traditions* as delineated in some of the chapters (Persico, Chapter 14; Ruah-Midbar Shapiro, Chapter 15). The collapse of the Zionist master narrative and the descent of traditional religion and collectivist ethos have led to a turn to the Far East and Asian traditions: “an increasing number of quests in search of meaning. . . . Individuals started searching for alternative sources of wisdom . . . that might serve as a recipe for daily living and self-understanding. . . . For Israelis, the journey to the East has become one of the popular stepping-stones on the track to social initiation, a part of the socialization process” (Ruah-Midbar Shapiro, Chapter 15). This state of affairs is also demonstrated in the burgeoning of contemporary spiritualities: “From luxurious yoga halls to private colleges that supply a diploma in alternative medicine, contemporary spirituality in Israel carries not only new religious content, but new religious forms and, with them, new religious

identities for those who seek meaning and fulfilment through such a course. . . . The Israeli individual now saw herself not as an integral part of the people, drawing its values and goals from the collective, but as an autonomous unit standing apart from society and, indeed, before it, both ontologically and ethically” (Persico, Chapter 14). Interestingly, many of these seekers eventually also adopt certain aspects of Judaism, yet reconstruct for themselves a new individualized combination of East and West, blending Judaism with Buddhism, Zen, Chinese philosophy, humanistic perspectives, Hinduism, or a combination of these. Despite being individualized, these seekers are often part of certain social circles or social groups which provide a context of belonging with their unique language and culture, even though these social structures are often quite loose and fluid. Such self-initiated processes within the fluid, eclectic, and deregulated arena of alternative spirituality (Bruce, 1996; Sutcliffe, 2000) are for the most part voluntary (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006) and idiosyncratic (Kwilecki, 1999). Thus, individuals are faced with the challenge of personally constructing their own worldview and identity with less clear guidance from traditions and the support of stable structures and designated authorities to guide this process.

2. Another direction which emerges as an alternative to the central master narrative is the *personalization of the religious narrative* that has been broadened and reshaped to carry various individual and flexible versions of connection to faith, subject to personal experience and interpretation. This is evident in various flexible adaptations, nuances, and structures to a rigid traditional framework which emphasizes social norms and a clear script of institutionalized religion within which one can search for his or her own personal meaning. For example, Orthodox women who integrate self-development as part of their religious way of life: “in such pursuits [for a meaningful life] they combine intrinsic adherence to a Haredi identity and tradition while also adopting other ways of behaving with personal agency to pursue meaning in their life. . . . In their eyes, unlike the opinion of many men and especially rabbis, the two sets of values can coexist and even strengthen one another” (Keren-Kratz, Chapter 12).

Another way of constructing connection to Jewish identity in a flexible manner, from a different perspective and setting, involves instilling

a connection to spiritual roots and legacy in the army: “the Jewish Consciousness unit representatives act as spiritual guides working to create. . . a spiritual-religious discourse injecting meaning into the military service, which in turn enhances individuals’ sense of service and wellness in their services, as well as granting them a sense of acknowledgment and recognition of their daily work” (Lebel, Ben-Hador & Ben-Shalom, Chapter 16). These examples and others suggest that various groups are constructing and reconstructing forms of religious affiliations that are no longer hegemonic, rigid, or communal, but rather ones that enable more space for individual connection.

Unmediated connection with the transcendent may embody qualities of more intimate presence “right here,” rather than “out there.” This may resemble the suggestions of contemporary scholars with regard to the changing perception of God, especially outside organized religions: from traditional images of a being that is external, distant, and removed from the world to a more accessible and more personal higher power that is both transcendent or “beyond” but still present in individuals’ everyday lives and experiences (Roof, 1999). Luhrmann (2004) described a rather similar phenomenon among evangelical congregants who, as part of the contemporary social-cultural influences of the post-modern condition, built an intimate interpersonal relationship with God. Such a relationship is essentially experienced as tangibly more vivid and personal than the God of their fathers (Wuthnow, 1998). In the context of this volume, this is evident in the renovation of secularized Judaism through individual, autonomous, tailor-made Judaism, which serve as a master narrative of meaning.

The first two narratives reflect an increased interest in and move toward spiritual and metaphysical venues of meaning in Israeli society (Beit-Hallahmi, 1992). Such spiritual yearnings have been manifested in religious circles where individuals who upheld the Jewish tradition started to also search for spiritual experiences and for a personal developmental path that would give them meaning in addition to adherence to expected religious behaviors (*mitzvot*). Being mostly a secular country, such spiritual yearning also provided an impetus for secular Israelis to search for spiritual meaning outside religious contexts through autonomous and individual processes (Russo-Netzer, 2018).

3. A third direction outlined in this volume is the *missionary or radical religious and/or ethnic master narrative*. This master narrative

emphasizes the importance of historical and/or ethnic background and is often involved with fundamentalism or delegitimization of alternate narratives and sometimes also with aggression and dehumanization. An example of such a master narrative of meaning can be seen in the case of the Hilltop Youth's extremist ideology and messianic activism which opposes mainstream political and religious structures: "the case of the Hilltop Youth demonstrates a vigorous blend of meaning and purpose: an individual pursuit of identity and content coupled with shouldering of social roles and responsibilities bestowed by a higher being or a social group. . . . The Hilltop Youth epitomize a revitalized extremist group driven by a fervent desire to usher in a holistic new future on the ruins of what is perceived by them as a totally failing system" (Peleg, Chapter 5).

In a different context, a master narrative that has some missionary tones and involves delegitimization of alternate narratives can also be found among the ethno-class identity of Mizrahim (Jews of Arab origin) from a low socio-economic class who hold strong ethnic identities and harbor intense anger at the dominant majority (see Shoshana, Chapter 10). A somewhat radical master narrative of meaning among Arab-Palestinian citizens in Israel is the "visionary" narrative, which "defines belonging as an ideological position. . . . In the religious politics of belonging, the visionary stance promotes an apocalyptic awareness according to which the end of days is approaching, and Islam will ultimately prevail, ruling globally through a just caliphate" (Agbaria, Mustafa, & Mahajnah, Chapter 11). These examples demonstrate belonging to a distinct and defined ethnic, national, religious, or cultural identity which serves as a central core anchor of identity and meaning, often with delegitimization of alternate narratives to varied extents.

4. Another unique master narrative of meaning relates to the *significance of death and symbolic immortality*. This master narrative comes in different forms and relates in Israel to the prominence of existential threats and the salience of death and mortality. The Holocaust and its modulations in the first, second, and third generation appear to reflect a shared national trauma as can be seen, for example, in the case of the survivors' memoirs as intergenerational healing processes: "the search for meaning has become increasingly present as in old age the survivors feel the urgency to tell their story before it is too late. . . . Their

children and grandchildren face this inevitable pressure of running out of time as they painfully realize that soon they will be the last to have had an intimate relationship with survivors and that it is up to them to carry on the familial legacy” (Duchin & Wiseman, Chapter 8). This is also evident in the manner in which MIL serves as a resource for older adults in Israel in the shadow of trauma: “concomitants of MIL mitigate the effects of distal [e.g., the Holocaust and Israeli wars] as well as proximal massive traumatic exposures [e.g., terrorism] on older adult Israelis” (Shrira, Palgi, & Shmotkin, Chapter 7). Another demonstrative example is that of the centrality of the movement to include more casualties (e.g., from terror attacks) in the “national bereavement discourse” and the “family of bereavement” to ensure that they have not died in vain: “the many families of Israelis killed and wounded in organized terror attacks against civilians in the aftermath of the Oslo Accords and the 2000 Intifada began to function as a ‘memory community’ aiming to include their loved ones among the country’s national fallen—a category referred to as ‘Israeli casualties of war. . . . In order to obtain the resource that they value most—national meaning for their loss and trauma—the families of terror victims did not ask to establish a unique or separate victimized identity for themselves but rather to be perceived as an inseparable part of the ‘families of Israeli casualties of war,’ a community recognized by the Israeli public as holding a meta-frame that leads to the perception of their loved ones as having died during productive operational action” (Lebel & Ben-Gal, Chapter 4). This is also the case in the Physical Immortality group, which has been small yet salient in Israel and believed that they could control their death and in fact live forever (Beit-Hallahmi, Chapter 6). These may serve as characteristic examples of human universal existential needs by offering a framework for “symbolic immortality” (see Kesebir & Pyszczynski, 2014; Tomer, 2014) which serves as a master narrative of meaning.

5. Another contemporary master narrative of meaning includes a *quest for self-fulfillment* and personal development, often shaped through the penetration of therapeutic, self-fulfillment, and self-actualization discourse into the Western cultural narrative (e.g., Illouz, 2008), where “psychology has become the secular successor to religion” (Fuller, 2001, p. 123). An example of such a master narrative can be seen among mobile Mizrahim: “the ethos of meritocracy and self-definitions of

Israeliness (all of which encourage dissociation from ethnicity) proposed by mobile Mizrahim who were born into a high socioeconomic class make extensive use of psychological discourse and the cosmopolitan ideal. The psychological discourse, which is attributed mainly to Western and secular cultures, is characterized by placing the self at the center (as opposed to the transcendental being or the community in traditional or religious societies), the preference for personal attribution to reality, verbalization of feelings, and particular engagement in values of self-fulfilment, separatism, and individualism” (Shoshana, Chapter 10). This process of self-fulfillment appears to be self-oriented and less community-oriented or prosocial.

6. The *universalist master narrative* outlines a perspective of multiculturalism or a “citizen of the world” manifested in a sense of interconnected to humanity in general rather than belongingness to a specific ethnic, national, or religious group. The focus is on the commitment to humanity, which involves a prosocial perspective, untied to specific cultural constraints or definitions. This may appear to be undermining the value of relatedness and belonging yet it provides a sense of competence and autonomy and may be more prevalent among upper mobility individuals (Jews and Arabs) as well as those adopting a Buddhist Vipasana stance, perceived as reflecting a connection to humanity as a whole, disconnected from particular identifications: “vipassana offers an alternative source for self-identity, one that reduces the importance of local and personal identities while at the same time creating a bridge to a universal conception of humanity. Through the presentation of vipassana as a universal global practice stripped from any particular local or religious connotations, through the unique configuration of the meditation center as a space without a place, through the turn of attention inward while detaching from collective identifications and biographical narratives, and through a cultivation of compassion for humanity at large, Israeli practitioners find an anchor for selfhood that is not based on local social context” (Pagis, Chapter 13).
7. Finally, a general master narrative of meaning relates to *identification with one’s nation as a unique and special nation* but without delegitimizing other narratives. For example, Doron (Chapter 2) suggests that for Jewish Israelis the “Startup Nation” of Israel provides a “deep sense of worth and significance through a ‘special compensation mechanism’ that connects each Israeli to its Jewish past, its ‘start-up nation’ present,

and the unique Israeli free spirit and self-expression.” Despite the weakening of the meta narrative of Zionism, Jewish Israelis are proud to be Israeli and have a cultural ethos for the Jewish state of Israel that gives them meaning, belonging, and worth (Doron, Chapter 2). Some similarity to such master narratives of meaning is the “romantic” narrative among some of the Arab-Palestinian citizens in Israel (Agbaria, Mustafa, & Mahajnah, Chapter 11): “the romantic narrative . . . is shared by both secular and religious political groups. This concept strongly invokes the past and is oriented to retrieve and restore it by promoting nostalgia and memory. In Arab secular politics, this concept is evident in the growing emphasis on Palestinian tradition and indigeneity and by celebrating Palestinian literature, folklore, culinary art, customs, and history as reflecting the special attachment to the homeland and the distinctive identity of Palestinians in Israel as an indigenous group.”

Major Trends in Israeli Narratives and Their Relevance to Other Cultures

Several trends can be observed in the master narratives just described.

1. The centrality of religious and spiritual narratives—self-spirituality within and outside established religions.
2. The still important role of national identity based on tradition and ethos as well as current achievements, such that citizens feel pride in their national belonging
3. A turn to radical messianic narratives (often religious ones) associated with delegitimation of other narratives and aggression
4. A humanistic stance with a focus on self (self-actualization and self-fulfillment) and/or on humanity at large (citizen of the world) with prosocial perspectives.
5. Search for symbolic immortality.

We suggest that different versions of such processes may also be observed in other cultures today. For example, Lu and Yang (2020) distinguish between cultures with religious polarization (a more dogmatic perspective) and cultures with religious fractionalization (multicultural perspective) and highlight the existence of different effects on health for each of them.

Similarly, Heelas (1996) and others (e.g., Hood, 2003) discussed self-spirituality and the blurring of boundaries between secular and religious in different cultures more than two decades ago. Future sociological research on processes of meaning-making in other countries and cultures may shed light on these issues.

What do these master narratives tell us about processes of search for meaning in a post-modern context?

We suggest that meta-narratives adopted by a very large number of people with qualities of master narratives (e.g., ubiquity, invisibility, compulsory, and rigidity; McLean & Syed, 2015) are less prevalent today, and instead cultures may offer a variety of master narratives of meaning that provide comprehension, purpose, and worth and probably also belonging and identity. Such narratives are often visible, and hence individuals feel moderately free to choose among them as well as adopt several concurrently or adapt them to their needs.

Additionally, we want to underscore several broad processes or dimensions of the search for meaning that became clear as we analyzed the variety of master narratives of meaning that unfolded in the Israeli scene. Although arising in the Israeli scene, we suggest that these general dimensions might be relevant to other cultures that are embedded within the post-modern sociocultural context as well.

First, a central aspect of processes of search is the mix-and-match quality of narratives that are constructed individually to fit each person but are still quite similar to those of others and allow belonging to social circles and groups. (See similar insights by other scholars; e.g., Hamilton, 2000; Rindfleish, 2005; Wuthnow, 2007).

Second, the narratives uncovered the centrality of the dimension of legitimation of a variety of narratives versus the delegitimation of other narratives and the upholding of a dogma with absolute truth.

Third, in search processes an important dimension relates to a somewhat selfish and self-focused process versus the focus on belonging to a community or becoming a citizen of the world with responsibility to make it a better place.

Fourth, despite the emergence of searching for a variety of ways to accrue symbolic immortality in the chapters of the book, these were less prevalent. We believe that such searches may not be unique to this era as people have been engaged in such processes for millennia (e.g., by erecting buildings and tombs, composing or writing, having children, etc.). Search for MIL through

symbolic immortality may be somewhat invisible as death might still be a major taboo in many cultures.

Conclusion, with an Eye to the Future

Cultures facilitate the gratification of humans' psychological needs, such as a sense of self-worth (Wan et al., 2011) or an epistemic and existential sense of order, stability, controllability, and connection (e.g., Chao & Kesebir, 2013), thus buffering against possible threats and uncertainties (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1997; Heine et al., 2006). The post-modern context has challenged the static, single, and continuous structures of self and society and called for a self that is fluid, multiple, and fragmented, and which constantly comes into being or is "becoming" (e.g., Rindfleish, 2005). Disconnected from sustaining overarching frameworks, individuals are challenged to construct their own personal guiding narratives of meaning and address fundamental existential issues on their own. Indeed, in many cultures today, individuals are no longer obligated to fixed, culturally given structures and are faced with the freedom to form their own identities through conscious and autonomous choices (Adams, 2003). This state of affairs, while liberating, also leaves individuals vulnerable in the face of their existential human condition. For some, this leads them to be guided by their inner reflection, choice, and observation for validation and judgment purposes. Others try to rely on a more rigid narrative with absolute truths that often involve delegitimization of other narratives, and both may also rely on tradition and the legacy of their culture/nation.

To conclude, while several core principles of master narratives have been outlined in the literature, such as utility, ubiquity, invisibility, compulsory, and rigidity (McLean & Syed, 2015), we suggest that, with the turn of post-modern processes, the variety and options of alternative master narratives which provide a sense of meaning appear to be more visible than before and more readily "mixed and matched." The numerous alternatives to master narratives of meaning have taken the place of a central hegemonic, invisible, and rigid one, accompanied by individuals' agency and autonomous choice. This demonstrates the dialectic between the committed sense of identity, MIL, and purpose and a continuous, fluid, and flexible process of "becoming," of shaping one's meaning through reevaluation and continuous exploration. The post-modern era offered opportunities for the search for

meaning and thus the creation of new identities: plural rather than unitary, relational and contingent rather than self-contained and absolute (Rattansi & Phoenix, 1997). The post-modern perspective views identity as dynamic, multiplistic, relativistic, fluid, context-specific, decentered, and fragmented (Rattansi & Phoenix, 1997). Post-modernism's wealth of choices spurred the creation of other identity structures, such as multiracial identities (Sanchez, Shih, & Garcia, 2009), the fragmentation of self (Strauss, 1997), and hybrid identities (Linzer, 1996). The relatively prevalent notion of identity hybridization reflects the individual's ability to borrow and mix different elements from a range of religious, gender, or ethnic identities (Rattansi & Phoenix, 1997). Along these lines, the master narratives of meaning described here reflect a central element of choice between options, given that traditional master narrative and the societal expectations, norms, and sanctions have declined and are less rigid.

The increased freedom to choose also involves weaker commitment and, perhaps, sense of belonging. With no clear guidelines, social markers, or absolute truths that have been accepted and taken for granted, as well as with the increasing exposure to a multitude of alternatives and options, there is an increased tendency to rely on internal touchstones and self-constructed guidelines as sources of validity and ultimacy. *Ultimacy*, in this sense, refers to experiences of deep truth, or what has been described as embodying the "absolutely true, absolutely real," which thus provides "tremendous authority and legitimacy" (Lomax & Pargament, 2011, p. 82). This may represent a potential way of coping with the post-modern challenges of pluralism, freedom, and choice, with individuals utilizing these very same qualities to navigate their journeys.

However, while a shift has occurred from an essentialist and committed identity to a more fluid and dynamic one, the beneficial aspects of the freedom of choice and decategorization may come with a price. In line with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which postulates that one's own identity and subsequent self-esteem derive in part from the affiliation with distinct social groups, it is possible that a lack of distinct commitment may affect the sense of significance, continuity, and unique identification.

Given the important role of culture in establishing people's values, assumptions, and needs (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), human processes and patterns may carry different manifestations across cultures. Open questions with regard to the cultural facilitators which trigger change or instead

maintain one's adoption of a master narrative remain: What allows a master narrative or script to "stick" as a meaning framework in a particular culture? Can we find a matrix or combination of master narratives of meaning in a given culture? What is the role of the *zeitgeist* (spirit of times) in the manner in which individuals choose their master narratives? Can we find processes similar to that of New Age discourse suggesting eclectic and idiosyncratic "pick-and-mix" (Hamilton, 2000) or "take-it-or-leave-it" experimental approach (Rindfleisch, 2005) or "tinkering" (Wuthnow, 2007)?

Epilogue

This book was conceived and written between 2016 and 2019, but 2020 brought with it the corona virus pandemic (COVID-19), a crisis that affected most nations and cultures in the world. A major aspect of COVID-19 is not just the fear for one's health but the social distancing it entailed and the strong and encompassing uncertainty about what will happen, how to cope, and what could be the consequences. This uncertainty and the ways in which political leaders coped further shattered many well-established and central national structures such as education systems, work arenas, and economic stability. Where this will lead us and what kind of master narratives of meaning we, as the human species, will adopt is still hard to tell. Will new master narratives emerge? Will new citizens of the world arise? How will this time affect the interplay between individuals and cultures? These are open questions yet to be discovered and explored.

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