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The Israeli Scene as a Case Study of Processes of Search for Meaning in Life in a Post-Modern and Globalized World

Ofra Mayseless and Pninit Russo-Netzer

Search for Meaning in Life in a Post-Modern Sociocultural Context

This book offers an academic inquiry on contemporary processes of the search for meaning in life in a post-modern context, with a focus on the Israeli cultural scene. Constructing or finding meaning in life is considered to be fundamental to human existence (Batthyany & Russo-Netzer, 2014; Frankl, 1963; George & Park, 2016; Mayseless & Keren, 2014; Russo-Netzer, 2018; Russo-Netzer, Schulenberg, & Batthyany, 2016; Steger, 2012; Wong, 2012). Such meaning reflects individuals' search to understand and organize their experience in a coherent manner, achieve a sense of their own worth and place (e.g., an identity and a sense of belonging), and recognize the things that matter to them (e.g., have purpose in life). When such meaning in life is adopted, individuals often feel that their life transcends their transitory existence and hence matters (George & Park, 2016). Viewed as a uniquely human quality (Emmons, 2003; Frankl, 1963) that enables people to interpret and consolidate their experience in the world (Steger, 2009), meaning has gained a growing degree of scientific attention within the psychological field. For example, several components of meaning have been identified (George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016), the distinction between search for meaning and having meaning in life has been delineated (e.g., Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008a), and the importance and centrality of meaning in life to individuals' well-being and functioning has been established (e.g., King et al., 2006; Park, 2010; Steger, 2012).

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The construal of meaning in life by individuals is a psychological process, yet it is intimately linked to the cultural context and historical period in which individuals live (Leung, Chiu, & Hong, 2011; Hicks & Routledge, 2013). The social and cultural contexts often offer and sometimes impose narratives, expectations, norms, and values that individuals can align with in their search for coherence, value, and purpose (Hicks & Routledge, 2013). Processes of globalization and neo-humanism challenge the meaning and security individuals find in their national or religious identity. Such processes appear to delegitimize the national and patriotic bases which grant a sense of meaning as part of a collective, advocating instead an individualistic, capitalistic perspective together with the virtue of seeing oneself as a citizen of the world (Navarro, 2007; Soederberg, Menz, & Cerny, 2005; Yeates, 2002). This may lead to diverse reactions, with some individuals and cultural groups, mostly from high socioeconomic statuses subscribing to the ideological legacy of globalization and adopting neo-humanistic perspectives; others turning instead to espousing extreme nationalist identities or radical religious worldviews; and yet others disengaging and adopting a more escapist and relativistic perspective on life, morality, and identity (Featherstone, 1990; Jasko, LaFree, & Kruglanski, 2016; Kinnvall, 2004).

Such processes of search for meaning in life are further affected not only by the grand post-modern perspective but also by the interplay between the specific culture in which an individual lives and that individual's personal pursuit of meaning in his or her life (Chao & Kesebir, 2013; Steger, Kawabata, Shimai, & Otake, 2008b). This book utilizes Israeli culture as a case study to learn about processes related to search for meaning in life in a post-modern and globalized world (Chao & Kesebir, 2013). The book sheds light on these processes in the Israeli cultural scene. It offers new insights with regard to our innate need for meaning and to how it materializes in a post-modern and globalized cultural context that intensifies such searches. The Israeli cultural scene thus serves as a magnifying glass for unravelling a variety of significant contemporary manifestations of the human "will for meaning" (Frankl, 1963), a fundamental motivation for finding meaning in life.

The Israeli Cultural Scene

Established in 1948, Israel is a young and small country, both in size (8,367 square miles/21,671 square kilometers) and in population (about 8 million

people). Israel is a Western liberal democratic state containing a complex mosaic of religious and secular policies and institutions (Cohen & Susser, 2000). Only about 20% of Israel's Jewish population consider themselves religious, whether Orthodox (10.0%) or Ultra-orthodox (8.8%). Traditionalists make up about 40% of the Jewish population, and they appear to value religion as a culture and tradition but do not uphold religious precepts (*mitzvot*). The majority of the Jewish population, about 42.5% (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013), identify themselves as secular in the sense of not belonging to a religious community and not observing traditional rituals. To the Israeli Jewish secular population, Judaism is experienced as more of a national than a religious identity (Ezrachi, 2004). Furthermore, the lack of a clear separation between religion and state in Israel leads to the dominance of religious laws (*halakha*), customs, and symbols in a variety of spheres. This state of affairs often evokes resentment and hostility toward religiosity among the more secular and traditionalist population (Pelleg & Leichtentritt, 2009) as it is perceived as involving an element of coercion.

Since the establishment of the State, Israeli society has undergone significant economic, political, and social changes, gradually moving from a collectivist orientation toward individualistic values; changing from old hegemonic groups to new ones (Mautner, 2011); struggling with large waves of immigration and with the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with its large population of Palestinian Arabs; and becoming more pluralistic, fragmented, and decentralized (Kenny-Paz, 1996; Sharabi & Harpaz, 2007). For example, a major change can be seen from the hegemony of the founders of the state of Israel who were mostly of Western origin (e.g., Europe and America) and were mostly secular and socialists, to the hegemony of more right-wing politics and stronger focus on Jewish religious tradition in its diverse forms. Concurrently, the Israeli scene is characterized by fragmentation, and several cultural groups (e.g., right-wing settlers, neoliberals, religious and Ultra-orthodox Jews) passionately vie to become the hegemonic voice, and these groups as well as others (e.g., Muslim Arabs and Mitzrahi ethnic Jews mostly immigrating from Arab countries) also compete to have their voice and, in particular, their narrative heard and adopted by Israeli society.

The schism can be seen along several divides, although these often do not show clear demarcation and have murky boundaries. These include schisms between the political left, which advocates the importance of compromise on land to achieve just and sustainable peace with Palestinian Arabs, and

the political right, which pushes toward annexation of the West Bank and is often associated with religiously based justifications for this act; between neoliberal and free-market economy and welfare state supporters; between Ashkenazi Jews (of European/American descent) and Mizrahi Jews (of Middle-Eastern/African descent), where the latter challenge the hegemony and dominance of the former in the narratives of the nation as well as in the nation's power positions; and between humanistic and human rights activists and nationalists (Azoulay & Ofir, 2008; Bar-Tal & Schnell, 2012; Barzilai, 1997; Rabinowitz, 2000; Ram, 1999, 2013).

As a Western society, Israel has also seen its fair share of contemporary trends and experienced the processes of globalization and individualism as well as the rise of a consumer culture (Ben-Porat, 2013). These processes were accompanied by weakening trust in other sources of security, such as political leaders, the nuclear family, and religious institutions (Canetti-Nisim & Beit-Hallahmi, 2007).

Consequently, a variety of historical, social, and cultural contexts contribute to the complex and multifaceted character of Israeli society and position it as a unique setting for the manifestation of meaning-making processes. Its uniqueness can be reflected in three central characteristics, each contributing to the intensity and prominence of the processes of searching for life's meaning and purpose.

1. *Existential focus*. A unique contextual characteristic of Israeli society stems from the prominence of existential threats and the salience of death and mortality. This is related to the acknowledgment of the fragility of life among Israelis in light of the collective trauma and legacy of the Holocaust and other experiences of persecution throughout the past 2,000 years. But it is also related to the ongoing shared experience of existential threats due to terrorist attacks and wars in a country constantly exposed to the danger of armed clashes with its neighbors and terrorist acts within its borders (Mayseless & Salomon, 2003; Reich, 2018). The small population, as well as the close familiarity among Israelis; intense media focus on terrorism and armed clashes; and compulsory military service for Jews at the age of 18 expose almost every Jewish Israeli home to such existential concerns. This shared experience of imminent existential threats raises critical questions concerning meaning, ethos, and mortality and often leads to a search for meaning (Vess, 2013).

2. *Predicament of identity*. Israel is a nation of immigrants. The large majority of its Jewish citizens are either immigrants themselves or the second or third generation of immigrant families. Israel thus includes an intricate, rich, and complex mélange of cultures, rituals, and identities that appears to split the country into "cultural tribes." These include the Arab minority in Israel (about 20% of its population, not including the West Bank), Jews of Ashkenzi and Mizrahi origin, and cultural groups divided by level of religiousness despite sharing a basic legacy and identity as Jews: secular, traditionalist, religious, and Ultra-orthodox Jews. Within this vibrant multicultural new nation, individuals often struggle with the construction of their identities while answering questions related to the meaning of their lives at three main levels: the personal ("who am I?"), the communal ("where do I belong?"), and the cultural ("what is the value of my life as part of this nation?").
3. *Co-existence of core dialectic worldviews*. Israeli daily life touches on several passionate and salient dialectics that often require individuals to take a stand. These relate to a strong ambivalence toward religion and toward Orthodox Judaism in particular, along with the realization that Israel as a Jewish state rests on a Jewish legacy which, at its core, is religious. Such a dialectic tension toward Judaism characterizes a large number of Israelis. A similar dialectic tension exists between the adoption of an individualistic perspective that accords with the values of other Western societies, including the free market neo-liberal paradigm, and the established communal and familial setting in Israel with its socialist and welfare overtones. In the latter, individuals feel bound by their responsibility and commitment to their family, friends, and, in particular, the state, and they expect the state to provide them with economic security and affordable housing. Another dialectic tension relates to the political left, characterized by pro-compromise with Palestinians attitudes regarding the land, versus the political right, characterized by pro-annexation of the occupied territories, attitudes which often rely on religious justifications. These three dialectic tensions are highly salient in Israel and instigate a search for meaningful answers with respect to a person's values, moral stand, faith, and identity.

Taken together, this collective alert to existential threats, uncertainty, and instability, coupled with the transition to new hegemonies and a deepening

of social, cultural, and ideological crises of identity and belonging, has instigated the search for a variety of alternative sources of meaning and has resulted in an increased interest in and a move toward spiritual, metaphysical, and radical venues of meaning in Israeli society (Beit-Hallahmi, 1992). This intense and vibrant scene is described in this volume at the macro, conceptual, and descriptive levels as well as at micro levels that include the empirical exploration of various subcultures of Israeli society as well as different age groups.

Building on the extant literature, this volume offers a much-needed and thus far neglected perspective on the human search for meaning in the post-modern context by focusing on one noteworthy culture (Israel) and examining a variety of manners in which these search processes manifest within this culture as well as how they are affected by its characteristics. The volume provides a multifaceted and nuanced picture of such processes within one overarching cultural context. Despite its small size and population, Israel continuously attracts international attention. This is due to a variety of reasons, among which are its status as a Jewish state in the Holy Land, a land and legacy significant to millions of people worldwide; the unabating violent conflict with its neighbors, and its economic success story in agriculture and industry (e.g., being a "start-up nation"). For people who are specifically interested in Israel as a nation and culture, the volume provides an in-depth, timely, and innovative perspective on major processes of the search for meaning characteristic of Israeli society, thus contributing to a better understanding of its contemporary cultural climate.

In addition, this volume highlights the centrality of the human search for meaning in human experience, offers new understandings of the variety of ways through which people express their search for meaning in life, and provides a better understanding of such endeavors at the cultural level, at the psychological level, and at the intersection of the cultural and personal levels. It underscores the importance of examining searches for meaning within the cultural context in which they take place.

Content and Structure

This volume includes 18 chapters by distinguished researchers from different disciplines including psychology, religious studies, anthropology, cultural

studies, sociology, education, and political science. It has six parts, including this Introduction.

Part II, "A Quilt of Perspectives of the Israeli Scene: Start-Up Nation, Multicultural, and Trauma and Bereavement Struck," includes three chapters that shed light on three core aspects of Israeli society, which will also resonate in other chapters. Chapter 2, by Eyal Doron, grapples with the quandary of how, despite all its tensions and socioeconomic gaps, most of Israel's citizens have a deep sense of connection and meaning. His suggestion underscores the importance of historical heritage, its "start-up nation" present, and the unique Israeli free spirit and self-expression. Chapter 3, by Hagar Hazaz-Berger presents a case study of the Rothschild encampment during the Summer 2011 Social Protest that underscores processes of "multitopia"—where ideological cracks in the Zionist utopia and Israeli society gave rise to individual processes of search for meanings reflecting the need to find personal utopias and identities through spiritual practices and by the deconstruction and reconstruction of social categories. Chapter 4, Udi Lebel and Tzlil Ben-Gal, sheds light yet on another major discourse in Israeli society, that of the national bereavement discourse, the meaning it gives to Israeli people, and the centrality of existential concerns both national and individual in Israeli culture.

These chapters thus underscore three major scripts that give Israelis a sense of meaning, a *unique cherished and valuable national and historical identity* (past and present), *individualistic freedom to shape one's meaning in life*, and *salient death awareness that can serve a purpose*.

Part III includes four chapters that delve more specifically into developmental issues and specific case studies under the heading of "Developmental Processes and Challenges in the Israeli Search for Meaning."

Chapter 5, by Samuel (Muli) Peleg, presents an in-depth case study of a small but influential group of youth in Israel—the Hilltop Youth in the West Bank. By adopting an extremist and messianic religious perspective (often also observed among youth in other cultures), defying current political and religious structures, and embracing violent activities, they create for themselves and others, often more passive observers and older, a new and liberating meaning.

Chapter 6, by Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, sheds light on yet another unique case study, the Physical Immortality group. Despite the group's declared focus on denying death, it appears that for participants—mostly wealthy and successful followers in their middle adulthood years who were also

habitual joiners of self-enhancement groups—it served as a venue of support, belonging, and positivity.

Chapter 7, by Amit Shrira, Yuval Palgi, and Dov Shmotkin, takes a look at yet another age group: older adults. The chapter underscores the frequency of trauma-related events in the lives of older adults in Israel (e.g., Holocaust, terrorist attacks, wars) and relies on several conceptualizations as well as a number of studies to underline the central role that meaning in life plays in their coping with the double challenge of aging (universal) and traumatic adversity (more specific to the Israeli scene).

The final chapter in this part, Chapter 8, by Adi Duchin and Hadas Wiseman, again focuses on a unique case study of Holocaust survivors (now in their 70s and 80s) who have written memoirs read by family members. The chapter underscores the significant role of intergenerational processes, especially between Holocaust survivors and the third generation (grandchildren) as central to creating a shared narrative and legacy that provides integrated meaning for family members and highlights the variability among families in this respect.

Together the chapters highlight the centrality of age and generational cohort in facing challenges related to meaning in life within the unique Israeli culture, underscoring both universal and distinctly Israeli/Jewish aspects. These chapters further highlight two other scripts that give Israelis a sense of meaning, *an extreme messianic religious perspective, belonging and being supported by groups or family*, and, again, the script that underscores the centrality of *trauma and death that can be meaningful*.

Part IV, "Struggling for Identity," includes five chapters that look at different subcultures in Israeli society and their attempts to form an identity and a cultural narrative that can give them clarity and belonging, well-being, and a sense of worth within the post-modern context and the Israeli cultural scene. Chapter 9, by Uriel Abulof, looks at the current situation of Zionism, which led to the establishment of Israel as a state and was central in the identity and meaning of its citizens. The chapter contends that nations need existential legitimation, or "nomization," which can boost the nation's resilience, and the author suggests that, based on analyses of social and political processes, currently, Zionist "nomization" is not as strong and clear as it used to be and hence the national "politics of fear" is closer to anomy.

Chapter 10, by Avihu Shoshana, looks at ethnic and socioeconomic class identities (both relevant to power status) among Jews in Israel, with a focus on Mizrahim (of Middle-Eastern/African descent). The chapter underscores

the centrality of class, ethnicity, and their interplay in adopting identity scripts (e.g., focus on ethnic or class identity) that provide individuals with meaning and personal value.

Chapter 11, by Ayman K. Agbaria, Mohanad Mustafa, and Sami Mahajnah, focuses on the Arab minority in Israel and identifies three narratives in the Arab politics of belonging. These narratives reflect a search for meaning and a political vision to reconcile the entangled relationships and contradictions between their Palestinian nationality, Israeli citizenship, and religion of Islam in Israel. The chapter further analyzes how these three narratives of politics of belonging—the romantic, the practical, and the visionary—are expressed among Arab political and Muslim religious actors.

Chapter 12, by Menachem Keren-Kratz, focuses on Haredi (Ultra-orthodox) women. This chapter discusses the historical background of Haredi women's status in Israel and highlights their current agentic pursuit to answer their intrinsic need for a meaningful life and self-fulfillment in spheres such as their own family, the workplace, their free time, and also in their public and political representation. The chapter underscores that, for them, such pursuits are in conjunction with their intrinsic adherence to Jewish Haredi identity and tradition.

Chapter 13, by Michal Pagis, focuses on a distinct, high-profile, and growing group of individuals whose interest led them to Buddhist thought and practice and in particular Vipassana practice. The chapter highlights that, through meditation, Israelis find an embodied anchor for selfhood, shift away from local social embeddedness, and find meaning in life. This meaning relies on a humanistic-based identification with humanity at large—a universal nonlocal existence, one that transcends the hectic and difficult local life in Israel.

Together, the chapters highlight a variety of scripts—narratives of identity and belonging that provide individuals with meaning and personal value and are deconstructed, reconstructed, and also adopted by individuals from a variety of subcultures in Israel. Some are more visionary in their content, and others may emphasize well-being; some rely heavily on the past and on tradition; while others focus on the present and on practices.

Part V focuses on a central dimension in processes of search for meaning in life: "Between Religiosity and Secularism." This part includes four chapters that discuss the place and significance of religiosity, spirituality, and secularity in processes of search for meaning in life among Israelis. Such issues have already been underscored using a variety of perspectives in previous

chapters as well (e.g., Chapter 5 on the Hilltop Youth and their extreme messianic religious orientation, Chapter 7 on older adults in Israel and the significance of spirituality and religion as sources of meaning, Chapter 11 on the Arab minority in Israel and the centrality of Islamic perspectives of belonging, and Chapter 12 on Haredi women). In this part, the chapters specifically center on the dimension of religiosity/spirituality and secularism.

Chapter 14, by Tomer Persico, looks at the burgeoning scene of contemporary spirituality in Israel and, as in Chapters 3 and 9, underscores the decline of the secular Zionist meta-narrative. The chapter discusses a strong tendency among those active in this scene to go back to Judaism as a source of meaning, but it also underscores that they do so using a post-collectivist, individualistic ethos. Such a process is conceived in the chapter as involving a renovation and restructuring of Judaism, often by creating an individual, autonomous, tailor-made Judaism which is itself seen as a new form of secularization.

Chapter 15, by Marianna Ruah-Midbar Shapiro, looks at the same scene of contemporary spiritualities and discusses another prevalent and significant phenomenon—that of turning to the Far East and Asian traditions as a source of meaning. The chapter underscores that this process involves an imagined East where Israelis (and other Westerners) selectively choose what they take from Eastern culture and embrace reverence toward this imagined East. When returning to Israel, Judaism also becomes an object for projections, and individuals redesign Judaism to be exotic, incorporating New Age values that lend them meaning in life.

Chapter 16, by Udi Lebel, Batia Ben-Hador, and Uzi Ben-Shalom, presents a case study of rabbinic seminars for noncombat officers who experience alienation in their military work environment. The chapter highlights how the seminar has succeeded in infusing meaning in these soldiers' lives and military service by infusing in them a Jewish-spiritualistic discourse and language that combines New Age motifs with Judaism and how such seminars promote a modern hegemony of religion in the army and draw participants closer to the Jewish-nationalist discourse that provides them with a strong sense of meaning, mission, and recognition.

Chapter 17, by Nurit Novis-Deutsch, Peter Nynäs, and Sawsan Kheir, examine university students from three faith traditions in Israel: Jewish, Muslim, and Druze. The chapter underscores the importance of culture in sanctioning meaning-making paths or narratives. For example, secular Muslims and Druze often expressed a sense of meaninglessness, whereas

Jewish seculars expressed high levels of purpose-making based on social action. In accordance, Muslims were most engaged in religious meaning-making as a source of meaning and Jews were least engaged.

Together, the chapters in this part, as well as others in the book, underscore the centrality of religious and spiritual narratives in current searches for meaning in life in Israel. The chapters further underscore that often such religiosity or spirituality is custom made and includes a renewed combination of tradition with New Age perspectives, individualistic concerns of self-agency and self-fulfillment, and secular individualistic undertones.

Part VI comprises one chapter by Pninit Russo-Netzer and Ofra Mayseless (Chapter 18), "Meaning in Life at the Crossroads of Personal Processes and Cultural Crisis," which provides a conceptual overview of the volume and addresses the main characteristics of the interplay among context, culture, and personal processes of meaning-making.

Taken as a whole, the volume's chapters highlight how a culture challenged by current and past existential threats, an identity predicament, and a core ambivalence in general worldviews engenders deep, lively, and powerful processes of meaning-making that rely on a large number of potential narratives of meaning.

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