

Special Editor's Introduction: Contemporary Spirituality in Israel

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When James R. Lewis, Editor of the *ASRR*, suggested that I try and put together a collection of articles on contemporary spirituality in Israel, a combination of joyfulness and excitement came over me, as I knew that this collection would be among the first of its kind to be published in English to date.¹

Israel is home to a bustling scene of New Age and alternative spiritualities, with only a fraction of these represented in this special issue. While several NRMs were imported to Israel during the 1970s, the last twenty-five years or so have featured an explosion in both the variety of different groups as well as the sheer number of participants. Indeed, each year dozens of New Age festivals take place, with the major festival drawing over 50,000 participants (Ruah Midbar 2006: 144-146), enough to populate an average Israeli town. Marianna Ruah Midbar and Adam Klin-Oron (2010) suggested recently that New Age phenomena in Israel are located along two axes: one ranging from shared global (Western) forms to home-grown cultural products, while the other focuses on the relational approaches between New Age spirituality and traditional Jewish praxis, ranging from indifference and opposition to adaptation and preservation. Global New Age discourse is thus adapted in many cases into an Israeli 'Jew Age' through the use of Jewish symbols and practices.

This 'Jew Age' spirituality is a direct outcome of Israel's unique and complicated politics of identity as the nation state of the Jewish people. In turn, it can supply researchers with a chance to witness how New Age and alternative spiritualities – produced in Western countries with a predominantly Protestant or secular culture – transform and adapt themselves in Israel, an ethno-national state which sees itself as an outpost of the Western world and constantly attempts “to reconcile the two conflicting principles of a 'Jewish and democratic state'” (Ben Porat and Turner 2011: 1).

In this context, it would not serve as a surprise to learn that the Israeli government did not fail to address the 'problem' of flourishing NRMs, New Age and alternative spiritualities in the country over the last thirty years. Between 1982 and 2011, four Israeli

¹ A Hebrew anthology which features articles on the New Age in Israel, titled *Rokdim Besde Kotzim* [Dancing in a Thorn Field] was published in 2007. A special issue of the *Israel Studies Review*, with contributions focusing on the links between New Age movements and politics in Israeli society, is due to be published during early 2015.

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governmental reports addressing the dangers of ‘cults’ were issued. Here again, Marianna Ruah Midbar and Adam Klin-Oron’s (2013) analysis reveals that at every point in time, NRMs represented a different perceived threat to Israeli society. The reasons for the state’s concern, as expressed in the reports, “reflect milestones in three processes of change that have taken place in Israeli society: from a collectivist-hegemonic ethos to a multi-sectoral one; from a focus upon society to a focus on the individual; and from nationalistic values to universalistic ones”. The 2011 report is also the harshest of the four, and has caused concern among scholars of NRMs in the Israeli academia. This concern has manifested itself so far in special colloquiums and conference sessions dedicated to the subject, as well as in the establishing of a steering committee for the creation of an Israeli Center for Information on Contemporary Religions, which will be modeled after the INFORM and CESNUR centers in the UK and in Italy.

The academic study of New Age, NRMs and alternative spirituality in Israel intensified since the early to mid-2000s. Theses and dissertations were being written², coupled with work by established scholars.³ In 2009, the first Israeli Conference for the Study of Contemporary Spirituality (ICSCS) was held at the University of Haifa. The annual gathering, which relocated to Tel Aviv University in 2013 and changed its title to the Israeli Conference for the Study of Contemporary Religion and Spirituality (ICSCRS), has served for the last six years as the main interdisciplinary venue for the presentation of relevant research in a variety of disciplines from the humanities, the social sciences, the exact sciences, etc. During the last three years these conferences have attained a rather international tone, with between a quarter to a third of the presenters arriving from overseas, as well as the Keynote Speakers.

One of these noted visitors from abroad was James R. Lewis. As Conference Coordinator for the last four years, I had the chance to meet him during his two visits to the ICSCS and ICSCRS, and this special *ASRR* issue is the fruition of these encounters. Although its six papers represent a mere fraction of a myriad of studies currently conducted in the Israeli scene, three of the issue’s articles are exploratory in nature and attempt to provide researchers with a rudimentary map of their respective fields. Indeed, there is still more than enough room for many scholars who wish to delve into the fresh spring which is the research of contemporary Israeli spirituality. The issue contains articles written by researchers from various rungs of the academic ladder: MA and doctoral students, a recent doctoral graduate, a mid-career researcher, as well as two

² See for instance Simchai (2005), Ruah Midbar (2006), Korvet (2008), Klin-Oron (2011), Keshet (2005) and Tavory (2005). Most of the writers are now established scholars in the field.

³ See for instance Zaidman (2007), Huss (2007), Shmueli and Shuval (2004).

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professorial staff members. A number of anonymous referees from Israel and abroad – to which I am ever grateful – provided invaluable help during the editing of this volume.

The first article is Shai Feraro's "'And Not a Word about the Goddess': On the Politics of Shaping and Displaying a Pagan Identity by Israeli Pagan Women in Israeli Women's Spirituality Festivals". Although the article focuses on Israel's embryonic Pagan community and burgeoning Women's Spirituality movement, which occupy a relatively marginal space in the local contemporary spirituality scene (a gross understatement in the case of Israeli Pagans), it also introduces the country's intricate identity politics in a way that can be helpful to those who are unfamiliar with the local context. A PhD student at Tel Aviv University, Mr. Feraro analyzes the processes by which Pagan identity is formed and expressed by Israeli Pagan women, when attending 'Women's Spirituality' festivals and workshops in Israel. As such it will deal with the complexities of identifying oneself as a (Jewish-born) Pagan in Israel, the nation state of the Jewish people. The unique connections between (Jewish) religion and the state in Israel, claims Feraro, coupled with the country's distinct Jewish character, create a situation in which – unlike their North American and Western European sisters – Israeli Pagan women generally find it difficult to express their Pagan identity when participating in Israeli Women's Spirituality festivals and workshops, and may even find their identity as Pagans challenged by other (Jew-Age) festival and workshop goers. This in turn contributes to a consolidation of a Pagan identity separate from the wider Israeli New Age scene. Mr. Feraro's findings are part of a wider and ongoing study of the Israeli Pagan community, but as a male researcher – who is unable to venture into 'woman only' spaces such as the Shakti Festival – his claims are based almost exclusively on the interviews he conducted with Israeli Pagan women, who shared with him their personal experiences from the Shakti festival. His paper is therefore exploratory by nature, and will hopefully serve as a call for female scholars to conduct their own participant-observant research in order to consolidate Israeli Women's Spirituality as a research field.

The next contribution is by Dr. Tomer Persico, a recent doctoral graduate who currently teaches at Tel Aviv University and at the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, and is the Co-Chairperson for the 6th ICSCRS. Titled "Neo-Hasidism & Neo-Kabbalah in Israeli Contemporary Spirituality: The Rise of the Utilitarian Self", Dr. Persico's article explores the rise of "the utilitarian self" in Israel's contemporary spirituality arena. Borrowing the term from Paul Heelas, Dr. Persico sees it as a particular hybrid of the Romantic spirit and Enlightenment rationalism, joined together by means of capitalist instrumental reason. It represents the current fascination with finding ways - indeed

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methods or techniques - which will allow one to actualize and exercise her or his “hidden” or “unrealized” capabilities in order to undergo an inner transformation and maximize the external conditions of her or his life. With its origins in the religious field of late nineteenth century America, “the utilitarian self” is quite a recent development in Judaic social circles, and has begun to play a significant part in Israeli contemporary spirituality since the 1990s. Dr. Persico suggests that the proliferation of certain Neo-Kabbalah and Neo-Hasidic movements since the 1990s is indicative of its rise. By examining these he hopes to better understand ‘the utilitarian self’, which lies at their background and presents the cultural conditions for their popularity.

The third article is written by Prof. James R. Lewis of the University of Tromsø. “The Dwindling Spiral: The Dror Center Schism, the Cook Letter and Scientology’s Legitimation Crisis”, concerns the 2012 defection of the Church of Scientology’s Mission in Haifa – Israel’s third largest city. The precipitating event was a critical email sent by high-ranking Scientologist Debbie Cook to her contacts throughout the Scientology world. The core of her critique was that the Church was in decline – a decline she attributed to policies that deviated from guidelines set forth by Scientology’s founder, L. Ron Hubbard. Lewis’s paper analyzes the current legitimation crisis within the Church of Scientology through the twin lenses of the Cook letter and the Haifa schism, and will hopefully aid in the future study of Scientology’s presence in Israel, which has yet to have been examined by local scholars.

The next article is titled “Gratitude, Israeli Spiritual Care and Contemporary Hassidic Teachers: The Theme of Thankfulness in the Works of Rabbis Brazofsky (the Netivot Shalom), Rav Arush and Yemima Avital”. Its author, Dr. Einat Ramon, is a researcher at the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, and founded its Training Program for Spiritual Caregiving. The Israeli spiritual care movement is still in its infancy, and has yet to attract the attentions of Israeli scholars of religion. In her exploratory article, Dr. Ramon highlights the possible contribution of three contemporary Hassidic Israeli thinkers – who are largely unknown outside of Israel but often mentioned and quoted by leaders in the country’s emerging spiritual care giving movement – to the shaping of the theological landscape of spiritual care in Israel.

Prof. Galya Sabar’s article, “Fluid Religious Identities in the Holy Land 1990’s – 2000’s: African Labor Migrants between ‘Brotherhood of the Cross and the Star’ and ‘Resurrection and Living Bread Ministries International’”, builds on a larger qualitative study she conducted between 1998 and 2008 among congregations of African Initiated

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Churches (AICs) set up by African labor migrants⁴ in southern Tel Aviv. She focuses on the “Brotherhood of the Cross and the Star” (otherwise known as Olumba Olumba) and “Resurrection and Living Bread Ministries International”. Whereas the later was considered to be one of the leading African Pentecostal churches in Israel, the former was branded by most African Christians as a ‘cult’.

The last article is written by Mr. Yotam Yzraeli, who studies at Tel Aviv University’s MA program in Religious Studies. His “Kumbaya in Zion – Secular and Religious Elements in Israeli Sacred Singing Circles” offers an introductory discussion of the emergent “glocal” cultural phenomenon of New Age sacred singing circles in Israel. Relying on Catherine Bell’s Ritual theory, Yzraeli establishes the ritual characteristics of Israeli sacred singing circles and proceeds to examine the typology of the ritual, its goals and liturgical components. His primary focus centers on the power dynamics at play between secular and religious elements within the circle as informed by local Israeli conditions. It is our hope that the studies found in this special issue will aid in publication of further scholarly works in the field of contemporary spirituality in Israel, as well as supply overseas researchers with some fascinating insights into the ways in which alternative spiritualities manifest themselves in countries outside North America and Western Europe.

⁴ Sabar’s paper relates only to migrant laborers from West Africa who entered Israel on a tourist or pilgrim visa in the early 1990s and overstayed it, thus becoming illegal. It does not relate to African asylum seekers, mainly from Eritrea and Sudan, who entered Israel via its lax boarder with Egypt since 2005.

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