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“Sometimes I Don’t Even Know Where I Am Going”: What Supports Individualized Personal Spiritual Change?

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Unlike processes of spiritual change within or between-faith, individualized processes of spiritual change cannot rely on the support provided by institutional religions through religious rituals, agents and coherent belief system (e.g., Pargament & Mahoney, 2009; Rambo, 1993). To understand how individuals manage such a potentially arduous change process, the present study explored the facilitating processes of deep personal spiritual change outside of institutional religion, using a qualitative-phenomenological perspective. In-depth interviews were conducted with 27 Israeli adults (13 men and 14 women between the ages of 25 and 66), who were undergoing such change. The analysis of the interviews uncovered 2 main kinds of supporting resources: internal-personal (i.e., deliberate choice, courage, and intentional attention and awareness) and external-environmental (i.e., the availability of spiritual contexts and experiences, spiritual groups and like-minded peers, spiritual teachers, and a sense of connection to a higher power or the transcendent). The findings underscore the pervasiveness of supporting mechanisms that individuals undergoing self-led spiritual change use. These reflect 3 central orientations, internal, horizontal, and vertical, that together maintain these change processes.

Keywords: adulthood, qualitative methodology, spiritual change, spirituality, supporting processes

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Spirituality has played a key role in human experience as an integral part of an individual’s life, throughout history and across cultures (e.g., Vaughan, 2002). However, unlike other domains of human development such as the cognitive, the motor or the emotional, relatively little attention has been paid within canonical life span theories and models to the study of spiritual development as integral to human normative development (e.g., Roehlkepartain, King, Wagener, & Benson, 2006). Furthermore, spiritual change and development are unlike other change processes that individuals undergo, such as marriage or choosing a career, given that they are more idiosyncratic and less normatively anticipated by society. The salience of spiritual change and development vary widely in different cultures and for different individuals (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006) and engaging in such processes often involves a volitional, conscious choice (Wink & Dillon, 2002). Thus, although the potential for spiritual experiences and development is considered inherent to human nature (Benson, Scales, Syvertsen, & Roehlkepartain, 2012), it is not necessarily relevant to everyone (Kiesling & Sorell, 2009). The present study sought to explore the processes which support and facilitate personal spiritual change.

Spiritual Change

Spiritual change is broadly defined as a transformation, “a change in the meaning system that a person holds as a basis for self-definition, the interpretation of life, and overarching purposes and ultimate concerns” (Paloutzian, 2005, p. 334). This conceptualization highlights meaning-making as a central underlying dimension of spiritual change (Pargament, 2006; Wortmann & Park, 2009). A wide range of internal and contextual factors may instigate such processes. These include socialization and spiritual/religious practices that lead people to seek spiritual answers (Chandler, Holden, & Kolander, 1992), as well as distinct life experiences. These include, for instance, transitions in life and stressful events that may challenge or destabilize existing meaning systems, and function as turning points which shape the route of one’s spiritual life (Fiori, Hays, & Meador, 2004; King, 2004). Internal experiences that involve doubts, inner conflicts, and spiritual struggles may also lead people to search for new answers regarding their spiritual concerns (Exline & Rose, 2005). Efforts to cope with such disequilibrium and to rebuild meaning may include processes of questioning, seeking and changing the way the spiritual is understood and experienced (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993; Pargament & Mahoney, 2009; Wortmann & Park, 2009). For example, one of the main domains of positive change as part of posttraumatic growth following adversity is spiritual change, reflecting an engagement with fundamental existential questions and increased interest in issues of a spiritual or religious nature (Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Positively valenced distinctive events such as peak experiences as well as religious, mystical, or transpersonal experiences may also serve as catalysts for spiritual change (e.g., Greyson, 2006; Miller

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& C'de Baca, 2001), by illuminating sudden insights and changes in perspective that may alter individuals' sense of self and meaning (McDonald, 2008).

Historically, processes of spiritual change have taken place within a particular organized religious tradition, and religion has been described as involving "the search for significance that occurs within the context of established institutions that are designed to facilitate spirituality" (Pargament, Mahoney, Exline, Jones, & Shafranske, 2013, p. 15). Spiritual change for individuals within organized religion often involves a personal search for higher meaning and purpose in relation to the divine, sacred, or the transcendent within the dogma and the practices of that religion such as in intensification and strengthening of faith (e.g., Danzig & Sands, 2007; Pargament & Mahoney, 2009; Sandage & Moe, 2013). However, processes of spiritual change may also involve a change of context, within the same religious tradition (such as in shifting denomination) or change across religious traditions (such as in "switching" between faiths or conversion) (Paloutzian, 2005; Rambo, 1993; Sandage & Moe, 2013). They may also include losing faith, disengagement from or leaving organized religion (Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003), such as in 'exiting' processes (e.g., Davidman & Greil, 2007) and deconversion (i.e., the rejection of religion for a nonreligious worldview; Hood, Csöff, Keller, & Silver, 2011).

This variety notwithstanding, spiritual change is described as involving challenging and demanding internal processes that require support (e.g., Fuller, 2001; Paloutzian, 2005). Within religious traditions, such processes are often maintained, guided, and facilitated by religious rituals and agents (e.g., Pargament & Mahoney, 2009; Rambo, 1993), which provide an organized and coherent belief system, guidelines for behaviors, framework of meaning and purpose to life (Park, 2005), and a means of social support for difficulties when needed (Pargament, 1997; Shaw, Joseph & Linley, 2005). These also include personal relations with a spiritual guide or mentor such as a rabbi, a priest, or an imam, the existence of a consensual worldview which serves as a guideline for the moral and worthy life, and a community of believers to belong to. For example, mechanisms of religion and social support networks were found to play a crucial role in facilitating socialization, commitment and a sense of belonging for individuals experiencing religious conversion processes (e.g., Gooren, 2007; Kerley & Copes, 2009; Lofland & Stark, 1965). This is also evident within the context of religious intensification in Judaism (*Baalei teshuvah*), where individuals report social relationships and belonging to a community as contributing to the continual process of extensive learning and engagement in religious precepts leading to strong commitment to Judaism (Danzig & Sands, 2007).

Spiritual Change Outside Institutional Religions

Spiritual change also occurs outside institutional religions. In fact, recent studies of Western societies indicate that the phenomenon of individualized spirituality involving the search for ultimate significance outside the boundaries of institutional religions is on the rise (see Fuller, 2001; Streib, Silver, Csöff, Keller, & Hood, 2011). In the United States, for example, roughly 28% of all adults and 33% of adults under 30 consider themselves spiritual but religiously unaffiliated (Oman, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2012). Evidence from Europe suggests a similar trend, with individual-

ization and a nonorthodox personal spirituality taking the place of traditional religions and spiritualities characterized by transcendent theism (e.g., Heelas, 2007; Houtman & Mascini, 2002). This is the case also in Israel, where the present study was conducted. About 42.5% of the Jewish population in Israel (Government of Israel, Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013) identify themselves as secular, in the sense of not belonging to a religious community and not observing traditional rituals.

In contemporary Israel, the distinction between religious and nonreligious affiliation is defined by marked characteristics, such as ways of dressing, educational institutions, and daily practices subscribing to either Orthodox or Conservative Jewish belief (Ruah-Midbar, 2012). Thus, to the Israeli Jewish secular population, their Jewish identity is often experienced as a national or ethnic identity and not as a religious identity (Ez-rachi, 2004). Furthermore, the lack of a clear separation between state and religion 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 toward religiosity and Jewish orthodoxy (Pelleg & Leichtenritt, 2009) because it is perceived as involving coercion. The transition to an individualistic worldview and the deepening of social, cultural, and ideological crises of identity spurred a search for alternative sources for meaning and resulted in an increased interest in and move toward spiritual and metaphysical venues of personal spiritual meaning in Israeli society (Beit-Hallahmi, 1992). This is evident in the growing interest and involvement in contemporary alternative spiritualities that may lead to significant changes in life (Ruah-Midbar, 2012; Simchai, 2009).

Spiritual change processes that take place outside institutional religious frameworks often reflect and are influenced by the characteristics of the postmodern sociocultural context (e.g., Heelas, 1996; Roof, 1999). For example, the current postmodern world is characterized by a lack of stability, a lack of certainty, and the dissolution of binding traditional frameworks (Buxant, Saroglou, & Tesser, 2010). In such a context, and in the absence of a sanctified authority to relate and attend to, the self is considered to be an authority and the constructor and creator of norms and standards (Roof, 1993, 1999). This is reflected in a shift from loyalty, commitment, and social belonging to an ideology of autonomy and agency (Sutcliffe, 2000), in which "the 'individual' serves as his or her own source of guidance" (Heelas, 1996, p. 23). For example, the literature discussing deconversion argues that such processes may often be experienced as solitary, as disaffiliation often requires the severing of both primary and secondary social ties (Streib et al., 2011; Sandomirsky & Wilson, 1990). In a broader sense, this is reflected in what Wuthnow (1998) has described as the contemporary changing spiritual landscape from 'spirituality of dwelling,' which emphasizes a particular (typically religious) community and tradition that provides stability and security, toward a predominance of a 'spirituality of seeking.' The latter involves open-ended seeking and journeying within or beyond the boundaries of religious institutions, emphasizing experience, transition, and eclecticism (Roof, 1993, 1999; Wuthnow, 1998), reflected in selective or uncommitted explorations of practices and worldviews (Smith & Snell, 2009).

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 of traditions and support of stable structures and designated authorities to guide this process.

The lack of established religious rituals, agents, and social networks illuminates the need for a better understanding of the elements, circumstances, and processes that support individualized spiritual change processes outside established religious contexts, a phenomenon which is on the rise in contemporary postmodern Western societies. In line with the call to explore spirituality using methodology that does not distance itself from people's experiences (e.g., Pargament & Mahoney, 2009), the present study utilized a bottom-up qualitative approach to explore the question—are there any processes that can be identified as supporting individuals in sustaining a self-led change process outside institutional religions, which is often idiosyncratic and eclectic? The primary interest of a qualitative design is understanding how individuals ascribe meaning to or interpret a given phenomenon (e.g., Hodge, 2001; Merriam, 1998). Of the variety of qualitative research methods available, the phenomenological research method was chosen because it places a specific focus on exploring the meaning of phenomena in human experience (Giorgi, 1997) from the perspectives of the individuals themselves (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited via multiple methods, including advertisements in various areas and Internet forums, as well as the “snowball” method (i.e., asking one participant to recommend others for interviewing; Babbie, 1995). A broad and open invitation was provided, as follows: “For an in-depth study, we are searching for individuals who have undergone, or are currently undergoing, spiritual change in their lives.” As is customary in qualitative methods, the sample size in the present study was determined by the saturation principle: data were collected and analyzed until no new themes emerged (Padgett, 1998). The final sample included the first 27 people who responded to this open invitation and experienced spiritual change outside the boundaries of institutional religion; that is, they did not describe themselves as participating in an organized traditional Jewish community. Three people who responded to the invitation but whose spiritual change was directed toward institutional religion were not included. The sample included 13 men and 14 women who came from a variety of spiritual orientations, such as Transcendental meditation, New Kabbalah, Buddhism, and Shamanism (see Table 1 in the online Supplemental Materials for more detail on the sample). Although participants often reported having a current preferred and perhaps dominant orientation or practice, all of them described a process of search that involved several spiritual orientations and noted that in their current worldview and conduct they mix aspects from different spiritual perspectives. Despite this variety, based on in-depth analyses of their interviews it appeared that for all the participants, the change process was experienced as fundamental and culminated in the establishment of a new “post-modern” committed spiritual identity that involved several coexisting dialectics (see Russo-Netzer & Maysseless, 2014). Furthermore, the process of spiritual change was experienced by them as work on the self,

which comprises two complementary processes: uncovering and cleansing the self—the Spiritual-Psychological facet—and expanding it and rising above—the Spiritual-Transpersonal facet (Russo-Netzer & Maysseless, under review).

All participants were Jewish Israeli, from various ethnic origins (51.85% “Ashkenazi,” i.e., of European American origin, 33.3% “Mizrahi,” i.e., of Asian-African origin, and 14.8% mixed origin). Ages ranged between 25 and 66 years ($M = 45.3$; $SD = 10.9$). Regarding education levels, participants ranged from high school graduates (28%), graduates of technical schools/professional diploma (28%), to college graduates (44%). Fourteen participants were married, six divorced, six single, and one widowed. The participants differed in the length of the change process at the time they were interviewed, ranging roughly from five years or less (four participants), five to 10 years (10 participants), 10 to 15 years (10 participants), and more than 15 years (three participants). See Table 1 in the online Supplemental Materials for further information.

Procedure

In-depth face-to-face semistructured interviews were employed, lasting between 1.5 and 3.5 hours ($M = 141$ min; $SD = 39.82$). All interviews were conducted by the first author and were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The participants signed an informed consent following a detailed explanation of the research and their rights prior to the beginning of each interview. Each interview began with a general, open-ended question regarding the experience of the spiritual aspect in the participants' lives, enabling them to speak spontaneously and describe their personal and subjective experience as freely as possible in their own words:

I am interested in the personal experience of people who have undergone, or are currently undergoing, a change in their lives which they define as spiritual. Could you please tell me how you experience the spiritual aspect of your life?

Throughout the interview, whenever necessary, the participants were asked open-ended probing questions to encourage them to elaborate, clarify meanings, reveal unexplored points or provide further details and examples, to achieve in-depth understanding of their experiences. For example: “What made this change possible?”, “Can you describe that particular experience / incident in more detail?”, “What was it like?” or “Can you give an example?” (van Manen, 1990). All interviews took place in the participants' homes at their preferred time, to maintain a familiar environment (Creswell, 2007) and allow them the conditions of time, space and convenience to freely and spontaneously develop their story in their own way, pace and language.

Data Analysis

A phenomenological analysis of the interview transcripts was employed to gain a deeper understanding of underlying facilitators of the spiritual change process. All interviews were read independently several times to gain an overall impression of the participants' experiences until a sense of immersion had been obtained. Then, ‘meaning units’ as expressed by the participants (Giorgi, 1975) were identified, through a process of ‘open coding’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These separate meaning units were used to create

descriptive categories of basic themes to construct an initial framework for further analysis. Next, the various categories and basic themes were reexamined and compared for possible connections across individual meaning expressions as well as between participants. In this stage, the different general and unique themes were gathered and grouped across the interviews into clusters of similar issues, resulting in two main categories. Although the process is presented here in a linear form, in practice it represented a cyclic process, as each stage built upon its predecessor, for each case separately and across all cases. As such, it involved a dynamic and repeated back-and-forth movement between “the parts” (i.e., texts and quotations) and “the whole” (i.e., the entire transcript), between units of meaning and general themes (e.g., van Manen, 1990).

Qualitative methods have employed various criteria of quality such as validity, rigor, trustworthiness, fairness, authenticity, and credibility (Morrow, 2005). Guided by the phenomenological paradigm, which honors reflectivity and subjectivity, the present study took into account constructivist criteria and trustworthiness standards such as *dependability* (“a systematic process systematically followed”; Patton, 2002, p. 546), *verstehen*, or the deep understanding of the participants’ meanings, a *dialogue* between various perspectives and *researcher reflexivity* (Morrow, 2005; Patton, 2002). These were addressed through methods of memowriting and reflexive research diary (Wall, Glenn, Mitchinson, & Poole, 2004) throughout the process to record researcher’s reflections and interpretations (van Manen, 1990). At the same time, a continuous process of critical discussion of the data was conducted, including feedback and insights from independent colleagues, enabling triangulation and increased vigor of the analysis and interpretations. In addition, all of the interpretations were grounded in direct and rich extracts from the interviews (Stiles, 1993).

Results

The participants recounted that as part of their spiritual change process, they are (or were) involved in exploring various spiritual practices and some forms of spiritual orientations. However, they did not identify themselves as adhering to a specific structured religious/spiritual tradition. Rather, they described a self-led process which is creatively and idiosyncratically constructed by the individual her/himself, and combines different elements from a range of practices, traditions and beliefs explored by them. The diverse ways and sources that serve these individuals in piecing together their spiritual change process reflect postmodern values of multiplicity, relativism, and choice, as well as the personalized and eclectic nature of the process. This highlights the importance of identifying what supports such idiosyncratic processes. The following example from Nathan (all names are pseudonyms to protect the privacy and anonymity of the participants) exemplifies the participants’ need for support in facilitating and maintaining the process of spiritual change and describes the different resources that he relies upon:

There are many challenges in this process, a lot . . . the hardest thing is where you feel very alone, misunderstood . . . or where I encountered a lot of barriers, a lot of frustrating points at which I don’t know where to go. Sometimes I don’t even know where I am going. As a result of trusting the process, I knew what to do. I knew I had to

sometimes get help from other people, to go to a clinician, caregiver or coach, to work on myself, to meditate, all sorts of things that always brought me the answer. It doesn’t make it easy. I think that the strongest tool I probably have is some kind of ability to stop and observe what is right for me at the moment. [Nathan, male, 43]

The analyses regarding the issue of support underscored two main kinds of supporting resources: personal-internal and external-environmental.

Personal-Internal Resources

Several personal resources were identified in all of the interviews as supporting the change process according to the participants: (a) deliberate choice, (b) courage, and (c) intentional attention and awareness.

Deliberate choice. Deliberate choice emerged from the interviews as important to the participants’ commitment to their spiritual change process. Yasmin, for example, refers to her deliberate choice as the mechanism that allows her to hold different dimensions and still maintain a solid core:

I choose. Yes, this is essentially what keeps me going . . . it helps me to be able to constantly be drawn to different directions, even if they are contradictory, but at the same time it also helps me to get back to my center, to keep myself centered. [Yasmin, female, 25]

Tali described a clear and thoughtful choice which involves a personal responsibility toward maintaining and coping with the continuous process of inner change:

You do this [spiritual] work because you want to understand, to learn, to change, to crack, to agree to see who you really are and it is hard . . . it’s really hard because it means getting inside your gut, going all the way . . . you have to be in a state where you understand that you can choose and that you are strong enough to choose and take responsibility for it. It’s knowing that there is a hand somewhere that is reached out for you, if only you would agree to reach yours as well. It will come but you have to want it, to choose it. [Tali, female, 53]

Similarly, Nathan emphasized the significant place of his conscious choice to be committed to the spiritual path:

I think that choice is the essential thing here. I chose this [spiritual] path. I chose and I continue to choose every day to remain in the position of choosing . . . there is always a choice of whether to persist . . . and the universe, it tries you out, to check if you are really serious. [Nathan, male, 43]

Rachel [female, 59] highlighted that the element of choice is not passive but associated with making an effort and with doing: “You have to choose to see the opportunity in what happens to you in life and to grab it, but, more importantly, you have to be willing to do something about it.”

Alongside the importance of choice, some participants also articulated a strong conviction that there is no turning back once the process has begun:

When you start to work on yourself and you start change, it’s very hard and unpleasant, and you really want to say ‘stop, what do I need all this for? . . . But at the same moment that I say it, it is clear to me that I have no choice. I have no choice, because once you start to see

there is no going back, you can't stop seeing and say 'it's all good.' [Meirav, female, 45]

A similar conviction was articulated by Reuven:

I don't have a choice . . . it's like wanting to go back to being a child again. A child has fun, he doesn't have that much of heavy responsibility, but I am already part of the process. I can't go back anymore . . . because I understand that I want to remove the foreskin, the blind that covers my eyes and I want to see, I really want to see. It's like in that movie, 'Matrix'. Once you take the pill, you can't go back . . . life becomes real. [Reuven, male, 47]

Such a lack of choice or an inability to "go back" to a previously held worldview essentially reflects the difference between two elements of the change process: "knowing" and "working." Once the participants have entered the spiritual change process, their worldview has changed and they can no longer choose to deny what they know or "close their eyes." "Working," as part of their personal change process however, is a matter of choice and such choice sustains their engagement in light of the demanding nature of the process.

Courage. The participants also highlighted the importance of courage in their commitment to the process. Yogev, for example, noted courage as an inner guide that led him to find meaning in and to develop a commitment to the process:

To do this kind of demanding work you have to have courage. Spiritual courage. That kind of courage allows you to be willing to take risks because you know they are worth taking since they reinforce something within you. [Yogev, male, 53]

Yasmin also highlighted the importance of courage to supporting her throughout the process:

You have to be willing to go through whatever happens . . . and I mean whatever happens, whether it's fear, or pain, or anything else . . . so courage is a very important ingredient in this process, in confronting these things. [Yasmin, female, 25]

Dorit identified two facets to courage derived from personal determination—an inner courage to contain internal challenges or struggles, and an external courage to endure in the process despite external challenges:

It demands a lot of courage . . . an inner courage to cope with things that are rising from the inside, and an external courage of not ascribing too much meaning or importance to things everyone else does . . . it requires that you know your direction and stick to it. [Dorit, female, 52]

Reuven also described courage as twofold, and highlighted the dual complementary facets of courage in overcoming fears and pain, and in trusting the process even when "you do not understand":

You need to be someone who isn't afraid to want to reform oneself . . . someone who isn't scared to run headfirst into a wall and is not afraid of pain. Because pain and suffering are elements that make you amend yourself. . . . It's also not being afraid to trust. Because once I learn to trust my inner system, it means understanding that in many cases there are things that have their own place even if they don't make sense. [Reuven, male, 47]

Intentional attention and awareness. The participants also overwhelmingly underscored the importance of being self-aware and reflective. Amit described the important interaction between being present, paying attention and an openness to see and accept:

You must be present, and must pay attention to what happens so you are able to really encounter reality, or other people. . . . I listen attentively, and when I encounter helplessness I say, 'here, my teacher has arrived', and then rather than feeling like I have to prove something, I can release it to explore what I really want and choose what is right from within. [Amit, male, 51]

Rachel articulated how close attention to and awareness of inner voices as well as of external reality throughout the process requires patience and mindful attention:

It means looking at it as a process throughout time, and being patient with the process . . . it is very meaningful to stop and observe, to ask ourselves and to listen. [Rachel, female, 59]

Yasmin also stressed intentional self-awareness and observing as critical:

Awareness is critical. You can't do this process without awareness. It's not something you do because someone 'brainwashed' you. It has to come from you. It has force and power because it comes from your awareness, from your observation, from your attentiveness. You have to be able to observe. If you don't, you can't do it. [Yasmin, female, 25]

The participants highlighted the importance of intentionally being attentive, open and self-aware throughout the process. Yaron, for example, noted:

You need to have a strong will to be open and attentive. In my experience, you need to maintain open eyes and an open heart. To be willing to be aware, to learn things about yourself, to acknowledge how much you don't actually know and to be open to it. [Yaron, male, 26]

In sum, the participants described several personal-internal resources: deliberate choice, courage and engagement in intentional and mindful attention, all of which contributed to their persistence in maintaining a continuous and demanding self-authored spiritual change process.

External-Environmental Resources

Along with the internal supporting processes, the participants also pointed out the significance of external support in the process. These included the following: (a) the availability of spiritual contexts and experiences, (b) specific spiritual groups and like-minded peers, (c) spiritual teachers, and (d) a sense of connection to a higher power or the transcendent.

The availability of spiritually related contexts and experiences. The participants described an active exploration of different and diverse spiritual orientations and practices. Many of them participated in workshops, retreats, courses, and voluntary spiritual practice groups (such as Vipassana, Mindfulness, or Transcendental Meditation). In addition, they described participating in the joint study of "spiritual materials" with others, such as scriptures from different religions, channeled materials, Shamanism, courses in miracles, ancient Eastern texts such as Buddhist sutras,

and so forth. Some of these practice groups, retreats, or study groups were led by spiritual teachers and some included same-status peers. The participants also engaged in dyadic interpersonal interactions led by spiritual teachers as well as in informal conversations with their peers. The availability of a variety of contexts and groups supported the participants' spiritual exploration, study, and practice, and allowed them to be exposed to and to experience a wide variety of traditions, approaches, and disciplines, and to come up with their own mixture of spiritual beliefs and practices. The availability of the spiritual context also enabled the participants to select a community that would resonate with their choices and interests. Yaron provided a clear and lively delineation of these issues:

I began to see, to feel, that there is something beyond. Something that I don't exactly know how to explain in words, and I began to slowly search for its meaning . . . I began to really get into, to delve into some kind of spiritual search process. To read a lot of books, and engage in all sorts of channeling, and courses and workshops, and Reiki, past life regression, Meditation, Vipassana, and Buddhism, rebirthing, a lot of searching, searching for questions, for answers . . . it's a lot but I can see truths in all kinds of ways . . . because each of us is a bit different and the variety of ways that exist today allow you to explore and understand things more deeply through different approaches. So you can really cover a wider spectrum. Because, eventually, all of this searching and exploration of different workshops, practices or methods are basically ways of 'knowing thyself.' All these allow me to know myself from the inside. [Yaron, male, 26]

To the participants, the active exploration of an eclectic variety of approaches constitutes a kind of mosaic that integrates different beliefs and traditions that coexist with no contradictions, as in the following illustrations by Boaz and Meirav:

I feel that my path was paved. It was paved through Indian Shamanism, Celtic Shamanism, Hebrew Shamanism, Jehovah, Kabbalah. . . . I basically synthesize beliefs to make my own path. Whatever felt right to me, from anything, I took it and synthesized it. And there is no contradiction, everything is connected and integrated together for me. [Boaz, male, 63]

I did some Kabbalah, and Buddhism, a lot of Vipassana and Yemima [a method for conscious awareness], and this integration between them was just what I needed, although my [spiritual] teacher didn't like it because people tend to think that their way is the right one, but I don't think so. . . . I love the connections, the combination. I can be, for example, when I'm in a retreat to translate to myself Buddhism to Yemima and Kabbalah, and the other way around, because for me, all of that are really connected and complement each other. They hold the same universal truth. [Meirav, female, 45]

Although the participants appear to be involved in various spiritual practices and some forms of spiritual orientations as part of their spiritual change process, they do not adopt a specific structured religious/spiritual tradition. Such eclecticism and mixture between traditions and practices appears to reflect the participants' belief in perennialism (i.e., the view that all traditions and religions share the same essential truth; Heelas, 1996).

Spiritual groups and like-minded peers. The discovery of like-minded peers, groups, or networks that are open to the spiritual and who engage in spiritual processes endowed the participants with a sense of belonging to a community, and provided

support throughout the demanding change process. This was articulated by them as finding a 'shared language' with people who understand them, as can be seen in the following excerpt by Ziva:

I don't share my experiences with everyone because they won't understand. It is like speaking a foreign language. But there are people I met in workshops and events and we have a shared path. We strengthen each other; it is an environment that supports and reinforces my process [. . .] it feels like a community, I feel like I found my 'soul family,' because I feel that the connection is so strong and powerful with these people that I can't explain it otherwise. [Ziva, female, 44]

Nofar articulated a similar experience, reflecting on the importance of taking part in a group that "speaks the same language", as a community committed to cooperative learning and development:

When I got to this group, it made me suddenly see that there are other people who speak the same language, the spiritual language . . . you feel a connection. [Nofar, female, 47]

The group and the connection with like-minded peers allowed the participants to engage in self-reflection, to elaborate on past and current difficulties, and to reintegrate them in a holistic, broader scope. The group further provided the enabling conditions of intimacy and trust that the participants could use to share their personal experiences and behavior, and experiences in the group taught them about themselves. Nathan and Shelley recounted such a situation:

I had an experience there [at a workshop] that I couldn't explain. An experience that felt especially good to me, that made me cry, not out of sadness, but from joy. I didn't know why. And then I realized that I saw the people around me and I felt the connection, I felt love, I felt close to them . . . I had some kind of paradigm about life, I've seen the world and the people within it as a rather cold and alienated place . . . and this experience suddenly made me see, it made me really experience that everyone is looking for warmth and love. And that is what eventually made me become connected and simply melted away something within me, that brought down some kind of wall I had within me. It made me cry. . . . It opened a crack in me, it made me realize that there is something very big here that I don't understand in life. [Nathan, male, 43]

It's like being in my weakest, most vulnerable, spot—and there to be accepted . . . it is a healing place. In the group there are very intimate encounters among people who are actually strangers, which I think allows some kind of process of self-acceptance that is very deep . . . there is something very liberating when you disclose a wounded place, it doesn't matter what, in front of people . . . because everyone was there and saw how much I hurt, even how much I lack control, and nothing [bad] happened. Everything was alright. [Shelley, female, 32]

Yaron pointed out the insights gained in group processes that mirror and reflect what they see in a person as supporting factors in an otherwise individualistic change process:

What is good in a group is reflection. Reflection means a group that you trust, people you love and can rely upon to truly reflect something out of love, to point out the places that you don't want to see, I think that is the power of a group . . . they can show you the way, the door, but only you can open it and pass through it. Most of the work remains yours. [Yaron, male, 26]

Along with providing emotional support and acceptance, the groups also functioned as a context for meaningful interactive experiences with peers that often revolved around sharing ideas and personal perspectives, joint learning and the discovery of new ideas and information. Roe, for example, discussed the importance of joining others who shared the spiritual process in order to explore, learn, clarify and crystallize insights:

I joined this group that was involved with the evolution of consciousness, where we explore together and meditate together and ask spiritual questions together, which develops your consciousness. The fact that there is a group that thinks about what spirituality means or what it means to develop, makes us develop ourselves and our consciousness . . . new patterns are created, new forms of communication or understanding. It's like some kind of advanced brainstorming. [Roe, male, 44]

Spiritual teachers. The participants emphasized the importance of spiritual teachers as significant sources for insights and as supporters of their spiritual change process, as can be seen in the following excerpt from Shay:

You must have a teacher . . . it's a big mistake for people to treat themselves . . . you must. It gives you an opportunity to grow. By myself, I can progress until I reach a limit, but I can't see. I can't really know what I look like from a bystander's viewpoint, no matter what. Even if I stand in front of a mirror, I don't know what I look like . . . I need someone to show me what I look like. Thus, whoever wants to really, really develop, must have a teacher. [Shay, male, 34]

Participants articulated the importance of the spiritual teacher as a "living model" and as a source for knowledge and guidance:

Throughout the process you feel that you need someone. It's like in anything, you must have a teacher. You can't learn to play music from a book . . . it's not like learning from a master who is an expert, a living model . . . he lives it and he can pass his skills to you because it [what is passed] is a living thing, not a dead one. It's not something that you can learn from a book. It's not something you can see on television . . . it must be someone who leads you . . . otherwise you can't. It's like you are going into the jungle. Our mind is like a jungle, you can't wander around there alone. You must have someone to guide you, to direct you through your emotions, your thoughts, your ups and downs within. [Dorit, female, 52]

Yogev recounted a relationship with a spiritual teacher that reinforced his self-confidence and allowed him to acknowledge an unrecognized part of himself:

In the interactions with him, I felt that he was taking me or this part of me [the spiritual; P.R.N] more seriously than I did myself. And in each such interaction, he treated me or my spiritual yearning in complete seriousness, which reinforced and made me more and more aware of this dimension. . . . So this is something that I think is one of the most important services that a spiritual teacher can do for his students. [Yogev, male, 53]

A similar experience of such meaningful dyadic relationship was described by Ziva whose spiritual teacher facilitated her self-discovery and empowerment:

During the workshop, the teacher carried out personal processes on people in front of the group. He sat in front of me and there was some kind of process where he held me and I burst into tears. It wasn't

crying, it was shouting and yelling, there was just so much pain . . . and the most amazing thing for me was that when I looked at him, I saw that he was crying with me. It was just amazing. He was there with me, for me. Something in his presence, you feel his power . . . it's like there was something there that allowed me to release all that pain . . . It's very powerful. . . . I think that what I met there is love, loving myself, and loving without an object. You feel it towards all living things. [Ziva, female, 44]

Elsewhere in her interview, Ziva distinguished between a teacher who exemplifies a humane model for development and shares the spiritual path, and a "guru," who she perceives as reflecting a nonequal relationship of dependence and relinquishment of personal responsibility, and also talks about nonsupportive encounters with teachers:

I am not a 'guru' kind of person, who favors erasing myself. What I mean is that I love teachers who are human beings. I am not looking for someone who will be above me . . . what I really love in the teacher I am working with is that he never pretends to be enlightened, or even close to being enlightened. He exposes his weaknesses so much, his humanness, and I really appreciate that. I can learn from such teachers. Because they are like me. They did a process, worked on themselves. I can see whether I can also go through this process, through the same work that they did. There were also teachers and moderators that hurt me, that I went through a very rocky process with and who I felt were not there for me [. . .] those were very scary and painful moments. [Ziva, female, 44]

Such reservation, accompanied by an inner examination and exploration of the spiritual teacher is also reflected by Roe:

I think you should be very careful not to turn a teacher into a 'guru,' to blindly adore him . . . you should check what is right for you, if it is right for you. . . . Because you will eventually need to learn for yourself, for real . . . the teacher is only a guide to show you the way, that's all. He can't replace you in your path. [Roe, male, 44]

Higher power. The higher power, the ultimate or the transcendent emerged from the participants' experiences as a significant source of support and trust, representing some kind of 'secure base' (a secure 'place' from which to explore), as well as a 'safe haven' (a 'place' that comforts you when you are agitated, distressed or frustrated and angry) that allowed the participants to trust and feel 'held' throughout the process. Although participants came from a variety of traditions and beliefs, this was apparent in all the interviews. Although participants referred to their feelings and mental states (e.g., feeling secure) they clearly referred to these experiences as emanating from outside help and from an entity, energy, or force that represents a transcendent external source, and not synonymous with the self. Shay and Tali, for example, articulated an experience of a strong connection to the transcendent that is perceived by them as a source for support and comfort and which empowers them to cope with challenges in the process (Shay refers to a 'safe haven' and Tali to a 'secure base'):

The greatest gift of channeling, at least for me, is that they [channeled entities] are always quiet, they are always silent. No matter the drama I am in, they always maintain a silence that is a kind of anchor . . . a constant reminder that it's not the end of the world, which is very meaningful in moments of adversity and difficulties in the process. [Shay, male, 34]

It's like walking in the world knowing that there is something beyond. You know, it's like you have something like an angel that guards you . . . and it gives you the strength to cope, even with crises in the process and with the insights. [Tali, female, 53]

Amit emphasized that such a connection with the transcendent is established by conscious and volitional trust and confidence rather than by the fear of a 'punishing God,' which he associates with religious tradition:

It's trust, trust and confidence, that helps you to continue and be present, to become aware, to see things as they are . . . it's trust in my deep connection, in some kind of personal connection with 'what is beyond,' that is conscious and aware, a trust that is not based on the fear of some kind of a grandfather-God who sits up in heaven and observes you, and disciplines you, and punishes you like in religion, which I find to be a childish and naive perception of divinity. I trust and have faith in what is immanent, in all that exists in a universe which is greater than me alone. [Amit, male, 51]

This inner sense of trust in the process, which is derived from 'knowing' that the transcendent, the ultimate or the 'beyond' guides and supports them throughout the process is evident in the words of Boaz, who emphasized that such an essence lies at the core of specific manifestations of different traditions:

You can't be in this spiritual process without faith or trust. And it doesn't matter what you call it: universe, nature, or the KanTaka, which is the great spirit of the Indians, or God. . . . Because when you break the things that you grew up on during this process, you are like a baby in troubled water. You need to trust something, or you will drown. You must trust something much bigger than you. Something infinite that you are a part of. [Boaz, male, 63]

A few participants also referred to the love they perceived from that source:

It is not a belief nor a religion, it's *knowing* that you can be helped, that you have 'someone' to talk to . . . that you are not alone, which is a huge thing. It changes everything completely . . . it's fantastic, this feeling of unconditional acceptance, it heals so many places inside. . . . I can't imagine my life without the connection to heavens, this higher wisdom, this guidance, however you want to call it . . . God, the angels, the divine spirit, the Holy One Blessed Be He . . . it doesn't matter what you call it, the connection is just essential. It's impossible to live without it . . . this acceptance, the unconditional love you get, supports you on your way. [Mira, female, 57]

In sum, it appears that alongside personal-internal resources, the participants also use external-environmental resources in order to initiate and preserve a process of personal spiritual change. These included supportive interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers, the availability of an enabling sociocultural context, and a sense of connection to an infinite source of higher power which transcends the private self but is unmediated by organized religion.

Discussion

The present study explored processes facilitating personal spiritual change, experienced by the participants as a major change in their lives. The findings demonstrate that despite the rather ambiguous, unaffiliated, and fluid nature of their spiritual change process, the participants were able to secure for themselves different sources of support and a sense of direction. The two main

forms of supporting processes discussed above, namely, the personal-internal and the external-environmental, can be seen as reflecting a multidimensional support system that includes both 'reaching-in' and 'reaching-out' to resources that helped maintaining the participants' spiritual change process.

Inner Processes

The personal-internal resources that were identified reflect intrinsic motivation processes, involving deliberate choice, courage, and intentional attention and awareness. These resources reflect the operation of inner guidance and self-reliance, which facilitate and support the participants' capability to manage experiences and challenges throughout the process. The participants' focus on conscious choice underscores the importance of volitional engagement in their development and growth. This finding lends support to Benson et al. (2012) assertions that spiritual development involves a volitional, conscious choice of active engagement. A similar view of the importance of choice was also eminent in accounts of quantum changes, in which, despite sudden experiences of conviction, individuals still articulated active choice to embrace or reject such experiences and the implications for their lives (Miller & C'de Baca, 2001). In the context of the present study, such volitional involvement appears to allow the participants to actively maintain their self-led process, to perceive challenges and barriers as opportunities for further development, and to fuel their efforts toward maintaining the demanding processes involved.

Another internal resource which emerged as important for the participants' engagement in the spiritual change process is courage to face and confront internal as well as external struggles, uncertainties, and challenges. Courage has been viewed as the energizing impetus for choosing growth over safety needs (see Goud, 2005). The participants in the present study are not provided with a clear image or structured script of the nature of their change process as is often the case with affiliation to organized religions (e.g., Davidman & Greil, 2007; Gooren, 2007). The strength gained through adopting a courageous attitude toward the "unknown," which is involved with a self-led change process appears to reinforce the participants' capability to exercise their agency throughout and to "trust the process."

The interviews further uncovered the noteworthy importance of the participants' reliance on inner reflection processes, which involved directed attention and self-awareness. The importance of such capacities has been apparent since antiquity, when the *Pythia*, the Delphic Oracle implored each supplicant to 'know thyself' above all things, and Socrates suggested that the 'unexamined life' should be avoided. It is also evident in contemporary views which regard spiritual development as a process of awakening to our inherent spiritual nature (e.g., Wilber, 2000) and practices that emphasize the importance of self-awareness and reflection for personal development such as mindfulness (e.g., Brown & Ryan, 2003).

The participants in the present study appear to not only engage in self-awareness and attentive observing on a continuous basis, but also clearly articulate their own awareness of the significance of these processes to their spiritual change process. The reflective dialogue engendered by processes of self-exploration and attentiveness contributed to their enhanced self-assurance, self-reliance,

and increased sense of personal accountability. Such inner awareness is thus manifested in a coherent metacognition and does not resemble rumination. These inner processes helped the participants become aware of their experiences, to provide an anchoring structure and thus allowed them to let go of previous knowledge or self-narratives and open up to the unknown in order to be able to transform and change. Together the inner strengths allowed them to feel agentic and competent.

External Support

Beyond the processes described above, which reflect a turn inward for support, as well as a reliance on personal agency and self-awareness, the present study revealed that the process of spiritual change is also strongly supported by relatedness. Such relatedness is experienced by the participants as both 'horizontal' (i.e., other peers, sociocultural context) and 'vertical' (i.e., the transcendent), and it appears to grant them a sense of being held and supported throughout the process.

In the horizontal sense, spiritual change is embedded in and facilitated by sociocultural contexts and their concomitant interpersonal interactions. The effect of the general cultural context with the multiplicity of alternative spiritualities is reflected in the availability of different types of spiritualities to experience, explore, or examine. This context and its diverse groups, courses, books, and workshops, as well as the open space it creates, may offer legitimacy and encouragement for inner spiritual change processes as well as play an important role in facilitating the participants' self-led change process. The personalized, autonomous, and eclectic nature of the process, as well as the moral relativism it embraces (Tucker, 2002), are manifested in the diverse ways and sources individuals employ in assembling their continuously unfolding process. 'Reaching-out' to like-minded peers who share similar processes of spiritual exploration and change, and facilitating contexts such as spiritual groups provided the participants with an opportunity to find others who 'speak the same language' as them, and to feel understood.

This resonates with processes within religious contexts, where social structures such as religious or faith-based communities promote social interaction and reinforce a collective set of shared values (e.g., Ebstyn King & Furrow, 2004; Smith, 2003), embedded within a strong grounded sense of group identity (Braam et al., 2001). However, although their function appears to be rather similar, the nature of the various forms of alternative spirituality communities in the present study is different from the more traditional close-knit communities of institutional religion as they are less organized and less formal. Some of these communities are formed ad hoc such as groups or alternative spiritual classes that work together for a limited time, as well as workshops, retreats, and festivals. Such contexts are experienced by the participants as more fluid, diffused, and flexible. As Bruce (2006) explains, "the weakness of community in the New Age alternative spirituality is not an accident but an inevitable consequence of its solipsistic basis of authority . . . the self is the final arbiter of truth and utility." (p. 42). Hence, although not contextualized within an organized and stable community with clear values and ideologies, the comradeship they found in groups and fellow searchers who helped them along the process provided them a sense of support,

connection, and relatedness together with individual self-autonomy.

More specifically, groups provided two main types of support: (a) the nurturance of joint learning and development, and (b) an affirming and emotionally supportive fellowship which encouraged self-expression, and which provided validating and empowering experiences. Such contexts thus allowed the participants to address their deep human need for acceptance and belonging (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000), as well as to support and reinforce their inner processes of self-awareness and self-discovery while encountering challenging emotions and psychological difficulties. Such support was achieved through sharing, mutual exploration and learning, as well as through the expression and recrystallization of insights, beliefs and attitudes. The need for confirmation and reassurance was satisfied through the experiences of emotional resonance and validation. Furthermore, and through their encounters with others, the participants could also learn about themselves and gain *in vivo* insights related to their behavior and interactions in the world. In a broader sense, such interactions contributed to the participants' sense of self-love and self-acceptance that was also mirrored in their own growth in love and caring for others. This was evident both within the various contexts and groups to which they were exposed and as an overarching sense of interconnectedness, acceptance, caring, and contribution, which emerged as important ingredients of their spiritual identity following their change process (Russo-Netzer & Maysseless, 2014).

In addition to facilitating contexts and groups, the participants also highlighted the importance of spiritual teachers as meaningful figures in their spiritual change processes. The participants reported experiences of supportive relationships with spiritual teachers who served as sources of guidance and knowledge. The teachers' authentic recognition and affirmation were perceived as empowering and provided an acknowledgment of a participant's often fragile sense of self, as well as a 'living model' to learn from. Together, the meaningful and deep group and dyadic relationships with spiritual teachers and peers appear to enable the participants to deepen self-discovery and to empower the development of the self throughout the change process. The importance of spiritual models and/or teachers as exemplars of spiritual development and change is evident in all spiritual and religious traditions (Oman & Thoresen, 2003). Such spiritual modeling is facilitated by social learning, socialization, and observational learning (Oman, 2013) and appears to be a significant source of support for a process of spiritual change inside and outside religious contexts alike.

Interestingly, although the function of context and relationships appears to be prevalent in various search and change processes, the present findings also emphasize the unique dialectics between internal and external processes. The participants continuously put each of these (e.g., courses, groups, teachers) to scrutiny through their internal mechanism of self-reflection to determine whether it is right for them—a tool which appears to be central in their experience and which is developed in the course of the change process. Such internally guided filtering involves discerning the 'authentic' from the specious (as, e.g., in distinguishing spiritual teachers from 'gurus'). In this respect, the commitment to and involvement in external supporting processes is moderated by the participants' own agency, by their individualism, and by the use of their own reflection and self-awareness. In this way, they maintain

balance between their need for community and reliance on others on the one hand, and the maintenance of their autonomy and personal responsibility on the other hand.

Along with human contexts and relationships, the participants also referred to a connection to a higher power or to the ultimate as a source for guidance, love, and support. This relatedness to the transcendent forms the vertical sense of support in the process of spiritual change in the present study. Interestingly, the participants' descriptions of their connection to the "higher power" appear to be different from the other three external sources. Whereas their descriptions explicitly refer to "actual" groups, teachers, and contexts alongside their feelings and experiences with regard to them, their description of the "higher power" is less concerned with the nature of that higher power which was perceived as rather amorphous ("it doesn't matter what you call it"; see p. 22) and more with their relationship to and connection with it. Yet, it is experienced as a source which is transcendent to them and to which they relate, and not as something which is internal or identified with the self.

The connection to the 'beyond' appears to function as a 'secure base' from which to explore, and as a 'safe haven' that comforted and reassured them throughout the process and its accompanying challenges. The idea that a relationship with the transcendent carries with it qualities such as 'secure base' and 'safe haven' resonates with Kirkpatrick's (1998; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008) model of religious processes, in which a relationship with God can be described as an attachment bond. More specifically, the model points out the resemblance between internal working models of God and religion and those developed within close relationships, suggesting that for securely attached individuals positive God images are perceived as "reliable and trustworthy" (Kirkpatrick, 1998, p. 962). The participants' connection to the transcendent in the present study was similarly experienced as granting strength and confidence to face challenges, although unbounded within formal organized structures of institutional religion. In this sense, the participants experienced a sense of personal providence, a connection and a guidance which accompanied them throughout their process of spiritual change.

Such unmediated and intimate connection with the transcendent may resemble the contemporary suggestions with regard to the changing perception of God, especially outside organized religions: from traditional images of a being that is 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 life and experiences (Roof, 1999). Such experiences have been reported within certain religious contexts as well. For example, Luhrmann (2004) described a rather similar phenomenon among evangelical congregants who, as part of the contemporary social-cultural influences of the postmodern 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). The participants' reliance on the connection to a higher power or to the ultimate as a source for support highlights an interesting component in their experience of 'spiritual but not religious' change processes. Although they are outside a traditional religious context and though they may maintain an ambivalent stance toward institutional religion, the study participants also appear to voice an experience of the deity as an important

source for security and guidance in the process. Such a sense of connection to an infinite source of higher power is experienced as transcending the private self yet unmediated by organized religion.

Support Processes Within and Outside Institutional Religion

Altogether, the supporting sources found to facilitate and bolster the demanding process of spiritual change reflect three central orientations: internal, horizontal, and vertical. The participants turn inward to draw on their personal-internal resources of intentional self-awareness, which anchors and validates their experiences. This is accompanied and maintained by their conscious choice of volitionally committing to the process as well as by their courage to explore new things and persevere in their engagement and see it through. They are also aided and supported by external-environmental resources: both 'horizontally,' through their facilitating contexts and connections with peers and teachers, and 'vertically,' through their relatedness to the transcendent. Taken together, these ingredients can be seen as providing the conditions necessary for addressing core human psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which, in turn, support their ability to hold and maintain the complex processes they experience.

These processes, voiced by the participants in the present study, appear to correspond to supporting processes within religious traditions, in particular with regard to external-environmental ones. Such structures (i.e., peers, spiritual teachers, social support, as well as a sense of connection to a higher power) are often inherent in organized religion and appear to be recreated by individuals engaging in this process outside of an organized framework. This illuminates common basic processes of utilizing support and facilitating environments in the context of search for spiritual meaning, despite the various forms and pathways individuals choose as part of their spiritual change processes. It also aligns with a general perspective of universal human needs (e.g., for security, autonomy, competence, and relatedness; e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000), and perhaps delineates universal paths by which individuals find support and recruit assistance in their search for spiritual meaning. This corresponds with King's (2008) assertion, referring to spiritual process of meaning-making: "Whether this process is one of personal construction or socialization, the intentional act of relying on personal, religious or cultural ideology is central to spirituality" (pp. 57–58).

Adapting and modifying traditional and fundamental frameworks appear to enable the participants to face contemporary challenges and changing environmental conditions, and organize their eclectic process and experiences into a seemingly coherent structure. Whereas religion traditionally tended to cultivate sense of unity and community by generating a cohesive and shared worldview which validates individual, group, and cultural beliefs (Mattis & Jagers, 2001), outside such context, the 'quest culture' appeals to seekers by emphasizing 'personal knowledge' rather than the 'unity of knowledge' and offers various activities aimed at greater inner discovery, experience and self-transformation (Roof, 1999). Thus, voluntarily self-constructed patterns of relationships with peers and spiritual teachers may enable such seekers to gain a sense of support and community in an accessible and yet infor-

mal way, amid instability and disengagement from religious institutions and practices.

Alongside the similarities of spiritual change processes inside and outside religious contexts, the findings of the current studies also underscore the saliency of personal-internal resources, experienced by the participants as crucial for the maintenance of the spiritual change process. This reflects an interesting dialectic between the reliance on ‘significant others’ (i.e., groups, like-minded peers, teachers, higher power) to support and accompany them, and the central role of the individual self which is the facilitator and moderator of the process. By accessing both poles of this dialectic and balancing them, the participants manage to gain a sense of belonging and community in uncommitted and fluid settings outside of a formalized structure of religion, and yet adhere to their autonomy and self agency. This observation resonates with Wuthnow’s (1994) insights, gained from his exploration of the widespread small-group movement phenomenon in North America. He suggested that these groups, often spontaneously and informally formed, reinforce contemporary values of individualism and fragmentation while still providing the highly needed personal connections. Additionally, they allow for individualized spiritual seeking in an otherwise secular context, “a form of spirituality that is thoroughly adaptable to the complex, pluralistic world in which we live” (Wuthnow, 1994, p. 25).

To conclude, in many of today’s world’s cultures, individuals are no longer obligated to fixed, culturally given structures, and are faced with the freedom (and challenge) to form their own identities through conscious and autonomous choices (Adams, 2003). The present findings point to an equally strong tendency to seek stable foundations to hold on to. The participants’ eclectic ‘self-made’ mechanisms of support appear to enable them to make-sense and organize their experiences of an individualized process. In this sense, the participants of the present study appear to replace institutionalized religion’s traditional functions of meaning-bestowing and commitment with alternative and self-constructed structures which provide them with continuity, stability and coherence. This might possibly reflect an inherent need for structure that provides an anchor and a compass for navigating through a self-led process which is often idiosyncratic, eclectic, and unaffiliated. These insights suggest that cultivating sensitivity to the unique nuances involved in the manner in which individuals conceptualize and experience these processes may contribute to a more complete understanding of spiritual change processes in particular, and human development as a whole.

Caveats and Directions for Future Research

The participants who volunteered for the present study, despite representing a rather heterogeneous cross-section in terms of socioeconomic status, age, and spiritual orientation, constitute a subgroup of individuals who have experienced spiritual change within a specific cultural context. Being spiritual yet nonreligious reflects a fundamental duality in the Israeli secular identity, manifested in the tension between rejection and continuity vis-à-vis mainstream Jewish culture and religion because of the lack of a clear separation between state and religion (Ezrachi, 2004). As such, their experiences may not necessarily capture the broader phenomenon of spiritual change in contemporary Western societies in general. Yet, qualitative research methods in general and

phenomenological research in particular do not strive for representation, generalization or the extraction of an objective truth from the findings (Patton, 2002). Instead, they strive to gain an understanding of the processes by which human beings construct meaning from experience (McPhail, 1995; van Manen, 1990) and allow the potential for extrapolating the findings to other settings or contexts by providing rich data suggesting ideas that merit further exploration (Elo et al., 2014).

In line with this, it is suggested for future research to further explore what facilitates the individual capability to hold and sustain self-led, challenging, and continuous processes outside organized institutionalized structures among other populations and distinct cultures, using larger samples and various methods of investigation. Such an exploration may contribute to the understanding and development of support structures for spiritual change processes, and in particular given the growing proportion of individuals in contemporary Western world who identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious”—a phenomenon which warrants closer empirical attention (e.g., McNamara Barry & Abo-Zena, 2016).

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