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Spiritual Identity outside Institutional Religion: A Phenomenological Exploration

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Spiritual Identity Outside Institutional Religion: A Phenomenological Exploration

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This study explores the essence and meaning of the lived experience of spirituality outside institutional religion among individuals who experienced spiritual change. Based on a phenomenological analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with 25 Israeli adults, 12 men and 13 women between the ages of 25 and 66 years ($M = 45.3$), the findings indicate that the developmental process experienced by the participants yielded the establishment of a new identity—a clear and committed spiritual identity different from the modern (e.g., identity statuses) and some of the postmodern (i.e., hyphenated or hybrid) customary conceptualizations of identity. Within this general sense of spiritual identity, three major themes were identified that can be seen as dialectic dimensions: (1) self-centeredness and authenticity together with self-dissolution and surrender, (2) "being there" together with becoming, and (3) alienation together with a sense of mission. The similarities and differences between this spiritual identity and other forms of identity are discussed.

This article explores how spirituality is experienced in the lives of adults following a process of spiritual change outside institutional religion. The scientific interest in spirituality has grown over the past decades, particularly as it has been found to be associated with health and well-being (Van Dierendock & Mohan, 2006), and has been perceived as a potential resource for optimal development (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Most conceptions of spirituality incorporate an aspect of transcendence that reflects a realization that "there exists a broader paradigm for understanding existence that transcends the immediacy of our own individual consciousness and that binds all things into a more unitive harmony" (Piedmont, 1999, p. 988). The terms *religiousness* and *spirituality* have traditionally been used interchangeably (Tanyi, 2002), but the current trend is to view them as related but different constructs (Hill et al., 2000; Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999). In relation to the distinction made by William James (1902/1961) between private and institutional religion, Marty and Appleby (1991) claimed that although spirituality and religion may be defined with similar descriptors, religion encourages certain behavioral expressions and practices that spirituality does not necessarily embrace. In general, *religion* is viewed as "an organized system of practices, beliefs and rituals, designed to facilitate the relationship with the sacred or transcendent" (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001, p. 18) whereas *spirituality* is viewed as a more personal and experiential connection to the sacred or transcendent (Elkins, 1990; Van Dierendonck & Mohan, 2006). Yet this distinction is quite fuzzy because religion often involves personal and experiential aspects besides institutional ones. Indeed, the

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search for transcendent spiritual experiences and transformation is evident throughout history and across cultures, within and outside the boundaries of institutional religious practice and tradition (Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude, 2003).

As universal phenomena, historical, cultural, and societal trends may color the manner in which the search for transcendent spiritual experiences and transformation is manifested. In the Western world today, a growing number of individuals define themselves as "spiritual but not religious" and value personal experience above institutional sources of authority (e.g., Fuller, 2001; Tacey, 2003). For these individuals, the spiritual path largely reflects an autonomous, subjective, and experimental process that often involves active search and openness to change. As discussed in Roof (1993) and T. Smith (2002), in the United States, this path of personal religion is especially significant among highly active seekers who view their personal faith as a spiritual journey or quest.

This study focuses on the experiences of individuals following spiritual change outside institutional religion. It was conducted in Israel with Jewish participants. Within Israeli society, there is a growing interest in New Age spirituality, which is perceived as distinct from Jewish religious tradition. About 42% of the Jewish population in Israel (according to the *Statistical Abstract of Israel* [Government of Israel, 2011]) is considered secular or nonreligious in the sense of not belonging to a religious community and not observing traditional rituals. Judaism is a praxis-oriented religion (Ruach-Midbar & Klin-Oron, 2010). That being so, the distinction between religious and nonreligious belief is defined by marked characteristics such as ways of dressing, special educational institutions, and daily practices subscribing to orthodox or conservative Jewish beliefs (Ruach-Midbar, 2012). For the Israeli Jewish secular population, the Jewish origin is experienced more as a national identity than as a religious one. Israel's exposure to the influences of globalization and the transition to an individualistic worldview have validated the legitimacy of alternative, direct, and personal venues for exploration of spiritual yearnings (Ezrachi, 2004). In fact, a large number of people have described spiritual journeys outside intuitional Jewish religion as resulting in major changes in their lives (Ruach-Midbar, 2006).

Although our participants were not identified by the research sampling criteria as New Agers, nor did they identify themselves as such, the New Age served as a social-cultural context for their experiences. *New Age* can be seen as an umbrella term describing alternative approaches to traditional Western culture in which individual spiritual development, aiming at personal transformations (Lewis, 1992), is a dominant theme (Luckmann, 1996). Tucker (2002) has suggested that the postmodern processes of the gradual weakening of institutional religion, increasing secularization, and emphasis on individualism have created a spiritual void that the New Age framework, as a mechanism for creating meaning, is attempting to fill. The focus on personal experience of the sacred through intensified processes of empowering and celebrating the individual is considered one of the main characteristics of New Age, often viewed as a form of "self-spirituality" (Hanegraaff, 1999; Heelas, 1996).

Spiritual change generally signifies a unique, multidimensional, and complex form of individual change. Regardless of whether the change is sudden and dramatic, as in the case of conversion (Paloutzian & Park, 2005; Rambo, 1993), gradual and incremental (e.g., Kasprow & Scotton, 1999), or within or outside a traditional religious context, in each case it involves transformation of the self (Hill, 2002). Profound change entails a process of self-transformation in terms of goals, feelings, attitudes, behaviors, and the meaning of life (Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999). Such transformations can be understood as changes in personal identity. Therefore,

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the concept of personal identity was adopted to explore the lived experiences of individuals undergoing spiritual change outside institutional religion.

Spiritual Identity

Most studies concerning spiritual identity have adopted Eriksonian and neo-Eriksonian frameworks. Erikson's foundational ego identity approach (Erikson, 1963, 1968) described identity as involving a subjective sense of sameness and continuity over time. In the light of Erikson's dimensions of exploration and commitment, Marcia (1966) identified four identity statuses (diffusion, moratorium, foreclosure, and achievement), and regarded the last as reflecting the most successful resolution of what Erikson (1968) termed "the identity crisis." Later conceptualizations suggested that a well-developed identity structure must be flexible and open to change (Fadjukoff, Pulkkinen, & Kokko, 2005). This flexibility was expected to be manifested in terms of the moratorium-achievement-moratorium-achievement (MAMA) cycle (Stephen, Fraser, & Marcia, 1992), characterized by repeated phases of structured commitment and reevaluation.

Erikson's (1968) writings consider religiousness and spirituality to be an important part of establishing a mature identity, involving the Eriksonian moral ethical concepts of responsibility and fidelity as "a commitment to an ideological world view" (Hunsberger, Pratt, & Pancer, 2001, p. 366). Although considered central in identity formation by Erikson, the spiritual (religious) element was treated and operationalized by Marcia (1966), together with politics, as a subdomain of the ideological domain, along with other identity domains such as the occupational and interpersonal. Furthermore, much of the research in the field has assumed equivalence between the spiritual and the religious (e.g., Sherry, Adelman, Whilde, & Quick, 2010), a theoretical and empirical conflation that has contributed to the limited research on spiritual identity (Roehlkepartain, Benson, & Scales, 2011).

Apart from the Eriksonian-psychosocial framework, there have been several attempts to define and conceptually explore the nature of *spiritual identity*. For example, Poll and Smith's (2003) four-stage developmental model describes the manner in which spiritual identity develops across the life span. Specifically, the model reflects the assumption that spiritual identity is developed through the integration of spiritual experiences into an individual's structured sense of self. The model has been criticized for overemphasizing the religious aspect and adopting a relatively narrow perspective based on a Judeo-Christian understanding that limits its applicability to other contexts (MacDonald, 2009).

Another attempt at the theoretical conceptualization of spiritual identity can be found in the multidimensional model suggested by MacDonald (2009), which incorporates conventional (particularly the Eriksonian approach) and transpersonal perspectives. MacDonald's (2000) five elements of spirituality (spiritual experiences, religiousness, cognitive orientation, paranormal beliefs, and existential well-being) were suggested to involve different aspects of spiritual identity. Spiritual identity was assumed to have three levels: primary spirituality (biosocial factors associated with its emergence—spiritual experiences and religiousness), ego-structured spirituality (spiritual and paranormal beliefs), and ego evaluative spirituality (perceptions of self in terms of ego readiness to deal with existential adversity). The empirically testable model outlines a framework for addressing the content of spiritual identity and its components, but does not discuss how this identity is experienced by individuals or how individuals experience and perceive

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the connections and interactions between these five elements. Our study is concerned with how individuals subjectively experience their spiritual self.

Empirical attempts focusing on spiritual identity per se from the perspective of the individuals themselves can be found in qualitative studies by Reimer, Dueck, Adelchanow, and Muto (2009) and Kiesling, Sorell, Montgomery, and Colwell (2006). Using a naturalistic approach, Reimer et al. (2009) explored spiritual identity among exemplary individuals from Muslim, Jewish, and Christian contexts who were recognized for their outstanding spiritual maturity, using a grounded theory method. Their analysis outlined five themes reflecting shared aspects of spiritual identity across religious contexts: relational consciousness, vocational identity, stewardship, tradition, and the divine as omnipotent. Further, with regard to the identity theory of MacAdams (1993, 2006), Reimer et al. (2009) found differences in the distribution of this theory's three precepts of mature generative identity (redemption, agency, and communion) in the narratives of the different religious groups, emphasizing the significance of religious context in forging spiritual identity.

Kiesling et al. (2006), who interviewed participants in a convenience sample of 28 devoutly spiritual adults, adopted Marcia's (1966) adult-appropriate extensions of commitment and exploration; that is, role salience and role flexibility respectively. Their participants were classified in Marcia's identity status categories of foreclosed, moratorium, and achieved identities, according to the manner in which they perceived their sense of role-related spiritual identity. Overall, their findings suggested that role-related spiritual identity is an important ingredient of ego identity in adults.

Both empirical studies (Kiesling et al., 2006; Reimer et al., 2009) focused on groups of exemplars or religiously devout individuals; their findings, therefore, are difficult to generalize regarding individuals outside institutional religion or those who are not extreme on the continuum of religious commitment. This may limit our capacity to understand spiritual identity because the institutional community focus of religion—as opposed to the more individual, experiential focus of spirituality (Van Dierendock & Mohan, 2006)—may carry distinct meanings in association with identity processes. Furthermore, both empirical studies adopted a specific perspective—Marcia (1966) and MacAdams (1993, 2006)—as a framework for interpretation. Their open qualitative analysis of the data yielded themes that, for the most part, corresponded to the classification and mapping of their chosen perspective.

Kiesling and Sorell (2009) revisited their study of a spiritually devout sample (Kiesling et al., 2006) and, adopting a grounded approach, questioned whether existing operationalizations of the Eriksonian framework adequately captured their participants' narratives of spiritual identity. Kiesling and Sorell (2009) noted that spirituality is not necessarily relevant to everyone, or experienced as a status or role that individuals are expected to acquire normatively or be defined by. Hence, the structure, characteristics, and development of spiritual identity are expected to be different from, and perhaps more complex than, those of other identity domains. They further contended that the framework of exploration and commitment can therefore bias and limit conceptualizations of the process of spiritual identity development. Their later analysis indicated that, besides a focus on individuation and separation, themes of surrender of the ego to the transcendent, and of being guided by it, were quite evident. In particular, for participants identified as having an achieved status, Kiesling and Sorell (2009) noted that their "inner voice was often associated with or indistinguishable from the voice of the divine" (p. 262) and they were seen to be "'giving over' the processes of identity formation to a higher power" (p. 268).

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The innovative interpretations of Kiesling and Sorell (2009) suggest that existing Eriksonian operationalizations of exploration and commitment are limited in their capacity to fully encompass the content and nature of adult spiritual identity, and call for further examination. The postmodern perspective that questioned the Eriksonian notion of a coherent and stable identity in the face of the flux and impermanence of postmodern life (Bauman, 1995; Gergen, 1991) may provide a relevant conceptual framework. The postmodern perspective viewed identity as dynamic, multiplistic, relativistic, fluid, context specific, decentered, and fragmented (Rattansi & Phoenix, 1997). The postmodern era offered opportunities for identity transformation and creation of new identities: plural rather than unitary, relational and contingent rather than self-contained and absolute (Rattansi & Phoenix, 1997). One of these structures is *hyphenated identity,* which involves the integration of conflicting sources of identification (Schachter, 2004, 2005) and a conjunctive of disparate identities, such as African American (Lang, 2005). Furthermore, postmodernism's wealth of choices spurred the creation of other identity structures, such as multiracial identities (Sanchez, Shih, & Garcia, 2009), the fragmentation of self (C. Strauss, 1997), and hybrid identities (Linzer, 1996). The relatively prevalent notion of hybridization of identities reflects the individual's ability to borrow and mix different elements from a range of religious, gender, or ethnic identities (Rattansi & Phoenix, 1997), such as, for example, the *JuBu,* an interfaith identity combining Jewish and Buddhist traditions (Linzer, 1996).

This study utilizes a bottom-up approach to explore and understand how spiritual identity, as a multidimensional construct, is experienced in the lives of ordinary adults who choose a spiritual path outside structured and institutional religion. This focus may help to reveal new insights regarding the essence of spiritual identity, without the constraints of a previously adopted, specific framework or terminology. Expanding current conceptualizations by exploring contexts outside institutional religion has the potential to broaden our understanding of the nature of spiritual identity. This study focuses on adults. Identity patterns found in adults may differ from those observed during adolescence and the transition to adulthood (Waterman, 1999), and may reflect possible progressive or regressive changes (Kroger, 2002; Whitbourne, Sneed, & Skultety, 2001). Pertinent to this study, research has also demonstrated an increased centrality and importance of spirituality later in life (e.g., Wink & Dillon, 2002), and researchers exploring spiritual identity have often focused on adult samples, as is the case in this study.

Because of their subjective quality, spirituality and the formation of spiritual identity can be better investigated by qualitative research methods that offer particular strengths in terms of capturing the richness and complexity of participants' spiritual experiences and realities (Hodge, 2001). Specifically, the phenomenological approach is adopted as it focuses on exploring the meaning of phenomena in human experience (Giorgi, 1997) from the perspectives of the individuals themselves (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The basic purpose of phenomenology is to develop a composite description of the common essence of the experience (Creswell, 2007), consisting of what individuals experienced and how they experienced the phenomenon addressed (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology is less concerned with the facticity of human experience under discussion (Van Manen, 1990). Rather, the phenomenological researcher aims to discover and understand "the lived experience," the distinct meaning individuals ascribe to their experiences (Denzin, 1983). The very essence of lived experience involves our direct, prereflective consciousness of life (Dilthey, 1985)—that is, an experience from within—and therefore its description has to capture the essential meaning as it is lived in human experience. As Van Manen (1990) put it, "lived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological

research. The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experiences into a textual expression of its essence" (p. 36).

In sum, this study uses qualitative phenomenological methodology to expand prior research by exploring the essence and meaning of spirituality outside institutional religion among individuals who had undergone, or were currently undergoing, spiritual change. Specifically, this study addresses the following questions: (1) Can the process of spiritual change experienced by the participants be understood as a process of constructing a spiritual identity? (2) If so, what are the characteristics of this lived experience for that kind of spiritual identity?

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study were 25 adults (12 men and 13 women). The sample size was determined by the saturation principle; namely, data were collected and analyzed until no new themes emerged (Padgett, 1998) and the collection of more interviews did not shed any further light on the research question (A. Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To obtain a broad diversity of participants, we advertised in different forums on the Internet, inviting people who had experienced, or were experiencing, spiritual change to participate in the study, as well as using a snowball recruitment technique. The sample was comprised of the first 25 people who responded to our invitation. It included individuals who experienced spiritual change outside the boundaries of institutional religion; that is, they did not describe themselves as participating in an organized traditional Jewish community.

All participants were Israeli and Jewish, had varied levels of education and ethnic origins (*Ashkenazi,* that is, mostly European-American origin; and *Mizrachi,* that is, mostly Asian African origin) reflecting a range from low to moderately high socioeconomic status. In Israel, indicators such as level of education and ethnic origin are considered better indices of socioeconomic status than income (Dar & Resh, 1990; Smooha & Kraus, 1985). Participants' ages ranged between 25 and 66 years old (M = 45.3; SD = 10.9). Education levels ranged from high school (28%) and professional diplomas (28%) to higher academic education (48%). Twelve participants were married (48%), six divorced (24%), and six single and one widowed (28%). The participants came from a variety of spiritual orientations (e.g., channeling, transcendental meditation, Vipassana, Kabbalah, Buddhism, shamanism, Tantra, healing).

Procedure

An in-depth, face-to-face, semistructured interview was conducted with each participant. Each interview lasted between 1.5 and 3.5 hours, and interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Meetings were usually held in the participants' homes, and all interviews were conducted by the first author.

Prior to the start of each interview, the aims of the study and the interviewee's rights were clarified. Written informed consent was obtained from all the interviewees. Each interview initially included some time dedicated to building trust and rapport that helped to set the conditions for the rest of the interview. The interview process did not follow a specific sequence of questions

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so as to respect the interviewees' sequencing of their story, but the interviewer ensured that most topics of the interview protocol (available from the authors on request) were ultimately covered (Fontana & Frey, 1994). At the outset, the interviewer approached each participant as follows: "I am interested in the personal story of people who have undergone, or are currently undergoing, a change in their lives which they define as spiritual. I would like to hear your story and would appreciate any assistance from you to enable me to comprehend it as fully as possible."

Participants were then asked a broad, open-ended question concerning the manner in which they experienced the spiritual aspect of their lives; this was to enable them to describe their personal and subjective experience as freely as possible in their own words: "Please tell me how you experience the spiritual aspect of your life? How would you describe it?" The interviewer then asked general follow-up questions covering different issues: "Tell me about the change that you have undergone (or are currently undergoing)…"; "How would you describe this change?"; "What triggered this change?"; "What made this change possible?"; "Can you recall any meaningful experiences in the change process?"; "What changed in your life following the process? Who are you today (compared with who you were prior to the change)?"; "Did this process affect your relationships or daily life in any way? In what way were you affected?" When necessary, the interviewer asked additional questions for clarification and elaboration.

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Data Analysis

A phenomenological analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted to develop a *textural description* of the experiences of the participants (what they experienced), a *structural description* of their experiences (how it was experienced in terms of the conditions, situation or context), and a combination of the textural and structural descriptions to convey an overall essence of the experience (Creswell, 2007). The process was cyclic, as each stage built on its predecessor in all cases. Specifically, following psychological phenomenologist guidelines (Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989; J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2003), the systemic data analysis can be summarized as follows:

1. The first step in the data analysis process was reading each interview transcript separately to get an overall sense of the participants' lived experiences. All interviews were read several times until a sense of immersion in the material had been obtained.
2. Meaning units ("significant statements" or quotes that provided an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon) were highlighted and identified by "line-by-line" coding (e.g., Charmaz, 2006). This method enabled insights to be conceptualized by asking the following questions: "What processes and meanings are evident in each line, sentence and paragraph? How, when and why are they conveyed? In what context does each theme arise?"
3. Meaning units were integrated into core themes, reflecting a higher level of abstraction (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2003) and allowing for comparison between different texts (A. Strauss & Corbin, 1998).
4. The themes were examined to find connections and interrelations. Themes were then clustered to construct a description of the participants' experience. The process of analysis was concurrent with data collection, constituting a cyclic process that involved continual reflection (Creswell, 2003; Tesch, 1990).

In qualitative research, acknowledging the positionality or standpoint of the researcher is considered an important validity standard (Lincoln, 1995). In this study, the first author (who performed the interviews and most of the analysis) underwent a personal journey, dealing with existential questions of meaning and transcendence. This positionality presented challenges and benefits. Such experience might have enabled more cooperation and openness on the part of the participants as well as richer understanding of their unique "language." On the other hand, it might have led to possible bias in the interview phase as well as in the data analysis phase. To address these challenges and to ensure the validity of the results, the interpretations were grounded in direct quotes from the data (Stiles, 1993). In addition, the first author consulted the second author and other colleagues, none of whom underwent such a process, regarding the themes emerging from the interviews and the relations between the different themes and their implications. This allowed for corroboration of the interpretations by independent readings. Furthermore, a fundamental methodological principle within the phenomenological framework concerns "bracketing" (Beech, 1999) in which the researchers set aside their experiences and attitudes, as far as possible, to adopt a fresh perspective on the phenomenon being explored (Moustakas, 1994). To address this challenge of self-awareness, the method of a reflexive research diary was adopted (Wall, Glenn, Mitchinson, & Poole, 2004) throughout the continuous process of data collection and analysis. For example, this method allowed the author to identify her emotional reaction to a painful experience recounted by one of the participants and to look at this account afresh and not only as a painful experience. These strategies served as a tool for increasing the trustworthiness and reliability of the data and the general integrity of the research process (Nadin & Cassell, 2006).

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FINDINGS

Change Leading to Spiritual Identity

The analysis of the interviews suggested that the manner in which the participants perceived and experienced their lives following spiritual change could be clearly conceived as a process of establishing a new identity that reflected exploration and commitment. This was apparent for all the participants. For the interviewees, the process yielded major changes in self-perception and life priorities that had a broad impact on their daily lives. The lived experience of the spirituality of the participants was perceived as a central component in their self-definition. The participants emphasized that the spiritual is not a transient element or a single strand of their lives, but an essential element defining who they are and how they view their lives. Furthermore, all participants described an intentional search as well as a commitment to a new worldview and self-definition.

The following are extracts from the interview transcriptions. The transcriptions have been translated from Hebrew, and the names are fictitious.

For Yogev, the spiritual functioned as a comprehensive and overarching definition of his sense of self:

> The spiritual is not some aspect in my life. …I can't separate my life from spirituality. What I experience as the core, the leading axis of my life, and basically as what my life is, is eventually the spiritual urge, the yearning for what is beyond. (Yogev, man, aged 53 years)

Meirav described her spiritual experience as based on her choice and responsibility, and as defining who she is:

> I used to be a puppet on a string, totally controlled by my egoistic desires, but not anymore. I feel that I have come out from darkness to light. … Being spiritual is who I am, I am investing myself in this place of taking responsibility for my life out of choice. … It is a way of being, of experiencing the good. All the time it is there. (Meirav, woman, aged 45 years)

Tali expressed inner awareness of the spiritual as underlying her understanding and interpretation of the world and her life:

> It is a way of life. It takes you all the time, all the time, because there the freedom is built in. No one can threaten me. I know I don't have to do anything to be loved. (Tali, woman, aged 53 years)

The participants demonstrated a chosen and committed spiritual identity. Amit emphasized the importance of his intention and commitment to spiritual growth:

> Take for example someone religious, he can wear fringes on the corners of an upper garment (Jewish ritual) and phylacteries, he can follow the commandment (*mitzvah*), but he doesn't do it with full intention to spiritually develop—then you basically do nothing. It is all mechanical, technical. Then for me it is something that is very internal, it is not something right or wrong to do. It is the intention, to really turn inside and look for meaning, to develop your soul. This is what being spiritual means. (Amit, man, aged 51 years)

From their descriptions, it appears that this inner "knowing" and confidence become clear through a path that is gratifying—not hedonically pleasurable, but rather committed to the search for truth and to making the challenges they face more bearable. In this sense, the highly positive affective tone of the experiences does not involve overall idyllic descriptions and the participants do not describe their paths as hedonically easy. Alon affirmed:

> Whoever goes along this path has to believe in his truth. If you don't believe in your truth you won't survive. … It is a very big commitment to the truth. … It's not easy, but once I experienced it, once I see that something is real it's not letting it go, not trying to go back … what draws me ahead most is exactly this commitment to the truth. I follow it because it is the truth, because that is what exists eventually. I look at everything from a spiritual point of view. (Alon, man, aged 35 years)

The new definition of the self is also manifested in an entirely new holistic and multilayered experience of life, as illustrated by Dorit:

> You see everything from a different perspective, not from a place of me, me, mine, but from a higher place … you suddenly discover that you exist in another dimension that is not the existence about which your senses or intellect can give you information, but it's some kind of existential dimension that you can experience. Think that all our existence is like the ocean. … It has its depth, right? The sea surface, the waves, is life, all of life's storms, ups and downs. Our senses and intellect can understand and perceive only the waves. But once you dive into some kind of the quietness with your mind, to a place that is beyond intellect, conceptions or words, then you experience another existential dimension that is actually the foundation to everything we call life. It is something entirely different. (Dorit, woman, aged 52 years)

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Despite the multiplicity and multidimensionality of their experiences, the participants expressed a clear and committed sense of spiritual self. Ziva explained:

> I feel that I have learned on this path that I am not one being but that there are all sorts of voices, all sorts of parts of me, that I can contain them all, and none of them is me. … It's an expansion of consciousness, of my acceptance of myself and everything, expansion of my experience, of my ability to experience different experiences, different people … it's like your vision opens up. You can see more, you experience more, accept more, and contain more. It's on many, many levels. (Ziva, woman, 44 years)

This capacity to contain diverse aspects of oneself, yet feel whole and coherent, is manifested in several themes that appear to characterize spiritual identity.

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Themes of Spiritual Identity

The second research question addressed the characteristics of the lived experience of spiritual identity among the participants. The analyses of the interviews yielded three major themes, each of which can best be described as a dialectic dimension that comprises a core aspect of spiritual identity in the participants' lived experience. The first two dimensions—self-centeredness and authenticity together with self-dissolution and surrender; and "being there" together with becoming—represent internal orientations. The last dimension—alienation together with a sense of mission—refers to an external orientation.

Self-Centeredness and Authenticity Together with Self-Dissolution and Surrender

The first theme that emerged from the analysis refers to the dialectical nature of the "ultimate goal" in the participants' experiences, involving the empowerment and dominance of the self on the one hand, with self-surrender and dissolution on the other. The participants described the process of constructing a spiritual identity as comprising an intensive inward examination and openness to experiences and explorations, aiming at authenticity and personal meaning. The self-centered pole of the dialectic dimension was demonstrated in the participants' experiences of the spiritual identity as centered in the self, highlighting agency and self-realization as an essence and destination. The participants often experienced this emphasis on the self as discovering the seed of a core authentic self as a result of their journey. The following was expressed by Mira:

> The connection to myself is very meaningful. The inner knowledge that gives a lot of strength, control … the confidence to be yourself, the authentic you, who you really are. To really connect to your true self and stop faking and stop pleasing. (Mira, woman, aged 57 years)

Alongside strong emphasis on self-focus and authenticity, the participants also described a sense of surrender or devotion to processes that are not controlled by the self. For example, Yogev clearly expressed how embracing the unknown and surrendering the self enabled him to find his inner sense of connectedness and purpose, which yielded a reinforced trust and confidence in the spiritual path:

> I surrender, I devote myself to the spiritual yearning, which is basically the most meaningful sense of who I am, and every time I choose to do that and let go of any other possibilities, it's like throwing some sandbags off so that my hot-air balloon can rise up. I am able to fly. … Sometimes it feels like

> you don't know what is up or down, forward or backward, you have no reference point, everything is unknown, but being able to face it and trust something that you are not even sure what it is, to show you the way—makes you exceptionally strong. … It's like that even if you don't have a clue where you are going and feel disoriented, there is still a part of you, some sort of inner compass, that is connected, that knows and keeps pulling you in the right direction. (Yogev, man, 53 years old)

Alon emphasized the liberating force of submitting to self-surrender:

> Looking back, I think I have learned that to win you have to surrender … and this realization released me and made me stronger. (Alon, man, 35] years old)

The coexistence of self-centeredness and surrender was articulated by all of the participants. For example, Yafit described the experience of being in touch with her inner self, a confidence in the path that she has traversed, which has granted her a sense of empowerment and peace:

> I found the connection to the inner place, to whom I am inside, to the real person in me. Who I am. Not to look for the answers outside, not to look for someone to tell me. … I have a structure that I've built that is mine and no one can come and dismantle it. And it is a lot, it brings lots of peace. … I feel very empowered, from within. … I am in touch with my inner self. I know myself. I am in touch with the inner good place within me. (Yafit, woman, 30 years old)

In another part of the interview, Yafit articulated that along with self-empowerment, there is a strong yearning to surrender and submit the self to God's will:

> I am strong, but I know that it's not just me. … I have providence and it is very accurate, I trust it, I surrender to it … it is like I am climbing on a ladder and each step is two times higher than the one before and I'm lifting my leg up, and with all the strengths in my body I have to pull myself towards the next step, knowing that the next step is harder and every time I am passing a step, the lower one falls, there is no getting down, there's an abyss underneath and I am holding really tight with my hands. I can do it, I know who I am … and I say, "Dad, [refers to God] thank you for this ladder, thank you for the new step, a harder one, thank you for the next that will be even harder."

Similarly, Rachel described self-confidence and a sense of agency regarding life:

> I have earned myself, my confidence in who I am, in my abilities, I am listening to myself, to my dreams. … I am in a place of being happy, fulfilled, I can enjoy anything I do, no matter what it is. … I have strengths within me, I am able to impact my life for the good. (Rachel, woman, 59 years old)

Yet in the same interview she discussed processes of devoting herself to the unknown while waiving a sense of control:

> I devote myself, I devote myself completely to whatever happens, I'm letting go of control … it's like I am looking and saying, "Okay so this is what has happened now. It probably had to happen, there is a reason, or there isn't and that is okay too because I don't understand the reason but I am going with that, and life becomes less hard and less agonizing. I am less helpless in facing life … because everything is alright, no matter what happens."

In a similar vein, Yaron highlighted the importance of being connected, attentive, and true to himself and to his self-fulfillment:

> True spirituality for me is to remove all the road obstacles between me and my true essence … all the things that stand between me and full self-fulfillment that is only good. This is actually internal awareness and true spirituality for me. (Yaron, man, 26 years old)

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Elsewhere in his interview, Yaron also discussed surrender, which is not something enforced but represents an active choice of the self:

> I consciously choose to do it [surrender]. … I know that I'm proceeding toward something and it's not like I'm accepting it in defeat. I accept it knowing that there is some kind of great purpose. I open myself to whatever comes and am ready to experience even the worst of things that happen to me, but from a different perspective, from a perspective that lets me experience whatever comes and not judge it. This is generally the essence of being spiritual, in my opinion. The essence is to really activate your awareness to the understanding that you will accept anything.

In sum, two seemingly opposing tendencies appear to coexist in the participants' lived experiences and are manifested in an active and individualized sense of self-empowerment and self-focus, together with processes of entrusting the self to the unknown and even self-submission and surrender, removing the self from the center stage to the background.

"Being There" Together with Becoming

The second theme concerns the dialectic between the acquisition of a new, unified, and what appears to be achieved core identity, and a sense of a continuous path that involves a flexible search and the unraveling of new truths. We have termed this a process of *becoming*. As described in the first section on spiritual identity, the participants' lived experiences involve a strong, clear, and committed spiritual identity, the "being there" side of the dialectics. We thus provide here only one short example of these experiences:

> I found my place, it feels like I have finally "come back home," and that reinforces me. … I know that I have gained a clear place that I know doesn't go anywhere. (Ziva, woman, 44 years old)

At the same time, all the participants identified this achievement as a constant never-ending path that requires maintenance, rather than as a static state or a destination. Gideon, for example, referred to a process of constant becoming that also involves regression to past phases:

> It never ends. There are always more questions, more insights and further observation, and self-examination. … Often you feel that you move forward and then there is a regression and you feel uncomfortable with it and try to do something to move ahead again … but I think that this linear advancement of some kind of ladder with stairs is an image we made for ourselves. There is a Zen quote that says that to face the truth is a mistake and to turn your back to it is a mistake too, meaning that the truth is not the advancement up, nor the regression. The truth is both, this is the process, and it is very challenging. (Gideon, man, 51 years old)

The participants articulated the struggle of simultaneously holding these two dimensions. Tali, for example, described an awareness of feelings of being there and achieving a sense of freedom together with a continuous process of becoming:

> I feel that I live in freedom now, like I was freed … and I'm telling you this in quotation marks because this path doesn't end. It comes in many variations, many levels. … It is not that you've learned and now you can rest. You can't live now like you used to, there's no going back … but there is no spirituality-light, there isn't … you are spiritual—then you are spiritual, it is a way of life, it's like constructing it all day all the time. (Tali, woman, 53 years old)

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Reuven provided another description of this dialectic that involves, as the previous description, a capacity to describe the two dialectic poles in a coherent manner:

> You are, so to speak, sure of everything, but you are not sure of anything. You know everything is yours and nothing is yours. You know that you live forever and you live for a second … and that is why I am telling you that I don't have a clue about anything. It is not out of pride, I just understand that there is no point to it. Who are we? We are all just a deposit. That is all. Life suddenly becomes peaceful; full of vicissitudes but still peaceful. (Reuven, man, 47 years old)

Some participants explicitly reflected on this tension and demonstrated an ability hold a coherent overview of the dialectics. Yaron expressed it by using the metaphor of a pendulum:

> If we take a metaphor then it's not "coming out of the closet" and that's it, and what I was is no longer there, but more like some kind of a pendulum … and I can choose, every time it's a choice, a constant choice. (Yaron, man, 26 years old)

In sum, the participants appeared to experience this dialectic tension, manifested in the coexistence of stability and fluidity, unity, and multiplicity, as taking place within a coherent sense of spiritual identity maintained by constant self-awareness and self-reflectiveness, allowing the containment of a self that continues to unfold and change.

Alienation Together with a Sense of Mission

The third theme concerns a dialectic relation with the social context. The participants expressed a two-sided sense of alienation with regard to their social environment. This was reflected in experiencing disapproval, lack of acceptance, and separation from the people surrounding them, as well as by self-criticism of their social context expressed by the participants themselves. Roey, for example, discussed the lack of common ground that led to separation from close friends:

> Very soon I came to realize that if I want to proceed in my path, I have to leave this environment, however painful that is. Frankly, I think this happens to anyone who develops spiritually, the environment changes whether he wants it or not, this is how it starts. Even very, very good friends drop out, because there is no longer much in common anymore. (Roey, man, 44 years old)

Mira referred to the feelings that accompanied her separation from close relationships:

> Some of the people really moved away, I've lost them in this round. … I understand them too, but I can't help getting angry, and I am a little disappointed. I miss them, yes. But I can't require people to cross over this big gap. (Mira, woman, 57 years old)

In an even closer circle, Iddo highlighted his difficulties in coping with severance from his parents, who did not accept his spiritual change:

> It is hard for my parents. Very hard, it's problematic. … They can't digest it, it contradicts their worldview … they say, "You moved away from us, there's nothing here for you anymore, we don't want anything to do with you. You disturb us" … my presence disturbs them. (Iddo, man, 41 years old)

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Shay described an especially painful experience with his parents that made him feel alone and misunderstood:

> My parents don't like it all, they don't understand me. It is strange to them. An especially traumatic time between us, that I can't forget, was around the time when they found out I started channeling. They almost got me hospitalized. They were sure I was going crazy and that it is some kind of schizophrenia. They even made me see a psychiatrist. … You have no idea how alone that makes you feel. (Shay, man, 34 years old)

The discovery of spiritual peers, groups or networks, and the potential to belong to this community, partially moderated these painful experiences. Ziva reported:

> 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 it. (Ziva, woman, 44 years old)

The alienation was not only driven by others. Participants, such as Dror, also expressed their own criticism of, and disappointment in, others and their way of life:

> I don't mind the standard life, it's each person's choice. What bothers me is the denial of what isn't standard, denial of their [other people's] strength, their confidence, their freedom of action, their choice, their creativity. When I see someone who denies all of that I feel pain. … These people who live small, smaller than they should live … they are huge but they are satisfied with staying small. (Dror, man, 49 years old)

Gideon referred critically to the values that guide other people's lives, using terms such as "mental disorder":

> Values of competition, success and failure, that everyone views as very real and important are not the standard by which I feel I have to measure myself anymore. … It's the norm when it is actually a mental disorder, a neurosis. I took myself out of this game; I am not playing this anymore. (Gideon, man, 51 years old)

Dorit made an even stronger assertion:

> People who don't want and choose to seek this spiritual place, in my opinion, are wasting their lives, and it doesn't matter how successful they are … they can be prime ministers, it has no significance at all. (Dorit, woman, 52 years old)

Despite the criticism, however, the participants did not actually disengage from their surroundings; instead and simultaneously in the same interview, they expressed compassion, responsibility, and a sense of mission in contributing to others outside the spiritual world. Tali, for example, highlighted her ability to adopt a humanistic, caring, and sensitive approach toward others—an approach developed through personal spiritual development:

> Once you build yourself from the inside, you learn to develop love for others, you can develop some kind of sensitivity towards others and see them from a position of true respect and sympathy rather than judgmentally … we are all human beings and it doesn't matter who they are or what they do for a living, my heart is open to everyone … it makes you love people for what they are … it's a different experience. (Tali, woman, 53 years old)

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Participants demonstrated a strong sense of mission to teach others, heal, or empower them to discover and lead a more meaningful life along with the sense of alienation that they experienced. For example, Roey, who described alienation from his close friends (see quotation at the beginning of this subsection), discussed a strong sense of compassion toward others as well as commitment to their personal development:

> My metaphorical lighthouse is to influence others, to spread abundance for the greater good, to do good, to be good, to give, it's less thinking about yourself and more about others, to get out of your ego. This is your main focus. Otherwise you won't develop. … These are the things that give my life meaning, I want to help others to see, discover, this spiritual place I have discovered. I think this an obligation of anyone who develops spiritually. (Roey, man, 44 years old)

A similar reference can be seen in this extract from Mira who described alienation from close relationships (see quotation at the beginning of this subsection), but also described a strong desire to give to others:

> I have been given a gift, and within this experience things that used to be at the center of your life become insignificant and something else occupies the stage. This is the essence of why this gift is so great. It teaches you that giving, being kind to others is the most fulfilling thing. It is a blessed commitment to make humanity better. (Mira, woman, 57 years old)

Some of the participants explicitly articulated awareness of ambivalence between these two seemingly contradictory dimensions of the dialectic. For example, Alon said:

> All of a sudden you see people around you that are not familiar with this [spiritual] path, and you feel very, very strong compassion towards them. You see how they suffer, how they create suffering and it makes you become a better person, both in the sense that you feel compassion towards others and also in being suddenly aware of how things that you do make others suffer … *on the one hand* [emphasis added] I have much more understanding for others' lives, *and on the other hand* I have some criticism that comes from my perspective … mostly it's a feeling of what they are missing, which is amazing … it's a pity that they can't see what there is beyond. (Alon, man, 35 years old)

Some participants articulated a clear sense of true calling, a redemptive sense of being chosen to spread the message, and a strong responsibility toward the spiritual awakening and development of others. This sense of mission entails struggle with criticism toward others, as Reuven articulated and reflected on:

> I am so grateful that I got this gift, this calling and I wish that everyone in humanity would be able to arrive at it. You see people that run into a wall, they see the wall but still hit it with their eyes open, and they are sorry, but your sorrow is much stronger and deeper. You feel sorry for them, you feel responsible. You are responsible for everyone, every second. They just don't see, they don't understand … it may seem like a contradiction but they are just allegedly contradictions. It is part of one whole. (Reuven, man, 47 years old)

In sum, the dialectic between alienation on the one hand and a sense of mission and responsibility on the other appears to coexist in the participants' experiences. It provides a further illustration of the complexity and multidimensional nature of spiritual identity as experienced by the participants even in their relations with others.

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DISCUSSION

This study sheds light on the lived experiences of adults outside the realm of institutional religion in Israel. According to the participants' accounts, the process of spiritual change appears to have culminated in the construction of a new identity, a spiritual identity, which has a broad impact on their lives. Their spiritual identity is perceived as an essential core of their sense of self, a way of being and living, and an encompassing meaning of their whole identity, rather than a single aspect within the sense of self. This finding resembles the findings of Kiesling et al. (2006) regarding the pervasiveness of role-related spiritual identity as self-defining among spiritually devout individuals from different religious backgrounds.

Specifically, our findings indicated three themes that were identified as dialectic dimensions characterizing the participants' lived experiences. Although participants articulated these dialectic poles differently, the themes stood out clearly across the whole sample. Each of these dimensions appears to differ somewhat from customary descriptions of identity (Marcia, 1966; McAdams, 1993). The first theme refers to the dialectic movement between placing the self on center stage and submission of the self to the mystery of the transcendent. Although the aspect of self-mastery and empowerment may resemble the agency narrative (McAdams, 1993), it is combined with an almost opposite tendency to surrender control by the self. In the participants' experiences, surrender reflects an inner conviction that everything happens for a reason and carries a lesson to be learned, and consequently provides an opportunity for growth. It further represents part of a greater picture or reality that, at times, demands giving in and letting go of control to allow the greater scheme to emerge. Within theistic frameworks, surrender or willingness to submit the self to the authority of God is often considered a central spiritual struggle, as it "works directly against basic human desires for personal control, self-reliance and freedom of choice" (Exline & Rose, 2005, p. 320). Some scholars have suggested that self-surrender often follows a point of hopelessness and despair, a "dark night of the soul," a phrase ascribed to James (as cited in Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993). Although challenging, research has also shown the potentially beneficial and adaptive power of surrender to the deity as a way of coping in treatment, and suggested that self-control is paradoxically enhanced through the process of surrender (Cole & Pargament, 1999). Our findings further suggest that self-surrender is a mechanism of conscious choice, enabling healthy functioning, rather than a sign of weakness. This is combined dynamically and dialectally with the seemingly opposing pole of self-focus and dominance of the quest for authenticity. Such a description is also eminent in the work of Kiesling and Sorell (2009) in which there is emphasis on surrender as a central component in the spiritual identity of spiritually devout participants who had an achieved identity status. This underscores a similarity in the experiences and connotations of spirituality both within and outside institutional religion, which may indicate universally common elements, such as the aspect of surrender, in the experiences of individuals who perceive themselves as spiritual.

There are, however, interesting features of such surrender in our sample. In the descriptions of Kiesling and Sorell (2009), it appears that the element of surrender does not necessarily reflect a process of autonomous choice, but rather that of "being apprehended more than that of choosing" (p. 261). Furthermore, they emphasized that spiritually devout participants, who were identified as having an achieved identity status, described their surrender as "entrusting the self to another that moves one either back toward dependency and security or toward interdependence, rather than toward individuation or autonomy" (p. 261). Our participants highlighted their

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autonomous choice of surrender. For them, this does not imply surrendering with the connotation of looking for protection, redemption, or rescue. Furthermore, the participants did not describe processes of self-dissolution as part of self-transcendence, as suggested in the transpersonal approach (Friedman, 1983). Rather, they seem to demonstrate a clear and free-willed self that knowingly chooses to relinquish a sense of control while submitting to, and embracing, the complexities and ambiguities of the unknown.

The second theme demonstrates the dialectic between the stable, committed, and unified sense of attained spiritual identity and, concurrently, a continuous, fluid, and flexible process of becoming, of shaping the self through reevaluation and exploration. The participants in our study, although confronting and abandoning previous parental beliefs and values, and consolidating a multifaceted and broad spiritual identity, do not end their quest when they find answers and make commitments, as has sometimes been described in the process of consolidating a personal religious identity (Fisherman, 2002; Pargament, 1997). Rather, they maintain the process of active search as an integral part of their newly constructed identity. Moreover, they seem to hold and integrate conflict, doubts, and questions within a unified and coherent sense of spiritual self-identity. In this sense, they are committed to an identity that involves a continuous process of change.

Our participants' lived experiences of their spiritual identity also reflect relational and interpersonal aspects. The third theme highlights the dialectic tension between a sense of alienation and criticism with regard to their social context and, at the same time, a strong sense of prosocial responsibility, mission, and calling. Previous research has found that elements of responsibility, a sense of being chosen, as well as obligation and calling, are prominent among nominated religious exemplars who view their vocational and social identity as integrated with their spiritual experiences and understanding (Reimer et al., 2009). Our findings suggest that these elements also play out significantly among individuals who do not perceive themselves as an integral part of their familial and social contexts, even when they feel alienated and rejected by these contexts. Their criticism and experiences of alienation do not lead the participants to distance or disengage themselves from their social environment, but ultimately motivate a strong desire for connectedness and commitment to contribute to others. The connection between spirituality and prosocial orientation has been amply demonstrated within religious contexts (Clary & Snyder, 1991; Furrow, King, & White, 2004) that encourage faith-based ideology of charity, altruism, generativity, and service. It is therefore significant that the participants in our study also voiced such orientation outside the religious context and even in the face of what they perceived as an alienating, rather than a supportive, community. Spirituality could be associated with being prosocial, even as a product of an individualized, self-focused (or "egoistic," as one participant noted) process. For these participants, the expansion of personal boundaries to something larger, which is beyond their immediate concerns, seems to grant them a sense of meaning, purpose, and unity that leads to prosocial and benevolent orientation, which echoes themes of generativity (McAdams, 2006).

The Nature of Spiritual Identity in This Study

Together, the characteristics of the spiritual identity as observed in our study are different from the modern (e.g., identity statuses) and some of the postmodern (e.g., hyphenated identity) conceptualizations of identity. The participants experienced their spiritual identity as something broader

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and more comprehensive than merely a social role in terms of Marcia's (1966) ego-identity statuses (Kiesling et al., 2006). Furthermore, their spiritual identity does not fit Marcia's (1966) classification of identity statuses in which individuals who have engaged in exploration are either achieved or moratorium. Their spiritual identity appears achieved because it functions as a strong, clear, and committed identity. At the same time, however, it is not static, but is created and recreated in a continuous process of becoming.

Yet our participants' spiritual identity also does not appear to reflect the MAMA cycle suggested in Marcia's later work (Stephen et al., 1992). Our participants demonstrated a strong achieved sense of identity while engaging in a continuous process of redefining and reconstructing its manifestations. The type of search for authenticity that leads to an intensification of inward examination, a degree of alienation from their tribe, and a focus on the self has usually been described as part of the moratorium status. For our participants, however, this process of becoming was part and parcel of their established identity as spiritual. In a way, this continued search may be characterized by a central defining feature of their achieved identity. To some extent, spiritual self-construction is both the source and the ever-changing outcome of a process that does not seem to have an end in sight.

This spiritual identity could perhaps be better described as a dynamic combination or dialectic between moratorium and achievement, a self-maintained quest process alongside an established commitment to an identity. In this sense, it accords with the suggestion of Kiesling and Sorell (2009) that the structure and characteristics of spiritual identity are different from those of other identity domains.

This type of identity, being holistic, flexible, dynamic, and fluid, as well as involving continuous processes of construction and reconstruction, constitutes a salient example of postmodern identity. The participants' construction of the self differs from the postmodern suggestion of a hyphenated or hybrid identity, however. Rather than hyphenating, merging, or combining separate and independent identities that involve common identity categories (e.g., African and American categories), the spiritual identity in this study is experienced as a stand-alone identity. Furthermore, instead of combining different identities, it reflects the containment of coexisting, seemingly contradictory, experiences or states of minds. In other words, this identity is experienced as an integrated and holistic construct, attained through agency and commitment, and containing elements that can be seen as contradictory. The participants' lived experiences contain strong contradictions that are held within a healthy, functioning, unified, and integrative identity, rather than a life in conflict or an identity crisis. The coherent, organized, and structured identity is manifested dynamically and dialectically in a multifaceted identity.

Humanistic and existential perspectives have tended to describe a self that is fluid, complex, and changing, yet stable (Hoffman, Stewart, Warren, & Meek, 2009). The participants in our study appeared to provide a clear embodiment of this complex and fluid yet stable identity.

Although the dialectical tension may invite synthesis as the resolution of the dialectic poles (Hegel, 1807/1931), the dialectic lived experience of the participants in this study does not appear to lead to a new synthesis. According to participants' accounts, it appears that they are concurrently able to coherently contain, integrate, and encompass these dialectic dimensions of experiences, but it requires a struggle and a deliberate effort to maintain a stable and coherent sense of identity. The choice and commitment to continue to invest in the endless process of spiritual development is perceived as clear and unyielding. The manifestations and outcomes of the process are, however, dynamic and continuously changing.

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This raises a question regarding the psychological and contextual mechanisms that enabled the participants to integrate different and contradictory aspects of the self into a healthy and functioning identity. A noteworthy feature in our interviews was the strong reliance on internal resources, which included an intensive reflective dialogue, and processes of self-exploration and introspection. This engagement in reflection was manifested in a coherent metacognition and did not resemble rumination. These extensive and continuous self-reflections may have helped the participants to contain and embrace dialectic and contradictory experiences and reach this unique sense of identity.

The Context of This Study

The complex multifaceted identity that comes to light in this study is formed in unique circumstances outside institutional religion. For these participants, the process of making identity choices is described as involving an intensified, continuous, and intentional introspection, and is not established or defined in relation to a specific tradition, God, or cultural context. Yet it does not unfold without an enabling social context.

The New Age context can be seen as a central cultural background that enables and facilitates such processes. The effect of the general cultural context of the New Age is reflected in the vocabulary used to describe the participants' experiences and conduct, in the different groups or types of spiritualities that they had experienced or examined, and in the comradeship of fellow searchers who helped them along the way. Hence, it is plausible that, although not contextualized within an organized and stable community with clear values and ideologies, the process of construction and reconstruction of identity takes place within the broad context of New Age spiritualities, commonly viewed by scholars as an expression of "self spirituality" (Hanegraaff, 1999; Heelas, 1996). This context with its offer of diverse groups, courses, books, and workshops, as well as the open space it creates, may be an important aspect facilitating the search. Still, the personalized and autonomous eclectic nature of the quest, termed "tinkering" by Wuthnow (2007), and the moral relativism it embraces (Tucker, 2002) are manifested in the many diverse ways and sources that serve individuals to piece together their spirituality. In Israel, individualistic-oriented values, together with an ambivalent stance toward institutional religion, serve as fertile ground for the surge of interest in broadly defined spirituality and, specifically, for the widespread popularity of New Age spirituality in the past decade (Ruach-Midbar, 2012). This general context provides meaning, involvement, and the capacity to find like-minded others, despite its individualized nature.

Another possible influence on the process of spiritual identity construction may be reflected in available familial, ethnic, and traditional orientations of Jewish Israeli culture. Secular, nonobservant Jews may continue to hold on to some aspects of Jewish tradition and culture acquired throughout their lives. These include, for example, exposure to Bible studies in the national education system or traditional symbols such as Jewish holidays. Further, the lack of separation between state and religion in Israel leads to the dominance of religious laws (*halacha*), customs, and symbols. This may raise resentment of religiosity (Pelleg & Leichtentritt, 2009), as it is perceived as involving coercion. At the same time, secular Jews also have expressed interest in some of the Jewish traditional ideas and practices, such as the Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism (Huss, 2007). Reflecting the postmodern mix-and-match practice there is a hybrid mixture of

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Jewish and New Age beliefs or practices, a phenomenon termed "Jew Age" (Ruach-Midbar & Klin-Oron, 2010).

A third unique contextual characteristic of Israeli society is associated with the shared experience of existential threat in a country constantly exposed to the danger of armed clashes with its neighbors. This is a situation that may lead to experiences of anxiety, stress, trauma, and loss (Mayseless & Salomon, 2003), as well as a pressured lifestyle (Milgram, 1986). The collective vulnerability, uncertainty, and insecurity, coupled with personal search for meaning, may push secular Israelis further to seek their authentic self through autonomous and individual processes. One instance of such processes can be seen in the long trips abroad (mostly to the Far East or South America) that Israelis take following compulsory military service whereby they create a space for their self-discovery and exploration of different cultures and beliefs (e.g., Noy, 2004; Scharf & Mayseless, 2010).

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Caveats and Directions for Future Research

Although the participants in this study were heterogeneous with respect to age, socioeconomic status, spiritual orientation, and practice, the sample included a specific subgroup of individuals who identified themselves as undergoing spiritual change. It is possible that those who felt less coherent and positive about their experiences of spiritual change and those not yet certain of their spiritual identity did not respond to our invitation to participate. This potential self-selection may also be reflected in the capacity of the participants in this sample to process and articulate a coherent containment of coexisting, seemingly contradictory, experiences or states of mind. An important challenge for future phenomenological research might be to examine individual differences in the lived experiences of individuals undergoing spiritual change outside institutional religion and the developmental trajectories of these experiences. In addition, a phenomenological study of individuals who are not exemplars, but who are undergoing a process of spiritual change within institutional religion, is called for.

To conclude, the findings of this study accord with other findings concerning the importance of spirituality in adulthood (Kiesling et al., 2006) and enable a richer understanding of the manner in which spiritual identity is experienced. Our findings also suggest that the ability to create and maintain this form of postmodern identity that is eclectic and fluid and, simultaneously, stable and coherent relies on spirituality as a unifying mechanism and a reflective self-examination that enables contradictions. Our findings suggest that spiritual identity may constitute a different type of identity that possibly emerges as a response to the complex challenges of postmodern society. Postmodernism opens up new opportunities for multiple identities and beliefs but, at the same time, destabilizes central values and narratives. In the face of unsteady forms of contextual influences, community integration, and relocations that produce a conjunction of separate and seemingly incompatible identities, spirituality may provide a unifying adaptive mechanism. The open, autonomous, and individual nature of spirituality, as our sample population testifies, may perhaps be considered most adaptive for identity in today's changing world. This calls for further exploration and reconceptualization of existing categories.

Understanding the content, structure, and processes underlying such a chosen and volitional identity that is capable of holding dialectical tensions in a unified identity appears to have great potential for understanding human development and growth.

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