In Search of the Promised Land: The Role of Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of Transnational Israeli Migrants in Greater Vancouver

by
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Abstract

Studies of religious activities of immigrants in Western society have usually focused on their experiences in religious institutions. This ethnographic exploratory study is based on detailed interviews with eleven Israeli immigrants residing in Greater Vancouver who speak about their religious and spiritual experiences both inside and outside of institutional religion. The aim of this study is to examine the various religious and spiritual activities of these immigrants as well as the role these play in their lives. The findings suggest that most study participants appear to engage in these practices for reasons that involve but also transcend religion and are related to their Israeli identity. Being transnational migrants, the Israeli interviewees also use their spiritual and religious practices as means to construct their transnational identities. This study suggests that religious and spiritual activities of transnational migrants should be examined in the context of their relationships with their homeland.

Keywords: Israeli; Jewish; lived religion; spirituality; transnational identity; migration
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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .................................................................................. vii
Dedication ................................................................................................. vi
Table of Contents .................................................................................... vii

1. Introduction ......................................................................................... 1
   1.1. Overarching questions for the thesis ............................................ 2
   1.2. Methodology and analysis .............................................................. 4
       1.2.1. Study participants and their recruitment ................................ 4
       1.2.2. Data gathering ........................................................................ 4
       1.2.3. Ethics ....................................................................................... 5
       1.2.4. Theoretical framework ............................................................. 7
       1.2.5. Analysis .................................................................................... 8
   1.3. Organization of the thesis ............................................................... 9

2. Literature Review .................................................................................. 10
   2.1. Introduction ................................................................................... 10
   2.2. Religion and postmodernity .......................................................... 10
       2.2.1. Modernity and self-identity ..................................................... 11
       2.2.2. Religion as a chain of memory .............................................. 12
       2.2.3. Lived religion ......................................................................... 14
       2.2.4. Seekers’ spirituality ................................................................. 16
   2.3. Immigration .................................................................................... 19
       2.3.1. Ethnic identity of immigrants ................................................. 19
   2.4. Jewish Ethnicity and Religion ....................................................... 21
   2.5. Israeli diaspora and transnationalism ............................................ 23
   2.6. Conclusions .................................................................................... 25

3. Chapter 3: Seekers ............................................................................. 27
   3.1. Introduction ................................................................................... 27
       3.1.1. Who are the seekers? ............................................................... 28
   3.2. Roots and Upbringing .................................................................... 28
   3.3. Migration ....................................................................................... 32
   3.4. What are they seeking and why? .................................................... 33
   3.5. Spiritual and religious hybridity ..................................................... 37
   3.6. Conclusions ................................................................................... 43

4. Chapter 4: “Ethno-Jews” .................................................................... 46
   4.1. Introduction ................................................................................... 46
       4.1.1. Who are the “ethno-Jews”? ..................................................... 46
   4.2. Roots and upbringing ..................................................................... 47
       4.2.1. Being a Jew in Former Soviet Union ....................................... 47
       4.2.2. Migration to Israel and later to Canada .................................. 47
1. Introduction

Most sociological studies of immigrants and their religious activities in Western societies use religious institutions as the primary or sole research site. This ethnographic study explores the various religious and spiritual practices of Jewish Israeli immigrants who are living in Greater Vancouver. This study aims to explore the religious and spiritual experiences of immigrants in both social spheres that are not considered religious as well as religious institutions (i.e. synagogues). Particular attention is given to the different reasons for which the study participants engage in these practices. Why is it important to them? What meaning do they ascribe to their choices of practice? How do they understand and live out their identities as members of an ethnic and, in some cases, religious group on an everyday basis? What do they gain from engaging in these practices, relationships, groups and activities?

In an attempt to address these questions, this study interrogates scholarship on religion, spirituality and immigration by means of detailed interviews and observations of eleven study participants. Overall, this study suggests that some of the interviewees engage in religious and spiritual practices for reasons that relate to religio-spiritual spheres. Yet, this study strongly suggests that as transnational immigrants the Israeli interviewees are using their spiritual and religious activities as means to negotiate their relationships with their sending country, Israel, as well as to construct their transnational identities. Most study participants engage in Jewish religious practices as means to demonstrate Israeli identity away from Israel.

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1 Immigrants who forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement (Basch et al. 1994: 7).
This study is an extension of my personal and intellectual interest in the field of religion, spirituality and immigration (see Appendix C). In the postmodern age religion is no longer confined to institutionalized religions; many individuals are engaging in religious and spiritual practices that until the past two decades were usually ignored by scholars in the field. Today growing numbers of researchers are investigating the “invisible religion” of individuals—the religious practices that are not performed in the context of institutional religion (Luckmann 1967). In order to have a comprehensive understanding of the role of religion in everyday life, one must also examine the religious and spiritual lives of individuals outside institutional religion (McGuire 2008). This ethnographic research is based on interviews with eleven Jewish Israeli immigrants residing in Greater Vancouver who speak about their religious and spiritual experiences both inside and outside institutional religion. In order to take account of a wide range of religious and spiritual practices, this study adopts the interpretive approach which allows the study participants to describe what they deem to be religious or spiritual in their daily lives.

Religion and spirituality are socially constructed and reshaped on an ongoing base as individuals create, revised and modify their practices (Roof 1999). Since we live in a time of limitless choices, many individuals, (including some participants in this study) make more than one choice when it comes to their favourite ‘flavour’ of religio-spiritual practice. Gone are the days when one was born into a faith and had to stick to it for the rest of her life; today you can be born Jewish but subscribe to Buddhist dogma and Native spirituality. Indeed the choices are unlimited, yet not all individuals are interested in experimenting with new religious and spiritual ideas.

1.1. Overarching questions for the thesis

Why is it important to track the religious and spiritual practices of Jewish Israeli immigrants to Vancouver? In this study I attempt to demonstrate that while most studies pertaining to religion and migration describe immigrants as a homogeneous category, deeper investigation of their spiritual and religious lives outside congregations may reveal that, like non-immigrants, some immigrants lead diverse spiritual and religious lives that may be different from one another. In their extensive review of literature
pertaining to religion and immigration Cadge and Ecklund (2007: 371) note that “sociologists rarely consider how religion influences the experiences immigrants have in social spheres that are not thought of as specifically religious”. In this study I attempted to address this gap as I asked the participants to describe their religious and spiritual practices as these manifest in all areas of their lives. Cadge and Ecklund (2007: 372) further suggest that future studies in this field should ask “how immigrants who are not involved in religious organizations experience religion, if at all, a topic about which almost nothing is known”. This study addresses this issue as well, as some of its participants are not involved in religious organizations. The stories of involvement with religion and spirituality as told by the Jewish Israeli immigrants who participated in this study provide us an opportunity to grasp the variety of ways in which religion and spirituality impact the lives of immigrants who have varying levels of religious adherence. Individual participants in this study variously consider themselves to be religious, spiritual, spiritual and religious, or atheist. Another issue that studies in the field of religion and immigration do not address is the engagement of immigrants with multiple faiths and traditions. Most studies assume that immigrants stick to their homeland faith or religion as it enables them to ease the process of adjusting to a new culture. However, as demonstrated in this study, some immigrants actively search for and adopt new spiritual and religious ideas that are practiced by some members of the receiving society. I hope that this study will inform future studies that consider spiritual and religious attitudes of immigrants of other faiths and ethnic groups and that it will enable us to have a broader understanding of the various roles that religion and spirituality have in the everyday lives of immigrants.

My purpose is to shed light on a category of people who are rarely researched in the field of religion, spirituality and migration. The majority of studies of religion in North America have focused on the institutional or denominational base groups rather than the lives of individuals (see Davidman 2003; McGuire 2008, to name a few). The majority of my interviewees rarely visit a synagogue; however they do lead meaningful religious and/or spiritual lives that do not necessarily revolve around a synagogue or other religious institutions. It is the fusion of rituals and practices that come from different religious and spiritual backgrounds that I would like to explore and analyze. Furthermore, this research aims to explore and analyze what the individuals, rather than texts and
religious leaders, deem to have religious or spiritual meaning. By using this approach I hope to provide a broader prism through which one can realize the complexity of one’s religious and spiritual life. The eleven participants in this study are Israeli Jews whose spiritual and religious lives may vary greatly. I hope that this research will support my claim that the spiritual and religious lives of Jewish immigrants are not homogenous, and furthermore, that synagogue attendance is far from being a sole (or even main) indicator of a person’s religiosity. Indeed, a decline in synagogue attendance may indicate a shift toward private spiritual practices rather than secularisation.

1.2. Methodology and analysis

This section describes the methods used in this study. Specifically I will describe how the study participants were recruited, methods of gathering the data for this study, ethical considerations, theoretical approach, and the process of analysis.

1.2.1. Study participants and their recruitment

The participants in this exploratory study are eleven Israeli immigrants, age thirty to forty-two, who identify themselves as Jews and reside in Greater Vancouver. Some of the immigrants are affiliated with a synagogue while others are not. Eight of the participants were born in Israel and three participants were born in Former Soviet Union (FSU). All three participants who were born in FSU immigrated to Israel with their families at an early age, and later in their lives migrated to Canada. Some interviewees lived in Greater Vancouver for more than thirty years, while some arrived within the last three years. However, most study participants have lived in Greater Vancouver between five to fifteen years.

The study participants were recruited by one of three strategies: snowball sampling, by replying to an advertisement that I had posted in a local Jewish website (see Appendix B), or through an informal conversation while attending a spiritual gathering. Snowball sampling is a common “network sampling method” for studying hard- to-find population (Bernard, 2006: 192). I chose to use this method since I am a Jewish Israeli immigrant myself and I am friends with a few Israelis. This strategy proved to be the most fruitful as my two initial interviewees referred me to five other
interviewees. All the seven interviewees whom I named “ethno-Jews” (see Chapter Four) were recruited through this strategy. Since the size of the Israeli community in Greater Vancouver is fairly small (1,925 Greater Vancouver residents were born in Israel according to 2006 Canadian census), the chain referral strategy helped me to find the interviewees in a timely manner. Furthermore, the snowball sampling strategy helped me in creating rapport with the interviewees since I was introduced to them through a mutual friend.

The four interviewees whom I called ‘seekers’ (see Chapter Three) were recruited through the advertisement and meetings in spiritual gatherings. Since none of the interviewees that were recruited through snowball sampling engage in any non-

Jewish practices I was looking for other approaches to locate them. I began by attending a spiritual gathering of sacred Hebrew chant where I made contacts with a few of the participants and eventually I was able to interview one member who later referred me to another study participant. Later, I decided to use the method of recruitment by placing an advertisement. This strategy was used successfully by Davidman (2003) in her study of twenty-eight “unsynagogued” [sic] Jews. Two study participants were recruited through this method.

1.2.2. Data gathering

Ethnographic interviewing—a method that enables researchers to elicit how individuals make meaning of their lives and the social world they inhabit—guided this study in combination with the “lived religion” approach (explained in Chapter Two). The ethnographic interview has been used in several studies that employ the lived religion approach (for example, Davidman 2003; Ammerman 2007; McGuire 2008). Anna Ortiz (2003: 36) argues that “if one suspects that there may be variation in meaning among specific groups...the ethnographic interview may be the best way to learn about the meaning held by different constituent groups or people”. In a few cases I was able to conduct observations at other sites when I was invited by the interviewees to attend different synagogues during the high holidays. In addition I was present at a few spiritual gatherings where I was able to meet participants that later agreed to take part in the study. I concur with Spradley’s argument that “the essential core of ethnography is this concern with the meaning of actions and events to the people we seek to understand”,

5
and that the researcher’s mission is to communicate genuinely: “I want to know what you know in the way that you know it...will you become my teacher and help me understand?” (1979: 5, 34). Being a Jewish Israeli immigrant, I was able to establish rapport with the participants as I am familiar with the Israeli culture and the Jewish religion.

Interviews were conducted in Hebrew or English, depending on the interviewee’s preference. The interviews were semi-structured; I had a list of preliminary questions (see Appendix A) that I asked all interviewees, yet more questions were asked spontaneously, usually in response to comments made by the interviewees. In the construction of the preliminary questions I consulted sociological literature pertaining to religion and spirituality, which I used as a springboard for understanding the meaning of spiritual and religious practices for the study participants. I conducted ethnographic interviews with eleven participants. Interviews lasted thirty minutes to two hours, and on some occasions, when I felt the need to ask further questions as new themes emerged, pending permission of the interviewees, I contacted them again by phone or email. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with the permission of the interviewees. Seven interviews took place at the interviewees’ homes where I was able to observe how they incorporate religious symbols and practices into their homes. Two interviews were conducted at coffee shops, one at a public park and another at a synagogue.

One of the challenges I encountered during the interviews was that most interviewees whom I met for the first time wanted to know about my religious and spiritual practices as much as I wanted to know about theirs. I did share my experiences when I was asked. However, I was careful to present my experiences (as well as listen to their experiences) in a neutral and non-judgemental manner since I did not want to affect their responses in any way. After a few interviews in which I realized that the interviewees appreciate the reciprocal exchange of experiences, I decided to share my experiences with interviewees who were more hesitant to share. I found this effective as these interviewees felt more open to comment on my experiences and shared with me more of their experiences.
1.2.3. **Ethics**

My research took place at ‘home’; the people that I observed and interviewed are Israeli Jews residing in Greater Vancouver, some of whom I knew on a personal level prior to the study. Since some of the study participants are my personal acquaintances, in some sense throughout this study I was always in the ‘field’. Virginia Caputo who conducted her doctoral research in the same Canadian city in which she lived, notes that “at times, the field became indistinguishable from home” (2000: 26). Furthermore, Noel Dyck argues that conducting fieldwork at home posits “a series of methodological challenges” which includes the ability to distance “oneself from far too familiar settings” and handling information that “is derived through forming personal relationships” (2000: 43). Since my study was done ‘at home’ I exercised extra caution in the way I conducted my encounters and interviews with the participants. Pseudonyms were given to all participants mentioned in this study and I did not use synagogues names in order to protect their confidentiality. Furthermore, in several cases, some of the characteristics of the participants were altered or concealed in order to ensure their confidentiality. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of conducting research close to home was to distinguish when I was a researcher and when I was a member of the community; when I am a friend and when am I an interviewer.

1.2.4. **Theoretical framework**

My view of social ‘reality’ is that it is constructed and contextual. Thus I adopt the constructivist-interpretive ontological approach which maintains that there are multiple realities in society as individuals construct their own reality based on their particular life experience and interpretation of social process (Travers 2008). Furthermore, the constructivist-interpretive ontology approach stresses that these realities are true and meaningful only to the individual who constructs them. This ontological position fits my research methodology as I conducted multiple interviews with newcomers to British Columbia. During the interviews I encouraged the interviewees to interpret the meanings for their actions since “social reality is not some ‘thing’ that may be interpreted in different ways; it is those interpretations” (Blaikie 1993: 96). In line with the constructivist-interpretive ontological approach, this study focuses on the individual (micro level) rather than the institutional level. The meanings, intentions, feelings and
motivations of the individuals, combined with their life histories, inform and guide my research.

Epistemologically I adopt the constructivist-interpretive epistemological approach that maintains that knowledge is the product of a mutual construction (of the researcher and the researched) of a “subjective account of social reality” (Travers 2008: 23). I believe that knowledge is subjective as its construction relies on one’s life history which is influenced by many social and cultural dimensions such as economic status, gender, race, ethnicity and religion. It is worth noting that although the construction of knowledge is a mutual effort of both the researcher and the researched, as a researcher I had a privileged position to present social ‘realities’ and events in the way that I view them, while the position of the researched, in some cases, was not fully presented. For example, although I provide the stories of the research participants as they told these (by providing many quotes), I am still the one that chooses which parts of their stories to present and how these should be analyzed; my own interpretation of their actions is presented in this study in the form of a developed theory. Thus, I acknowledge the existence of a hierarchy between the researcher and the researched, even when using the constructivist-interpretive approach. Yet I believe that it is my duty as a researcher to provide the reader with an abundance of evidence (in the forms of direct quotes, and thick description) to support my interpretation and theory. Furthermore, after conducting the interviews I contacted some of the interviewees (who had given me their permission earlier to do so) with further questions that emerged as I transcribed and analyzed both their interviews and interviews of other participants.

1.2.5. Analysis

Analysis of data gathered in ethnographic interviews is “iterative and ongoing, not a separate stage that can start after data collection has finished” (O’Reilly 2005: 203). Themes were drawn from the interviews and were used to inform future interviews. The emerging themes and the relationships between them informed the final analysis of the data. After transcribing each interview I looked for a pattern or ideas in the data that may help to explain why the participants engage in their practices. To some extent the process of analysis began with the review of the literature as I sought to understand
what previous studies in this field suggested. When the literature did not provide sufficient explanations I consulted studies that pertained to the emerging themes.

This study does not aim to be generalized to other immigrant communities; the aim of this study is to **explore** how religion is practiced, expressed, and experienced in the daily lives of Jewish Israeli immigrants and how they interpret its meaning. Here I adopt Small’s (2009: 24) argument that “a well-executed single-case study can justifiably state that a particular process, phenomenon, mechanism, tendency, type, relationship, dynamic, or practice exists”. Small further argues that “this, in fact, remains one of the advantages of ethnographic work, the possibility of truly emergent knowledge” (ibid). I fully agree with Small’s argument, and I view this study as an exploration that may suggest and open new avenues to be studied. Furthermore, the interviews and observations inform my interrogation of the literature pertaining to this study.

1.3. **Organization of the thesis**

The thesis is organized as follows: chapter one introduces the study, research statement, and methodology and analysis of the research. Chapter two provides an extensive review of literature pertaining to the study. Chapter three includes both description and analysis of the findings relating to the seekers. Chapter four includes both description and discussion of the findings relating to the ‘ethno-Jews’. Chapter five provides analysis of the key themes discussed throughout the thesis, summarization of the study as whole, limitations of the study, and suggests areas for future research.
2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This chapter explores the literature that is relevant to the main concepts and themes explored in this study. This review includes theories and research pertaining to this study; including religion, spirituality, Jewishness, immigration, and ethnic-identity. It also includes a review of literature on transnational migrants and Diaspora communities. By presenting this review I wish to provide the reader with the different approaches used in the literature to analyze the role of religion and spirituality in postmodernist Western societies.

2.2. Religion and postmodernity

Although there is a considerable disagreement among sociologists of religion concerning what constitutes a religious or spiritual matter, there is a consensus that postmodernity further problematizes this matter. Overall, in postmodern societies adherence to traditional religion is dwindling; synagogue attendance in United States is at its lowest level, particularly among youth and young adults (Cohen & Blitzer 2008) as well as church attendance in Europe (Hervieu-Léger 2000) and Canada (Bibby 2011: 834-835). In the 1960s the common notion among many theorists was that Western society is becoming a secular one, so theories of secularization proliferated (for example Cox 1966; Wallace 1966; Wilson 1966) and indicated that postmodernity and secularisation goes hand in hand. However, in a thought-provoking book, The Invisible Religion, Thomas Luckmann (1967) suggested that the declining presence of religion in Western society may suggest that individuals are leaving institutional religion but still practicing religion in a private manner. Luckmann (2003: 281) argued that the production and distribution of world-views is no longer controlled by institutional religion; “a variety of sources supplies the market of world-views” including individuals, ‘new-age’
movements and institutional religion. Luckmann was the first scholar to suggest that sociologists of religion should expand their research to include religious attitudes that are not confined to institutional religion. Luckmann’s theory was subsequently further developed and utilized by several sociologists, particularly those who use the lived religion concept in their research (e.g. Ammerman 2007; Hervieu-Léger 2000; McGuire 2008; Orsi 2003).

2.2.1. Modernity and self-identity

In his influential book, Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age, Anthony Giddens (1991: 75) argues that in high-modernity—the time in which we currently live—the self becomes more reflexive since it has constantly to consider new ideas and information; “the self is seen as a reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible...we are not what we are, but we are what we make of ourselves”. Giddens further asserts that in comparison with pre-modern societies, in high-modernity the experiences of the self are fragmented and cause anxiety since, in most cases, there is no overarching entity or institution that can provide guidance and assurance pertaining to the decisions that one needs to make in multiple realms of life. Therefore he argues that “living in a secular risk culture is inherently unsettling” while religion is able to mediate anxieties pertaining to nature (ibid: 181). Giddens (ibid: 196) argues that, in the religio-spiritual sphere, intense reflexivity may produce three types of individuals: first, individuals who may “find that the freedom to choose is a burden and they seek solace in more overarching systems of authority”; second, individuals who may consider new ideas and information as these come their way, and adjust their daily life accordingly; and third, individuals who faced by the flood of ideas become sceptical and find meaninglessness in all life endeavours including religion. Giddens (ibid: 195) further asserts that although religion has the capability of mediating individuals’ anxiety, traditional religion has a little role to play since the insecurities of individuals are being addressed by different experts and specialists (therapists and consolers in different fields).

Giddens (ibid: 206-207) later makes a further distinction between what he calls traditional religion and new forms or religion. He acknowledges that in high-modernity individuals are more likely to develop new modes of religious expression, yet he also
argues that these new forms or religion and spirituality represent a return of the repressed—individuals who felt that their concerns are not being addressed on institutional level. Giddens in fact relates the emergence of new forms of religion and spirituality to institutional neglect: Institutions neglect to address the moral and existential concerns of individuals who then feel the need to find avenues that will satisfy these needs. Although Giddens does not literally say it, his analysis strongly suggests that new forms of religion and spirituality are predominantly concerns with issues that are not related to the sacred but to personal morals. Giddens does not provide much data to back his arguments, yet his arguments complement the approach of several sociologists of religion, among them Hervieu-Léger (2000) and Luckmann (1990).

### 2.2.2. Religion as a chain of memory

The French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger offers ‘memory’ as a new concept for consideration in the debate concerning religion and modernity. Hervieu-Léger (1994: 125) argues that the main element in forming a religious identity “is the process by which the individual or group is notionally incorporated into a line of believers”. She further argues that in modern western societies “this process is frustrated by the obstacle of memory” (Ibid). In her book, *Religion as a chain of memory*, she discusses the importance of memory in maintaining a chain of believers (Hervieu-Léger, 2000). She notes that in order to maintain and expand its circle of followers, traditional religion must retell and manifest its story, symbols and history among existing and potential followers. However, Hervieu-Léger (2000) argues that the chain of memory, which is primarily maintained by using these symbols, stories and history, is losing its power in modern western societies, mainly due to a sheer decline in institutional-religious practice which leads to loss of collective religious memory. Hervieu-Léger (ibid: 129) argues that in comparison to traditional societies, “in modern societies each individual belongs to a number of groups” and therefore the collective memories of individuals are fragmented and contrived from multiple sources.

The functional disassociation of the experience he or she undergoes forbids access to a unified memory, which in any case is beyond the power of any single group to construct, restricted as each is by its specialization. The contemporary fragmentation of space, time and institutions entails the fragmentation of memory which the speed of social and cultural change destroys almost as soon as it is produced. The
collective memory of modern societies is composed of bits and pieces (ibid).

The crumbling of traditional memory in modern societies is evident and well supported by quantitative research that shows a decline in church attendance in Europe (Hervieu-Léger 2000) and Canada (Bibby 2011: 834-835). However, Hervieu-Léger (2000) argues that modern societies are fertile grounds for the emergence of new types of religious life. She explains that in modern societies individuals have been conditioned to have higher expectations from life since as a society we made technological advances and innovations based on rational choices (Hervieu-Léger 1990). However, she argues, when these expectations are not being met individuals are experiencing a tension “between the limited world of the present, with its contradictions, and the unlimited world of the future”, and as a result a “space for belief” is created “at the very heart of modernity” (ibid, S23). Modernity creates the conditions for the emergence of new types of religious ideas, primarily of individualistic and private character, since “it arouses expectations that it cannot satisfy without stimulating the religious imagination” (ibid, S15).

When Hervieu-Léger notes that the religious ideas being generated in modern societies are new she does not reject the possibility that ‘new’ ideas may be traditional ideas in ‘new packaging’. Léger argues that there is much at stake for traditional religions and therefore innovative attempts are made to bring in new members, particularly youth, to religious institutions. For example, she mentions that the decline of church attendance by French Catholic youth prompted church authorities to establish World Youth Day, an international gathering of Catholic youth that attracts over two million pilgrims and takes place in different important Catholic sites around the world (Hervieu-Léger 1994). The climax of World Youth Day is the Papal Mass in which the youths are walking some distance to a catholic site where they meet the Pope. Hervieu-Léger argues that the fact that the event organizers emphasize that it is a physical and spiritual pilgrimage, and the international mixture of youths provides the young pilgrims an experience that suites their modern lifestyle. This example demonstrates that officials within traditional religion recognize the need to form new types of memory within new adherences in order to remain attractive.
2.2.3. **Lived religion**

In the last decade several scholars (Orsi 2003; Amerman 2007; McGuire 2008) have been using the “lived religion” approach in the study of religion. The “lived religion” approach explores how religion operates in the social lives of people both inside and outside the religious institutions (Orsi 2003). The primary difference between this approach and previous approaches is that “lived religion” does not consider the religious organization and congregation as the prime or only site of analysis, it rather considers them as a part (when it exists) of the multiple sites (home, work, school, social gatherings, etc.) in which people practice what they deem to be religious or spiritual. Orsi, (2003: 172) argues that “religion is always religion-in-action, religion in relationship between people” and “there is no religion apart from this, no religion that people have not taken up in their hands”. In other words, like other advocates of “lived religion”, Orsi argues that in order to understand the full meaning of religion to the people who are practicing it, we cannot assume that all people subscribe to the entire set of beliefs and practices that are set upon by any ‘official’ religion. There are various innovative practices and interpretations which resemble, in some capacity, those of an ‘official’ religion. Researchers that use the lived religion approach come to recognize that describing the religion and religiosity of individuals “as a standard package of beliefs and practices” does not reveal the full scope of these concepts (McGuire 2008: 17). Thomas Luckmann (1967) argues that “the activities and teachings of official religions do not encompass all of the resources” that individuals can use for practicing their spiritual and religious beliefs (in McGuire, 2008: 17). Luckmann (1967) named these resources that are not recognized as religious as “invisible religion”, which is similar to the concept known as “popular religion”. There is no single definition for popular religion. However, according to McGuire (2008), it is the unofficial/non-prescribed set of different practices and beliefs that are practiced by many lay people.

The few scholars who have used the lived religion approach in their studies note that tracking the daily religious practices of immigrants is not a task that yields less credible information regarding the religiosity of immigrants (Hagan & Ebaugh 2003; Smith & Bender 2004; McGuire 2008). Orsi (1997) and Hall (1997) argue that, in fact, the lived religion approach enables us to know how religion ‘really’ works in the lives of people as it includes observation and analysis of their conduct in both the religious
institutions and their daily lives. Furthermore, Smith and Bender (2004: 77) argue that “daily practices are not an “additional” or “subsequent” element in the study of immigrant religious communities but are part and parcel of immigrants’ ideas and choices in developing any kind of religious organization”. In other words, the lived religion approach enables us to get a more complete view of the religious experiences of immigrants. Lynn Davidman (2003: 261) argues that the concept of lived religion “is not necessarily only about practices per se, but also about how people understand and live out their identities as members of a religious/ethnic community on an everyday basis”. David Hall (1997: ix) adds that lived religion is not “confined to what people do” but rather it attempts to unpack the meaning of one’s action. Hall (ibid) further argues that “behaviour cannot be understood apart from meaning, or what sometimes is loosely designated as “culture””. In other words, Hall recognizes the importance of exploring why people act in certain ways, rather than just exploring what they do. The lived religion approach enables (or even requires) a deeper examination of the lives of individuals and the meaning that they give to their practices.

Cadge and Ecklund (2007) note that the lived religion approach is not implemented in research pertaining to immigrants. They argue that in order to “understand how immigrants live and experience their religions outside of particular religious contexts”, scholars need to adopt a “lived religion” approach that will explore how immigrants negotiate and practice their religion while interacting with non-migrants and people of other faiths (ibid: 371). Although there are several studies which use the “lived religion” approach (Hall 1997; Orsi 2003; Amerman 2007; McGuire 2008; Williams 2010), to my knowledge, only one publication (Smith & Bender 2004) used this approach while studying a group of immigrants. In 2000, Smith and Bender (2004) interviewed Muslim immigrants who are taxi drivers in New York City. They note that by using the lived religion approach they were able to observe the religious practices of the research participants both inside and outside the mosque. They further note that by using this approach they were able to understand “how groups “make sense” of the transformations and structures that they adopt” in their everyday lives (Smith & Bender 2004: 80). For example, they observed how the taxi drivers were able to pray five times daily as they used restaurants and garages owned by Muslims as spaces for prayer. They further observed that some taxi drivers shaved their beards in order to prevent
tension or avoid being misidentified by their passengers as radical Muslims. Using the lived religion approach, Smith and Bender (2004) were able to observe, note, and analyze the inventive manner by which migrants negotiate their religion in everyday life. Had they only observed their research participants at the mosque, they may have glossed over such observations.

2.2.4. Seekers’ spirituality

Jews no longer necessarily discover Judaism through Jewish Texts, ritual, and traditions. Often, Jews discover Judaism through their personal quests and journeys—finding, as a seemingly belated surprise, that Judaism has something to say about their lives and circumstances after all (Orenstein 1994: 370).

This quote by Rabbi Debra Orenstein could be applied to any religion; ancient texts and rituals are not attracting individuals that are more interested in immediate answers and solutions to their personal dilemmas. Luckmann (1990) argues that the location of religion has shifted as religion and spirituality become a matter of personal choice, rather than something that you are born into. He further stresses that individuals in postmodern societies who do not conform to institutional religion are not seeking “great transcendences”—answers to “other-worldly” inquiries, but they rather seek “little transcendences”—answers to inquires pertaining to the personal level, particularly in the realms of “self-realization, personal autonomy and self-expression” (ibid: 127). These realms of interest indicate, according to Luckmann (ibid: 138), that postmodern seekers are “partly egoistic and hedonistic, partly ecological, symbolically altruistic” individual. Put simply, Luckmann (1990) argues that seekers’ main objective in their quest revolves around exploring their self-identity rather than exploring the sacred. Furthermore, Wade Roof (1999: 44) argues that “spiritual searching should come as no surprise” since we live in an age where information is widely available and freely exchanged. However, not all individuals engage in spiritual searching; why do some individuals choose to embark on the quest of spiritual searching? What are the sources of a seeking mentality? Are the seekers disenchanted with the religion in which they were raised in? Was there a specific incident that triggered their spiritual search?
Georg Simmel (1997 [1911]) was, arguably, one of the earliest theorists to note that tension between individuals—who seek autonomy over every aspect of their lives—and the society—which limits individuals’ self autonomy—in which they live is becoming apparent in institutional religion as well. He (1997: 186) viewed society as a process in which individuals assert their individuality although society “accords [them] only a subordinate status”. In Simmel’s view, the needs of the self are always superior to the needs of society. In the religious realm, he (ibid: 194-195) outlined two main reasons for which he argued that individual religiosity always has priority over institutional religion: First, the salvation of the soul is seen in Judeao-Christian religions as a private matter that is within the responsibility of every individual. Second, since the salvation of the soul is within the responsibility of the individual, the self attempts to find its own explanation (also outside institutional religion) for questions that relate to religious matters. The autonomy required by the self, explained Simmel (ibid), is being satisfied by the production of new rituals that assert one’s status and control. Bearing in mind that Simmel wrote his theory more than a century ago, when institutional religion still held much power in Western societies, one can assume that his perceptions were considered thought-provoking. Simmel’s observation that religiosity (or spirituality) naturally exists within every individual (regardless whether the individual considers himself or herself to be religious or spiritual) contributes to our understanding of why one becomes a seeker. Nevertheless, theories and research pertaining to the rise of individualisation and its impact on seekers have developed since then, particularly in the last two decades.

Roof Wade (1999: 84) who conducted in-depth and telephone interviews with hundreds of Americans throughout the U.S. notes that “in a world where symbols, belief, and practice are easily disembedded from their original context, the autonomy of the individual believer is greatly privileged; individuals begin to assume that they are the masters of their own spiritual faith”. Among the characteristics of the new seekers, Roof mentions their preference to have a private ritual (such as meditation) rather than participate in a communal spiritual activity (ibid). Based on his extensive research Roof suggests that most seekers are more interested in individual transcendence than a community salvation (ibid). Philip Cushman (1995: 79) further argues that we start noticing the emergence of a “self-contained individual” in Western societies, “a self that experiences a significant absence of community, tradition, and shared meaning”.

17
However, that should come as no surprise since, as McGuire (2008) and Roof (1999), for example, demonstrate most seekers embark on their spiritual journey as *individuals on a personal quest*; they were triggered by a personal set of issues that they want to resolve. Based on hundreds of phone and in-depth interviews Roof (1993) concluded that:

As to social networks, seekers are more likely to be social isolates, or to have fewer strong social relationships. They have broken away from the churches and synagogues, an indication that they are not perhaps as socially anchored in their communities as are most other Americans....Because seekers are more individualistic and eccentric in their beliefs, there is less reason for them to rely on the support of social networks. The lack of strong social ties is functional for them, freeing them to pursue their own personal spiritual journeys uninhibited by conventional sanctions (82).

Nevertheless, some seekers do seek the company of like-minded people to share their spiritual practice in an attempt to create a spiritual community or just for sporadic meetings. McGuire (2008: 115) notes that some rituals and practices “such as singing or dancing together, can produce an experiential sense of community and connectedness”. Furthermore, some of the seekers that participated in this study enjoy both private and public religio-spiritual practice. They noted that they do participate in spiritual lectures, chanting groups, and even services at spiritual synagogues, while at the same time they enjoy meditating alone. It is worth noting that Roof (1993: 82) mentioned that seekers “have broken away from the churches and synagogues”, however Roof himself noted that some seekers still take part, in some capacity, in activities of institutionalized religions. Based on this study and other literature I suggest that seekers may demonstrate both a tendency to isolate as well as a desire to share their practices with other seekers.

Although much theory and research maintain that the ‘self-contained individual’ who becomes a seeker for personal reasons is not interested in creating or being part of a community, there is some evidence that suggests the opposite. Meditating, chanting, practicing yoga, taking a nature walk, and praying are activities that can be performed individually, but some seekers prefer to practice them with others (Roof 1999). Roof provides many examples from his research of individuals who seek to be in a small
group setting. Seekers do need a support structure, a place where they can exchange ideas pertaining to their practice. Indeed, self-help books, media and internet are useful resources that can provide answers and guidance for most inquiries. However, most seekers who participate in small group activities report that they feel supported while some even created personal relationships that are nurtured beyond the spiritual context (Roof 1999). Seekers who do join a group tend to bond with other group members around their emotions, experiences and yearnings rather than a prescribed dogma, thus, the bonds created with such a group may be quite strong and could resemble the type of relationships created in non-spiritual self-help groups. Nevertheless, Roof (1999) notes that most seekers who choose to be part of a group are most likely to join a group which practices the religion or spiritual path that the individual was raised in; A Jewish seeker who regularly practices Buddhist meditation will most likely join a progressive Jewish group (not necessarily a synagogue) rather than a Buddhist temple.

2.3. Immigration

2.3.1. Ethnic identity of immigrants

Sollors (1989) claims that members of ethnic groups tend to view themselves as natural categories that have always been in existence, as they pass the myths and stories of their survival as a group from generation to generation. However, ethnic identity is socially constructed; “cultural and social factors are apparently embedded in the concept of ethnicity more than biological characteristics” (Miskovic 2007: 517). Furthermore, Hall (1991: 49) argues that ethnicity is always constructed relationally:

The notion that identity has to do with people that look the same, feel the same, call themselves the same is nonsense. As a process, as a narrative, as a discourse, it is always told from the position of the Other

Indeed research on immigrants of different ethnicities has demonstrated that, in some cases, immigrants construct their ethnic identity according to the perceived expectation of the receiving society; they may reshape their stories about their history, culture, heritage, or religion in an attempt to satisfy the norms that they perceived to be desired by the receiving society (Hagan & Ebaugh 2003). Foley and Hoge (2007), who
conducted research among immigrants of different faiths throughout the United States, recognize that the receiving society has an active role in shaping the ethnic identity of immigrants. Miskovic (2007) notes that in the United States, Muslim immigrants from the Balkans tend to hide their religious affiliation in response to anti-Muslim attitudes that prevail in the U.S. particularly after the September 11 attacks. Since most Americans mistakenly assume that all Arab people are Muslims, Balkan Muslims, who have white features, are able to conceal their religious orientation. It is further important to note that ethnic identity is a complex concept that lacks an agreed-upon definition since it includes several components (some of which are already vaguely defined) such as culture, nation, shared history, heritage, biological origin and religion (Nash 1989). However, religion is arguably the most researched concept pertaining to immigrants and ethnic identity.

In *Heartwood*, Wendy Cadge (2005) tells the story of Thai Theravada Buddhist immigrants who reside in the U.S. Cadge begins her ethnography by meticulously describing and analyzing the journey of the immigrants to the U.S., the organization of their temples, and the history of Theravada Buddhism. She then proceeds to explore the role of the temple in shaping the immigrants’ religious, ethnic and gender identities. Based on her fieldwork in two temples and extensive interviews, she argues that a small group of the immigrants attend the temples because in their view “to be Thai is to be Buddhist” while a larger group does not associate their visits to the temple with being Thai (Cadge 2005: 163). Cadge notes that the immigrants who belong to the former group maintain “traditional” Thai characteristics; they wear Thai clothing and adhere to homeland rituals (ibid). Immigrants who belong to the latter group emphasize the religious teachings as the prime reason for attending the temples. Cadge’s observation is a reminder that, even within a seemingly homogenized group, members have different reasons for participation (in this case enhancing religious or ethnic identity). Furthermore, Cadge demonstrates that ethnographers who familiarize themselves with the history and rules of the religion and ethnic group they are studying are able to write a meaningful and compelling ethnography. Although she is not Thai or Buddhist she was able to write a convincing ethnography of Thai Theravada Buddhist immigrants.
2.4. Jewish Ethnicity and Religion

Contrary to most religions, Judaism is both ethnicity and religion; one could be Jewish by ethnicity but not practice the Jewish religion. Some scholars of Jewish identity argue that for this reason, many Jewish people feel free to construct their religious identity as they wish since they are ethnically Jewish (Altman et al. 2010; Davidman 2007; Heilman 1996; Cohen & Eisen 2000). Phillips (2010: 81) further argues that “this is because Judaism is based on the concept of peoplehood” [sic]. Indeed, there is a wide agreement among scholars of Jewish identity that in modern times most Jews are cultural Jews, rather than religious.

It is worth noting that the terms cultural, ethnic and secular Jew are often used interchangeably in the literature; all three terms refer to a Jewish person who does not follow the Jewish religion. However, some studies of Jewish identity made certain distinctions between ethnic and cultural Jews. Herbert Gans (1979: 8) argues that “ethnic identity can be expressed either in action or feeling, or a combination of these” and he further noted that “Jews can express their [ethnic] identity as synagogue members”. Bruce Phillips (2010: 66) further notes that American synagogues have been “consistently reconfigured...to express ethnic affinities via religious structures”. The synagogue is viewed as a location where one can celebrate his or her ethnicity. Phinney (1990) argues that ethnic-identity refers to one’s sense of belonging to an ethnic group and the part of one’s thinking, perceptions, feelings, and behaviour that is due to ethnic group membership. On the other hand, Gary Tobin (2002: 12), who conducted a study of Jewish culture in the San Francisco Bay Area, argues that many Jewish people prefer to name themselves cultural Jews since Jewish culture—the “rituals of everyday life, the preservation of historical Jewish artifacts, the visual and the performing arts”—is their sole form of identification with Judaism. Tobin supports his argument by providing data from his survey of 1,269 Jews from the Bay Area in which the participants were asked to choose one or more of the following options—cultural, ethnic, or religious Jew—as the term that best identifies them (ibid). The results of the survey show that while most participants age fifty and above do not distinguish between cultural and ethnic Jew as they identify themselves as being both ethnic and cultural Jews, participants between the ages eighteen and thirty-four did make such a distinction as more participants
identify themselves as cultural (66%) rather than ethnic Jews (58%) (ibid: 31). On the other hand, more participants between ages thirty-five to forty-nine identify themselves as ethnic (79%) rather than Cultural Jews (63%) (ibid). However, we can see that some Jews do prefer to be identified as either ethnic or cultural Jews. Tobin argues that the most distinct characteristic of those who identify themselves as cultural Jews is their reluctance to be associated with Jewish institutionalized religion (ibid). I am aware that by attempting to distinguish between cultural and ethnic Jews I enter a contested territory. However, it is important for this study to make these distinctions since some participants in this study view their seemingly religious practices as part of their non-religious Jewish culture, while other study participants engage in religious practices as a means of affirming their membership in an ethnic group.

In their book, *The Jew Within*, Cohen and Eisen (2000) conduct fifty in-depth interviews with American Jews who are members of synagogues or any other Jewish organizations, but who are not activists within these institutions. They conclude that, because their interviewees see themselves as being Jewish, they feel “free to use their own authority when deciding about the ways they express their Jewishness [sic]” (ibid: 27). A study of young American Jews reveals that although most of them avoid institutional affiliation, they are proud to be Jewish (Greenberg 2006). Simon Herman (1977: 36) argues that Jewish ethnic identity is interwoven within Jewish religious identity in a non-separated way, and further “there is strictly speaking no “secular” Jewishness” [sic]. Jack Lightstone argues that, similar to most Canadians, Canadian Jews “have largely abandoned their traditional patterns of behaviour and belief” (1995: 56). Lightstone maintains that the majority of both Canadian and American Jews “have abandoned whatever reflects an autonomous Jewish social system” in order to fit into the social, cultural, political and economic North American lifestyle (ibid: 57). In his opinion, the religion of North American Jews is merely “a selective practice of traditional Judaism”. Lightstone (ibid: 62) suggests that Canadian Jews are a “peoplehood” [sic] whose cohesiveness is primarily dependent on its ethnic bond. In contrast to Lightstone, Kivisto and Nefzger (1993: 9) suggest that “Jews are a religioethnic group” where the religion provides a vehicle for sustaining a distinctive identity. However, many studies, including this one, demonstrate that a distinctive Jewish identity may be sustained even when there is no evidence of religious practice. Nevertheless, the main objective of my
study is to find out what symbols and rituals are part of the research participants’ lives, how religion operates in their lives, and what the participants consider as religious (and not religious) in their lives.

2.5. Israeli diaspora and transnationalism

“\textit{I just live here, but really...my life is there}”. (Orna, an Israeli emigrant from Edmonton. In Magat 1999: 125)

In 2006 more than 500,000 Israelis were living abroad, of which more than 300,000 reside in the U.S. (Cohen 2011a: 50). The increasing numbers of Israeli emigrants are worrying Israeli officials who actively attempt to convince emigrants to return to Israel (Cohen 2011b). Research on Israeli diasporic communities has proliferated in the last two decades, particularly concerning Israelis in the U.S. (for example Gold 2002; Lev Ari 2008; Cohen 2011b). Immigration and emigration are sensitive topics in Israeli society. Lilach Lev Ari (2008: 9) notes that “emigration from Israel is problematic...because it is incompatible with the Zionist ideology and perceived as a failure in the attempted ingathering of the Diaspora Jews in Israel”. Since its inception in 1948 the state of Israel has relied on a constant flow of Jewish immigrants to help maintain its status as a ‘Jewish state’ (ibid). Lev Ari further explains the terms \textit{olim} and \textit{yordim} that are used in describing immigrants and emigrants respectively.

Immigrants to Israel are called \textit{olim} (people ascending) --a concept taken from the sphere of religion; a pilgrim is an “ole regel” in Hebrew, meaning one who ascends (to Jerusalem) for a festival. On the other hand, emigrants are labeled “yordim” descending from the Holy Land into secular exile. The word [yordim] itself with its negative emotional connotation condemns emigration from Israel. (ibid)

However, Lev Ari (ibid: xii) further notes that in recent years “part of the stigma on emigrants-\textit{yordim} disappeared just to be substituted by a sense of curiosity and sometimes admiration for those fairly numerous Israelis who succeeded in their economic and professional endeavors”.

23
The issues most investigated in studies of Israeli diasporas are the degree of assimilation (with Jewish, or mainstream society), ties with Israel, and attitudes of emigrants’ offspring toward Israel and the country in which they reside. In his research concerning the meaning of home, identity and belonging among ten Japanese and ten Israeli emigrants living in Edmonton Ilan Magat (1999: 119) observes that in contrast to Japanese emigrants, Israeli emigrants “tend to equate home with personal and national identity and ultimately in terms of belonging and loyalty”. Magat (ibid: 122) notes that regardless of the time they reside in Canada, the Israeli interviewees were reluctant “to let go of Israel and to call Canada home”. Furthermore, all of these Israeli interviewees considered themselves Israelis (rather than Canadian-Israelis or Canadian-Jews) and noted that they would eventually go back to Israel, while most Japanese interviewees, who viewed home as the actual living space in which they lived, agreed that Canada was their new home. Magat (ibid: 136) concluded his study by arguing that the Israeli emigrants did not seem to have a sense of continuity and future since they are “territorialized” and “only the original nation-state of Israel can satisfy this need” for continuity and future. Similarly, Steven Gold (1997) conducted ninety-seven in-depth interviews with Israeli emigrants in Los Angeles. He observed that most Israelis do not define themselves as Americans or American Jews; they mainly associate with other Israelis and they talk about returning to Israel (ibid). Gold (ibid: 414) further notes that his findings indicate the existence of “two contradictory images of Israeli immigrants: one depicting them as a successful, upwardly mobile group and another as alienated marginals”. Furthermore, he notes that these two contradictory images were often self-described by highly successful immigrants. Gold (ibid) addresses this contradiction by suggesting that Israelis are transnational migrants—they maintain ties to both nations: The one that they come from and the one in which they reside. In the case of the Israeli migrants they maintain close ties with family members in Israel and they demonstrate loyalty to Israel while, in the U.S., they mainly interact with other Israelis as they make an effort to maintain their Israeli culture and way of living.

Recent studies of migrants (to the U.S. in particular) show that some immigrants maintain and develop economic, political and cultural ties with their sending nations (e.g. Grasmuck & Pessar 1991; Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004). Peggy Levitt (2010: 39) notes that “we live in a world in which people embrace multiple identities and turn to a variety
of institutions around the globe to claim them”. She further observes that transnational migrants are likely to not fully assimilate as they constantly attempt to craft a combination that allows them to maintain their membership in both the sending and receiving countries (ibid). Studies of Israeli migrants in Canada (Cohen & Gold 1997; Magat 1999; Harris 2009) and the U.S. (Gold 2002; Lev Ari 2008; Cohen 2011b) establish that they are transnational migrants. Cohen (2011b) interviewed twenty Jewish Israelis who resided in Los Angeles area and had lived in the U.S. for at least five years. Based on his interviews and participant observations in cultural events (such as celebration of Israel Independence day) of the Israeli Los Angeles community, Cohen (Ibid: 1145) argues that these events “become hybrid spaces linking the diaspora ‘here’ with the homeland society ‘there’”. By celebrating Israel’s Independence Day Israeli Migrants in Los Angeles feel that they fulfil their ‘cultural duty’ to their homeland, while at the same time they celebrate their own existence as an Israeli community abroad. Furthermore, Cohen (ibid) notes that the Israeli culture as interpreted by the Israeli migrants may defer from Israeli culture of their co-nations in Israel as the migrants may incorporate American or Jewish- American themes and values into Israeli festivals.

2.6. Conclusions

The review of the literature reveals that scholars endlessly debate the boundaries of religion and religious practice. Moreover, spirituality and private religion have gained much recognition and attention in recent times. I adopt the lived religion approach as a method to track the religious and spiritual practices of individuals outside traditionally recognized religious settings. Most scholars agree that the full impact of religion on our society cannot be analyzed without recognizing its affect beyond the institutional level. Furthermore, I concur with Luckmann and Hervieu-Léger’s assertions that religion is not a dying phenomenon; modernity did not necessarily bring the decline of religion, but it rather prompts us to rearrange our consideration of what constitutes religion. Thus, my understanding of religion is primarily shaped by the ideas brought by Luckmann, Hervieu-Léger and McGuire; religion is a malleable concept that is constantly shaped by individuals within a given society.
Examining the religious practices of Jewish immigrants presents further challenges since some Jewish religious practices may be viewed by individuals as cultural practices. Since I adopt the constructivist-interpretive approach, the study participants will be left to define the context in which they view their practice. Most scholars of Jewish ethnicity and religion in the U.S. agree that there is a decline in synagogue attendance, yet as noted by Phillips “the wide spread secularity [of American Jews] has not led to secularism. American Jews dutifully retell the short stories of the Exodus at their Passover Seder and seek divine forgiveness on Yom Kippur without being particularly certain that God is listening or even exists” (2010: 82). Phillips further problematizes the term secular by suggesting that one can be secular (or even an atheist) while he or she take part in religious events. On the other hand it may be suggested that these secular individuals may view such practices as part of their Jewish culture or as an act that affirms their membership in an ethnic group, and therefore these are not religious practices as Phillips suggests. As will be demonstrated in the subsequent chapters, some of the participants in this research do indeed engage in what one may view as a conventional religious practice. Yet, they attribute their participation to their ethnicity and/or culture, and not to religious convictions.
3. Chapter 3: Seekers

3.1. Introduction

In a lecture at Hebrew Union College, Arthur Green (1994) described an iconic contemporary Jewish female “seeker” as an individual who attends yoga retreats and lectures on spiritual teachings, but does not attend a synagogue “from which she continues to feel alienated”. She does observe some Jewish holidays; she fasts and meditates on Yom Kippur and celebrates Passover. She further views Orthodox Judaism as a non-spiritual dogma, and considers herself as being spiritual and not religious. Most of the iconic female seeker characteristics can be observed among the female seekers who participated in this study. However, some of the seekers participating in this study do attend synagogues, not traditional synagogues though, but spiritual synagogues that promote social justice and community involvement.

“Seekers” is the name I gave the four interviewees who note that their religious and/or spiritual practices involve both Jewish and non-Jewish practices. The term “seekers” was used by Wade Roof (1993: 33-34) to describe individuals who seek answers to a variety of existential questions and are on quest “for something more than doctrine, creed, or institution, although these are usually involved”. Roof further mentioned that seekers do not feel bound to one doctrine and usually tend to describe themselves as spiritual but not religious. The four seekers in this study fit Roof’s description in many aspects; they consider themselves as spiritual individuals, they feel free to search for answers to their existential questions in various religious and spiritual locations, and they do not recognize one specific path or dogma as the ‘only truth’.
3.1.1. Who are the seekers?

Dina², Gila, Ron and Debora are four bright individuals that spend a considerable amount of time in search for the essence of life. They have some similarities among them: They are Jewish, born in Israel, university educated, and in their late thirties to early forties. Judaism plays a role in their religious and spiritual practices, and they incorporate religious and spiritual practices from Eastern religions. Between them they practice Yoga, meditate, chant in sacred gatherings, and attend spiritual lectures and liberal synagogues. Two of them are involved with liberal streams of Jewish institutional religion. The seekers are artistic; among them are choir singers, visual artists and a musician. They work in the fields of education and customer service. Three of them are married to or in relationship with a non-Jewish partner, while the fourth seeker is a single mother. With the exception of one seeker, they all have young children. Some seekers have been moving back and forth between Canada and Israel. With the exception of Gila and Dina who know each other from previous participation in a casual Hebrew singing group, the interviewees do not know each other. This chapter tells their stories, and addresses the following questions: What prompts them to delve into religio-spiritual matters? How do they shape their religious and spiritual practice? What role do these practices have in their lives?

3.2. Roots and Upbringing

The environment in which they were raised had an impact on the religious and spiritual lives of the seekers. Three of the four seekers grew up in a secular or even (as Debora called it) “anti-religious” settings. Both Gila and Debora were born in Israel and

² pseudonyms were given to all participants mentioned in this thesis in order to protect their confidentiality.
raised in a kibbutz\(^3\). Debora, whose parents came to Israel from the United States in the early 1970s, lived most of her life in a kibbutz which belongs to Hashomer Hatzair (in Hebrew, the youth guard), a socialist-Zionist movement. She recalls that “religious people were very much against us” since kibbutz members were known to live a lifestyle which stands in sheer contrast to that of orthodox Jews. In Debora’s life in the kibbutz “religion and Judaism just seemed like very exotic, something dangerous like a cult and not even an option”. Although she “grew up extremely secular, anti-religious” Debora now considers that this lifestyle which was based on socialist-Zionist ideology was “in many ways...a religion”. In her early thirties, while living in Canada, Debora had “a moment when [she] started looking at spirituality and meditation, yoga”. One of her searches took her to the United States east coast, where in a Jewish meditation retreat she had an experience that “just went straight into [her] heart”. Following the retreat, Debora chose to become more involved in organized Jewish religion, a decision that shocked her parents. However, she told her parents jokingly “it’s your fault, because everything that you do in your life had ideology and meaning behind it, and now that I left the kibbutz I want to have one too”. This suggests that Debora’s religio-spiritual quest was prompted to some extent by her desire to fill a void of structure and meaning which she missed since she left the kibbutz. Furthermore, in some sense Debora, as she acknowledged it, comes from a ‘religious’ lifestyle where ideology, meaning and the community dictated much of the daily lives of kibbutz members.

Similarly to Debora, Gila was born in Israel and grew up in a kibbutz before moving to Vancouver at the age ten. Gila’s mother, an Israeli with European

\(^3\) A kibbutz is a type of communal society unique to Israel that was founded around ninety years ago on the premise of equality. The basic principle of the kibbutz was that each member would be responsible to the whole group and the whole group would be responsible for each member. The kibbutz is responsible for each member’s needs such as food, clothing, childcare and health. People work according to their ability and do not receive a salary for their work. If they are employed outside of the kibbutz, they are required to donate their salary to the kibbutz so that everyone is equally rewarded. Until few years ago, children lived apart from their parents in the children’s house. However, in recent years most kibbutzim have moved from communal sleeping arrangements to family sleeping arrangements (Lobel & Bar, 1997: 283-284).
background, and her father, a scientist from a Christian background met at the kibbutz. Gila grew up in a secular setting, she did not attend a synagogue, but she explains that celebrating the Jewish holidays was an important part in her life:

I remember the holidays in the kibbutz as something very important. The holidays were always somehow connected to nature. For example, [the holiday of] Shavuot I love a lot; we would sit outside around the tables, and they would bring food and more food and we would sing songs. Those were holidays that were part of the kibbutz spirit. Since grade five each kid has a role in the holiday; dancing, reading or singing. I loved being part of this.

Although Gila enjoyed celebrating the Jewish holidays, it seems that the religious component was not emphasized or, as in this case, simply ignored. However, it seems that she considers the celebration of the Jewish holidays as an important part of her childhood. The way in which the holidays were fused with nature and the kibbutz spirit may further explain their importance in Gila’s upbringing. Gila further provides an account of a typical Shabbat with her family at the kibbutz. She stresses that she and her family enjoyed being in nature, and a typical Shabbat would include a cycling trip to nearby fields. Her love for nature and the land is tightly fused with the Jewish holidays as she later admits: “I have a hard time to differentiate between Israel and Judaism”. At age ten, Gila and her family moved to Vancouver where they lived for three years before moving back to Israel for another three years. Gila’s family eventually returned to Vancouver where they live today. However, at age eighteen Gila returned to Israel to serve in the Israeli army, and finally settled in Vancouver at age twenty-one.

Gila’s roots and upbringing did not provide much prior indication of the spiritual awakening she would experience at a later part of her life. However, as will be discussed later in this chapter, the Jewish component in her spiritual life has further developed due to her immigration to Canada; I suggest that, to some extent, Gila is ‘using’ her Jewishness, partially, to express her longing and love for Israel.

4 A holiday that commemorates the anniversary of the day God gave the Torah to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai. It is also a day of celebrating the harvest.
Dina was born in Israel in the early 1970s and moved to Vancouver ten years ago. Her grandparents, passionate Zionists, came to Israel from East Europe and helped to establish one of Israel’s many kibbutzim. Dina, who lived in one of Israel’s major cities, recalls that although she did not attend a synagogue as a child, her grandparents used to have them over for Shabbat dinner where they will bless the wine and sing. Dina feels blessed that it was a part of her upbringing since in general her attitude toward religion was negative due to what she describes as “the intensity of forced religion by the orthodox”. Her fond memories of Shabbat dinners with her grandparents maintained her connection with Judaism, and helped her to include Jewish elements in her spiritual practice today.

There are some commonalities in the roots and upbringing of these three seekers. They are all females who were born (and spent their childhood) in Israel. They are Ashkenazi Jews from an Eastern European Zionist background that grew up in a secular (or even anti-religious) environment. Although their Jewish practices stem from the Jewish religion they may be considered as cultural practices; celebrating major Jewish holidays and having Shabbat dinners became part of Israeli-Jewish culture and most Israeli-Jews celebrate these occasions regardless of their religious beliefs. Religion and/or spirituality were not otherwise part of their lives while living in Israel.

The forth seeker, Ron, was born in Israel to North American parents that separated shortly after his birth. His mother, Naomi, a convert to Judaism, moved to Vancouver when he was two years old. In Vancouver, Naomi “really dropped off” Jewish practices. Ron recalls that “she wasn’t paying too much attention; we did light Shabbat candles sometimes and we did something for Hanukkah”, nothing more than that. The religious shift in Naomi’s life, which took her into organized Jewish religion and had a direct impact on Ron’s religio-spiritual path, occurred when Ron was twelve years old. Ron’s roots and upbringing are quite different from the other three seekers. Although he was born in Israel, he arrived in Canada at the age two, and therefore he did not experience the tension between religiously orthodox and secular Israelis. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that he is the only seeker of the four who is a member of a synagogue. Furthermore, as will be discussed later in a greater extent, Ron’s immigration did not have an immediate impact on his religious and spiritual life although it affected the lives of the other three seekers. On the other hand, Naomi’s own religio-
spiritual quest had a direct impact on the choices he made in a later part of his life. In particular, Ron adapted Naomi’s inclusive approach of welcoming all people who want to have any Jewish experience regardless of their religious background or sexual orientation. Furthermore, Ron followed Naomi for prayer and services at a liberal and egalitarian Vancouver synagogue which is affiliated with the Jewish Renewal movement\(^5\). It provides Ron with one of the main foundations to his religio-spiritual practice; Ron feels that the community at this synagogue gave him the support and foundation to practice Judaism in a progressive way that suites his set of beliefs. According to Ron, everybody is welcomed there and the synagogue’s rabbi encourages all members to contribute their thoughts on the weekly readings of the Torah\(^6\).

Unlike the other three seekers, Ron’s Jewish upbringing started, to a great extent, at the age twelve. His mother’s decision to become religiously active had a great impact on his religious and spiritual life. However, unlike the other seekers, he was at an age where he was able to exercise his judgment and even choose whether he wanted to attend the synagogue. As it will be demonstrated later, Ron fully embraced Naomi’s choice and continued his spiritual quest that stems from her choice.

### 3.3. Migration

The seekers emigrated from Israel for reasons that mostly relate to their family members. Dina followed her Canadian husband to Vancouver and Ron came with his mother at the age two. Gila and Debora have moved between Israel and Canada several times. Gila followed her family in her first migration as a young child, and her later movements between Israel and Canada stem from her desire to be with her immediate family.

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\(^5\) A Jewish religio-spiritual movement, established in 1962 in United States. The core values of Jewish Renewal are to bring creativity, joy and awareness to spiritual practice as a path to healing the hearts and finding balance and wholeness. Jewish Renewal promotes justice, freedom, responsibility and care for all life and the earth that sustains all life.

\(^6\) The Jewish name for the first five books of the Jewish Bible. A portion of the bible is read every Saturday at the synagogue.
family who resided in Vancouver. Debra first migration was, by her account, not exactly planned. After completing her two years of service in the Israeli army she traveled in South America and decided to visit distant relatives in both the U.S. and Canada; however, her ‘visit’ lasted for nine years while she attended university and had was involved in a long-term relationship. Shortly after completing her studies (and separating from her boyfriend) Debora decided to return to Israel and be with her family. Yet, five years later as a single mother of a three-year-old child she moved to Vancouver where her brother and his young family reside. Debora notes that it was a hard decision to leave Israel this last time, particularly since her son, Kobi, is quite attached to his father. Yet she was determined to leave Israel since she believes that, unlike many Israelis, Canadians will not view her choice of being a single mother in a negative manner.

The seekers’ migration, according to their accounts, was not prompted by economic incentives. Current migration literature suggests that the motives for migration are complex, particularly among transnational migrants (Gold 2002). In the case of Israeli migrants in the U.S., Gold (ibid: 58) argues that the most suitable approach for understanding their motives for emigration is the “network approach [which] emphasizes that migration is embedded in a series of political, ethnic, familial and communal relationships and environments, including some that cross borders”. The seekers had familial networks in Vancouver and furthermore they are familiar with North American culture as it is quite dominant in Israeli secular society. Furthermore, Debora’s motives for migration (in both times) could be explained by Aihwa Ong’s (1999: 19) argument that “flexibility, migration, and relocations...have become practices to strive for rather than stability”. Debora is simply, yet again, ‘trying on’ living in a social setting that may suite her current life circumstances.

3.4. What are they seeking and why?

The four seekers began their soul search for different reasons. Yet, while shaping their spiritual practices they ask new questions and develop new expectations from their practices. “My role is to be Jewish” replies Debora when I ask her what her role in this world is. Debora began her soul search as she was struggling with health issues, however, since then she has immersed herself in studying Judaism and
practicing it in her daily life. Her approach to practicing Judaism is informed by the Reconstructionist Jewish movement\(^7\) with which she is affiliated; Debora feels that her main role as a Jew is to seek social justice.

In some ways we should be a light upon the nations. Not that we are better, but we have gone through so much oppression, persecution and murder that we should really not do the same and serve in some way as an example. If we already say ‘we are Jews’, this showing off should come with responsibility.

It seems that Debora harnessed her spiritual and religious practice to pursue goals that she had before, such as ending Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands. During the interview Debora mentioned numerous times that in her opinion Judaism is about practice and not about intellectual debates; we are judged by our actions, and not by our thoughts. Furthermore, Debora who sees herself as a future community leader, emphasizes that she grew to appreciate the importance of community and family in Jewish life. She further notes the importance of Shabbat in “this crazy life”. For Debora, Shabbat is “a time to pause and be with family, notice the now, the sacred, and the simple things”. The weekly significance of Shabbat in her life may serve as an analogy to the overall role of religion and spirituality in her life; it seems that religious and spiritual practices keep Debora, a single mother who just moved here from Israel, grounded amidst “this crazy life”.

It seems that Debora was seeking answers, therapy and comfort that would help her cope with the separation from her long-time partner. Debora embodies a fusion of two types of individuals that were mentioned by Giddens (1991): the individual who considers new ideas and information that she encounters and at the same time the

\(^7\) A modern American based Jewish movement that views Judaism as a progressively evolving civilization. The movement emphasises positive views toward modernism, and has an approach to Jewish custom which aims toward communal decision making. Reconstructionists believe that religious commandments should be categorized as non-binding customs that can be democratically accepted or rejected by the congregations (jrf.org).
individual who seeks solace in an overarching system of authority. Indeed Debora tried different practices such as yoga and meditation until she found that Reconstructionist Judaism suited her best. Although she still meditates and practices yoga, she views these practices as an extension of her Jewish identity; her spiritual search in some sense is over since she found, at least for now, her true meaning in life. Judaism, she maintains, provides her with all her spiritual needs; in this sense she adopts an overarching system of authority. Yet again, later in the interview Debora calls herself a Jew-Bu (a term that describes an ethnic Jew that practices Buddhism). These seemingly conflicting definitions that Debora uses when describing her religious and spiritual identity can be explained through the Jewish Reconstructionist approach that maintains that Jewish religious laws are not binding and furthermore that congregants can decide if they wish to accept or reject new customs.

Ron admits that studying the torah and composing sacred music are the religious and spiritual practices that he enjoys most. On the other hand he is aware that he does not follow many of the mitzvot (religious commandments).

I’m kind of imperfect; I just start to recognize the rules and I’m breaking most of them. But, you know, I know that Judaism doesn’t say ‘if you don’t follow all the mitzvot than you are horrible’, we are not like that. You know, you start where you can, right? So I thought this is a great thing for me to always have to study, and that would always be something. So, I do study regularly, yes.

In some sense, Ron’s approach stands in contrast to Debora’s practical approach. Where he prefers to increase his theoretical knowledge, Debora prefers to use her practice in order to bring practical change. This is not to say that Ron is not involved in his community; he shares his knowledge frequently when he leads the prayers at the synagogue. However, he is more content with the intellectual and creative aspects of his practice.

Dina continued the process of her soul searching since she moved to Vancouver. She does not subscribe to one tradition as she seeks answers to existential questions
that she is still grappling with. She regularly attends two spiritual lectures on a weekly basis, one on the Vedic tradition, and the other one on Osho. In addition from time to time she attends a progressive synagogue that promotes social justice and interfaith gatherings. Although she finds all the teachings that she is involved with to be complementary, her connection with Judaism through her synagogue fulfills her longing for community and companionship as well as cultivating her son’s Jewish identity. Furthermore, the lectures she attends as well as yoga and meditation grounds her and stimulates her love for comparative religion, a subject that she enjoys studying. In particular she enjoys learning about the journey of her soul, and she feels that the knowledge that she gains from the Vedic and Osho’s lectures helps her in understanding her position and role in this world.

Bottom line, according to the Vedic teachings, is that we chose to come here and take a physical experience. So, who is the we? Who is this I? And that is the full exploration through four main questions: why am I here? Why do we get sick? Why do we die? Where do we go to when we die? It is simply fascinating. I love comparative religion; there is so much overlap.

Dina grapples with philosophical questions and the various lectures that she attends help her to expand her knowledge regarding the theories of different religious and spiritual bodies. However, from our interview, there is no indication that these theoretical debates manifest any tangible change in her life. Yet, like the three other seekers, she mentions that being exposed to different theories and practices reaffirms her belief that “there is so much overlap” among the many religious and spiritual theories. Dina’s quest is a never-ending one, since, like a scholar, she is fascinated by the ever growing body of theories pertaining to soul searching.

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8 This is an ancient Indian philosophy which is part of the Hindu religion. It is characterized by beliefs in reincarnation, and a belief in a supreme being of many forms and natures. It further holds the view that opposing theories are aspects of one eternal truth, and that one should desire liberation from earthly evils.

9 He was a contemporary Indian guru who advocated for fusion of several Eastern traditions. His main teachings called for practice of meditation, love, and ending all institutional religions in their current forms. He died in 1991.
Gila admits that she is “a very curious person”, particularly when it comes to New Age spirituality; she believes that spirituality comes from many sources and thus she likes trying “different things”. Gila has a strong need to connect with and understand the world beyond our physical world. This need was further strengthened after the sudden death of her father eight years ago. She believes in transmigration of souls, and in an attempt to connect with her late father she contacted him both through her visions and a medium. When she described her spirituality room she ended by saying “I have cards, I do card readings”. My reaction was ‘oh you read cards?’ to which she replied “Yes. I’m not sure that I understand it (we both laughed)...I have a booklet that explains it so I look at the booklet”. Gila’s reply raises the possibility that a great part of her seeking has to do with satisfying her curiosity and developing avenues to be playful and creative.

The practices of the four seekers are manifested in different ways in both individual and social contexts. For example, Debora seeks social justice; as a Jewish person she feels that it is her responsibility to help bring justice to our society. Debora clearly states that her role in life is to be Jewish, yet there are multiple ways of being Jewish, and she is clearly shaping her own path as a self-declared “Jew-Bu”. Debora and Ron are both seekers who are comfortable to be associated with institutional religion since the movements with which they are affiliated are liberal movements that enable freedom to seek other avenues for spiritual practices. On the other hand, for Dina and Gila, Judaism seems to be a way of connecting to their family and Israeli culture, while their non-Jewish practices are part of their daily spiritual practice. The practices of all seekers are not necessarily grounded in religious convictions. Rather they seem to be used as ‘tools’ that enable them to organize other aspects of their lives.

3.5. Spiritual and religious hybridity

“Being in nature in the forest; Oh my god, that’s such a beautiful synagogue” (Debora).

The four seekers incorporate in their spiritual lives practices from various traditions. Although they may have different practices, they all have a Jewish element as part of it. Gila’s spiritual practice is quite complex; it is comprised of Kundalini yoga,
meditation, Reiki, reading spiritual books, nature walks, diary writing, and card reading. In her apartment she has a room, that she calls “my spirituality room” where a major part of her spiritual practice is taking place.

It is a green room, you can see the forest’s trees behind, and it’s really nice. It is my room; Dave [her partner] never comes to this room. I do yoga, meditation, writing in my diary, I have cards and I do cards reading... I have a creation bag that is in this room with crayons and pencils...this is my room where I create from within. Sometimes I just sit there, or read a book. Also nature....I get a lot from nature. I go for a walk in the forest in Lynn Creek.

Gila’s spiritual practice is done in solitude, and it matches Roof’s (1999) research that demonstrates that seekers would rather perform their rituals in solitude. However, she meets with her family—her mother and two brothers who migrated from Israel twenty-six years ago, along with their wives and children—once a week for Shabbat dinner at her mother’s apartment. Gila is committed to attend the weekly Shabbat dinner; it is a time that she can relax from the working week and have a visit with her mother, brothers, sister in-laws, nieces and nephews. She also has her ritual that she performs before the dinner starts.

I light the candles and bring the Shabbat to the heart. I make a little prayer; this is the time for me to make a little wish. It is a silent prayer, whatever I want, what happened in that week...and then after I light the candles one of my brothers blesses the wine, and we all begin to sing.

It is important for Gila to add her own elements to traditional rituals; it is a way in which she exercises her autonomy over her spiritual practices. In this case she incorporates a silent prayer after lighting the candles. Some sociologists of religion and spirituality mention that in modern times, spiritual people feel free to reshape traditional customs and give them a meaning that suites their own circumstances (Roof 1993; Stanczak 2006). Perhaps the way in which Gila connects with Yom Kippur best demonstrates how she reshapess Jewish rituals. Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the year for religious Jews; it is a Day of Atonement and repentance that even many non-religious Jews observe by fasting and attending a synagogue. Here is Gila’s extensive account of a typical Yom Kippur in her life.
I have a special connection with *Rosh Ha Shana* and *Yom Kippur*, they are special days; there is a certain energy that I feel in these particular days. It is special to share this energy with other people. For me, *Yom Kippur* is not the same as what religious people consider it to be. For me *Yom Kippur* is a time to come to terms with myself, which means that I think about what had happened to me throughout the year? What were my goals? What do I want to develop? What did I do that had already worked out? It is a way to summarize the year. What I do is this; I take Yom Kippur as a religious observant day from work. I’ve done it for few years now. I don’t get paid for it. What I do is this: I’ll go to… [synagogue] or stay at home, I put on a white shirt, silence with no television or radio; just silence with myself. I write in my diary, read a book, or anything that is silent. In the morning [of *Yom Kippur*] I go to Porteau Cove, on the way to Squamish, it’s a park right on the water. I fast with drinking water. I don’t eat anything but I drink coffee in the morning, and I take my diary and a bottle of tea and I sit on a hill that overlooks the ocean and I write about the year. I do my soul accounting. That is my routine and my special connection to *Yom Kippur*.

Gila modified the traditional practice of *Yom Kippur* in order to fit it into her own style and personality. For example, since she prefers to conduct her spiritual practice in solitude, Gila chooses to do her “soul accounting” in nature by herself, rather than praying in a synagogue. Furthermore, she has modified the traditional strict fasting and chooses to “fast with drinking water”. Gila makes a point to distinguish herself from religious Jews (specifically orthodox Jews) as she acknowledges that she draws different meaning from *Yom Kippur*. It is quite obvious that *Yom Kippur* is a special and meaningful day in Gila’s life; she takes a day off work, wears special clothing, avoids solid food, and spends the day in solitude while reflecting on her life for the past year. Gila does not feel the need to adhere to Jewish religious laws; she simply does what she feels is congruent with her needs. Nevertheless, Gila mentions several times throughout the interviews that it is important to her that people in her social and professional circle know that she is an Israeli Jew. Gila further notes that, in her opinion, “spirituality comes from many different places and each person has different components that build up his spirituality”.

Debora, who is in the midst of her religious studies, still practices yoga and meditation and declares that she is looking forward to meeting Jew-Bu’s in Vancouver, as she calls them “my people”. Although Debora attends a Jewish religious institution (though quite a liberal one), she insists on weaving into her spiritual life elements of non-
Jewish practices such as yoga, meditation, and reading spiritual books of different traditions.

I read spiritual books, do yoga to get in touch with my body, I cycle, explore Vancouver...being in nature in the forest; oh my God that’s such a beautiful synagogue. I believe in god and I speak with god, I pray to god...

Similar to Gila, being in nature is an important part of Debora’s spiritual practice. By equating the forest with a synagogue, Debora demonstrates the broadness of her spiritual world. She believes since the world was created by God, spirituality can be found everywhere. Yet, Debora stresses several times throughout the interview that her role is to be Jewish, and that is how she describes the expression of Judaism in her life.

My home is Jewish. Everything on my walls is Jewish; the Hamsa (a hand shaped Jewish artifact), this thing that I got in Zefat- a written sentences from Tehillim [Psalms] in a shape of dancing people. I have a photo of a Klezmer [Eastern European Jewish musician] and of Jerusalem, and soon to be a Mezuzah [a piece of parchment, often contained in a decorative case, inscribed with specified Hebrew verses from the Torah. A mezuzah is affixed to the doorframe in Jewish homes to fulfill the Biblical commandment to inscribe the words ‘hear, o Israel, the lord our God, the lord is one’ on the doorposts of Jewish homes]... I wanted to put it up, but I really wanted to create kind of a family ceremony. I have a Jewish kid, Jewish music, Hebrew music on my computer. I speak Hebrew with my son, I will send him to a Jewish daycare if I can afford it [laughing], we have Jewish artefacts like candles sticks and Tzedakah box [charity box], Havdalah candles, although I haven’t done Havdalah [a Jewish religious ceremony that marks the symbolic end of Shabbat and holidays, and ushers in the new week] in a while. I celebrate the Shabbat and the holidays; I go to synagogue every week if I can. I work in the Jewish world. I am going to lead kids’ services. I like Israeli food.

Having a “Jewish home” and being part of the Jewish community are important aspects in Debora’s Jewish life. Debora, who arrived from Israel few months ago, attaches much importance to the Jewish artifacts that are hanging on her walls. These artifacts serve as a daily reminder of the religio-spiritual path to which she has committed herself. Mehta and Belk (1991: 399) note that objects brought from immigrants' homeland are “material reminders” that allow them to “transport part of their former identity to a new place”. It is important for Debora to surround herself with artifacts, food and music that are more likely to be considered as Israeli rather than
merely Jewish. For example pictures of cities in Israel such as Zefat and Jerusalem, Israeli food and music, and speaking Hebrew with her son, are seen by her as an expression of Judaism, while I would suggest that it is also an expression of her love and longing for Israel. Similar to Gila, Debora has a hard time distinguishing between Judaism and Israel. Her Jewish home is, in many ways, an Israeli home ‘away from home’.

Dina celebrates comparative religion in that she enjoys attending spiritual lectures of various faiths and traditions. She is Jewish but she does not label herself as such. In fact she refrains from using any label to define her spiritual path, as she states “I am spiritual; I see spirituality in people that I meet everyday”. Dina is open to finding truth and answers to her quest in all spiritual avenues. She is actively searching for new spiritual avenues since she believes that, like any other person, she is “a spiritual being on a physical journey”. The way in which Dina conducts her spiritual practice is described extensively in the previous segment. However, here is her response to the question: ‘How do you nurture your soul?’

Keeping time for me alone, being with myself, doing meditation, active meditation or a sit down meditation, my Hatha yoga practice that I do. To me it’s also being in the creative world and nourishes my soul through singing, dancing, painting or just bringing the awareness of creativity. I feel that knowing the purpose of my soul is nourishing when I make the choice following my heart. I chose to be born in this lifetime in Israel to a family that is of Jewish descent that I learned a lot about Judaism and I am very thankful for that. It definitely gave me a platform to experience my spiritual life.

Here, Dina adds the activities of singing, dancing and painting which are an important part in her life as an artist. Perhaps, by noting the importance of her creative world in her spiritual life, Dina demonstrates the broadness of her spiritual world; she does not distinguish between singing, meditating or attending a Vedic lecture since in her view all these activities contribute to her spiritual growth.

Being alone sometimes and meditating are important for the three female seekers. They feel free to add new practices to their spiritual ‘toolbox’ as they have the sole responsibility for shaping it. We can see that for the female seekers, spirituality is not only confined to sacred and religious matters but it also includes singing, dancing,
cycling, painting, and diary writing—activities that may be practiced by non-spiritual individuals. Here we are reminded again of the problematic aspect of defining what constitutes spirituality. Nevertheless, it seems that the seekers truly follow their heart and are not bound to any religious authority.

Ron attends the synagogue once a week (usually on Saturday mornings). He is quite involved in the synagogue activities and he often speaks about the weekly Parashah (a portion of the bible) to the entire congregation. Ron makes an effort to expand his knowledge of the bible; he took a year long course of biblical Hebrew in order to be able to read the bible in its original language. Furthermore, for the last year he was able to combine his love of composing and playing music with reading the bible as he became a part of a chanting group that gathers once a month for Hebrew Chanting. I have attended two of the chanting gatherings which attracts a steady crowd of ten to fifteen followers. Ron chants and plays the guitar, while the two other group members play the African drums and lead the chants. Ron greatly enjoys this activity since it allows him to combine his love for music, performance, composing and the Bible in one practice. Although the chants are mainly in Hebrew, according to Ron “maybe twenty-five percent of the people there are Jewish; it is very interfaith”. Here Ron speaks about his love of music and performing and its connection to his religious and spiritual life.

My love of music has probably impacted my Jewish practice because I lain [read the Torah in front of the congregation] a lot at the synagogue and I think that I have kind of a nut for melody and singing and memorization. I write music and I pretty much just focus on writing. But for a long time I just learned songs from, you know, Beatles, and country music, lots of classic rock.... Kind of learned all these songs so I can play them... if I want to, I can be in a cover band. I love that, the challenge of memorizing something and then being able to perform it; and that’s laining. You don’t memorize, I mean you do memorize aspects of it and I love the performance aspect of it, being up there in front of the torah, having people say great job. I love that feeling. So yes, my love of music which grew in me totally independent of Judaism has impact it, and now with the

10 Throughout the thesis “bible” refers to the Hebrew Bible, as it is the term used by the study participants.
chanting we get together we will take a verse or a section of a verse from the bible and turn it into a piece of beautiful music. We have written maybe one or two chants; most of them have already been written. But we are still writing our own music, we still have our own instrumental arrangements.

When Ron speaks about his experience with the chanting group he is clearly excited. In the two times that I have attended the chanting evenings, I could see and feel that it is his true passion; Ron makes an effort to explain the Hebrew words to the participants who are predominantly non-Jewish females, as he includes in his explanation the meaning and biblical context of the verse. While chanting and playing his guitar Ron would close his eyes for long periods, an act that reminds me of deep meditation. This act may imply that he is immersed in his love for words and music. Furthermore, Ron loves this part of his spiritual aspect since he literally creates his own way of worship.

3.6. Conclusions

All four seekers mentioned, in response to my question, that in their view there are many avenues to experience the sacred, and Judaism is not the only “true” path. It is worth noting that while Ron and Debora specifically note that they believe in God, Gila believes in “a higher power”, and Dina believes in the existence of “an intelligence behind everything…something amazing that is part of us”. All seekers suggested that religious and spiritual diversity should be celebrated. The seekers demonstrate a great sense of freedom in shaping and choosing their practices. However, although most scholars identify spiritual activities such as yoga, meditation and Reiki as ‘new forms of religions in modern era’, it should be noted that these are well developed Eastern practices that were brought to the Western world in the last fifty years. Thus, we are noticing adoption of other traditional religions and practices that are new only to Western culture. Furthermore, as noted by Wood (2009) these practices, may maintain the institutional and hierarchical structures in which they were originally formed. For example, in a study that I conducted in 2006 among Kundalini Yoga practitioners in Vancouver it became apparent that although the teachers were advocating egalitarianism, socialism and a just society, the 3HO Foundation (Healthy Happy Holy
Organization) was hierarchical and authoritarian in its conduct. For example, Yogi Bhajan, the Master of Kundalini, was the sole decision maker in the foundation, and no member could challenge his decisions. However, this is the way in which Yogi Bhajan was taught Kundalini Yoga in India in the 1940s. My point is that the seekers are simply ‘reinventing the wheel’ rather than truly inventing new forms of connecting with their inner spirit and the sacred. In this light I can further understand why Gila, who used to take part in 3HO activities, decided to practice on her own since seekers who feel betrayed by fellow members of a small spiritual community tend to withdraw from this type gathering. Paul Heelas (1996) adds that, to some extent, hierarchy and authority are always part of any organization and therefore it should come as no surprise that spiritual communities are facing similar challenges.

Ron and Debora are two seekers who have a strong affiliation with institutional Jewish religion. It is important to note that the liberal modern streams of Judaism to which they belong enable them to endorse other practices; both Jewish Renewal and Reconstructionist Judaism are spiritual movements that promote creativity and engagement with other faiths. Furthermore, in contrast to Dina and Gila, Ron and Debora note that they are both religious and spiritual since the liberal movements to which they belong enable them to express their spirituality outside the Jewish world. Based on Ron and Debora’s accounts, it could be suggested that the future of institutionalized religion lies within movements that, rather than subscribe to rigid dogma, recognize their members’ desires for self meaning. Ron further note in this regard: “I think I’m just lucky that I ended up with…[my] synagogue…therefore the gap between spirituality and religion has never played an issue for me; it is great that I have all these like minded people at…[my synagogue]”. Hervieu-Léger mentioned that institutional religions make efforts to attract new members by catering to their preferences and style. However, Ron and Debora belong to movements that seem to have been created by people who did not find their place within institutional religion. This seems an attempt to create communities that can have similar rituals and ideas while encouraging their members to explore other spiritual options.

For Dina and Gila, Judaism has cultural and historical meaning more than a religious one. Indeed, they do celebrate the high holidays, and Gila observes Yom Kippur in her unique way. Yet, practicing yoga, meditation, Reiki, and attending Vedic
and Osho lectures, are their core practices. Dina attends a synagogue from time to time, usually with her son, while Gila, who does not attend a synagogue, has Shabbat dinners with her extended family every Friday evening. Both Gila and Dina enjoy seeking out of curiosity and appreciation of other traditions and practices. They both note that their practices make them feel grounded and present. In the context of immigration, Dina notes that since she realized that she is a spirit on a journey she feels peaceful wherever she is regardless if it is in Canada or Israel. Gila, on the other hand debated for many years if she should go and live in Israel. She mentioned that yoga and meditation has helped her to go through the process of deciding, or rather grasping, that Vancouver is her home.

We can see that for some seekers Judaism is not a core religious or spiritual practice. Their Jewish practices may symbolize their connection with Israel and/or Jewish people, yet the reasoning behind them is beyond a merely religio-spiritual sphere. The next chapter will discuss the religious and spiritual practices of the ‘ethno-Jews’—Jewish interviewees whose religious and spiritual practice is informed by Jewish tradition only. How do ‘ethno-Jews’ view their practices? Why are they confining their practices to Judaism?
4. Chapter 4: “Ethno-Jews”

4.1. Introduction

“Ethno-Jews” is a term that I made-up to describe the category of the seven interviewees who only engage in Jewish practices albeit in varying capacities. However, in many respects the “ethno-Jews” are different from one another in the level of their engagement with Jewish practices; some interviewees are atheist Jews who only attend a synagogue sporadically for non-religious reasons, while others are observant Jews who follow most religious laws. I chose to use the term “ethno-Jews” since they either do not seek answers to existential questions outside the context of Judaism or they are not asking such questions at all. Yet, all “ethno-Jews” are proud of their Jewish ethnicity and they identify themselves as Jews regardless of the extent of their adoption of Jewish religion. Although the majority of them are non-practicing Jews, they all refer to biblical and more recent Jewish history, as well as Israel when explaining the role of Judaism in their lives.

4.1.1. Who are the “ethno-Jews”?

Within the category “ethno-Jews” there are two main subcategories: Israeli-born and Jews from former Soviet Union (FSU). All seven were born in Israel or FSU, and those who were born in FSU immigrated to Israel before settling in Canada. Throughout the interviews it became evident that the general attitude towards Jews in FSU, as well as the role of institutional religion in Israel had a significant impact on the way in which the “ethno-Jews” shape their Jewish identity. Furthermore, in comparison with the seekers, the “ethno-Jews” were generally more concerned about their ethnic identity rather than their religious or spiritual identity. The “ethno-Jews” hold a variety of occupations, between them they are self employed, professionals, and students. They are all married with children (four of them are two married couples). With the exception of one, they all have Jewish partners.
4.2. Roots and upbringing

4.2.1. Being a Jew in Former Soviet Union

Three of the “ethno-Jews” emigrated twice from their country of origin; Natalie, Dima and Anna immigrated to Israel from FSU before immigrating to Canada. To a large degree their attitude to Judaism was shaped by the prevailing political and social climate in each of the countries in which they have lived. Dima and Anna mentioned in their interviews that while living in FSU they did not celebrate Jewish holidays at all, while Natalie, who immigrated to Israel at the age eight, remembered that her family used to celebrate Rosh Ha Shana and Passover. Dima, who immigrated to Israel at age nineteen, stresses numerous times throughout the interview that he knew that he was Jewish, but he did not know other Jews in his town and his knowledge of Jewish culture and religion was strikingly limited. Dima further noted that “in the Ukraine people did not let me forget that I am a Jew, not that I forgot”. He continued on to describe various incidents from his childhood where he encountered anti-Semitism. For example he mentioned that more than once he found himself in a physical fight after a schoolmate or a neighbour made derogatory statement to him related to his Jewish background. Anna mentioned in the interview that since only her mother was Jewish, her last name is not Jewish and she and her family “did not speak about [them] being Jews”. Anna further mentioned that she did not experience anti-Semitism in her childhood, but she vividly remembered an incident where she was walking with her Jewish grandmother who was racially insulted by a passing stranger. Natalie did not remember any specific incident related to her ethnic origin since she immigrated to Israel at an early age. We can see that, in their country of origin, Anna and Dima had limited knowledge of Judaism and furthermore they had to conceal, or at the very least under-communicate, their ethnic origin in order to be a part of the local society.

4.2.2. Migration to Israel and later to Canada

In Israel Dima, Natalie and Anna were exposed to the Jewish religion and Israeli society. Natalie attended an orthodox religious school “mainly because there were no good schools in the area [that she] lived in”. Reflecting on her religious education, Natalie who came from a secular family maintains that she has a strong theoretical
knowledge of Jewish religion, however she argues that the method by which the material was delivered was very authoritarian and unpleasant and she “got lot of brainwashing”. Dima was nineteen years old when he immigrated to Israel and shortly after his arrival he joined the Israeli Defence Army (IDF). Reflecting on his arrival in Israel Dima mentioned that for the first time he learned about *Yom Kippur* and other Jewish religious laws. He further stressed that in Israel he was proud to be a Jew. Anna attended an Israeli university which is known to promote Jewish religious values. She expanded her knowledge relating to Judaism, but she had no desire to implement any Jewish practice in her life. We can see that in Israel Dima, Natalie and Anna had the opportunity to learn about Judaism in a society where Jews are the predominant ethnic group. Equipped with their various degrees of knowledge relating to Judaism, they later embarked on a second migration to Canada for different reasons. Dima met his first wife, Abigail, a Canadian Jew, while serving in the army. Shortly after completing his three years of service they moved to Canada with their newborn, Gabi, in order to be with Abigail’s family in Vancouver. Natalie moved to Canada with her family at the age seventeen as both her parents were hoping to find better employment in Canada. Anna met Dima when he was visiting his family in Israel and after a year of maintaining long-distance relationship she came to Vancouver.

### 4.2.3. Israeli “ethno-Jews” in Canada

David, Dan, Ben and Yossi are four “ethno-Jews” who were born in Israel and immigrated to Canada in their twenties. With the exception of Yossi, who grew up in a religious orthodox family, the Israeli ‘ethno-Jews’ grew up in what they call “*Hiloni*” (in Hebrew, secular) and “*Masorati*” (in Hebrew, traditionalist) settings. *Masorati* or *Shomer Masoret* (in Hebrew, tradition keeper) is a definition that is used in Israel to describe a Jewish person who observes some of the religious commandments, particularly those that related to *Kashrut* (dietary laws) and Shabbat. Nonetheless, not all traditionalists keep similar religious laws. David, Dan and Ben stressed numerous times throughout the interviews that while in Israel they did not want to have any contact with religion and religious issues, mainly due to the manner in which religious laws were imposed on secular Jews. However, they did attend synagogues on high holidays. Ben, who came from a traditional family that kept most of the orthodox laws, attended a synagogue every Shabbat until the age sixteen. In his interview Ben noted that “while in Israel [he]
lost [his] connection with the religion”, he stopped attending a synagogue altogether. Ben explains that until the age sixteen he attended a synagogue regularly because that was what “all [his] family did”. However, he did not find any benefit from reciting the same prayers “over and over again” and he chose to stop attending the synagogue. David, who grew up in a kibbutz, mentioned that like many other kibbutz members he did not like the way in which religion is “forcing its rules on the lives of all Israelis, regardless of their religious orientation”. David further noted that the Jewish religion is being wrongly interpreted by religious figures in Israel. Yet, he does distinguish between living in Canada and Israel, as he claimed that it is important to him to be Jewish and maintain contact with Jewish people in Vancouver. Dan noted that while living in Israel he was quite apathetic towards religion and he “didn’t think much of it”. On the other hand, Yossi who grew up in a religious community in Israel was educated in religiously orthodox institutions.

The Israeli ‘ethno-Jews’ immigrated to Canada in their twenties. Yossi who married an orthodox woman from Vancouver found that it is “more challenging to follow all the Jewish laws here [in Vancouver]” mainly due to the small size of Vancouver’s Jewish Orthodox community. For example, the variety of kosher food products is strikingly limited in comparison with the abundance and availability of such products in Israel. However, Yossi was welcomed here by the orthodox community and soon enough he was able to lead a religious life which resembled the religious settings he left in Israel. David, who immigrated to Vancouver fifteen years ago, attends a synagogue “a few times a year, mainly [in order] to meet friends and to give [his] daughters some Jewish experience”. However, David does not “believe in all the Jewish laws and everything that is in the bible”. His main reasons for visiting a synagogue are socializing with friends (mainly other Israeli immigrants) and providing Jewish experience for his offspring. One may wonder why, considering his aversion to institutional religion, David choose to attend a synagogue. Adopting Cohen and Eisen’s (2000) argument, it could be suggested that David already ‘feels’ Jewish and therefore he also feels free to

11 Food that may be consumed according to Jewish dietary laws.
participate in the synagogue’s activities on his terms. Furthermore, it is well established that immigrants attend religious institutions for non-religious reasons such as speaking their native language, longing for their homeland and being with their ethnic group (Casanova 1994; Ebaugh 2003; Ebaugh & Chafetz 2000).

Ben states that his “connection with Judaism became much stronger since [he] moved to Canada”. An important point in Ben’s spiritual and religious life came when he met his future wife Daniela, a Catholic immigrant from South America, in Vancouver.

I realized that I need to make a choice and to decide if I am Jewish or that it is not important for me. So I decided to give Judaism a thorough examination. Daniela is a very spiritual individual and at the beginning the gap in this realm was seemingly unbridgeable. But we both took lessons in Judaism, and she made an orthodox conversion. It was a long process [three years], but both of us had a great desire to bridge the gap. We are still visiting the synagogue and interacting with the community.

Ben acknowledges that when he met Daniela he was thinking about his future and the future of his offspring; for the first time, since he left Israel, Ben had to re-evaluate his relationship with Judaism. However, Ben grew up in a traditional Israeli family and he used to attend an orthodox synagogue. In fact Ben only attends orthodox synagogues since he views the orthodox stream as the true path to God. Ben mentioned that he views the members in the synagogue as if they were his family. He invites people that he just met to his home for a Shabbat dinner and sometimes, when asked, tries to find work for unemployed members. Ben mentions several times during the interview that in Vancouver he has been able to “rediscover the beauty in Judaism”. Perhaps, the main reason why Ben appreciates the practice of Judaism in Canada more than in Israel is that through it he is able to build and be part of a community, while in Israel he did not need to make any effort to feel belonging or to feel Jewish.

4.3. Ethnic and religious identity

Regardless of their level of religious adherence, both Israeli-born Jews and Jewish interviewees from FSU referred to their Jewish identity as a source of pride. However, at times it is hard to distinguish whether it is their Jewish or their Israeli identity
that they are proud of. Jewish religious rituals and holidays that they take part in are not necessarily viewed by them as religious activities, but rather as Jewish or Israeli cultural and heritage events. David, who is probably the interviewee who demonstrated the least tolerance for institutional religion, mentioned that he is “proud of [his] Jewish heritage and that [he is] from Israel”. He further explains why it is important for him to be recognized as a Jewish person.

It is important to me to label myself as Jewish...it’s more for what the Jewish people managed to achieve over the years in science and other fields, and since the birth of Israel. Obviously, the religion played a major role in the creation of Israel and what they achieved. I also believe that there are lot of negative interpretations of the religion, but I don’t believe in all the Jewish laws and everything that is in the bible. Being Israeli is my connection to Judaism.

David recognizes that religion has a role in making him proud of being Jewish. He praises the achievements of Jewish people in science and the building of Israel, yet he believes that the religion contributed to these achievements. To what extent is David’s pride of being Jewish based on religious convictions? This is a question that David himself cannot clearly answer since the boundaries between Jewish heritage and culture and Jewish religion which seems quite distinct in Israel, are much harder to define in Canada. When David lived in Israel his attitude toward religion was quite negative, yet now when he lives in Canada (where he is not directly affected by Orthodox Jewish laws) it softened. It could be that David is prouder of his Israeli identity rather than his Jewish identity.

With the exception of Yossi who is religiously involved with religious orthodox organizations, Ben is the interviewee who demonstrates the highest degree of involvement in religious practice and synagogue attendance. This is how he explains the negotiation of his identity.

It is much easier to be a Jew here because there is a lack of identity and family. My soul is craving for identity: who am I? Am I Israeli? A Jew? A Canadian? In Israel there is a bad stigma for religious people and it ruined the motivation to go to a synagogue because the model is not good. Here it is much easier. When comparing the importance of being Jewish here and in Israel, it is obvious that there is a religious pressure that takes the fun away in Israel. Here my role is to shape and construct my Jewish identity. It is for us and for our kids. Here our role is much more important; we need to build a community with
activities. Judaism means community, not only religion. We are different and that is what makes us stronger.

Ben provides a rich account of the factors that shaped his ethnic and religious identity: immigration, community building and shared goals. The process of migration separated Ben from his family and friends as well as culture. In a foreign setting Ben started to ask existential questions such as who am I? The “craving for identity” as Ben names it, is a process that most immigrants encounter usually in the first few years after their arrival as they try to find where they belong. For many immigrants in western society religious institutions are among the first stations from which they start networking in search for employment and social orientation (Ebaugh 2003). The synagogue attended by most of the “ethno-Jews” is quite popular among newcomers to Vancouver since one of its leading rabbis is a newcomer from Israel who makes them feel at home. It provides its members with services that stretch beyond the religious realm. Among the synagogue activities are: business networking gatherings, parties for singles, and family activities. Helen Rose Ebaugh (2003:230) notes that, within foreign and multicultural settings, “religious institutions provide social and physical space and social network that help [the newcomers] reproduce and maintain their values, traditions, and customs in the midst of an often alienating and strange society”. Ben finds in the synagogue a group of people with whom he shares a similar history, language, culture, ethnicity and religion. By attending synagogue Ben was able to feel comfortable and ‘at home’ within a foreign setting. One could argue that Ben’s decision to visit the synagogue did not necessarily stem only from a religious motive, but also from a need to find where he belongs and ease his settlement in Canada both socially and financially.

Dima and Natalie note that it is more important to them to be Jewish and keep the tradition in Canada then in Israel. They further note that since in Israel most people are Jewish it is much easier to maintain their Jewish identity. In Canada they have to practice Judaism in order to maintain this identity. Since they want their offspring to be Jewish it is crucial that they will set an example and maintain a Jewish lifestyle. Dima summarized it in these words.

In Canada I am proud to be Jewish. In the Ukraine you could not have been proud about it. It was a sign of defiance; it was like asking for troubles. In Canada I am proud to be Jewish; I want my kids to grow up as Jews. In the Ukraine the kids would have been reminded that
they are Jews. In Israel everybody is Jewish, so it doesn’t matter. Here you have the option to be proud; there is a lot to be proud of. I will not make my kids religious but I want to give them basic knowledge about their heritage... My grandparents were murdered in the ghetto... They [my kids] should know what it was for. My kids should know.

Dima identifies the main reasons for which it is crucial for him to maintain some level of Jewish lifestyle; it is a historic story of struggle for maintaining Jewish heritage that must continue. It is not a religious conviction that prompts Dima to maintain a Jewish lifestyle, it is rather his aspiration—which was denied at his country of origin—to maintain and celebrate his ethnic identity that fuels his concern for his offspring. Dima’s concern is echoed by Natalie as well when she stated “it is important for me that my child will not shy away from it [acknowledging his Jewish roots], and honestly, it is important to me that my child will marry a Jewish person. That is important to me and I will try to keep that”. We can see that both Dima and Natalie are concerned about the continuity of Jewish lineage. It is worth noting that in their interviews both Dima and Natalie mentioned that being married to a Jewish partner, as they are, was highly important for them. Furthermore, Dima and Natalie are not only proud to be Jewish, but they make a point of informing their colleagues of their ethnic background. Dima who encounters anti-Semitic prejudice and discrimination in FSU is proud to wear a Magen David (Star of David) necklace and would gladly engage in conversation about Israel or Judaism. Natalie who has a German sounding last name mentioned that she is quick to correct people that mistakenly think her to be German.

Claire Mitchell (2006) claims that one’s ethnic identity is highly influenced by religious identity. The construction of ethnic identity among secular people, she contends, is influenced by latent religious ideas. Mitchell further suggests that one’s “[ethnic] identity debates can stimulate religious revival” (ibid: 1137). In other words, the religious identity component is never divorced from one’s ethnic identity as in certain circumstances one might adopt more religious beliefs which suit him or her at that time. Mitchell’s suggestions are well echoed by Kivisto and Nefzger who suggest that “Jews are a religioethnic group” [sic] where the religion provides a vehicle for sustaining a distinctive identity (1993: 9). The desire to explore one’s ethnic identity and the secularization of religious institutions may be the prevailing reasons. In the last three decades, a number of scholars have pointed out the importance of distinguishing
between one’s ethnic identity and religious affiliation (Gans 1979, 1994; Mitchell 2006; Amyot & Sigelman 1996). They maintain that religion has a role in the construction of one’s ethnic identity, even if he or she considers themselves to be secular. Furthermore, other scholars suggest that many religious institutions which recognize their members’ desire to construct their own religious practice, are adjusting their boundaries accordingly in order to remain attractive (see Casanova 1994; Davie 2007).

4.4. Religious and cultural practices and the reasoning behind them

Religious and cultural practices as well as the reasoning behind them vary among the ‘ethno-Jews’; for some ‘ethno-Jews’ like Ben and Yossi religious practice is part of their everyday life, while for others such as David and Dan religious practice is in fact cultural in nature. Why do the ‘ethno-Jews’ engage in these various practices? There are several reasons. Among them are: connection with god; being part of a community; necessity; social justice; and maintaining our culture and tradition. It is worth noting that many ethnic Jews view some religious practices as being cultural ones. For example, David and Dan do not consider their sporadic synagogue attendance as a religious practice; they rather view it as “part of [their] heritage” (Dan) and a way to connect to Israel (David). David and Dan demonstrate throughout their interviews that their engagement with Jewish practices stems from their desire to maintain what they consider as Israeli culture.

Dima and Natalie acknowledge that they engage in religious practices partially since that is what Jewish people are expected to do. This is how Natalie describes her practice and the reasoning behind it:

I don’t eat pork, I keep Yom Kippur [by fasting], and I eat Matzo bread on Passover. I read Theilim [Psalms] sometimes, and I pray at the synagogue. I would say that because of my upbringing it is something that I was taught and I also do it because I’m Jewish. It used to be part of my life, so I don’t feel that it is a choice; it is what I’m supposed to do as a Jew, and I do the main obligations.

Natalie’s reasoning seems to lack any agency; she feels that since she was born and raised Jewish she has to follow the rules of Jewish religion. This contrasts with the
attitude demonstrated by the seekers who feel that they are free to shape their own religio-spiritual conduct. However, similar to the seekers, Natalie does pick and choose the rituals and rules that she wants to follow, except that she confines her choices to Judaism. For example, Natalie chooses to attend the synagogue sporadically and read Theilim when it suits her. Furthermore, Natalie states that it is important to her to associate with other Jewish people.

Dima and Anna attend synagogue few times a year, mainly on high holidays such as Passover, Rosh Ha Shanah and Yom Kippur as well as few Friday nights each year. Dima mentioned that for a few years he took weekly lessons in Judaism at the synagogue.

I learned... [Judaism] for a few years, it made me feel good. Not only that I feel belong; it gives me pride, more than I had. It’s like... you learn from scholars from ancient times, and it helps you in life. When I think about it it’s like a guard, you know, it doesn’t let you fall to the negative side. Nothing can go wrong from learning Judaism. I believe in God, I keep kosher, I don’t eat pork and shell fish and I don’t mix Dairy and meat products. I celebrate the Jewish holidays and fast on Yom Kippur, and I go to the synagogue sometimes on Friday nights. These are the basic physical things. Spiritually, I believe all the way, but my upbringing does not allow me to practice everything that the religion requires. I could put a Kippah [yarmulke] on, but what’s the point when I don’t follow all the requirements? I do what I can do.

Dima’s practice is quite similar to Natalie’s practice. However, Dima argues that since he had no Jewish upbringing he is not able to follow all the religious rules even though he believes in them. Dima demonstrates an attitude that only seems to contradict Hervieu-Léger’s perspective regarding religious memory. According to Hervieu-Léger’s (2003) perspective one would expect that since Dima did not attend a synagogue in his childhood nor had he any Jewish upbringing (hence, he was not part of a collective chain of memory), he would shape religious or spiritual conduct independent of institutional religion. Hervieu-Léger argues that in modern societies traditional-institutional religions attempt to maintain the chain of memory which is passed through active participation in institutional religion activities and the reciting of traditional history. This is done in order to prevent the dwindling of its adherences. Dima’s upbringing was void of both religious and cultural Jewish practice and yet he attends a synagogue from time to time and observes some religious rules. However, throughout his childhood Dima was reminded
by his parents that he was Jewish (although no content of its meaning was provided) and he was further told how his grandparents and other relatives were murdered during the Second World War for the reason that they were Jews. The oral history that Dima received from his parents had no religious component, yet, since the boundaries between Jewish religion and Jewish ethnicity are vague this recent family history was enough to fuel Dima’s desire to enquire into the religion of his ethnic group. I would argue that when using Hervieu-Léger’s perspective to analyze the religious behaviour of Jews in modern time such analysis should include also memory of an ethnic-cultural nature since, as demonstrated in Dima’s case, it may trigger affinity to traditional-institutional religion.

Religious practice was embedded in Ben’s collective memory from a young age; being born to a “religious-traditional Yemenite family” religious practice was part of his upbringing. However, after many years of not attending a synagogue, Judaism and Jewish practice has had a profound impact on his life. This is how he describes his view of the essence of Judaism and his religious practice.

The most important thing for me in Judaism is to love the other; this is the foundation of Judaism. It’s not only the commandments; that doesn’t mean anything if you neglect the love for others which is the most important thing. I go to synagogue two to three times a month on Saturdays. I invite Jews and non-Jews for Shabbat dinner at our place. We light the candles and eat well. Judaism is part of my everyday life and is in every part of my life; it is expressed in the way I treat other people, my wife, employees, customers, God. I put on Tefillin [a set of small black leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah, which are worn by observant Jews during weekday morning prayers] every day, I pray, and I try to eat only kosher food. We separate dairy and meat products. I also donate a portion of my revenue to Jewish organizations. It is all a spiritual experience; every morning I thank God for bringing me here [to Vancouver]. It is important to me to set an example for my family, friends and people that are missing company and Judaism. Over all being closer to Judaism has only brought happiness to my life.

Ben’s religious practice is part of his everyday life. Similar to Yossi he states that Judaism has an impact on every realm of his life. Ben provides several reasons for his engagement with Jewish religious practices including: handing on the tradition to his offspring, preventing Jewish assimilation, and cultivating love for others. He further
mentioned that by living a religious life he is able to “relax and trust God; the recipe for living a happy and meaningful life is written there (in the Bible), we just need to follow it”.

Religious practice varies greatly among the ‘ethno-Jews’; Dan and David mainly restrict their practice to participation in high holidays and some Shabbat services, while Ben and Yossi engage in daily practices that have become an essential part of their identity. Dan and David are cultural Jews; they attend synagogue and celebrate the Jewish holidays because it is part of their culture and their upbringing in Israel. Dima engages in his practice out of a conviction that it is a way to maintain Jewish tradition, while Natalie maintains that she does what Jewish people are supposed to do. Similar to the seekers, most “ethno-Jews” shape their own practice and give it different meanings.

4.4.1. “It is our history”

Many of the “ethno-Jews” respond to the question ‘why do you engage in the practices that you do?’ by referring to issues relating to history, heritage, culture and identity, as well as religion. It was already suggested that since Jewish identity includes both ethnic and religious identity, it is hard to assess the components of each identity separately. However, during the interviews it became apparent that some interviewees, particularly David, attribute nonreligious reasons to their participation in religious practices. David clearly stated “I am proud of my Jewish heritage and that I am from Israel” and “being Israeli is my connection to Judaism”; this is the main reason for his sporadic visits at the synagogue. David attends the synagogue on high holidays since he feels that this is part of his culture; that is what Israelis do. As mentioned earlier, Natalie believes that since she was born and raised Jewish she needs to continue the tradition and it is not a matter of choice. Dima also mentioned the importance of heritage and how it should be passed to subsequent generations. Jewish history is fused with Jewish religion and vice versa. In fact, Jewish religion is part of Jewish history. Thus, even atheist Jews, such as David, engage in Jewish religious practices on their own terms. David made a few interesting comments during the interview pertaining to how most Jews (but not him) view institutional religion. To the question ‘do you consider yourself religious or spiritual?’ David responds “I am not religious at all, not in the way that it is considered to be religious”. David made an interesting observation which implies that religious orthodox Jews ‘appropriate’ the term religious. David implies that he is religious.
in his own sense, like Sheila Larson, a nurse who when asked by Robert Bellah about her religious practice declared that she does not attend church but listens to her own voice and called her own religion “Sheilaism” [sic] (Bellah et al. 1985: 221). The point here is that individuals may engage in a practice that is considered by most members of society to be a religious practice, and yet some individuals who engage in such practices attribute other meanings, cultural for example, to the same practice.

4.5. Conclusions

Religious practice varies greatly among the ‘ethno-Jews’; David is an atheist who implies that he is religious in a different way than the one prescribed by orthodox Judaism, while Yossi adheres to all Jewish laws as, in his view, these are god’s commands. Perhaps the fact that their introduction to Judaism took place in Israel, where Orthodox Judaism impacts all Jewish people regardless of their sets of beliefs, restricted their ability to consider the exploration of other streams of Judaism while in Canada. Growing up in Israel I can attest that in the first few years after I immigrated to Canada, I only visited orthodox synagogues for the high holidays; I did not attend conservative or reform synagogues since my opinion of them was that ‘they are not really Jewish’. It is interesting to note the power of a dogma to which I was conditioned for a major part of my life. Even though I had many disagreements with Orthodox Judaism I did not dare considering that there are other options of being Jewish. Coming from Israel I ‘knew’ that you could be either religious (Orthodox) or secular, but there wasn’t any other option in between. This is the same attitude that all the “ethno-Jews” demonstrate, including David.

The “ethno-Jews” demonstrates that one could be a cultural Jew like Dan or David, an ethnic Jew like Natalie, Anna and Dima, or a religious Jew like Yossi, or Ben. However, even within these subcategories there is a considerable difference in terms of religious practice. For example Ben considers himself a religious person, yet he does not follow all Jewish laws as Yossi does. Thus, the “ethno-Jews” are able to shape their practice with some degree of freedom. It is further worth remembering that most “ethno-Jews” attend the same synagogue, which is popular among many new immigrants. The rabbis here, some Israeli immigrants themselves, are aware of the different role that a
Canadian synagogue has in comparison to an Israeli synagogue. In comparison to an Israeli synagogue it is more entertaining as the rabbis attempt to lighten up the dogmatic service by providing a lecture about the weekly chapter of the bible while making references to current affairs.

The “ethno-Jews” turn to Orthodox Judaism in part since it is embedded in their memory. Hervieu-Léger’s (1994) example of the French Catholic youths that attend World Youth Day have some similarities to the “ethno-Jews”. The clergy at this Vancouver synagogue are aware that the “ethno-Jews” were raised to follow the Jewish holidays and to some extent, obey some religious laws. Now that the “ethno-Jews” are immigrants in a new setting, this synagogue provides them with a set of services that are not necessarily solely of religious nature (networking, a place that feels like home, Sunday social activities, etc.). The process of bringing the ‘ethno-Jews’ closer to Orthodox Judaism continues through the lectures that blend Jewish religious, ethnic and cultural motives that are meant to instil spirit of pride and shared identity among the congregants. In fact, these rabbis are reviving and recreating the religious ethnic and cultural memory of the congregants. Furthermore, it is important that the “ethno-Jews” feel that they have a choice and that they construct their own identity. In this regard, in contrast to the Israeli style of Orthodox Judaism, these rabbis are using a non-judgmental approach which makes the congregants feel that they do have freedom to choose their level of engagement with religious practice.

Overall, it should be noted that engagement with Jewish practices among the ‘ethno-Jews’ is far from being explained through spiritual and religious theories alone. Most ‘ethno-Jews’ celebrate Jewish holidays since they feel that it is part of their Israeli culture.
5. Chapter 5: Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

This study of Israeli immigrants to Greater Vancouver explored the reasons for which they engage in religious and spiritual activity as well as the meanings that are ascribed to these activities. It is important to note that the study participants are not forming a representative sample, and that is not my intention in this study. Rather this is an exploration of religious and spiritual practices among Israelis residing in Greater Vancouver. I examined several theories related to spirituality, religion and immigration as I attempted to find their applicability to the interviews and observations that I conducted. The findings suggest that there are many reasons for which the Jewish immigrants engage in religious or spiritual practices. In this final chapter I will summarize the main themes and findings in each chapter, discuss the findings of the overall study, outline the limitations of the study and suggest some areas for future research.

Chapter one provided an outline of the thesis. I discussed the questions that drew me to observe and study the religious and spiritual lives of Jewish immigrants from Israel. This chapter also presented the overarching questions that this study dealt with which are: What are the various spiritual and religious practices that these Jewish immigrants in Greater Vancouver engage with? And what are their reasons for engaging in these practices? In this chapter I outline the methodology and process of analysis used in this study.

In chapter two I reviewed the literature and theories pertaining to religion, spirituality, immigration and Judaism in order to subsequently determine their applicability for the study participants. The review reveals that determining what constitutes a religious or spiritual matter is quite contested as some scholars suggest that spiritual matters are secular in nature. However, it seems that the main differences between being religious and being spiritual is that spirituality denotes both a demonstration of agency in shaping one’s religio-spiritual practice as well as being
critical of institutionalized religion. The review further suggests that in postmodern Western society institutional religion is no longer viewed by many individuals as an overarching system that shapes and controls many aspects of life. Furthermore, in the postmodern era, attendance of religious institutions is generally in decline. According to Hervieu-Léger (2000), this is one of the reasons that our society is losing its ‘religious memory’. The review further provides theories of Jewish identity, some of which argue that Jewish religion is inseparable from Jewish identity; others claim that one can be a cultural Jew—a Jewish person who enjoys secular Jewish culture devoid of Jewish religion. In relation to immigration, the literature stresses that many immigrants, regardless of their level of religiosity, attend religious institutions as a means of expanding their social network and socializing with members of their ethnic group. This chapter ends with a review of literature pertaining to Israeli transnational immigrants and the ways in which they negotiate their identities in the receiving country. Since the study participants come from Israel, I decided to include this in the review as an alternative approach which will be further discussed in this concluding chapter.

In Chapter three I discussed the lives of the four seekers. My main objectives in this chapter were to allow the seekers to tell their stories of upbringing, immigration, and religious and/or spiritual lives, as well as to integrate the literature with the findings from my interviews and observations. Analysis of the different models of religion and spirituality in modern times helped to explain some of the reasons for which the seekers engage in their religio-spiritual practices. Indeed, the interviews and observations that I conducted are in accordance with the view that in postmodern Western society institutionalized religion generally ceases to be an overarching institution that affects most dimensions of individuals’ social life. The rising need to enhance one’s self identity promotes the production and performance of new religio-spiritual practices among some individuals. Furthermore, some of the study participants did seem to tap into their memories as they performed religious related practices (such as celebrating Jewish holidays) that were part of their childhood. Yet, the full meaning of the engagement of the interviewees in religio-spiritual practices is far from being explained by these theories alone. The theories that were interrogated may explain the reasoning for recent trends in religious and spiritual spheres, yet they do not provide adequate explanation for the meaning that is ascribed to these practices. Put simply, the theories that were
considered, (including theories that looked specifically at the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of immigrants) gloss over the transnational element in the lives of some immigrants, which may better explain the meaning ascribed to their practices. The impact of the continuing relations between immigrants and their sending country on their lives in their receiving countries is not considered in these theories. The seekers have talked, explicitly and implicitly, about their relationship with and longing for Israel. Some of them have moved between Canada and Israel several times and it seems that their practices, both Jewish and non-Jewish in nature, serve them as a means of negotiating their transnational identities.

Chapter four discussed the lives of the seven “ethno-Jews”, Jewish immigrants who have arrived from Israel. Similar to the objectives presented in chapter three, my main objectives in this chapter were to allow the “ethno-Jews” to tell their stories of upbringing, immigration, and religious and/or spiritual lives, as well as to interrogate the literature by means of my interviews and observations. Analysis of the different models of religion and spirituality in modern times did help to explain some of the reasons for which the “ethno-Jews” engage in their religio-spiritual practices. My main findings were that, regardless of their varying levels of religio-spiritual practices, “ethno-Jews” are proud of their Jewish and Israeli identity. Furthermore, the ostensibly religious practices of most “ethno-Jews” are mostly confined to celebrating Jewish holidays and, in some cases, eating kosher food. I find it interesting that even atheist “ethno-Jews” attend a synagogue of the Orthodox stream which is known to be the strictest of all streams in the Jewish faith. However, these findings echo Hervieu-Léger’s (2000) assertion that individuals tend to replicate their childhood religious practices. Since the “ethno-Jews” were only exposed to Orthodox Judaism while living in Israel, they do not attempt to explore other streams of Judaism. Similar to the seekers, all “ethno-Jews” mentioned, explicitly and implicitly, their strong connection to Israel. The interviews and observations further suggest that most “ethno-Jews” do not differentiate between Judaism and Israel. Rather they view their engagement in Jewish practices as Israeli related and they use their ethnic identity to bridge and reconcile their transnational identities.
5.1. Summary

The examination of the religious and spiritual approaches outlined in the review of the literature suggests that religion and spirituality, as defined by the participants of this study, have a role in the lives of some participants in this research. However, an examination of research pertaining to transnational immigrants better explains the meaning that the study participants ascribe to their religio-spiritual practices.

Regardless of the different sets of reasons that brought them to engage in spiritual and religious practices, these eleven individuals were guided by their memory when they made their choices. For example, an examination of the religious and spiritual practices of David and Ben reveals that Ben is committed to following many Jewish religious laws, while David observes the high holidays and rarely attends synagogue. Nevertheless, from a religious perspective, Ben and David were raised in different Israeli settings; Ben attended Orthodox synagogues regularly throughout his childhood, while David who was raised on a kibbutz had no religious experiences other than celebrating Jewish holidays, in a non-religious context, with other kibbutz members. Both David and Ben immigrated to Canada in their mid twenties and, like other immigrants who ponder their identity, they chose to preserve their culture because it provides them with a sense of being ‘at home’ while away from home. Based on her extensive research of immigrants’ religious institutions in the U.S., Ebaugh (2003: 230) notes that, regardless of their religiosity, immigrants also use these congregations in order to “reproduce and maintain their values, traditions, and customs”. Based on their ‘religious memory’ they return to their familiar routines. So Ben started attending an Orthodox synagogue frequently, and David kept celebrating major Jewish holidays and started attending an Orthodox synagogue mainly in pursuit of making social contacts with other Israelis. Their ‘religious memories’ were triggered as a response to the process of immigration. Ebaugh and Chafetz’s (2000) extensive research among religiously active immigrants to the United States from different faiths suggests that immigrants tend to link their homeland religion with their self identity, regardless of their level of adherence. By merging the research and theory of both scholars, I argue that Ben and David
re-enact their childhood religious and cultural habits respectively in a new setting since they wish to establish a familiar routine in a foreign setting.

Theories of transnational migration (that are offered as an alternative approach in the literature review) seem to better explain the meaning that the study participants ascribe to their religio-spiritual practices. The study participants are transnational migrants, and as such they maintain and develop their relations with the sending country, Israel. Indeed most interviewees have families and friends in Israel, they regularly follow Israeli news and they go to Israel for vacations and even for extended stays in some cases. An issue that kept surfacing throughout most interviews, explicitly or implicitly, is their relationship and longing for Israel. It is worth noting that their longing for Israel is not of a religious or spiritual nature. For example both Gila and David note that being Israeli is their connection to Judaism; celebration of Jewish holidays is the means through which they cultivate their relationships with Israel. When I asked Gila, ‘Is there anything which you do because you are Jewish?’, she replied that she does not attend a synagogue but her family is important to her and it is also important to her to go to Israel every few years for a visit. She further noted:

Now it has been five years since I have last been there; I’m way past due. I get so much energy from that. I am connected to the soil and earth of Israel. Some people you miss, some you don’t, but the connection to the earth and place is so unique.

Gila is torn between living in Canada and Israel. Her ‘Jewishness’ is expressed through love for her family and a unique connection to Israel. It seems that Gila’s religious and spiritual practices serve her as a means to deal with her life as a transnational migrant outside Israel—practicing yoga, meditating and celebrating Jewish holidays are activities that help her come to term with living outside of Israel.

Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004: 1010) argue that transnational migrants have two different ways of demonstrating their connection to their homeland: “Ways of being and “ways of belonging”. Ways of being are the practices and social interactions that migrants engage in but not necessarily identify with. Ways of belonging are those interactions and practices that they do identify with as they “combine action and awareness of the kind of identity that
action signifies” (ibid). David’s synagogue attendance signifies a way of being since he attends the synagogue but does not identify with its messages. On the other hand, Dima is fully aware of the message that he communicates when he wears a Magen David (Star of David) necklace and display Stickers of Israel’s flag on his car—I’m proud to be Jewish and Israeli; these actions signify a way of belonging. I would argue that all study participants, to some degree, are engaging in Jewish practices as a way of sorting their transnational identities. It is as if they were saying: “yes, I live in Canada, but I am an Israeli”. Perhaps the attendance at a predominantly transnational Israelis’ synagogue by the “ethno-Jews” provides the clearest demonstration of a way of being, as most study participants attend it for non-religious purposes. Israelis in diaspora are called yordim (in Hebrew, those who descend) and Israeli society and officials still make them feel shame and guilt for leaving Israel (Rebhun & Lev Ari 2010). In light of this, demonstrations of ways of being by the study participants may also be viewed as symbolic performances of individuals who feel constant pressured to remember their homeland.

The transnational approach argues that transnational immigrants are constantly reassessing their assumed obligations to both the sending and receiving countries as they “take actions, make decisions, and develop subjectivities and identities embedded in networks of relationships that connect them simultaneously to two…nations” (Basch et al. 1994: 7). Ironically, the Israeli migrants need to feel Israeli in order to be Canadian citizens. In this regard Yi-Fu Tuan (1984: 3) notes:

We all want to be in a place, oriented and accepted. The expression “he is nowhere” captures the bewilderment and pain of placelessness. We want to know our place. We want to know where we are, to be accepted by society for who we are, and to set up homes at a particular spot on earth so that we can come to know it intimately.

It should be noted that the participants in this study (like other transnational immigrants) chose to live in Canada, and perhaps knowing that they have the authority to decide where to live further complicates their attachment to their receiving country. Adopting Niezen’s (2004: 40) argument pertaining to
displacement, the Jewish practices of most participants could be viewed as a way of “reclamation and protection of distinct territories and ways of life”. Put simply, by observing some Jewish rituals, the study participants relive their lives as Israelis in Israel.

5.2. Limitations of the study

This study is mainly built from the interviews conducted with eleven study participants. Stanczak (2006: xviii) who conducted research on the spiritual lives of Americans of different faiths noted that this type of research “can be inspiring, challenging, and at times frustrating” since at times you may not be sure what is the feeling or experience that the interviewee is communicating. Throughout the interviews I have learned that as the interviewer I need to exercise sensitivity and care in asking questions and listening to the religious and spiritual experiences of the study participants. An intrinsic difficulty of this study stems from my need to grasp the meaning and importance that the study participants ascribe to their spiritual and religious activities. For example, some interviewees note that certain practices or dogmas have special meaning in their lives, yet they rarely perform or follow them. In such cases I had to ask more questions relating to the dogma or practice that they describe in order to understand its effect on their lives. However, this is an exploratory study and as such it mainly aims to expose a certain phenomenon that may deserve further attention. I encountered several challenges while conducting interviews and analyzing the data and literature. My original intention was to interview Jewish immigrants from a variety of source countries, yet all those who became study participants had lived in Israel before migrating to Canada. Thus, this study does not capture the experiences of Jewish immigrants to Greater Vancouver, but rather provides an account of the experiences of Israelis, including those who were born in former Soviet Union. I found that recruiting interviewees for this study was not an easy task since many people see their religious and spiritual lives as a private matter that should not be shared with a stranger, let alone a Jewish stranger from their ‘community’. I did meet a few people in different spiritual gatherings that were willing to take part in the study, but later chose to withdraw (before we set a time for interview). This is one of the main reasons that most of the interviewees were recruited through a snowball sampling. Another limitation of the study
is that some of the study participants attend, in varying frequencies, the same synagogue and this thereby limited my ability to provide analysis that included broader segments of Israeli immigrants in Greater Vancouver. Overall this study is exploratory and by no means are aims to suggest that the issues and analysis presented here applicable to all Israeli or Jewish immigrants residing in Greater Vancouver. However, I concur with Small’s (2009: 24) argument that single case studies may indicate “that a particular process, phenomenon...” or tendency exists.

5.3. Areas for future research

Throughout this exploratory study I encountered themes which I considered while analyzing my data. The review of the literature and analysis of the interviews and observations mostly examine religious and spiritual theories. Since I find that transnational and diasporic theories better explain the role and meaning of religion and spirituality in the lives of most study participants, I would suggest that future studies pertaining to transnational migrants might further examine the role of religion and spirituality in the construction of transnational identities in several ways.

This study demonstrates that a particular synagogue attracts many transnational Israeli migrants. I would suggest that a study of religious institutions of transnational migrants may provide valuable information regarding the ways in which such institutions impact other religious institutions in both sending and receiving countries. To what extent does globalization affect the flow of ideas and beliefs? What role do such institutions play in facilitating integration? Since Canada receives 250,000 immigrants per year it is important to understand the role that these religious institutions play in the lives of newcomers (particularly those from common source countries such as China and India).

Another study, which will require more time and funding, may track the ways in which transnational migrants affect religious ideas and institutions in the sending country. Are transnational migrants the ‘new missionaries’? What are the social and political implications of transnational migrants’ increasing involvement in both countries?

What is the impact of age on the experiences and actions of the study participants? A follow-up study of the participants in this study in twenty years from now
may provide information to this inquiry. Would these individuals still live in Canada? Would they move back to Israel? To what extent would they be impacted by the movement patterns of their offspring? Another perspective that my study does not capture is that of Israelis who are not interested in maintaining any ties with other Israelis. How do these individuals construct their identities? Do they maintain ties with Israel? What is the role of religion and spirituality in their lives?

If I were to pursue further study I would like to examine the ways in which feelings of longing and placelessness affect the mental health of transnational migrants. How do they cope with these feelings? What efforts are made by them, their community and health authorities to deal with such feelings? Why do they choose to stay in the receiving country?
References


Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (JRF). http://jrf.org/showres&rid=141


Appendices
Appendix A.

Preliminary interview guide

Do you have any questions before we begin?
Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
Where were you born? How long have you been living in Canada?
Are you involved in any organizations?
What kind of Jewish upbringing, if any, did you have?
What, if anything, do you consider to be an important aspect of Judaism? Why?
How important was being Jewish for you in your country of origin? How was being Jewish expressed in your life?
How important for you is it to be Jewish in Canada? (If less or more important) Why so? Can you tell me more about it?
How is being Jewish expressed in your life?
Do you have Jewish friends? (If answered ‘yes’ to last question) What types of activities do you and your Jewish friends engage in?
What does it mean to you to be a Jew?
Do you attend a synagogue? (If yes) How often?
Have you been involved with any other Jewish organizations?
Is being Jewish helping you to settle in Canada? How so?
What do you do in your leisure time?
Do you believe in God? Would you consider yourself as spiritual or religious? How do you nurture your soul?
Is there any other thing that you wish to communicate regarding this topic?
Thank you very much for your openness.
Appendix B.

Advertisement for recruiting potential interviewees

How do you nurture your soul?
Does spirituality or religion has a role in your life?
Would you like to share your experience?

A graduate sociology student from Simon Fraser University is conducting interviews with Jewish people who live in Greater Vancouver regarding the role of spirituality and/or religion in their lives. If you consider yourself spiritual or religious in a conventional or any alternative way, and you would like to share your views and experiences through a short interview, please contact Yuval Maduel by phone or email.

Further information can be obtained through email or phone. Interviews may be conducted in English or Hebrew.

Contact information
Yuval Maduel
Yma9@sfu.ca
604 971-4749
Appendix C.

A note on the author`s interest

I have spent much of my adult life actively seeking a religious or spiritual path that echoes my moral beliefs. I was born and raised in Israel to a Jewish family and my grandfather on my father’s side was an Orthodox Rabbi. As a child I used to attend a synagogue almost every Friday evening, however at the age of sixteen, when I started asking questions and pondered the validity of ‘the only truth’, my visits to the synagogue became less frequent. In my early twenties I traveled to East Asia and East Africa where I was exposed to the religious and spiritual practices of many different faiths. When it was possible I would inquire about the reasons and beliefs behind practices; this is how my interest in comparative religion began.

I immigrated to Canada fourteen years ago and I sporadically attended several synagogues in an attempt to develop my social network and feel ‘at home’. Eight years ago I was invited by a friend to attend a Kundalini yoga class that she was teaching; when the class ended I knew that I wanted it to be part of my life. Kundalini yoga is a form of yoga that is affiliated with the Sikh religion and as I became more involved with this practice I started attending early morning Sikh prayers. Throughout my involvement with Sikhism I pondered my Jewishness and identity; I was torn between following what I perceived, at that time, to be a true spiritual path and ‘my’ religion and identity. In some sense through my limited practice of Sikhism I was forced to face my relationship with Judaism. Who am I? Why is it important to me to be Jewish even though I don’t practice Judaism? Can I be Jewish and a Sikh?

In my undergraduate studies I pursued my interest in religions and I conducted a few quantitative and qualitative studies pertaining to religion and immigration. In an ethnographic study in 2007 I observed the ways in which members of the Vancouver chapter of 3HO Organization (Happy, Healthy, Holy) –Kundalini Yoga practitioners—organize various aspects of their lives in order to fit in the demanding requirements of daily yoga practice such as attending a two and a half hour daily yoga and meditation practice at 4am. Most interviewees (Caucasians with a Christian background) talked about their inner debates whether they should become Sikhs or just adopt the practice of yoga without the Sikh component; ethnic and self identity were common issues that were raised by the interviewees. Similarly, in a 2008 ethnographic study of young secular Jews who attend a Vancouver Orthodox synagogue I found that exploration of ethnic identity and self-identity were the main reasons for which the participants attended the synagogue. Furthermore, I conducted two quantitative studies that looked into the role of religiosity in social integration of immigrants to Canada. The findings of these studies demonstrated that higher levels of religiosity correspond with higher levels of integration. However, the databases that I worked with did not provide enough information to determine whether immigrants felt integrated within their own ethnic and religious groups or within broader Canadian society.

This study is an extension of my interest in the field of religion, spirituality and immigration. In a way this study is also self-examination of my own religious and spiritual practices as I share similar practices with some of the study participants. I find it interesting that some study participants have a display of Jewish artifacts and a Buddha shrine at the same room. How do they reconcile the differences between Judaism and Buddhism? I was quite surprised to see that most participants in a Hebrew chanting group are non-Jews. Considering my own practices I should not be surprised by these findings. However, these observations draw me toward an investigation of sociological literature on religion and spirituality in modern times, where I thought that I will find more information relating to the reasons for which immigrants engage in different spiritual and religious practices.