Do Adult Learners Who Engage in Torah Study as a Leisure Activity Report Higher Levels of Meaning in Life than Learners of General Enrichment Studies?

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Abstract

Aim. The aim of the research is to assess whether adult learners engaged in Torah/Bible studies report higher levels of psycho-social resources, specifically spirituality, meaning in life, hope, and social support, than learners who attend general enrichment courses, and whether psycho-social resources contribute to their meaning in life.

Methods. Participants were 234 men and women over age 55 who study regularly in their leisure time: 56 Torah students in the *hevruta* (communal learning) method, 50 Torah students who participated in frontal Torah lectures, and 128 adults who attended lectures on various enrichment subjects. Participants completed self-report questionnaires that included demographic information and characteristics of the course, evaluations of the learning experience, the Spiritual Health and Life-Orientation Measure, the Snyder Hope Questionnaire, the Multidimen-

sional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), and the PIL – Purpose in Life questionnaire.

Results. Torah and enrichment learners did not differ in meaning of life and hope. Torah learners reported a stronger learning experience, higher levels of transcendentality (an aspect of spirituality), and more social support from their peer group. For all learners, social support from the family was the strongest contributor to meaning in life, followed by hope and finally the communality aspect of spirituality.

Conclusions. Findings confirm the importance of the human need for relatedness in determining meaning and suggest that the social milieu in which the leisure activity is held may be more important for cultivating meaning in life than the discipline studied.

Keywords: adult learners, Torah study, leisure, meaning in life, enrichment studies, spirituality

INTRODUCTION

In western culture, leisure occupies a significant place in human life. At present, there are an abundance of leisure activities available to people. Leisure activities are characterised by choice rather than obligation. In addition, they involve pleasure and reflect one's personal motivation (Hayosh, 2018). The present study focuses on older adults who engage in Torah/Bible studies as a leisure activity. Torah studies inherently involve connecting with sacred and spiritual ideas and texts, exposure to ethical issues and opportunities for philosophical and religious contemplation. Such a setting begs the question of whether engaging in Torah/Bible studies is associated with higher levels of spirituality and meaning in life.

In the present study we focused on adult learners approaching retirement who attend courses at their leisure in public institutions that cater for older learners interested in learning as a leisure activity. One group of learners participated in Torah studies and the other studied other enrichment subjects. The study was based on several theoretical frameworks that suggest that leisure activities foster valuable psychological resources such as meaning, social support, and hope and develop positive emotions, thus increasing participants' well-being (Newman et al., 2014).

The aims of the study were twofold. First, to assess whether learners who engage in Torah/Bible studies report higher levels of meaning in life and spirituality as well as of other psycho-social resources, specifically hope, and social support, compared to other learners who attend general enrichment studies unrelated to spiritual ideas or texts. If such differences would be found this could be due, at least in part, to the differing content and focus of the various disciplines. Second, we aimed to explore the contribution of the various demographics and psycho-social resources to 'learners' level of meaning in life.

Torah Studies

On the whole Torah/Bible studies inherently involve connecting with sacred and spiritual ideas and texts, exposure to ethical issues and opportunities for philosophical and religious contemplation. The universal contents of the relation to the Other is a significant component, as exemplified in the writings of the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1981). Levinas' philosophy prioritised the issue of the Other and relates to one's responsibility towards the other person, an orientation that is linked to his intensive interpretation of the Talmud and scriptures (Epstein, 2001). Studies indicate that the population of Torah students in Israel has changed over the past few decades and that this population has become more diverse. One of the developments that indicate the change in the population of leisure learners is that, in addition to men, women too are studying Torah. In recent years several studies have been conducted on this topic (Elor, 1998; Feuchtwanger, 2011). Moreover, a shift is evident in the motivation underlying studies (Sheleg, 2010). At present, not only religious people study Torah as a religious precept, guided by the saying "And the study of the Torah is equal to them all" (Mishna, 2014, Tractate Pe'ah 1:1), but rather a wider and more diverse public is studying Torah by choice as a leisure activity, integrating interest, pleasure, inspiration, uplifting, and enrichment (Davidovitch & Soen, 2016). Studies show that the groups are diverse and characterised by a different "profile" of learners than in the past (Ben David, 2016). The "new" groups constitute a diverse sociocultural cross-section.

It is said that since the murder of Prime Minister Rabin in 1995, due to the fracturing and trauma experienced by Israeli society, a "revolution of Jewish renewal" is emerging (Sheleg, 2010), one that crosses sectors and genders, embracing traditional and other contents and study methods. This Jewish renewal (Ben David, 2016) is manifested among other things in the domain of Torah study, with a different time and place, teachers and students, nature of discourse and study methods. This encompasses a breach of the stigma whereupon Torah study necessarily takes place in a Yeshiva (Shenhav, 2001). The change is evident in the establishment of pluralist *batei midrash* (study centres), such as *Elul*, *Kolot*, *Alma*, *Bina*, where Torah is learned as a leisure activity, and an umbrella organisation called *Panim*, which unites 60 organisations engaged in studying Israeli Jewish culture. These study recentres gather together students from a wide social range.

From students in secular yeshivas in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, the circle of students has grown to include Nahal groups and study groups abroad (Ben David, 2016). The shared studies are part of dynamic identity processes taking place in Israel (Sheleg, 2010) and are challenging the traditional division into sectors (Shenhav, 2001) and particularly the dichotomous "religious/secular" distinction (Ben David, 2016). The question is whether the choice of Torah studies as a leisure activity is positively related to meaning in life, as perceived by older learners' pre-retirement.

Meaning in Life

Meaning in life is a philosophical term that relates to the reason and pur-
pose of existence in general and of human existence in particular (Vohs et
al., 2013). Viktor Frankl (1969, 1984), one of the prominent writers on this
subject, suggested that humans are motivated by a desire for meaning, that
is the need to find meaning and purpose in life. He viewed this need as
the primary motivational force in humans. Frankl characterised meaning as
something to be found rather than given. He wrote in his book *Man's Search
for Meaning* (Frankl, 1969) that when one has meaning he can bear difficulty
more easily. He claimed that if one fills his innermost recesses and finds
meaning in life in some external cause at which he can direct himself, this
will reveal his essence and most of his neuroses will be solved. Frankl saw
the frustration at the lack of meaning as a neurosis of the new era, due to
human socialisation and the dissolution of traditions and religion.

Terror management theory, which deals with the importance of grant-
ing meaning in life, contends that one has a basic psychological conflict
between the will to live and the knowledge that death is inevitable. This
conflict produces terror and, in order to overcome the terror, one needs
a life of value and meaning (Greenberg et al., 1986). The theory is based
on the work of anthropologist Ernest Becker (1973), who, in his book *The
Denial of Death*, claimed that people are aware of their inevitable death and
therefore require cultural structures to give their life value and meaning
that is not transient. Many empirical findings in this field indicate that
when people are aware of their mortality they become more protective of
their cultural values and self-esteem, and in this way moderate anxiety
(Greenberg et al., 1986).

Meaning is frequently emphasised in theories of well-being. Research-
ers claim that finding meaning in life has significant implications for the
will to live (Shmotkin & Shrira, 2012), that meaning in life has an important
role of moderating the negative effects of grave events in life by restruc-
turing and reappraisal, and that meaning in life can reinforce the indi-
vidual's wish to survive and improve his life and its quality (Seligman &
Csikszentmihalyi, 2014).

Meaning and Leisure Activities

Theoretical approaches to successful ageing suggest that, as people age and
become aware of the diminishing amount of time left to live, they seek out
emotionally meaningful engagements and relationships (Newman et al.,
2014). Important traditional sources of meaningfulness in life include the
domains of religion, work, and the family. However, as people approach
retirement and reside in an "empty nest," they may search for alternative or
additional means of obtaining meaning in life. Many of them can no longer
participate in the activities they engaged in earlier in life, and they must

select from a more modest number of possible options to continue engaging in meaningful activities (Martela, 2017).

Several venues for fostering meaning and purpose in life have been proposed throughout the years. One is participation in communal activities and sharing thoughts or feelings with another person or group of people, activities that may help develop the sense of community. A second key factor in fostering a global sense of meaning is by participating in meaningful leisure activities (Iwasaki, 2006). In the present study we focus on studying as a meaningful leisure activity.

The association between leisure activities and increased purpose in life may be explained by the theory proposed by Yoshitaka Iwasaki and Roger C. Mannell (2000), who defined leisure as a coping strategy. They proposed that undertaking leisure pursuits can help individuals cope with stress and improve well-being through three strategies: leisure mood enhancement (leisure as a means of promoting positive mood), leisure companionship (leisure as a shared activity which promotes social support), and leisure palliative coping (leisure as a distractor from current problems). An additional correlate of meaning and purpose in life is spirituality, which involves "the search for meaning, purpose, and morally fulfilling relation with self, other people, the encompassing universe, and ultimate reality, however a person understands it" (Furman et al., 2008, p. 2).

Spirituality and Meaning In Life

Spirituality is a collective name for a variety of terms such as purpose, soul, reward, retribution, karma, fate, God, or supreme power. Recently Nasreen Lalani (2020) suggested that spirituality is an elusive concept and that the existing definitions and meanings of spirituality are too broad, abstract, and context dependent. In most studies, spirituality is defined through the main concept of the meaning and goals that one sets for oneself (Chiu et al., 2004). Several researchers focused on defining spirituality in terms of relations: relations with oneself and relations with others (Bowden, 1998). Others include the desire to reach self-actualisation (Fryback, 1993), and satisfaction with life (Mickley et al., 1992); desire for self-comprehension and inner balance (Astedt-Kurki, 1995); and developing new perspectives regarding oneself, others, and a supreme power; a developmental process of expanding the boundaries of the self-concept (Chiu et al., 2000).

Ruth Beckmann Murray and Judith Zentner (1989) defined spirituality as a dimension that exists in any person who strives to be in harmony with the universe, to find answers to queries regarding eternity and infinity, and who aims for meaning and mission, inspiration and wonder. Roger D. Fallot (2007) defined spirituality as an experience that contains elements of eternity, sanctity, and/or supreme values. Moreover, spirituality includes

a special awareness or conception of life that strives for unity, integration, and wholeness.

Pninit Russo-Netzer and Nachum ageing (2015) claimed that in the current global and digital post-modern era, the disintegration of tradition and religious settings, and the absence of ethical anchors are generating uncertainty, instability, alienation, and loss of meaning.

Spirituality is considered an important correlate of successful ageing (Hodge et al., 2010; Park et al., 2012). Spiritual beliefs have been found to play a vital role in helping older adults traverse life challenges. Spirituality in older adults is also associated with health and wellness and an increased coping ability (Hodge et al., 2010). Moreover, studies have indicated a positive relationship between spirituality and gerotranscendence, especially in relation to the cosmic dimension (Braam et al., 2006). Gerotranscendence is the:

> shift from focusing on materialistic and practical needs to developing a broader cosmic view, rethinking about time and space, life and death, and the meaning of self, and aspiring to elevate their faith and spirituality to a higher plane through a simpler lifestyle. (Tornstam, 2005, p. 15)

HOPE

Hope is considered a protective factor that contributes to improving quality of life, both directly and indirectly via anxiety reduction (Mardhiyah et al., 2020). A common definition of hope is the aspiration for a better world and the perceived capability to derive pathways to achieve desired goals and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways (Snyder et al., 1991). It has been suggested that hope is a process that occurs throughout life by coping with the various developmental tasks (Groopman, 2006). It is continuous and occurs both consciously and unconsciously, manifested in life transitions (Levi, 2013).

Judaism has a positive attitude to hope. In his classical article "Hope" Karl Menninger says that despite tribulations Jews are people of hope; they clung to the expectation that the Messiah would come and the world would get better (Menninger, 1959). The Mishna and Talmud contain deep insights regarding the importance of hope in one's life (Hopper, 2001). Christianity too relates to hope as a virtue, similar to charity and faith (Hopper, 2001), and perceives hope as a motivational force that leads to investing constructive efforts and sound expectations rather than unsound ones (Menninger, 1959).

Eric Erikson's stages of psychosocial development theory is one of the prominent models of the development of hope and its effects on behaviour. According to Erikson (1950), the first task of the "developing self" is to resolve the conflict between the sense of trust and the sense of mistrust. Successful resolution of this conflict instils in one not only trust in himself and others but rather also hope (Miller & Thoresen, 2003).

Studies note a negative association between hope and anxiety and between hope and social alienation and a positive association between hope and coping; Hope is meaningful for processes of resilience and recovery (Levi, 2013). Mature hope is realistic and independent, recognizing and accepting life's difficulties, limitations, and finiteness (Frankl, 1984).

Torah studies as a leisure activity may instil hope in learners. Hope is part of the Israeli national story. Students learn contents that involve departure and renewal, destruction and revival and hope is part of finding a solution for conflict and trauma (Herman, 1992). Prayer is an expression of hope, and hope was chosen as the theme of the Israeli anthem. Moreover, the Talmud, the Mishna, and the Jewish oral traditions were written after the destruction of the Second Temple. The Temple was the religious centre of the Jewish people. It was the destination of thrice-yearly pilgrimages, the place of the central authority, a location of sacrificial offerings. All this ended with the destruction of the temple and then post-trauma (Herman, 1992; Schottenbauer et al., 2008). Then, scholars appeared and wrote the Mishna and Talmud. At that time, established prayers were written instead of the temple and the sacrifices. Their very inscription in writing might have been an expression of hope and faith in continued life and in the good. Learning these contents might instil hope in the heart of those learning Torah as a leisure activity. Accordingly, the present study explored whether Torah students report higher levels of hope than students of general enrichment studies, and furthermore, whether hope as a psychological resource might be linked to meaning in life.

Aim of the Study

Since Torah/Bible studies inherently involve connecting with sacred and spiritual contents and exposure to interpersonal dilemmas and ethical issues, it therefore begs the question whether people who engage in this activity report higher levels of spirituality, hope and meaning in life compared to learners engaged in general enrichment studies.

The current study explores this question among a group of Torah learners with comparison to learners of general enrichment studies. The study relates to Torah study in its wide meaning, and therefore includes the study of foundational Jewish texts in addition to the Old Testament.

There were two modes of Torah/Bible studying: face-to-face lectures and *hevruta* (communal studies) mode. This is a classical Talmudic method of studying in a collaborative group consisting of 2-5 people who learn together). Students read the text studied to their peers and share their understanding, questions, and queries with them (Teomim-Ben Menachem, 2013). Studying in a *hevruta* creates discourse, portrays controversy, and encourages thinking out loud. The many voices and the text-based controversies may enrich and inspire the students (Goodman, 2017; Teomim-

Ben Menachem, 2013). The enrichment study group attended face-to-face lectures.

Research Hypotheses

H1: Differences would be found between Torah learners (including both those studying in the *hevruta* method and those studying face-to-face) and the group of those learning general enrichment studies, in the measures of hope, social support, spirituality, meaning in life and evaluations of personal experience of learning. The levels of these variables will be higher among Torah learners than among the control group.

H2: Significant positive correlations would be found between levels of hope, social support, spirituality and personal experience of learning, and the levels of meaning in life.

Method

Participants

The research participants were 234 respondents divided into three groups: a group of Torah students in the *hevruta* method, consisting of 56 respondents (23.9% of the research respondents), a group of Torah students who were studying face-to-face by participating in lectures, consisting of 50 respondents (21.4% of the research respondents), and a control group consisting of 128 respondents in enrichment courses who were studying face-to-face by participating in lectures, constituting 54.7% of all respondents.

c^2 analyses found significant differences between the groups in the characteristics of gender, marital status, and religiosity. The percentage of men in the two Torah student groups was larger than that of women, while in the enrichment group only about one quarter were men. Most of the respondents were married. Moreover, the percentage of the married respondents in the group of face-to-face Torah students was one third more than in the two other groups.

A significant difference was found between the groups in religiosity as well, where in the two Torah student groups the percentage of religious respondents was much higher than in the enrichment studies group.

The mean age of all participants was fairly high, above 55, with no significant differences between the groups. Moreover, the mean years of education in all groups were fairly high, more than 16 years, with no significant differences between the groups. No significant difference was found between the groups for financial status. Most of the respondents defined their financial status as medium. With regard to the time invested in studies, analyses of variance found a significant difference only with regard to

study hours per week. The number of study hours of *hevruta* Torah students was higher than among the group of enrichment students (p < .01).

Research Measures

Sociodemographic Questionnaire
This questionnaire was compiled for the current study in order to explore several personal characteristics of the respondents. Age was measured as a continuous variable. The categorical personal characteristics included: gender, marital status, religiosity, and socioeconomic status.

Type and Manner of Studies
The questionnaire included questions related to the topic studied in one's leisure time, the location of the studies, the weekly and annual number of hours devoted to studying the subject, encounters with the other students beyond the formal setting, the manner of studies (via *hevruta* or face-to-face), and whether the participant's family members study with him or her.

Personal Experience of Learning
Evaluation of the study experience included four questions compiled for the present study concerning satisfaction with studies, contribution of studies, extent of efforts, and the importance of learning the subject studied. Evaluations were reported on 5-point scales, from 1 (very little) to 5 (very much); the higher the score the higher the evaluation of efforts invested in studies.

Spirituality
Spiritualty was assessed by the Spiritual Health and Life-Orientation Measure (SHALOM) developed by John Fisher (2010). This scale is comprised of 20 items that pertain to four domains, five items for each domain: Personal (e.g., sense of identity), Communal (e.g., forgiveness towards others), Environmental (e.g., connection with nature), and Transcendental (e.g., feeling close to God).

The validity of the questionnaire was explored by calculating correlations between the scores on Shalom questionnaire and questionnaires measuring satisfaction with life, will to live, general well-being, and health perceptions. Significant positive correlations were found. In addition, correlations between the questionnaire and questionnaires on depression and death anxiety were explored and significant negative correlations were found.

The SHALOM questionnaire was translated into Hebrew and validated (Elhai et al., 2018). Internal consistency found for the four dimensions ranged from adequate to excellent ($0.72 < \alpha < 0.96$). Respondents evaluate how each item reflects their experience most of the time, ranging from 1

(*very little*) to 5 (*very much*). High scores indicate a high level of spirituality. In the current study, in order to explore whether the questionnaire's items can be divided into four factors also verified in the Hebrew translation by Rinat Lifshitz et al. (2018), a principal component factor analysis was conducted. In this analysis, only three factors were found to explain 69.88% of the variance.

The first factor includes 10 items that explain 28.72% of the variance. Their common element is Communality. The second factor includes five items that explain another 22.89% of the variance. Their common element is Transcendentality. The third factor includes five items as well, explaining 18.27%. Their common element is Connection with nature. A reliability test of the measures found high reliability: Transcendentality = α = .97, Connection with nature = α = .90, Communality – α = .91. In light of these results, three measures of spirituality were formed, according to the mean of the items in each factor. The higher the mean score the higher the level of spirituality.

Perceived Social Support
Perceived social support was measured by the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), developed by Gregory Zimet et al., (1988). The scale examines one's subjective perception of the social support at his disposal from three sources: family, friends, and significant others. Respondents estimate their degree of consent with each of 12 statements on a 7-point Likert scale, from 1 (*strongly incompatible*) to 7 (*strongly compatible*).

The scale was translated into Hebrew by Rivka Statman (1995). For the present study, in order to assess the perceived social support received from the group of learners and manifested in the sense of belonging to this group, four statements were added to the scale, as described previously (Alkan et al., 2022). In order to explore whether the added items would constitute a new factor of social support, a principal component factor analysis was conducted on the 16 items. This analysis found three factors, as described in the above study. One factor refers to the support of family and close acquaintances, the second to support by peer learners, and the third to the support of friends. High scores indicate high levels of perceived support. When examining the reliability of the three factors, high reliability was found (family: α = .93; group: α = .95; friends: α = .92).

Hope
Hope was measured by the Hope Questionnaire, developed by Charles Richard Snyder et al., (1991). The questionnaire is based on the Hope Model devised by Snyder, (1991), whereby hope is defined as the perceived capacity to derive pathways to desired goals and motivate oneself to use those pathways via agency thinking. The questionnaire consists of 12 items. The measurement range of each item is from 1 (*absolutely incorrect*) to 8 (*absolutely correct*). Snyder et al. (1991) report Cronbach's alpha reliability in a

range of .74 – .78 on the overall Hope Questionnaire. The questionnaire was translated into Hebrew by Ayelet Dubrov (2002). A high reliability coefficient was found, Cronbach's a = .90 (Levi, 2008). The current study also found high reliability, a = .84. For the purpose of the present study, the mean of the questionnaire's items was calculated, such that the higher the score the higher the sense of hope.

Meaning of Life

Meaning of life was defined in this study as one's sense of meaning, purpose, and mission (Hill et al., 2015) and was assessed by the Purpose in Life (PIL) questionnaire developed by James Crumbaugh and Leonard Maholick (1964). The questionnaire consists of 20 items on a 7-point Likert scale. Sample items: "I am usually bored", "Life for me always seems routine and unstimulating". Replies were given on scales of 1-7, with 1 representing low meaning and 7 high meaning. The current study found high reliability, α = .92. The PIL score is the mean of the questionnaire's items, such that the higher the score the higher the level of meaning in life.

Procedure

The study was approved by the Brookdale Institute and Kolot, as well as by the Institutional Ethics Committee at Ariel University. Three hundred and fifty questionnaires were distributed between June 2019 to October 2020. Respondents from lecture-style Torah studies and general enrichment courses were recruited from the Brookdale Institute at Bar-Ilan University. At this institute, people study various academic courses in their leisure time. Torah learners studying in the *hevruta* method were recruited from Kolot, a pluralist organization that operates Torah study groups in Israel. All participants signed an informed consent form. The questionnaires were collected personally by the researcher during classes in these settings. Students in Brookdale and Kolot who preferred to complete the questionnaire via e-mail received a link to the questionnaires. None of the respondents were rejected by the researcher. Of the 350 questionnaires distributed, 43 were not completed in full and were therefore not included in the study, and 73 questionnaires were not completed at all. The response rate was 67%.

Statistical Analyses

In order to explore the differences between the three groups of learners (*hevruta* Torah students, face-to-face Torah students, and students in enrichment studies) in the categorical personal characteristics (such as groups of learners, gender), c² analyses were conducted. In order to explore the differences in continuous personal characteristics (age, years of schooling,

weekly study hours, socio-economic status), one-way analyses of variance were conducted.

To explore the research hypothesis related to the differences between the three study groups in the measures of support, spirituality, hope, evaluation of the study experiences and meaning, 3×2 (Group × Gender) multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) were conducted. Notably, when checking the distribution of the continuous research measures, normal distribution was found in all measures. To explore the correlations between the continuous research variables, Pearson correlations were calculated.

A hierarchical regression was conducted to explore the contribution of the personal characteristics (gender, number of hours, groups, socio-economic status), dimensions of spirituality, dimensions of social support, hope and evaluations of study experience (perceived time invested, significance of studies, satisfaction with studies, and the contribution of studies) to explaining the variance in meaning in life. The regression included six steps and included the variables found to be associated with meaning in life.

RESULTS

Differences between Groups

According to the first hypothesis, the means for hope and meaning in life in the two groups of Torah learners would be higher than the means of the enrichment group. In the MANOVA analyses no significant differences were found between the research groups, $F_{(4, 454)}$ = 2.01, p > .05, and no significant difference was found between the women and men, $F(2, 227)$ = .04, p > .05. Also, no significant Group × Gender interaction was found, $F(4, 454)$ = 1.41, p > .05.

The results of MANOVA analyses for each of the four evaluations separately were reported previously (Alkan et al., 2022) and are summarised here. These analyses found significant differences between Torah students and the enrichment studies group for three of the four evaluations: perceived importance of studies, satisfaction, and the contribution of studies. In all analyses, the evaluations were significantly higher among the Torah learners than among the enrichment studies learners. Only the evaluation of efforts was similar in both groups. Since the findings in the previous section were insignificant – they should not be presented in a table.

Dimensions of Spirituality

To test the research hypothesis regarding differences between the research groups in the three dimensions of spirituality and between male and female learners in these measures, a 3×2 (Group × Gender) MANOVA analysis was conducted. This analysis found a significant group effect, that is differences between the three research groups, $F(6,452)$ = 13.48, p < .001, Eta^2 = .15. Moreover, a significant gender effect indicated differences between

male and female learners, $F(3, 226) = 3.53$, $p < .01$, $Eta^2 = .05$. No significant Group × Gender interaction was found, $F(6, 452) = .51$, $p > .05$.

In the analysis of variance conducted for each of the three spirituality measures, a significant difference was found only for Transcendentality. In Scheffé's post hoc comparison analyses, a significant difference was found between the two Torah learner groups and the face-to-face enrichment group. The means for Transcendentality were higher in the Torah learner groups than in the enrichment group. This finding confirms the research hypothesis only with regard to Transcendentality. In the MANOVA, a difference was also found between the male and female learners. Furthermore, a significant difference was found between men and women in two dimensions: Connection with nature and Communality. Among the women learners, the means in the two measures were higher than among the men.

Social Support

According to the first hypothesis, support by one's family, by the group of learners, and by friends would be higher among the two Torah study groups than in the face-to-face enrichment group. As described by Ora Alkan et al. (2022), a significant group effect was found, $F(6, 452) = 2.33$, $p < .05$, $Eta^2 = .03$. In addition, a significant gender effect was found, $F(6, 452) = 2.77$, $p < .05$, $Eta^2 = .03$. However, no significant Group × Gender interaction was found.

The MANOVA for each measure separately found a significant difference only for the measure of support by the group of learners. Among the *hevruta* Torah students, support was highest, followed by support among the face-to-face Torah students. The mean of the enrichment group was lower than that of the two Torah groups. Post hoc Scheffé analyses found a significant difference between the *hevruta* Torah students and the face-to-face Torah students and the enrichment group. These findings partially confirm the first research hypothesis whereby the social support among Torah learners would be greater than in the enrichment groups. Further specific details of the support analysis can be found in Alkan et al. (2022).

Predicting Meaning in Life

A hierarchical regression analysis was performed to assess the contribution of the research variables to meaning of life. The first step included background variables (gender, group, number of hours, socioeconomic status); the second step included the three social support measures (family, peer learners, friends). The third step included the three spirituality dimensions (Transcendentality, Connection with nature, and Communality). The fourth step = invested effort, significance, and contribution; the fifth = satisfaction and hope; the sixth step included meaning.

Table 1

Hierarchical regression for explaining the variance in meaning in life (N = 229)

Step	Measures	B	β	R^2	DR^2
1	Gender	06.-	05.	***11.	***11.
	Groups	14.-	**21.-		
	Financial status	28.	***28.		
2	Family support	16.	**24.	***21.	***10.
	Support by peer learners	03.-	06.-		
	Support by friends	06.	11.		
3	Connection with nature	07.-	10.-	***23.	02.
	Transcendentality	05.	11.		
	Communality	18.	15.		
4.	Invested effort	07.		***26.	03.
	Significance	05.-			
	Contribution	19.			
5	Satisfaction	36.	***30.	***36.	***10.
	Hope	15.	**20.		
6	Meaning	34.	***39.	***43.	***07.
7	Gender × meaning	10.	*15.	***45.	**02.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

The table indicates that the first step, in which the variables of gender, research groups, and financial status were entered, showed a significant contribution of 11% to explaining the variance. Of the three characteristics entered in this step, the variables of groups and of financial status were found to have a significant contribution. Regarding the two research groups, the ß coefficient was negative, such that the quality of life of Torah learners is higher than that of the control group. Regarding the contribution of financial status, the ß coefficient is positive, such that the higher the financial status the better the quality of life.

In the second step, the three support measures were entered. The contribution of these measures to explaining the variance was 10%. Of the three support measures, significant contribution was found only for the measure of family support. Thus, the more supportive the family the higher the quality of life.

In the third step, where the three measures of spirituality were entered in the regression analysis, as well as in the fourth step where the measures related to studies were entered, i.e., effort invested in studies, significance of studies, and contribution of studies, no significant contribution was found to explaining the variance in quality of life.

In the fifth step, the measures of satisfaction with studies and hope for the future were entered and a contribution of 10% to explaining the variance was found. The contribution of the two variables was found to be significant, as the ß coefficient of the two measures is significant. Thus, the

greater the satisfaction and the more hope for the future, the higher the quality of life.

In the sixth step, where the measure of meaning was entered, a significant contribution of 7% was found to explaining the variance. Thus, the higher the perceived meaning of studies, the better the quality of life. Notably, adding the measure of meaning led to a drop in the ß coefficients of satisfaction and of hope for the future. The ß coefficient of satisfaction, ß = .30, dropped to ß = .22. This drop was found to be significant, $Z = 5.86$, $p < .001$. In addition, a drop was also found in the ß coefficient of hope, from ß = .20 to ß = .06. This drop too was found to be significant, $Z = 5.86$, $p < .001$. These findings indicate that life meaning mediates between satisfaction and hope, and quality of life. Hence, the more satisfaction and the more hope, the more life meaning, and when the latter is higher the quality of life is higher.

In all, the variables included in the analysis explained 45% of the variance in meaning in life. Interestingly, the discipline studied (Torah vs. enrichment studies) did not contribute to predicting meaning in life. Among the spirituality factors, only communality contributed significantly and positively to meaning in life. Satisfaction and hope contributed 10% while the perceived amount of effort invested, and the importance of studies added only a little to the explained variance of meaning. Thus, the two most important contributors to meaning were communality (a spirituality dimension) and hope.

Conclusion

Differences Between the Groups

One of the surprising findings in this study is that, in contrast to the expectation of uncovering significant differences between Torah learners and general enrichment learners in the levels of all psycho-social resources, in fact no differences were found between the groups in the levels of meaning in life and of hope. Moreover, of the three dimensions of spirituality, only the level of Transcendentality was found to be significantly higher among Torah learners than among other learners.

The difference in Transcendentality is to be expected, as the absolute majority of Torah learners reported being religious and the items measuring Transcendentality involve feeling close to and united with God, for instance Oneness with God, Feeling close to God. Therefore, it is only to be expected that the Transcendentality dimension of spirituality would be higher among Torah learners than among those studying enrichment courses, of whom the absolute majority were secular.

Although it may be tempting to characterize religious Torah learners as having high levels of spirituality, it should be pointed out that Transcendentality was the only spirituality dimension in which differences were found between Torah learners and other learners.

Few other differences were found between the groups in partial aspects of spirituality and social support. Regarding social support, according to the first hypothesis support by one's family, by peer learners, and by friends would be higher among the two Torah study groups than in the enrichment course group. The statistical comparison for each of the three measures found a significant difference only for the measure of support by peers, found to be higher among Torah learners than among the face-to-face enrichment courses group. This difference may be related to two factors. First, one of the two Torah groups (the *hevruta*) invested significantly more time in learning than all other learners, which could have led to more opportunities for social connections with peers compared to the other groups. Second, the methods of Torah learning encourage intense intellectual and social interactions between learners, which could have fostered a higher sense of support by peers than among learners in regular face-to-face enrichment lectures.

Significant differences between Torah students and the enrichment studies group were found for three of the four evaluations of the study experience: perceived importance of studies, satisfaction with studies, and the contribution of studies. These evaluations were significantly higher among the Torah learners than among the comparison learners. The evaluations of efforts invested were similar in both groups. It therefore appears that Torah learners attach more importance to their leaning experience than do other learners.

Religious learners (who were the majority of Torah learners) may attach more importance to engaging in leisure studies than do secular learners and may even regard them as part and parcel of their cultural background and religious practices. This possibility should be further explored in future studies. Yet, despite these group differences, the personal experience of learning was not predictive of meaning in life, which suggests that Torah learning may have been part or continuation of a life-long habit, rather than a new intellectual or spiritual experience. This explanation too should be further explored in future studies.

Finally, the women in the study were found to be more spiritual than the men on two dimensions: Connection with nature and Communality. Although we did not formulate specific hypotheses, it is to be expected that the social sphere would be more engaging and meaningful for women than men, based on numerous studies on gender differences in agency and communion (Hsu et al., 2021) and therefore this finding is not surprising. Further studies can delve more deeply into the reasons for gender differences in the dimensions of spirituality.

Notably, women constituted about one third of the Torah 'learners' group. This fact reflects a shift in the population of leisure Torah learners in recent years. Namely, at present women too are learning Torah. In recent years, this topic has been a focus of research attention (Elor, 1998; Feuchtwanger, 2011). Yeshayahu Leibowitz referred to this shift when he

said: "Distancing the study of Torah from women is the denial of a basic right, her 'Jewishness' becomes inferior to that of men… this situation is unbearable…" (Leibowitz, 1982 p. 25). Women's entrance into the world of Torah study reflects a lengthy process of development and socialisation, where women are entering areas previously characterised by a distinctly male majority, from which they had been barred (Blum-Kulka et al., 2008; Teomim-Ben Menachem, 2013).

Predicting Meaning in Life

In contrast to the small number of differences found between the groups of learners in psycho-social resources, meaningful contributions were found for three psycho-social resources (spirituality, hope and social support) when researching what predicts the level of meaning in life among all research participants. Interesting patterns of findings emerged from the hierarchical regression analysis,

First, the variable of social support constituted a significant predictor of meaning in life and it adds to the explained variance no less than 21%, much more than any other variable in this study. Nonetheless, only family support contributed significantly to meaning, and not the support of friends or learner peers. Since the group of learners is at an age associated with retirement, this finding probably involved the support of one's spouse or children. The highly significant contribution of social support to the level of meaning in life reflects *one of the basic tenets of self-determination theory (SDT), i.e., that relatedness (also called Connection) is one of the three basic needs of the individual; that people need a sense of belonging* and connectedness with others (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Second, spirituality contributed on the whole about 8% to the explained variance in meaning in life, where Communality was the *only* dimension of spirituality found to be a significant predictor in the regression. In contrast, neither the level of Transcendentality related to closeness to God nor the level of connection with nature contributed significantly to the level of meaning in life. Thus, with regard to spirituality, the research findings show that the level of meaning in life is predicted by the importance of the tangible human context, i.e., relationships and attitudes to others and to myself as an individual in society, rather than by one's abstract attitude to God or nature.

The finding whereby only the Communality dimension of spirituality contributes significantly to the level of meaning in life may reflect the importance adult learners attach to communion, one of the two main perspectives of social perception. "Communion refers to a person's desire to closely relate to and cooperate and merge with others" (Bakan, 1966. p. 38). Andrea E. Abele and Bogdan Wojciszke (2014) have suggested that communion-oriented individuals experience fulfilment through their relationships with others and their sense of belonging, in qualities such as benevolence, cooperativeness, and empathy, which express caring for others. It

is therefore possible that a learner who perceives spirituality in the sense of communality and connecting to others is more engaged in caring and giving than individuals who view spirituality as a connection with God or with nature.

In addition to these findings regarding psycho-social resources, level of hope too contributed significantly as expected to meaning in life (16%). Finally, with regard to learner evaluation of the experience of learning, it is notable that none of the variables related to evaluating the contribution, meaning, and importance of studies contributed significantly to predicting meaning in life. Finally, although about half the sample was religious and engaged in Torah/Bible studies, neither the level of religiosity nor the study subject predicted the level of meaning in life.

To summarize the findings regarding predicting meaning in life, the current study found that of all the psycho-social resources, only the social dimension, which emphasizes the importance of maintaining equitable and cooperative relations between people in society, was found to contribute to determining the level of perceived meaning in life. The findings concerning the supreme importance of the social connection to meaning in life above other factors, and the fact that the disciplines studied did not predict meaning in life, suggests that the social milieu in which the leisure activity is held may be more important than the actual discipline studied.

Cognitive Value

The results highlighted the similarity in the type and amount of psycho-social resources (rather than differences) among adult learners of Torah and enrichment studies. Surprisingly, neither the level of religiosity nor the study subject predicted meaning in life.

The main theoretical importance of the research findings is the understanding that the most meaningful contribution of learning as a leisure activity to meaning in life is the social encounter, the human connection, rather than the subject studied. The more one's studies raise hope and promote a positive experience by virtue of studying the greater is the contribution to meaning in life, regardless of the subject studied or the study method. This conclusion should be verified by further research. The findings that the Communal domain of spirituality and family social support were the most significant contributors to meaning in life, support the importance of the human need for relatedness and connection.

The social milieu in which the leisure activity is held as well as the perceived level of support given by the family may contribute more to meaning in life than the subject studied as a leisure activity or any of the background variables, including religiosity and gender.

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