Guest Editors' Introduction

• • • *New Age Culture in Israel*

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On 17 June 2014, in the heart of the Etzion Bloc (Gush Etzion) in the West Bank, the site of the abduction of three Israeli teens by Palestinian terrorists the week before, an unusual event took place. Several Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian peace activists, a few rabbis, and a Muslim Sufi sheikh gathered in order to pray for the safe return of the kidnapped youths. The group prayed both in Hebrew and Arabic, reciting psalms and Quran-based Muslim prayers. "Our hearts are torn at this moment, and my heart goes out the mothers of these children," said Sheikh Ibrahim Abu Al-Hawa, before reciting the first chapter of the Quran, the Fatiha. He continued, "There is a wall between our two nations, and we hope to remove the wall separating the hearts of humans" (Miller 2014). He concluded his speech by proclaiming "God is One" in Arabic and Hebrew, followed by the young Rabbi Yossi Froman (son of the late Rabbi Menachem Froman), who stood beside him.

A few days later, after the discovery of the bodies of the murdered teenagers, Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh, the far rightwing spiritual leader of the radical, anti-establishment young settlers in Israel's West Bank, often referred to as the "Hilltop Youth," (*noar ha'g'va'ot*) published on his website a call for revenge:

It is customary to say on Jews who were murdered "May God avenge their blood." Yet, like in all other matters, we should not wait only for celestial intervention. Rather we must think how to act as the emissaries of God, who execute his will ... From the Jewish perspective, revenge is not a venting of anger, but rather, the uprightness of justice – the revival of the murdered blood, and together with it the whole nation. It sends a message that this is not tolerated by us. Revenge is an essential part of our love to the murdered and their families. (Ginsburgh 2014)

These two reactions to the tragic events present very different political and ideological positions. Nonetheless, they are both related to contemporary New Age culture in Israel. It is probably not surprising that New Agers take part in interfaith and neo-Sufi activities, and that the interfaith dialogue between Sufi sheikhs and Neo-Hasidic rabbis is embedded in a characteristically New Age belief in spiritual universal harmony (Bram, in this volume). It is more surprising that distinct New Age themes appear also in the teaching of Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh and in the alternative life style of his “hilltop youth” followers (Schwartzmann 2013; Tamari in this volume).

The New Age contexts of the Jewish-Sufi interfaith dialogue and of Ginsburgh’s radical theology, discussed in the present volume, indicate the political nature of contemporary New Age culture in Israel. In a society as highly politicized as Israel’s, New Agers find it difficult to ignore political questions and to avoid taking part in political and social activities. From an analytical perspective, the spirituality-oriented interfaith dialogue, as well as the integration of New Age themes within a radical right-wing ideology, challenge conventional understandings regarding “the subjective turn”—“a turn away from life lived in terms of external or ‘objective’ roles, duties or obligations and a turn towards life lived by reference to one’s own subjective experiences” (Heelas et al. 2005: 2)—and the consequent depoliticization of New Age and contemporary spiritualities.

Besides Ginsburgh and his followers, and the participants in spiritual interfaith dialogues, many other Israelis take part in New Age-related activities. Many New Age movements, ideologies, and practices have been imported into Israel since the last decades of the twentieth century, and many local adaptations and variations of New Age culture have been created here. This special issue of *Israel Studies Review*, which is devoted to New Age culture in Israel, aims to explore some of the local adaptations of New Age culture and examine their political and social significance.

The Concept of ‘New Age’ and Its Political Aspects

The term New Age is used, both by scholars and by the larger public, to refer to a variety of interconnected social practices and cultural formations which became widespread, mostly in Western and Westernized countries, since the late twentieth century. The New Age is not a unified movement, but rather a segmented network of groups, social institutions, and cultural practices without central authority or leadership or even a set of common teachings (Arweck 2002; Lyon 1993; Sutcliff 2003; York 1995).

While it is difficult to offer a definition of ‘New Age’, scholars have observed several characteristics that are typical to it. One of them, which

lends its name to these cultural phenomena, is the expectation or experience of a profound transformation on both a cosmic and a personal level. This transformation is perceived as the dawning of a New Age, identified frequently as the Age of Aquarius (Hanegraaff 1998). As Gordon Melton observed: "The New Age movement can be defined by its primal experience of transformation. New Agers have either experienced or are diligently seeking a profound personal transformation from an old, unacceptable life to a new, exciting future" (Melton et al. 1990: XIII). The expected cosmic transformation to a New Age is primarily a transformation of human consciousness. This perception is related to the belief which, according to Wouter Hanegraaff (1998), is one of the central notions of the New Age, that we create our own reality. This is part of a holistic and monistic world view held by New Age movements, which reject the dualism between God and nature, spirit and matter.

New Age expectations and experience of consciousness transformation and the perception of the mind's control over reality are related to the psychological orientation of New Age, and to its sacralization of the self. As Hanegraaff observes, New Age offers a "Psychologization of religion and sacralization of psychology" (ibid.: 224). Paul Heelas (1996:2) suggests that the defining characteristic of the New Age is "self-spirituality." According to him, New Agers believe that "the initial task is to make contact with the spirituality which lies within the person" (Heelas 1996: 2). Another central theme in New Age culture is healing—both spiritual and physical. As Catherine Albanese (1988: 75) suggests, "[T]he discourse and related action promoted by the New Age have emerged as a new healing religion."

A key term used by New Agers to define their identity and practices is "spirituality." In contrast to its meaning in previous generations as the essence of religion, spirituality is perceived today as standing in opposition to established religion and not regarded as necessarily opposed to secular culture (Huss 2014). It is common for New Agers to declare themselves to be 'spiritual, but not religious'. Hence, scholars and practitioners sometimes prefer the appellation of "contemporary spiritualities" to that of New Age (Fedele and Knibbe 2013; Fuller 2001; Wuthnow 1998).

New Age culture is a global phenomenon. Its origins are Europe and America, and it is especially prevalent in the West. Yet, New Age movements and practices are found in many cultures and societies around the globe. Although many New Age practices, ideas, and texts retain their global hue, there are also many local variations (Horie 2013). Israel provides a very interesting case study of the globalization of New Age culture. As a Westernized culture with close economic, social, and cultural contacts to Europe and especially to the United States, Israel has easily adopted many forms of New Age and contemporary spiritual culture. Yet

as a country with a strong Jewish identity, a large Muslim minority, and diverse immigrant populations from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, Israeli culture offers many forms of local appropriations of New Age culture. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the left/right and secular/religious divides of Israeli society also produce specific local characteristics of Israeli New Age culture.

As a highly politicized society, Israel provides an opportunity to examine the political aspects and the significance of New Age culture. New Age and contemporary spirituality are often perceived as detached from the political realm and as eschewing social activism. Indeed, New Age practitioners often declare their disdain for social and political action and describe their stance as apolitical. As Heelas observes:

Perfection, it is maintained, cannot be found by tinkering with what we are by virtue of socialization. Neither can it be found by conventional (political, etc.) attempts at social engineering ... The inner realm, and the inner realm alone, is held to serve as the source of authentic vitality, creativity, love, tranquility, wisdom, power, authority and all those other qualities which are held to comprise a perfect life. (1996: 18)

Nonetheless, New Age spirituality, including its claim to be politically neutral, is in no way disconnected from the political arena. As a social and cultural construct, New Age cannot be detached from the larger power structures in which it is embedded: class hierarchies, economic ideologies, gender power structures, and politics of ethnic and national identities. New Agers take part in social and political activities, and New Age themes and practices are prevalent in various contemporary political and ideological movements. Furthermore, New Age values and ideas, especially the belief that the inner realm is the starting point for social (and cosmic) transformation, has political import. The idea that the self is the source of vitality, creativity, and power can validate existing political and social power structures (including those of the radical right) but may also offer alternative ways for social and political action. The two ethnographic descriptions opening this introduction exemplify this claim.

Besides issues of gender and power (Fedele and Knibbe 2013) scholars have especially noted the close relation between New Age spirituality and capitalistic and neoliberal ideologies (Gauthier and Martikainen 2013; Taira 2009). Some scholars disparage New Age as embodying capitalistic consumerism and regard contemporary spirituality as an expression of neoliberal ideology. Kimberly Lau's (2000: 2) book, *New Age Capitalism: Making Money East of Eden*, discusses the "serious cultural and political consequences of New Age capitalism for a democratic society." Carrette and King (2005: 2) attempt "to uncover what amounts to a silent takeover

of 'the religious' by contemporary capitalist ideologies by means of the increasingly popular discourse of spirituality" and seek "to challenge the contemporary use of this concept as a means of reflecting and supporting social and economic policies geared towards the neoliberal ideals of privatization and corporation" (see also Gauthier and Martikainen 2013).

Indeed, New Age has emerged in the context of Western, globalized, consumer culture and expresses the cultural logic of late capitalism. Contemporary spirituality and neoliberal ideology share ideological commonalities (such as individualism, entrepreneurism, and freedom of choice) as well as a significant social overlap. Yet, we argue that the relationship between the New Age and neoliberalism is complex and that New Age should not be seen only as enforcing and promoting late-capitalist ideologies.

Scholars have shown that New Age spirituality emerged in the context of the 1960s counter-cultural movements and share their criticism of capitalistic consumerism (Hanegraaff 1998; Hedges and Beckford 2012). Although New Age has become part of Western mainstream culture in the last few decades, it still maintains some of its counter-cultural character (Heelas 1996; Höllinger 2004; cf. Sutcliffe 2003). Moreover, New Age culture has ideological and practical affinity with new social movements such as the feminist movement and green organizations (Finley 1991; Höllinger 2004). Hence, some scholars maintain that contemporary spirituality not only enhances neoliberal and capitalistic principles, but also offers alternative ways to subvert and resist such ideologies (Lynch 2007).

Israel offers an interesting opportunity to examine the political and social aspects of New Age culture. New Age is prevalent mostly in middle-class, urban, secular sectors of Israeli society and is often linked with neoliberal ideologies. Nonetheless, New Age practices and ideas are prevalent also in other Israeli sectors and have been appropriated into a variety of different ideologies, from the secular left to the religious right.

From New Religious Movements to New Age Culture in Israel

The emergence of New Age culture in Israel in the late 1990s is rooted in the new religious movements (NRMs) that appeared here in the early 1970s. This included not only well-known NRMs that emerged in the West since the 1950s, such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISCKON) and Scientology, but also movements such as anthroposophy, theosophy, and Jehovah's Witnesses dating back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Beit-Hallahmi 1992). The growth of NRMs in Israel was remarkable. If the number of members of NRMs in

Israel was about 250 in 1972, it grew to be more than 10 times that size a decade later (Cohen and Grunau 1972). Historian of religion Yaacov Ariel (2010) includes in this growth not only non-Jewish NRMs but also Jewish movements, among them the *Baal Teshuva* movement (return to Jewish tradition), the settlers' movement (*Gush Emunim*), and Christian-Jewish movements such as Messianic Jews.

In Israel, as in other Western countries, the rise of NRMs aroused a wave of public panic and, concomitantly, a strong anti-cult movement (Beit-Hallahmi 1992; Cavaglion 2008; Ruah-Midbar and Klin-Oron 2013; Zaidman-Dvir and Sharot 1992). The peak of this wave was expressed in the report on "cults" by the Interministerial Committee for the Examination of the Cult Phenomenon ("New Groups") in Israel, also known as the Tassa-Glazer Report, published in 1987 (Ruah-Midbar and Klin-Oron 2013; Tassa-Glazer 1987).

By ten years after the publication of this report, Israelis' keen interest in alternative religions and spiritualities had expanded and deepened through a growing engagement with New Age culture. The end of the 1990s witnessed the rapid proliferation of various expressions of New Age culture. Many Israelis today partake in New Age related activities, such as alternative medicine treatment methods (Fadlon 2012; Keshet 2010; Shuval et al. 2012), human potential workshops (Malchior and Sharot 2010), and channeling (Klin-Oron 2013). Festivals celebrating New Age culture are attended by thousands (Simchai 2009; Tavory 2007; Tavory and Goodman 2009), and New Age stores offer books, merchandise, and specialized magazines, as well as sponsor events that introduce a variety of New Age practices (Zaidman 2007). To these activities one may add the growing numbers of Israelis practicing various Eastern and indigenous techniques such as Buddhist (mainly Vipassana) meditation (Loss 2010), yoga (Rosen 2008), tai chi and neo-shamanism (Ybleberg 2007), and neo-paganism (Feraro in this volume). It is estimated that there are currently hundreds of local New Age groups in Israel; the number of people who relate to or participate in New Age activities or rituals has been estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands, out of a total population of about seven million (Ruah-Midbar and Zaidman 2013).

Moreover, New Age ethos, symbols, and even practices have found their way into Jewish cultural and theological forms, active both outside and inside mainstream Orthodoxy. Some of these forms are the result of intentional attempts to integrate Jewish tradition with New Age spirituality. Such is the case of the Jewish Renewal communities influenced by the North American Jewish Renewal Movement (Magid 2006; Werczberger 2011; Weissler 2006), and mind-body techniques, among them Hebrew shamanism and Jewish yoga (Rothenberg 2006a; 2006b). Other

formulations declare themselves as wholly Jewish, yet display in their creed a disposition toward New Age spirituality. The Neo-kabbalistic groups, including the Kabbalah Center and Bnei-Baruch, led by the successors of Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag, are examples of this type of Jewish New Age. These groups offer a universal New-Agey/spiritual interpretation of kabbalistic doctrines and practices (Huss 2007; Myers 2007).

Concurrently, one may also point to New Age themes and practices in the rhetoric of the young Orthodox settlers in the West Bank, especially those groups known as the hilltop youth (Steinhardt 2010) and in the teaching of one of the major spiritual leaders the hilltop youth, the Chabad Hasid Rabbi Yitzchak Ginzburg mentioned above (Fischer 2007; Schwartzmann 2013; Tamari in this volume). New Age themes and practices can also be found in elements of the neo-Bratslav Hassidic movement (Persico in this volume). On the other end of the Jewish/non-Jewish New Age continuum are the secular Israeli New Agers who emphasize their non-Jewish spiritual beliefs and yet display some sort of engagement with Jewish texts, myths, and symbols (Klin-Oron and Ruah-Midbar 2010).

New Age phenomena have not experienced the Israeli public opposition that the NRMs have encountered. In fact, scholars have noted that New Age culture has gradually permeated into mainstream Israeli culture (Ruach-Midbar and Zaidman 2013). As discussed above, the New Age operates within the framework of consumer culture. The New Age festivals which usually take place during public holidays and attract tens of thousands of participants (Simchai 2009; Tavory 2007; Tavory and Goodman 2009) have become part of the leisure culture of the Israeli secular middle class (Kaplan and Werczberger forthcoming), and New Age books have been on bestseller lists. The prevalence of New Age elements in mainstream advertising suggests that the general public is willing to purchase products with New Age associations (Ruah-Midbar and Zaidman 2013).

Moreover, New Age ideas and practices have found a place in typical mainstream institutions such as the Israeli public medical services, which have seen a tremendous growth in the incorporation of complementary and alternative medicine (Fadlon 2012; Shuval et al. 2012), and the public education system, which has recently started to include activities such as yoga and other Oriental spiritual practices (Drori 2006). Recently, the establishment of a B.A. program for Mysticism and Spiritualities at Zefat Academic College marks the entrance of New Age culture into Israeli academia. Prior to the opening of this program, a series of conferences on New Age and contemporary spiritualities was held annually at Haifa University.

How can we make sense of the momentous success of New Age culture in Israel in recent years? The narratives for the rise of New Age in Israel may be roughly divided into two parts: the global and the glocal. From a

purely global perspective, the fact that New Age in Israel displays similar characteristics to those of Western New Age culture is dependent on the globalization of Israel and its integration within Western consumer and postmodern culture (Ram 2008). The emergence and evolution of New Age culture in Israel and elsewhere in the final decades of the twentieth century should be understood in the context of the restructuring of late capitalism, the emergence of a network global society, and the postmodern mode of cultural production (Huss 2007).

Several scholars offer socio-historical localized explanations of the rise of New Age culture in Israel. One of the earliest accounts was offered by Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi. In his psychosocial hypothesis, NRMs, New Age spirituality, return to the fold (to Jewish tradition), and even psychotherapy are all a part of the attempt of Israelis to find personal salvation in times of the collective calamity that followed the 1973 (Yom Kippur) War and the security crises that ensued.

Another explanation, also focusing on the 1973 War as the watershed moment of Israeli society, is offered by Ariel (2013), who stresses the impact of the crisis of secularity on the emergence of NRMs in Israel. Until the 1970s, modern secular Zionist ideology offered meaning to people's lives and efforts and provided an interpretation of Jewish history that equated the State of Israel with the ultimate redemption of the Jews. Since the 1970s a series of security and social crises, among them the war(s) in Lebanon, the never-ending Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and more, have led Israelis to lose their confidence in the secular Zionist nation-building project, and more widely in modernist-rationalistic values. Consequently, more and more Israelis are drawn to non-rationalistic mystical religious solutions, such as Chabad Hasidism and the movement to return to tradition, radical religious Zionism and the settlers' movement, North-African saint veneration, and various non-Jewish options, as well as NRMs and New Age spirituality (Ariel 2013).

A sociological perspective is offered by scholars including Tavory and Goodman (2009) and Klin-Oron (2012). This perspective argues that the success of New Age spirituality in Israel may be explained by the transition of Israeli society from the collectivist-hegemonic ethos to a multi-sectorial and individualist one. According to this thesis, until the 1970s the dominant ethos of Israeli society was collectivist-nationalistic. Somewhere between 1973 and Yitzhak Rabin's assassination in 1995, this ethos went through a significant transition. The national collective disintegrated, and Israeli society moved on to an individualist, capitalist, and consumerist ethos, favoring smaller communities and competitive sectors (Tavory and Goodman 2009). New Age spirituality, with its theological stress on the individual, his or her welfare, and self-realization, is the epitome of this transition.

Research on New Age Culture in Israel

From the various accounts and scholarly works cited above, it is obvious that New Age spiritualities have managed to attract the attention of Israeli scholars. Since 2005, a number of such academic works have been published and several research groups and conferences convened. The first to be published were PhD dissertations that explored Israeli New Age culture from theological and anthropological perspectives (Keshet 2005; Ruah-Midbar 2007; Simchai 2005). While Ruah-Midbar's work offered a comprehensive mapping of the conceptual network of the New Age, Simchai's and Keshet's accounts offered an ethnographic 'on the ground' perspective, stressing the micro-social processes involved in the actual making of New Age culture in Israel.

About the same time that these dissertations appeared, the first edited volume on New Age culture was published. This pioneering volume, edited by Iddo Tavory (2007), assembled papers on a variety of New Age practices available in Israel, among them neo-shamanism, rainbow gatherings, New Age festivals, and holistic medicine. Interestingly, although the papers utilized different theoretical perspectives, all but one were based on ethnographic methodology. Some of these works matured into full-fledged monographs (Simchai 2009; Keshet 2010), and others were published in peer-reviewed journals (e.g., Tavory and Goodman 2009). This tendency continued with the publication of more dissertations based on anthropological field work (Klin-Oron 2011; Werczberger 2011). Exceptions to this propensity are the studies focusing on Jewish forms of New Age, such as New Age kabbalah and Jewish meditation (Huss 2007; Persico 2013; Ruah-Midbar 2007).

At about this time New Age studies in Israel branched out into two main directions: the relationship of New Age culture with the hegemonic, mainstream culture, and Jewish adaptations of New Age spiritualities. The first attempts to delineate the interrelations between the local socio-cultural context out of which Israeli New Age culture has emerged and the global New Age culture (Ruah-Midbar and Zaidman 2013; Tavory and Goodman 2009). The second focuses on the Jewish religious context and the specific amalgamation of New Age with the Jewish tradition, including aspects such as Jewish meditation, Jewish New Age communities and identities, and other "Jew Age" (Ruah Midbar 2010) cultural forms (Huss 2007; Persico 2013, 2014; Werczberger 2011, 2014).

The Research Group on Political Aspects of New Age Culture and This Volume

It is in this context that we convened our research group on the political aspects of New Age culture in Israel at the Van Leer Jerusalem institute,

aiming to uncover some of the political aspects that underlie all New Age endeavors, be they overtly Jewish or non-Jewish. The research group, which convened between 2011 and 2012, examined the social contexts and political aspects of a variety of contemporary spiritual groups and New Age practices in Israel. The group itself and the articles that emerged from its activity, collected in this special issue of the *Israel Studies Review*, aim to highlight the ways Israeli New Age practices and institutions are shaped both by global social processes and local political situations, and the ways Israeli New Agers respond, participate in, and conceptualize contemporary political issues. The investigation of the phenomenon of Israeli New Age from these social and political perspectives seeks to contribute to the understanding of contemporary Israeli culture and its New Age aspects, as well as to a better understanding of the political aspects of New Age as a global cultural formation

This volume is based on papers given in the framework of the research group and in the conference that concluded its activity, held at the Jerusalem Van-Leer Institute in May 2012. It examines a wide variety of New Age-related movements and themes in various sectors of Israeli society. The researchers address a number of questions relating to the political aspects of New Age practices and adaptations in contemporary Israel, both of a non-Jewish and Jewish (orthodox) nature.

Dalit Simchai's article, "Ethno-national Identity and the New Age World View in Israel" examines the identity of secular Israelis as expressed by activists in major publishing houses of New Age journals in Israel and in one of the largest New Age festivals. She shows that most of the Israeli New Agers hold mainstream values and preserve most of the hegemonic Israeli worldview concerning the centrality of ethno-nationalism. Notwithstanding this, she shows that there is a marginal group within the Israeli New Age milieu that expresses alternative ideas and practices.

Adam Klin-Oron's study, "The End Begins in Me: New Forms of Political Action in Israeli Channeling," examines the possibility of new forms of political action, looking at Israeli channels who are mostly members of Israel's secular middle and upper class. By examining their eschatological beliefs and practices, he demonstrates an avoidance of traditional, group-oriented political action and an embrace of alternative, spiritual action performed individually. This is linked to Israel's shift to a neo-liberal economy and culture, where self-accountability becomes the norm. Moving beyond the claim that New Age, and especially channeling, is a hyper-individualistic and narcissistic religion, Klin-Oron argues that it also offers new forms of social groups and political action.

Shai Feraro's "Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: The Shaping of a Community-Building Discourse among Israeli Pagans" focuses on the

small Israeli New Age Neo-Pagan community, whose members belong to similar social strata. He focuses on questions of organization and of religious-political rights in the discussions of Israeli modern-day Pagans, and the complexities of identifying oneself as a (Jewish-born) Pagan in Israel, which is defined as the nation state of the Jewish people.

Other articles in this volume investigate New Age themes and practices among Jewish orthodox circles. In his "The Place of Politics: The Notion of Consciousness in Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh's Political Thought," Assaf Tamari examines the political significance of the idea of consciousness change in the thought of Rabbi Yizchak Ginsburgh, a Chabad Hasid, who is a key figure in both anti-statist extreme settler groups and the current New Age Hasidic revival. Tamari highlights the implications of according primacy to consciousness change in political thought, and proposes to read Rabbi Ginsburgh's connection of the political to consciousness within the context of liberal individualism.

Tomer Persico, in "*Hitbodedut* for a New Age: Adaptation of Practices among the Followers of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav," examines the New Age adaptation of a central Hasidic practice within contemporary neo-Bratslav circles. He analyzes the changes and adaptations made to the Hasidic practice of *Hitbodedut* by Rabbi Nachman's current popularizers in the context of New Age and contemporary spirituality's quest for personal and inner spiritual transformation and development. Persico addresses the socio-political significance of the novel interpretation to Bratslav *Hitbodedut*, and situates it within the framework of capitalist commodification of spiritual paths and ideas.

Finally, Chen Bram, in his study "Spirituality under the Shadow of the Conflict: Sufi Circles in Israel" concentrates on the "new" Sufi spirituality, mainly in Israeli Jewish society but also in local Muslim "renewed" Sufi brotherhoods, and on the interaction between these two groups. Bram focuses on the role of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in these Sufi circles and shows that although new spirituality is often described as emphasizing an apolitical approach, the evolving Sufi "field" in Israel is an example of a spiritual and social dynamic that cannot detach itself from the conflict. Moreover, he argues that the very emergence of Sufi circles in Israel is closely connected to the conflict.

Bram's study is emblematic of the wider claim we make in this issue. While New Age culture may be proclaimed as apolitical by its adherents or as a narcissistic, consumerist inward-turn by its critics, in reality it is never divorced from its socio-political and economic context. New Age plays a part in local identity politics as well as in inter-religious and national conflicts, and its ideologies and practices carry social and political import. While the different studies in this issue begin to touch upon these matters,

we call for further examination, in both the Israeli and wider contexts. More theoretical and analytical work on these issues is needed, as well as localized empirically-based studies from a variety of perspectives and disciplines. We hope that this volume will stimulate further research of New Age culture in Israel and its political and social aspects.

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