

# Religious Meaning-Making at the Community Level: The Forced Relocation From the Gaza Strip

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The purpose of the current study was to describe the process of religious coping in a religious community that underwent a forced relocation. Whereas previous work on meaning-making processes has looked at individuals, we sought to understand what happens to the process of religious coping when an entire community experiences a shared stressful event. Using Park's (2005) model of religion as a meaning-making framework, we analyzed open-ended narratives of 230 former residents of Gush Katif who wrote about the ways in which they coped with their relocation, 8 to 10 months after it took place. The primary finding was that participants referred to the impact of the relocation on their religious beliefs and referred to it not only as individuals but also, and perhaps mostly, as members of a community. Analyzing the content of these answers revealed four pathways of religious coping: resilient (no change in religious belief), strengthening of belief, weakening of belief, and open crisis. The findings suggest that in collective events, and especially in communities, meaning-making processes take place at both individual and collective levels. We discuss the findings in light of existing theories of religious coping.

*Keywords:* collective trauma, meaning-making, religious coping, forced relocation

One of the common definitions of religion conceptualizes it as “a search for significance in ways related to the sacred” (Pargament, 1997, p. 32). It is often characterized as the prime example of a belief system that provides ways to understand suffering and loss (Kotarba, 1983) and serves as an individual's core schema, informing beliefs about the self, the world, and their interaction (McIntosh, 1995). It provides an understanding of both mundane and extraordinary occurrences (Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003).

The study of the associations between religious beliefs and coping with stressful and traumatic events has grown rapidly in the last decade. A recent review found that, in most of the studies, religious belief was associated with stress symptoms following traumatic events (Chen & Koenig, 2006). However, the direction of the association was less clear. Several studies reported positive associations between religion and posttraumatic stress symptoms (Martz, 2004; Witvliet, Phipps, Feldman, & Beckham, 2004), whereas others documented negative associations (Lee & Waters, 2003; Krejci et al., 2004). Regardless of the type of association, most of this literature has focused on religion as a meaning-making resource at the individual level (e.g., Oman & Thoresen, 2005).

The current study explored the pathways by which religion shapes the coping processes of people exposed to a collective trauma, in the context of their membership in a religious community. This idea was examined in the aftermath of a forced relocation of whole Jewish communities in the year 2005, from Gush

Katif in the Gaza Strip to other areas in Israel. The theoretical base for the current study stems from the meaning-making coping model (Park, 2005). This model has been employed in different stressful and traumatic contexts such as bereavement (Park, 2005), coping with cancer (Park et al., 2008), and coping with war-related trauma (Larner & Blow, 2011). However, these studies looked at the process only in the context of individual events.

## Religion and the Meaning-Making Process at the Individual Level

According to the meaning-making coping model, people understand reality and give meaning to their lives as guided to do so by their global beliefs and goals. Park (2005) describes these two components. Global beliefs are the basic internal cognitive structures that individuals construct about the nature of the world. These structures guide people throughout life by influencing their fundamental ways of construing reality and by structuring their global goals. Global goals are the basic internal representations of desired outcomes that motivate people in their lives (Park, 2005, p. 709). Individuals who encounter a potentially stressful event appraise its meaning (i.e., “Why has this happened?”). They then determine the extent to which the specific appraised meaning diverges from their global meaning system of beliefs (i.e., “How different is the meaning of the event from my beliefs?”). The extent of the discrepancy determines the level of distress that the event may provoke. The processes by which people reduce this discrepancy involve changing the appraised meaning of the situation, changing their global beliefs and goals, or both. According to the model, religion plays a role in the repertoire of initial appraised meanings that people attach to events, to the extent to which this appraised meaning diverges from their global meaning system, and in supplying resources and coping strategies that can reduce their distress (Park, 2005).

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Research indicates that religion commonly influences the appraised meanings of stressors (Pargament, 1997) either via the attachment of positive meaning and the identification of subsequent benefits (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989) or by offering avenues for reattribution. For example, people often come to see the stressful event as the will of a loving or purposeful God, even if it is a God who is inscrutable and beyond human understanding (Park & Cohen, 1992).

When events are too traumatic, an extreme discrepancy between appraised events and earlier and global perceptions arises, and individuals are unable to bring the reappraised meaning into line with preexisting beliefs and goals. Thus, making meaning of such events can involve changing one's fundamental philosophical, religious, or existential belief systems, or construing drastically altered goal hierarchies (Lehman et al., 1993). More specifically, meaning-making following traumatic events may involve changes in global beliefs about the world or about the self, such as coming to view God as less powerful (Kushner, 1989), or ceasing to believe in the existence of God, or being unable to know or understand the things that happen in the world (Pargament, 1997).

### Religion and the Meaning-Making Process Following Collective Traumas

Several researchers have claimed that it is important to consider not only the idiosyncratic meaning systems of individuals but also the religious and nonreligious collective world views of the relevant groups (Beck, 1999; Durkheim, 1964; Eidelson et al., 2003; Moscovici, 1988; Silberman, 2005; Thompson & Fine, 1999; Triandis, 1989). Religion was long ago identified as social capital (Durkheim, 1964). According to Durkheim, religion is the individual's way of becoming recognizable within an established society. Hardin and Higgins (1996) claim that these collective meaning systems compose the "shared reality" of a group and may play an essential role in defining the group's essence and identity (Bar-Tal, 2000). According to Silberman (2005), these collective meaning systems enable groups and group members to interpret shared experiences. Such experiences include past and current relations with other groups and attach shared and culturally acceptable meanings to events.

Despite the rich theoretical discussion of collective meaning systems, there seem to be very few studies regarding the role played by religion in the aftermath of a collective trauma (Niaz, 2006; Jervis & the AI-SUPERFPF Team, 2008). One such study, however (Niaz, 2006), described the overwhelming displays of gratitude to God by survivors of an earthquake in Pakistan. Instead of becoming resentful or losing hope, these survivors sought refuge in God, religion, and faith. They asked God for help and, at the same time, were thankful to Him for the fact that they were still alive. They saw themselves as being better off than the thousands around them.

### The Relocation of Communities From Gush Katif

Jewish Settlement in Gush Katif began after 1967, when Israel conquered the Gaza Strip. Eight thousand individuals, most of them Orthodox Jews, took up residence in 17 settlements; many of them moved there for ideological reasons, in order to inhabit all

parts of what they considered to be the Jewish nation. In August 2005, however, as part of Israel's unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip, these individuals were forced to leave Gush Katif, and their homes were demolished.

Examining the religious coping process of these individuals within the broader context of their being part of a community is justified on several bases. First, despite changes in Israeli society, it is still conceived of as a collectivist society (Sagy, Orr, Bar-On, & Awwad, 2001), and religious Jews have an even stronger collectivist orientation than do secular Jews (Sagy, Orr, & Bar-On, 1999). Several scholars suggest that religions can be differentiated from one another according to their location on the individualistic–collectivistic continuum (Hill, 1999; Sagy et al., 1999). Collectivistic religious cultures such as Judaism value social connections as an integral element of religious life, and group affiliations are seen as important. In Judaism, individuals are seen as fundamentally connected with each other and their communities (Cohen & Hill, 2007). Based on these characteristics it is important to see how this collectivist orientation holds up during times of stress and crisis.

Second, the ideology typifying most of the Gush Katif settlements was based on leading a communal life, with a strong emphasis on the collective (Schnell & Mishal, 2005). In addition, because Gush Katif was located on the periphery of Israel and very far from the mainland, relationships between community members became a primary source of support and affiliation. Finally, as the relocation was experienced by entire communities at the same time, it created a unique situation in which religious personal meanings were mixed with broader meanings related to the community.

The main purpose of the research was to gain a better understanding of the evacuees' coping experiences under the unique circumstances created by their forced relocation. For this reason we used a qualitative methodology, enabling participants to subjectively describe how they coped in their own terms. Because religious coping came up as the primary and almost sole coping strategy, we focus in the current article on the ways religion played a role in the meaning-making processes of the relocated communities from the Gaza Strip, both at the individual and community levels.

## Method

### Sample and Data Collection

This study is part of a larger study on the adaptation of the residents following the relocation from Gush Katif ( $N = 269$  residents). The current sample consisted of 230 residents from the total sample, who supplied the narratives that are used in the current article. Almost two-thirds (63%) of the participants were women, possibly due to the fact that the women were the ones at home when interviewers went door-to-door seeking participants.

The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 71 years ( $M = 35.5$ ,  $SD = 12.17$ ), and the average duration of time they lived in Gush Katif was 16.3 years ( $SD = 7.7$ ). The majority of participants (85.5%) were born in Israel, 73.6% were married, 76.6% were

Modern Orthodox<sup>1</sup>, 8.3% were ultra-Orthodox, and 15.1% were nonreligious or traditional. Fifty-five percent of the participants reported a below-average monthly income (i.e., the average income per family in Israel), 29.6% an above-average monthly income, and 15.2% an around-average monthly income.

## Procedure

Data was collected by trained research assistants, 8 to 10 months following the relocation. The sample was a targeted one: Research assistants visited the four temporary housing sites to which the majority of evacuees had moved. More than half of the sample (57.1%) was living in the large temporary dwelling area, 29.4% in caravans in a smaller dwelling area, 8.9% in hotels, and 4.6% in apartments they had rented for themselves.

This geographical distribution of the study participants was similar in ratio to the geographical distribution of the entire relocated community (“Gush Katif evacuees,” 2006). At each site, research assistants approached participants’ houses and explained that the subject of the study was the evacuees’ adjustment following the relocation. Contact was made with 360 relocated residents, of whom 269 agreed to participate, out of which 230 supplied narratives. The most frequent reasons cited for refusal to participate were being too busy due to the search for new jobs, or a lack of interest in participating. Participants received research questionnaires to be filled out at their convenience. All participants gave their informed consent upon distribution of the questionnaires, and questionnaires were collected a few days later. Participation was voluntary, and participants did not receive any incentives.

## Measures

**Qualitative questionnaire.** Participants answered an open-ended questionnaire in which they were asked three questions:

1. What are the main changes you have experienced as a result of the relocation?
2. In what ways do you think the relocation will affect your future life?
3. How do you understand the event and why it happened?

Each participant wrote his or her answers in the space provided. All materials were written and analyzed in Hebrew, and citations were translated for the purpose of the current article by a professional dual-language (Hebrew–English) translator. When in doubt, the translator discussed the options with the authors until agreement was reached. In a few cases, we decided to keep the original Hebrew wording, for lack of adequate translation.

**Sociodemographic characteristics.** Questions were posed regarding gender, age, family status, religious belief, education, and length of time having lived in Gush Katif.

## Data Analysis

Analysis of the narratives was based on the model for narrative analysis proposed by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998). This model suggests that each text may be analyzed for its content and/or its form. In the current research, we employed both content

and form analysis. Each participant’s written answers to the three open-ended questions were collapsed into one narrative. Analysis was done in three stages, in which we used a combination of exploratory and confirmatory strategies.

**The first stage.** In this stage, the strategy used was an exploratory strategy, as it aimed to open up new hypotheses and theoretical concepts (Patton, 2002). Due to the unique circumstances of the relocation and the population involved, this strategy seemed the most appropriate approach. Therefore, we (the two authors) did not come to the analysis with predetermined themes but instead made note of all the themes that emerged in the narratives provided by the participants. The first reading of the narratives revealed two prevalent themes. Participants described the changes following the relocation primarily within a religious frame of reference, and these changes were described not only as experienced at the individual level but also—and perhaps mostly—at the communal level. Our decision for the second stage was therefore to look carefully at what participants wrote about these two themes.

**The second stage.** In this stage of the analysis, we randomly chose 60 narratives<sup>2</sup> and read them carefully in order to map out and refine all contents related to religious beliefs and to the way religion impacted perception, appraisal, and coping with the relocation.<sup>3</sup> Guided by Park’s (2005) model, we tried to answer two questions. First, *what impact* did the relocation have on the participant’s perceived religious beliefs? After independent readings of all texts by both authors, we saw that every response collapsed into one of four possible options: The relocation had no impact on the participant’s religious beliefs, the relocation had a negative impact, the relocation had a positive impact, and the relocation’s impact was unclear.

The second question was *how* did the participant describe his or her coping with the relocation within a religious framework (namely, his or her coping strategies?). The answer to this question included the way in which he or she described the event (if at all), the ability to find meaning in the event, and the type of meanings attributed to the event.

The combination of the type of impact (first question) and the religious coping strategy described (second question) led to the refinement and naming of the four groups. For example, those who described experiencing a religious crisis, found meaning, and ended up becoming even stronger in their religious faith were assigned to the group we termed “strengthening of belief.”

**The third stage.** In this stage, the rest of the narratives were read independently by two trained research assistants, and each

<sup>1</sup> There are different groups within the Jewish religion. The *Orthodox* stream (sometimes referred to as Modern Orthodox) attempts to synthesize Jewish values and the observance of Jewish law with the secular, modern world. The *ultra-Orthodox* stream is more conservative and rejects values of enlightenment and the western world and culture. *Traditional* Jews are not committed to the strict observance of the Jewish laws but identify with Judaism as a culture and keep some of the rules.

<sup>2</sup> The rationale for choosing 60 narratives—a larger sample than is common in qualitative research—was based on our wish to elaborately map out the phenomenon of religious coping, in order to provide answers to the two questions we posed. Because there was a wide heterogeneity in the length and amount of detail given in the narratives, we increased the number to be analyzed at this stage.

<sup>3</sup> From now on, we will use the term “religious coping” to refer to all aspects of coping described by participants as related to religious beliefs and attitudes.

narrative was assigned to one of the four pathways identified. Interrater reliability was at the level of  $\kappa = 0.9$ . In cases of a disagreement between coders, the text was reread and discussed until agreement was reached.

## Results

### Stage I: Exploratory Reading

Two primary findings emerged from the open reading of the texts. First, of the 230 participants who participated in the current research, 202 (87%) spontaneously referred in their answers to how the relocation affected their religious beliefs and how religion served as a coping frame of reference following the relocation. This finding, which is particularly notable, as there was no direct question about religion, might be attributed to the fact that both the relocated communities and the majority of the participants were religious. The majority of participants described their religious faith in God as a presupposition. Faith in God and in His goodness served as a general framework upon which personal meanings were sought. For example, one participant wrote, "I believe that if God gave us this difficult experience, He knows that we can tolerate it; otherwise it would not have happened" (a man, age 38). Several participants wrote that, as human beings, they only had a relative perspective and could only see one part of the whole picture; therefore, events such as the relocation, which may have seemed negative in the short term, could have been part of a bigger plan controlled by God, not yet understood, and could therefore appear as positive in the long run.

The second most salient finding was that the majority of participants referred to their religious coping not only as individuals but also, and perhaps mostly, in terms of their being part of a community. The meanings they attached to the relocation (explanations offered as to why the relocation had happened) were attributed mainly to the collective. In fact, the question "Why me?"—which is considered a common question in the search for meaning following traumatic events (Neimeyer, 2001)—was replaced with the question "Why us?" Participants wrote that because the relocation was not just a personal experience, the community, or the collective, needed to examine itself and interpret the relocation as a message from God not only to individuals but also to the community. The majority of participants described the months before the relocation as a time of strong belief and spiritual elevation. There was a feeling of people coming together in a joint effort to prevent the relocation, and protests were accompanied by great enthusiasm—even euphoria. During the days of the relocation, however, when it became clear that the decision was final and irreversible, the dominant emotion was shock and disbelief, and in the months following the relocation, we saw the emergence of several religious coping pathways, as we will now proceed to describe.

### Stage II: The Impact of the Relocation on the Participant's Perceived Religious Beliefs—The Four Pathways

We identified four pathways of religious coping, reflecting a dual process by which religion influenced the initial appraisal of the relocation and the relocation, in turn, impacted existing religious beliefs and values. The first distinction was made between

those individuals whose religious worldview was challenged by the relocation and those for whom it was not, leading to four possible pathways, as shown in Figure 1. The four groups were *resilience* (no change in religious belief), *strengthening of belief*, *weakening of belief*, and *open crisis*. In the following sections we describe each of the pathways, and illustrate them via examples.

**First pathway: No change in religious beliefs.** The first group, representing those with intact religious beliefs, was composed of 81 participants (40%<sup>4</sup>) of the sample and included participants who described their religious worldview as having been unaffected by the events. For these participants, religion seemed to supply the framework for appraising the relocation as related to their beliefs and values. Their narratives demonstrated that, for them, the event was not traumatic and therefore did not challenge their beliefs. One man, age 28, wrote,

*We hoped and believed that it (the relocation) would not happen, we did what we could, and believed, but God did what he decided and we accepted it with love. We are responsible for our deeds, not for their outcomes. We did everything we could, we did not cooperate with the relocation authorities, we tried to convince the authorities to cancel it, and we stuck to the land until the very last minute. But God is not our servant. We serve Him. (Emphasis added by the authors)*

The belief that the relocation was part of God's will makes coping with it easier, as described by another woman, age 43: "It is all for the good. The uprooting did not change anything in my religious, family or communal beliefs. We believe it is all from God, and we move on with life. In God's will, it will be good."

It is worth noting that, in these citations, the participants, like most of the other participants, spoke in the plural, as if they were representing others as well. One possible explanation for the use of the plural is that coping in this context is not only an individual experience but also a shared and collective experience. As a result, the meaning-making process applies to the community as well as to the individual. Therefore, those individuals whose religious beliefs provided an efficient and satisfactory framework for meaning-making also perceived the community as operating in God's service and dependent on God's will. The lesson they took from the event was not a personal one, but rather a collective one, as described by a man, age 26:

*The relocation meant that God did not want us here (in Gush Katif) anymore as a community, that we had finished our job here, and that we would now have to look for the new roles we were meant to play for the nation of Israel.*

In contrast to the experience of the individuals in this group, marked by steadfastness in their religious beliefs, the relocation challenged and shook up the religious beliefs of the individuals in the three other groups. Although religion did serve as a meaning-making system for these three groups, the relocation was so discrepant from their existing values and beliefs that they could not assimilate it, and as a result, they experienced changes in their global religious beliefs. Participants in all three groups described serious doubts and crises. They addressed questions to God, asking how such a terrible thing could have happened and why. Although

<sup>4</sup> Percentage of participants out of the 87% who referred to their religious coping.



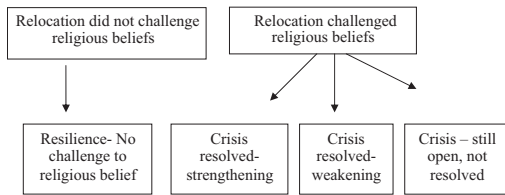


Figure 1. Pathways of religious coping.

all three groups experienced a religious crisis, they dealt with it in different ways. Sixty-one participants in one group (30.7% of the sample) described a crisis that ended in a strengthening of their religious world and belief system. In the second group, which was very small (16 people; 7.9% of the sample), participants described a weakening of their religious beliefs. The third group (44 people; 22.8% of the sample) described an open, still unresolved crisis.

**Second pathway: The strengthening pathway.** The second group was comprised of participants whose religious beliefs grew stronger as a result of coping with the relocation (about 30% of the sample). Many participants in this group conceived of the relocation as a message from God, or as a religious lesson for themselves or their families. The lessons described were primarily related to the public rather than the private, for example, viewing the relocation as a “red flag” for an Israeli society that needed to examine its priorities, or as a wake-up call for those settlers who were too naïve and needed to be more politically aware and realistic. One of the participants in this group, a woman, age 25, said,

We have a strong belief that the king of the world is leading us through the very complicated path of redemption, and that we are privileged to have the opportunity to learn one of the most difficult but also potentially one of the most beautiful lessons in the history of the Jewish nation. God is the source of everything, no one is like Him.

Although participants on the “strengthening pathway” may sound somewhat similar to those on the “intact belief pathway,” the former group differs from the latter in that they experienced a crisis, and as a result, grew stronger in their faith. Individuals in this group tended to describe the event as very difficult, oppressive, and traumatic, as described by a woman, age 58:

I was sure this was not going to happen. The prayers, the learning of Torah, the fasting in order to revoke the decision, the tears: I saw all of this and said to myself, If indeed it does happen, then it means that this was God’s will, and we are God’s messengers—our role was to uplift the nation, spiritually and morally . . . The week of the relocation was very difficult for each one of us: We were angry, we cried, we could not believe what we were seeing. Each evening we sat together, the whole family, and everyone shared his feelings and decisions. It brought us closer, and we found within us a strength that we did not know we had.

Another woman, age 35, wrote, “Referring to the emotional aspects, my faith in God intensified, so did my relationship with God, and with the family—It all got stronger.”

And another woman, age 23, wrote,

All I can say is I came to be more accepting of the suffering from God. I now feel closer to God. I also understand that only the poor and oppressed, which was what we became after the relocation, can really

develop to be better people, more tolerant of their surroundings, and more capable of helping others.

In this meaning-making process, the relocation was viewed as creating new challenges and roles for the community, and primarily as an opportunity to be exploited for the good. Participants held various ideas about the new religious and spiritual challenges now facing their communities and what the event signified at the community level. In this citation from a woman, age 56, the community was viewed as putting God’s will into practice:

We were relocated to an area that I was familiar with from the past. It was on the periphery, very detached, a godforsaken, neglected area, nothing had changed here for 50 years. So maybe that is what God wanted: for us to leave the place where we did so many great things, and come here, to a place where we could do so much to uplift the area.

In this group, the strengthening of religious beliefs was very much related to the recurring concept of “redemption,” a central concept in Jewish tradition (Talmudic Encyclopedia, 2007), which refers to the process of the collective ingathering of the Jewish people and the rebuilding of the temple. The process of redemption is perceived as involving painful but necessary stages, and even disasters, before the final redemption can occur (Arnault, 2003). As the concept of redemption in Judaism refers not to individuals but to the collective, the meaning of redemption in this situation was related to the evacuated community and Israeli society in general. When participants were able to attribute the relocation and its negative impact on their lives to the process of redemption, seeing it as a necessary and inevitable part of this process, they were able to feel hope and meaning as well. The explanation of the relocation as a critical stage that would precede, and even predict, redemption seemed to be a common concept that enabled participants in this group to feel secure in their religious beliefs, as described by a man, age 39: “This is the process of redemption—it happens slowly, slowly, with ups and downs. Some events are difficult to understand now, but in the future we will see how the relocation promoted the process of redemption.”

Another participant, a man, age 22, relied on an old Jewish fable as a source of consolation:

I am comparing our situation to the old Talmud story of Rabbi Akiva and the scholars, who went to Jerusalem and saw the destroyed temple with foxes walking around in it. While the others started weeping, Rabbi Akiva was laughing and told them that this proved that because the prophecy of calamity was executed, so too the prophecy of redemption would be. I hope it will be the same with us: that after our uprooting, redemption will follow.

**Third pathway: The weakening pathway.** The third group was composed of people for whom the religious crisis ended in a weakening of their faith and beliefs. As noted earlier, this group was very small—only 7.9% of all participants. The following are two examples; the first of a woman, age 30:

When I lived in the Gush, and during the time preceding the relocation, I had strong faith: in God, in people, in moral values, in the nation of Israel. Now, my faith has been undermined—my religious life is more technical, to my sorrow. I still find it very difficult to go back to where I was in my religious level of faith and practice.

Another woman, age 22, wrote,

The most extreme change is in the religious aspect; nothing interests *me* anymore. *I* feel that my family and I were abandoned, *I* hoped and waited for God's salvation, and it did not come. *I* became less observant, less of a believer, and engaged less in religious practices. It does not interest *me* anymore. It has to do with the rich and vibrant religious community life *we* used to have in the Gush, which was full of spirituality, religious classes and a religious atmosphere. (Emphasis added by the authors)

It is important to note that only in this group did participants speak of their personal and religious beliefs in the singular, that is, they frequently used "I," "me," and "my." It is also significant that when they spoke about the past, they reverted to use of the plural. Those who experienced a weakening of their religious beliefs tended to describe the relocation as resulting from a "mistake" the community made, or a "punishment" for the community, or they saw it as a "price" paid by the Gush Katif communities for other Israelis' sins and misdeeds. Like those whose beliefs were strengthened by the relocation, these individuals also viewed it as a lesson, but not as a meaningful one. Instead, they saw it as arbitrary, negative, and undeserved, as described by a man, age 52: "It happened because the government wanted to channel public attention away from its wrong decisions and corruption. It had nothing to do with real security issues, and we were the scapegoat."

Some participants perceived their communities and themselves to be the ones who were sacrificed in order to save other Israelis from even worse political disasters. Such reasoning, although it seems to view the individual as a passive recipient rather than an initiator of events, still seemed to help people in this religious community find comfort and meaning. It is important to mention in this context the Jewish value of mutual interdependence, reflected in the well-known adage, "All of Israel is responsible for one another." (A man, age 25, said, "We are the sacrificial lambs of the nation of Israel.")

**Fourth pathway: The open crisis pathway.** The fourth group was composed of participants who described their religious faith and beliefs as being in an ongoing state of turmoil and crisis (around 22% of participants). Their faith was still challenged, questions of a religious and spiritual nature were still being asked, and the process of meaning-making seemed to be open, as described by a man, age 31: "God gives and God takes away. God gave us Gush Katif, and He took it away from us and we do not understand why. Did Job understand?"

Another participant, a woman, age 31, wrote,

This is something that happened, and I cannot understand it now. God planned it. That does not mean that those who were responsible for it, or took part in it, will not be punished. I might never understand why it happened, but maybe in a few years, we will look back and understand more. At the end, it will be good. I hope I will be here to see it, but if not, my children will be.

Participants for whom the religious crisis was still unresolved, like participants from the other groups, also referred to the role and state of the community, but they used terms such as "ambiguity," "loss of direction," and "lack of understanding," as described by a man, age 38:

As religious people, it might be that it is easier for us, because we say it is God's will. But still, as a man with a family, my feeling is not good. I could even say I feel troubled. My question is, why? How come? And unfortunately no one has the answer.

Another participant, a woman, age 42, described the pain resulting from the shattering of personal and community realities, leading to the feeling of having come to a dead end:

There are things which bother me very much now: Where are we going from here as a family, and as a community? The pain is a result of not knowing: why? Why do we have to go through all this? Not knowing where and how we are moving . . . there is a lot of turmoil and a lot of contradictory feelings, and it feels like a cement mixer, with everything enmeshed and mixed inside.

Many of the individuals in this group described an active search for meaning, and the feeling that they had not yet found it.

## Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to describe the process of religious coping in a religious community that underwent a forced relocation. As previous work on meaning-making processes has looked at individuals, we sought to understand what happens to the process of religious coping when an entire community experiences a stressful event together. We found that although religion served as the foundation upon which meanings were sought, and was used by participants to appraise and explain aspects of the relocation, religion itself was also impacted and challenged by the coping process.

Park's (2005) meaning-making model suggests that, following a potentially traumatic event, three possible responses exist. If the event is not perceived as traumatic, there is no discrepancy, and an efficient coping persists. When the event is experienced as traumatic, the individual struggles to settle the discrepancy between his global beliefs and the meaning of the traumatic event. He may do so either by changing the appraisal of the event or by changing his global beliefs. We identified three pathways, representing the three aforementioned processes of religious coping Park (2005) described. In addition, we identified a fourth pathway representing people for whom the crisis was not resolved and for whom the discrepancy between their religious beliefs and the traumatic relocation still persisted. Participants in the first group, whose religious beliefs were not impacted by the event, appeared to respond to the relocation in a way that is similar to what has been termed in the trauma literature as "resilient" (Bonanno, 2004; Hobfoll et al., 2009) or "resistant" (Norris, Tracy, & Galea, 2009). These terms describe people who respond to traumatic events with a near-zero level of symptoms or with very short and transient ones. Although these terms can be used in relation to symptom levels, they also seem to be appropriate and relevant in this context as well, to describe the group whose religious beliefs and religious perceptions were not affected.

In the three other groups, the event was experienced as too traumatic to be explained by existing religious beliefs; therefore, an accommodation was required, leading to changes in global religious beliefs. Meaning was achieved in the group whose religious faith was strengthened, and these individuals might have experienced what is known as "posttraumatic growth" (PTG; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). PTG is defined as a positive psychological change experienced as a result of a struggle with highly challenging life circumstances. This positive change is not simply a return to baseline after a period of suffering; instead, it is an experience of improvement that, for some individuals, is profound (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Marcia's work on religious identity may also be relevant here. Marcia and his colleagues (Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer, & Orlofsky, 1993) suggested four identity statuses (foreclosure, identity achievement, identity diffusion, and moratorium) that may be somewhat parallel to the four pathways we identified in our study, respectively. It might be that those in the "no impact" pathway are those characterized as being in foreclosure; those in the "strengthening group" are parallel to the identity achievers; those in the "weakening group" are similar to those with identity diffusion; and those with an "open crisis" resemble those whom Marcia described as being in a state of moratorium. However, any comparison with Marcia's theory should be made with caution, as Marcia studied identity formation in adolescents, whereas our study focused on adults and their responses to one event. In relation to collective trauma, Updegraff, Cohen Silver, and Holman (2008) suggest that finding meaning facilitates adjustment by reducing people's feelings of vulnerability. As such, making sense of a collective trauma such as a terrorist attack is likely to foster adjustment by restoring people's fundamental belief in a world that is benevolent, predictable, and meaningful (Antonovsky, 1979; Janoff-Bulman, 1989; Taylor, 1983). The results of our study suggest that religion serves as a framework for restoring order and organization both to an individual's private life and his life as part of a collective. Religion gives meaning not only to routine daily life but also to life in the aftermath of a trauma, providing a framework for processing and accommodating the event.

However, there were two groups in the current study, comprising about one third of the sample, for whom religion could not supply the assurance and meaning it once did in the past. Those participants who could not find meaning in the relocation ended up with a weakening of their religious faith and beliefs, and those who were still actively searching for meaning were experiencing an ongoing religious crisis. It might be, as suggested by Park's (2005) meaning-making model, that individuals in both these groups experienced the greatest conflict between the events that befell them and their previously held beliefs, or that they had fewer religious resources. Individuals in these two groups might therefore be more susceptible than others to higher levels of distress and symptoms as they try to readjust and recalibrate their beliefs and goals. The relationship between these pathways and distress should be further studied.

The majority of participants had in common an experience of stages and shifts in religious belief over time. We interpreted the similarity in their perceptions of their level of religious coping as reflecting the important role played by the community in the Gush Katif residents' daily life and coping process. As prior to the relocation, whole communities were fighting against the decision and subsequently were disappointed and distressed by it, the dynamics of change in religious feeling and atmosphere were also shared. Park (2005) suggested that religion may be related to some negative consequences during the initial stages of coping, when individuals are struggling to understand disturbing events that seem to contradict their religious belief systems, including for example their belief that good people should not suffer (Hall & Johnson, 2001). Yet religion may have a long-term positive impact because many religious systems encourage and foster the process of making meaning out of negative events in benign ways. The stages we describe in our study broaden Park's description, as we describe the stages even before the actual event took place and for several months afterward. As we claimed,

whether religion has a long-term positive impact depends on the resolution of the coping process.

Our study documents the importance of examining coping processes following traumatic events in the wider context in which they occur. Because the forced relocation from Gush Katif was a collective event and the majority of residents were religious, individuals described their coping in religious terms, with a greater focus on their being part of a community than on their own individual experiences. It is important to note that the extent to which religion is involved in a given individual's coping with a particular event is largely dependent on the extent to which religion has already been part of his or her orienting system. Religion is more likely to be used in the coping of those for whom religion is a highly salient aspect of their understanding of self and world than in the coping of those who are less devout (Pargament, 1997).

The limitations of this study include a single examination of religious coping, a retrospective design, and a lack of planned or direct questions about the subject under investigation. However, the fact that religious coping was so salient in the narratives—despite the lack of instructions to write about it—was also an advantage of the current study. The spontaneous outpouring of references to religious coping suggests that it was indeed a significant resource in coping with the relocation.

Our study was conducted about 8 to 10 months after the relocation. At that stage, it was reasonable to assume that coping was still taking place and that meaning processes were in the making. Therefore, some of the pathways could very well have disappeared or merged with other pathways at a later stage (this possibility would have been especially pertinent for the group in crisis). Furthermore, with time, and as other ramifications of the relocation occur, participants' religious beliefs could continue to evolve. Further follow-up studies should clarify this point.

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