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Current Jewish pilgrimage tourism: Modes and models of development

Abstract

Whether in its traditional religious form or its modern secular form, pilgrimage is currently experiencing resurgence the world over. This study analyzes the traits of current Jewish pilgrims to holy sites in Israel and explores the phenomenon of Jewish pilgrimage tourism in the country. To this end, it employs a variety of methodologies, including a questionnaire completed by 703 pilgrims at seven different pilgrimage sites in Israel; interviews with the pilgrims and staff of organized tours to these sites; observations in situ; and participant observation. The purpose of this paper is to conduct a market analysis based on geographic, demographic, and psychographic characteristics of visitors to Jewish holy sites in Israel. Such a survey is a basis for understanding the motivations and preferences of the visitors' specific needs and the first stage 'pre-planning' that is necessary for every future plan of a tourism site. It was found that the sites attract an extremely diverse visitor population, ranging from very religious orthodox pilgrims, to 'traditional' pilgrim-tourists, to secular tourists, who can also be understood as alternative tourists. Thus, the traits of present-day pilgrims can be represented on a scale ranging from 'secular' to 'spiritual,' or from 'tourist' to 'pilgrim,' which enables us to propose a model of site development, and to grade the sites on a scale ranging from spontaneous, undeveloped sites to formal, highly developed sites. The study also indicates that secular visits of tourists are what trigger site movement toward formal recognition and development, transforming them from pure pilgrimage sites to religious-tourist sites and drawing greater attention to the relationship between pilgrimage and tourism.

Keywords:

pilgrimage; tourism; religious tourism; holy sites; stages of development; Judaism; Israel

Introduction

Pilgrimage, one of the religious and cultural phenomena best known to human society, is an important feature of the world's major religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Pilgrimage may be defined as "a journey resulting from religious causes, externally to a holy site, and internally for spiritual purposes and internal understanding" (Barber, 1993, p. 1) or as a journey undertaken by a person in search of holiness, truth, and the sacred (Vukonić, 1996).

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Whether traditional and religious or modern and secular, pilgrimage is experiencing resurgence the world over, as longstanding shrines still serve as magnets for those in search of spiritual fulfilment (Digance, 2003). Superficial relationships between tourists and pilgrims have been acknowledged for several decades by medievalists and historians of tourism (Smith, 1992) and have also been the subject of more recent research (Timothy & Olsen, 2006).

This article explores the phenomenon of modern-day Jewish pilgrimage tourism to the shrines and graves of *tsaddikim* (saintly and pious religious figures in the Jewish tradition) in Israel. Current Jewish pilgrimage to the shrines located at the graves of saintly personages is a subject that has barely been researched. Moreover, very little attention has been paid thus far to the tourist components of this growing phenomenon, which account for millions of visits each year and has had a marked effect on society and culture in the country.

The article begins with a review of the pilgrimage tourism literature, including the niche occupied by Jewish pilgrimage. This is followed by a detailed background of the sites explored and the methodology employed, as well as a discussion of the traits of both the visitors and the sites themselves, based on the research findings. These sections provide a solid foundation for a discussion of the need for a re-examination of the definitions used by the current literature, and of the fact that the difference between tourism and traditional pilgrimage is gradually fading and giving way to an emerging similarity from a number of perspectives.

Pilgrimage and tourism

Smith (1992) claims that in current usage the term "pilgrimage" connotes a religious journey, a journey of a pilgrim, especially one to a shrine or a sacred place. However, its derivation from the Latin *peregrinus* allows broader interpretations, including foreigner, wanderer, exile, traveller, newcomer and stranger. The term "tourist" – one that makes a tour for pleasure or culture - originally evolved from the Latin term *torrus*: one who makes a circuitous journey, usually for pleasure, and returns to the starting point. But Smith (1992) also claims that contemporary use of terminology that identifies the "pilgrim" as a religious traveller and the "tourist" as a vacationer is a culturally constructed polarity that blurs travellers' motives.

Pilgrims and tourists are distinct actors situated at opposite ends of Smith's continuum of travel, which first appeared in 1992. The poles of the pilgrimage tourism axis are labelled *sacred* and *secular* respectively. Between the two exists an almost endless range of possible sacred-secular combinations, with a central area (c) that has come to be referred to generally as "religious tourism." These combinations reflect the multiple and changing motivations of travellers, whose interests and activities may change – consciously or subconsciously - from tourism to pilgrimage and vice versa.

The nature of the 'tourist experience' has received much attention from tourism research (Cohen, 1979; MacCannell, 1973; Turner & Turner, 1969, 1978). Cohen

(1979) proposes a typology of tourist experiences based on the place and significance of tourists' experiences in their total world-view, their relationship to a perceived 'centre', and the location of that centre in relation to the society in which the tourist lives. Because tourists cannot be described as a "general type" (1979, p. 180), he discusses several tourist experiences that help us better understand the phenomenon of pilgrimage. Cohen (1979, p. 183) defines five primary modes, reflecting a spectrum of the experience of tourists as travellers in pursuit of 'mere' pleasure, to the experience of modern pilgrims in quest of meaning at someone else's centre: the "recreational mode," the "diversionary mode," the "experiential mode," the "experimental mode," and the "existential mode." Cohen claims that tourists travelling in the "existential mode" are analogous to pilgrims. Both are fully committed to an elective spiritual centre, external to the mainstream of their native society and culture, because they feel that the only real meaning in life exists at the centre. This paper makes use of this system of classification to classify current Jewish visitors to holy sites in Israel while conducting a market analysis based on geographic, demographic, and psychographic characteristics of the visitors.

Jewish pilgrimage tourism

The Jewish religion is focused on the importance of Jerusalem. The city has several important holy sites, of which the Western Wall (*Hakotel Hama'aravi*) is undoubtedly the most important (Coleman & Elsner, 1995). Today, visits by Jewish pilgrims to the Western Wall are usually associated with praying, swearing oaths (*nedarim*), making requests, and placing notes (supplications) between the stones of the Wall to increase the chances of a wish being granted. Jerusalem in general and the Western Wall in particular is a formal pilgrimage centre *par excellence*. The site is spatially and symbolically central. Other holy sites that could be grouped into the same category but that are less important and less accessible than the Western Wall are Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem (the burial place of the Matriarch Rachel) and the Cave of Machpela in Hebron.

After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., the Galilee in general, and the upper Galilee town of Safed in particular, became the main Jewish centre. During the days of the Mishna and the Talmud times (1st–5th century) many rabbis and sages (*Tanna'im* and *Amora'im*) settled there. During this period, the Galilee became a region of sages and poets, and Safed and Tiberias became two of the four holy Jewish cities. Modern day holy sites from this historical period include the burial places of saintly and pious religious figures (*kivrei tsaddikim*), who have become important in Jewish tradition due to a general belief in their holy powers. Since the 1970s, these sacred sites have undergone more intensive development. According to Weingrod (1990) and Ben-Ari and Bilu (1987), one of the main factors influencing the emergence of these sites was the mass immigration of North African Jews to Israel in the 1950s, who brought with them the popular Muslim tradition of *ziara*, or visiting the sacred graves of holy figures.

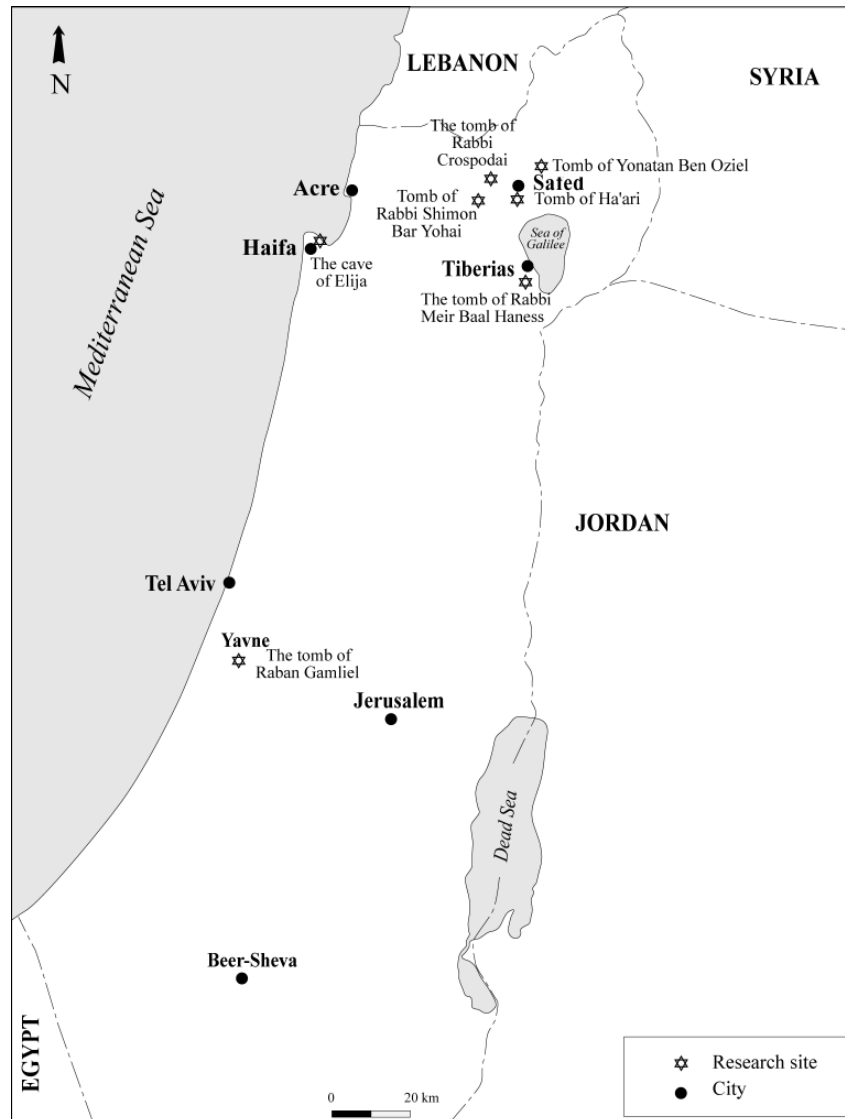
The subject of Jewish pilgrimage tourism has become more topical in recent years, in light of the increased demand for numbers of sites and the marked rise in visitor

volume. Despite interest in the theoretical dimensions of religious tourism, only a few studies of Jewish travel and the role of pilgrimage in modern Judaism have appeared thus far (Ben-Ari & Bilu, 1987, 1997; Bilu, 1998; Epstein, 1995; Goldberg, 1997; Levy, 1997; Sasson, 2002; Weingrod, 1990). For this reason, Jewish pilgrimage tourism must be understood as an important emerging research theme. This research is the first and only one of its kind until now (2010), that conducts market analysis based on geographic, demographic, and psycho-graphic characteristics of visitors to Jewish holy sites in Israel. Such a survey forms a basis for understanding the characteristics, motivations and preferences of the visitors' specific needs.

Methodology

A structured questionnaire was distributed to 703 visitors at seven selected holy sites in Israel (Figure 1).

Figure1
ISRAEL: THE HOLY SITES EXPLORED IN THIS STUDY



The questionnaires were distributed throughout a one year period (2005) and included weekdays, weekends, and holidays, each of which have unique patterns of pilgrimage activity. The purpose of conducting such a large market analysis based on geographic, demographic, and psychographic characteristics of visitors is that it will serve as a basis for understanding the motivations and preferences of the visitors' specific needs and become the first stage of 'pre-planning' that is necessary for every future plan of a tourism site.

The questionnaire, which consisted of closed-end and opened-end questions, focused on pilgrims' expression of beliefs, feelings, motivations, behaviour, and experiences. The first part of the questionnaire was aimed at assessing the pilgrims' personal characteristics, such as age, gender, origin, socio-economic status, and religious affiliation. The second part of the questionnaire focused on different aspects of their visit to the site, including: motivation for the pilgrimage; duration of stay; activities and behaviour at the site; visitation patterns; and the tourist context of their visit. An estimated three quarters of all visitors who were asked to participate in the survey agreed to do so, and all visitors who agreed to participate were sampled. Overall, approximately one hundred questionnaires were completed at each site. The data included in the 703 questionnaires was analyzed using quantitative and qualitative methods.

Visitor characteristics

According to the pilgrims' age curve, most (57 per cent) of the visitors are younger than 35 years old. The curve also reveals that 32 per cent of all pilgrims sampled are between the ages of 21 and 35; 26 per cent are between the ages of 36 and 50; and 25 per cent are younger than 20. Only 17 per cent are older than 51, and this finding clearly indicates the relative youth of the pilgrims, which differs from findings of other case studies relating to Christianity and Judaism.

Another finding was the slightly higher number of male visitors to the site (58 per cent), which differs from the findings of case studies regarding other religions, such as Christianity, in which female visitors are predominant.

The research findings show that each site has unique "catchment area," referring to visitors' main place of origin and its distance from the site. For example, the attraction of the grave of Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yochai proved to have international (accounting for 26 per cent of all visitors) and national (47 per cent) reach, while most of the visitors arriving at Rabbi Yonatan Ben-Oziel's grave were from the surrounding region of northern Israel (49 per cent) and from other parts of the country (27 per cent). The Grave of Ha'ari is mainly a local attraction, with 49 per cent of all visitors coming from the nearby town of Safed, less than 20 km away.

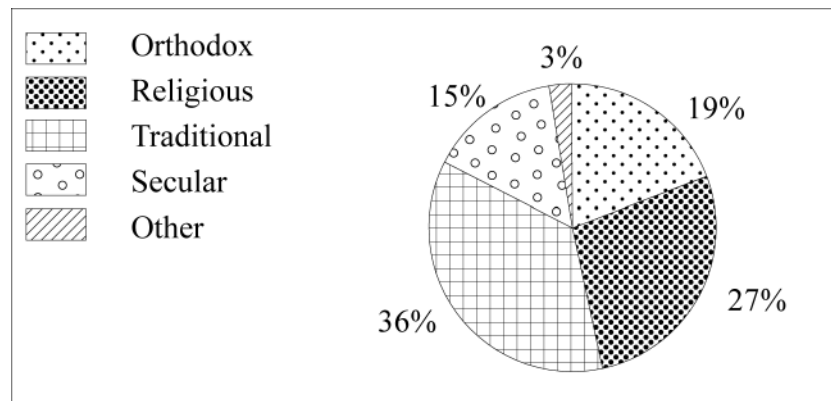
Most of the visits (73 per cent) to the sites were classified as religiously motivated by "a belief in the holy personage," "a desire to pray," "a sacred religious commandment," and "a desire to make a request." 24 per cent of all visitors came because

of non-religious, yet nonetheless spiritual reasons such as the desire for an overall improved feeling or an emotional-spiritual experience, as part of a tour, or out of curiosity. The reasons provided by respondents may suggest that some sites are not only religious sites but cultural heritage locations as well.

Visitors' activities at the sites were consistent with the factors that motivated their visits in the first place. The most common activity was prayer, but visits also involved other activities such as resting, eating, enjoying the view, and watching other visitors. These activities attest to the fact that the sites in question are not only religious sites but tourism sites as well. Most respondents visited sites other than the holy graves and participated in different activities, the most popular of which was hiking and visiting nature reserves, but which also included eating out, sightseeing, and visiting tourist attractions.

The pilgrims were asked to describe their religious affiliation, if any, and to indicate whether they would describe themselves as 'secular,' 'traditional,' 'ultra-orthodox,' 'religious,' or some other way. Four main groups of visitors were identified among those participating in the pilgrimages: traditional Jews (36 per cent), religious Jews (25 per cent), ultra-orthodox Jews (19 per cent) and secular Jews (15 per cent) [see Figure 2]. A few respondents preferred to use different, unconventional terms to describe their religious affiliation.

Figure 2
THE DISTRIBUTION OF VISITORS TO THE HOLY GRAVES



Respondents' selection of these terms to describe themselves was based on their own understanding of these descriptions, and no attempts were made to influence the interviewees. An assessment of the manner in which visitors describe themselves is important for understanding the connection and the continuum between pilgrims and tourists. In this context, an interesting correlation emerges between visitor self-image and socio-economic status, as visitors who defined themselves as "ultra-orthodox" and as "pilgrims" tended also to describe themselves as belonging to a low socio-economic stratum, while those who described themselves as "secular" and as "tourists" also tended to see themselves as belonging to a high socio-economic stratum.

Typologies of visitors

The parameter of religious affiliation proved to be the most important for our analysis. Culture specific terminology was used in order to give more meaning to the pilgrimage. Here, current Jewish typology of *khilonim* (non religious), *masortiim* (traditional), *datiim* (religious) and *haredim* (ultra-orthodox) is employed in order to classify the four types of pilgrims. Parameters such as age, socio-economic status, place of origin, gender, and extraction (Sephardi or Ashkenazi) were found to have less influence on the characteristics of pilgrims.

"Pure" pilgrims – ultra-orthodox Jews (*Haredim*): These visitors to the holy graves come solely for the religious reasons of praying and making supplications, and they can therefore be classified as "pure" pilgrims. Their visits are usually combined with visits to other graves in the area.

One sub-group among the ultra-orthodox consists of Hasidic males ranging from seventeen to twenty years of age who spend their free time travelling in pairs or in groups, usually on organized tours or hitchhiking excursions, visiting different sites in Israel, with an emphasis on graves of saintly personages. The interviews with these young male visitors ascertained that they come mainly from Jerusalem and Bnei Brak (both largely populated by ultra orthodox Jews), but that some come from all over Israel. Their visits are marked by excitement and enthusiasm, and one particular group of Hasidic youths even reported hitchhiking from one grave to another at night.

Another sub-group consisted of orthodox Jewish women travelling alone or with a close friend or relative, who typically carry prayers relating to marriage, health, and fertility. There were also orthodox families on tours that included visits to different graves in the area. Some ultra-orthodox Jews travelled to the holy graves as part of an "official pilgrimage," that is, organized tours of fifty or more people arranged by different religious organizations. Such tour buses travel from site to site reciting prayers at each location.

"Pilgrim-tourists"- religious visitors (*Datiim*): These visitors to the holy graves are motivated by the religious desire to pray and make supplications, but their visits are typically combined with visits to other graves or holy sites in the area. Most visitors of this kind come with their families, but many also come alone. Although they can be understood as more 'pilgrim' than 'tourist' due to the strong religious motivation underlying their visits, they also engage in other activities, such as touring the area and spending time on activities that 'pure' pilgrims would not view as religious.

Traditional believers (*Masortiim*): The main reason for the visits of traditional believers is different and stems from their belief in the holy persons themselves, and in what they have to offer. Most traditional visitors are women of different ages from all over Israel, usually coming from a low or medium socioeconomic background. Most of them are Sephardic in extraction, and many visit the sites as part of an organized group and ask for things such as fertility, health, marriage, and other such personal needs. These women place their supplications on the gravestone of the holy person,

light candles, and tie coloured cloths on the branches of a "wishing tree" in order to have their wishes granted. The phenomenon as a whole was found to be more traditional and popular than religious, as more than a third of all visitors belonged to this group (36%).

Secular visitors (*Hilonim*): Another common phenomenon is organized groups of secular men and women visiting holy graves. Members of these groups are mainly middle-aged people of medium to high socioeconomic status, and their visits are usually organized by travel agencies or other recreational organizations. Each group has a local leader who specializes in spiritual tours to holy sites. Among these visitors, the motivation for visits range from curiosity, interest, and a wish to observe cultural phenomena to a search for new meaning in life.

Such tours are sometimes organized at night to add an element of mystery. Although these tours usually involve spiritualism and mysticism, they would be better classified as heritage tourism, which has recently become quite popular throughout the world and which accounts for people who visit sites for a variety of reasons, including nostalgia; the search for self-identity; the search for family roots; increased awareness; and an understanding of historical events and places, which necessarily involves components of history, patriotism and nationalism.

Tours consisting entirely of secular women, usually of high socioeconomic status, have also proved popular in recent years. Despite the fact that they are secular in outlook, a number of small tour groups of this type visit the grave sites to make specific requests from the holy figures in question. Secular individuals also happen to visit the graves on rare occasions as part of hiking trips in the area, or simply out of curiosity.

Stages of development

Based on the research findings, a typology of sites was compiled according to each site's stage of development and character. The typology is based in part on the typologies offered by Sasson (2002) and Cohen (1992), and is divided into three stages: 1) the 'spontaneous-popular' stage; 2) the 'semi-formal stage'; and 3) the 'formal' stage. The development of each site is contingent on two primary types of forces: those exerted from above, consisting of the efforts of a variety of official bodies; and those exerted from below, coming from the people themselves.

The 'spontaneous-popular' stage

The sites of Rabbi Cropsodai and the site of Ha'ari were found to be in 'the spontaneous stage' of development. During this stage, while the holy site and its surrounding facilities are in the midst of development, the existence of the site becomes well known by word of mouth, attracting a small but steady flow of visitors. The Grave of Ha'ari is mainly a local attraction, with 70 per cent of all visitors coming from less than 20 km away. As a result, various groups and bodies become involved of the tasks of maintenance and keeping order. During this phase, there is no formal body that

identifies with the site or ventures opinions about relevant historical or religious issues. Over the past few decades an increasing number of sites have been found to be in this primary stage of development, which also includes the spontaneous pilgrimage of visitors from the local area.

The 'semi-formal' stage

This stage of development is the current stage of the grave of Rabbi Yonatan Ben-Oziel. It involves an increase in activity site recognition by religious institutions, government bodies, and such official agencies as the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Tourism. The site grows rapidly and its physical development keeps pace. Private enterprise is usually involved at first, with an entrepreneur building the basic infrastructure required for the growing number of visitors. In the case of the grave of Rabbi Yonatan Ben-Oziel, a woman named Venecia came to the site in 1980 and began to care for it and develop it. During the semi-formal stage, the pressure created by increasing numbers of visitors encourages local authorities to assume a permanent role in the process, thus endowing the site with formal recognition. According to the research findings, most of the visitors to Rabbi Yonatan Ben-Oziel's grave were from northern Israel (57 per cent) and other parts of the country (30 per cent), and not from the local community.

Recognition for Rabbi Yonatan Ben-Oziel's grave was attained in the 1990s, and was followed by the paving of a special road to the grave. As time passed, signposts to the site began to appear and weekly prayers were officially organized at the site by different groups. In time it grew in size, expending far beyond the original small grave, and a spacious walkway and a large candle-lighting furnace were constructed and a grave-cover cloth was donated. The site started to gain public awareness as it developed, and today it is ready for thousands of visitors.

The 'formal' stage

The grave of Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yohai, the cave of Elijah, and the tombs of Rabbi Meir Baal Hanes and Raban Gamliel are at the third and highest stage of official grave sites, and enjoy the formal recognition of the Israeli establishment. They are now administered by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which makes them eligible for a variety of services, just like any other government site.

To summarize, the research findings show that the grave of Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yochai has the strongest attraction on the national and international levels, while the tomb of Rabbi Crospodai is still in the first stage of development, and still awaits a patron capable of helping it advance to the next stage. The current small number of visitors and absence of basic infrastructure are adversely affecting the expansion process, and as a result its 'catchment area' is very narrow and includes only visitors from the nearby Jewish localities.

The Ha'ari site, in contrast, is currently undergoing development and is soon expected to advance to the 'semi-formal' stage that currently characterizes the grave

of Rabbi Yonatan Ben Oziel. As noted, all of the other graves under discussion are at the highest stage of development and enjoy wide public and governmental recognition. Our research revealed a clear correspondence between the stage of development and 'catchment area' of each site.

**Discussion:
Jewish holy sites
and their visitors
today**

The study's findings of a common search for meaning among both pilgrims and pilgrim-tourists serves as confirmation of Cohen's (1979) typology of tourist modes, and reconfirms the complex connection between tourism and pilgrimage. Our findings suggest the following typology for pilgrims: *existential pilgrims* are Orthodox Jews who see their pilgrimage as a religious experience, which is characterized by the existential mode. Their visits seldom have recreational and diversionary elements, although they do feel that such trips have mentally and spiritually restorative effects. *Experiential existential pilgrims* are secular visitors who, in addition to their existential mode of experience, also have an experiential mode which is motivated by the search for authentic experiences and stresses the quest for meaning outside the confines of one's own society.

Tourist pilgrims are primarily *traditional visitors* with a combination of modes of experience, dominated by the experiential mode with, perhaps, small doses of diversionary and recreational experiences. Their experiences also include elements of tourism which are directly related to leisure activities. Few if any tourists, or people looking for recreational and diversionary tourist experiences, visit the sites, as their institutional and organizational framework is different, as are their motivations.

Correspondence was found between each of the sites' stage of development on the one hand, and the characteristics of their visitors on the other hand. Visitors to sites in the first or 'spontaneous stage' of development tend to be strongly identified with religion and a mixture of folk beliefs and customs. Visitors come from different market segments and co-exist at the sites, even though their reasons for visiting and the activities in which they participate there differ greatly. Each site is also believed to have its own special qualities and to fulfil visitors' needs for supernatural and spiritual comfort. Nevertheless, whereas visitors to the formal sites regard their visits as the main goal of their trip, pilgrims regard visits to spontaneous sites as 'chance opportunities.' This study reveals that it is the visits of secular Jews to sites in the 'spontaneous stage' of development that trigger a site's transition from the spontaneous stage to the 'semi-formal' stage, as in the case of the grave of Rabbi Yonatan Ben Oziel. However, when sites reach the 'formal stage' and become well recognized religious pilgrimage sites, as in the case of a number of the sites under discussion, secular visitors usually abandon them and move on to other sites that are still in the spontaneous stage of development.

Conclusions

One of the main conclusions of this study relates to the existence of a continuum upon which different groups of visitors to the sites can be represented. At one end are pilgrims: Orthodox Jews who visit the sites out of religious belief, and whose primary activity is praying. At the opposite end of the scale are tourists (so-called 'spiritual' or 'heritage tourists') who are motivated by curiosity, cultural interest, and the quest for 'new meaning in life.' Between these two extremes are the 'traditional' visitors, who are more similar to the Orthodox in their belief in the power of the *tsaddik* and his helpful advice and therefore closer to them on the continuum. However, this belief on the part of 'traditional' visitors stems not from their religious faith but from their personal outlook, attested to by the fact that they tend to make specific requests rather than to offer formal prayers.

The differences between the various groups can be observed in their different customs and patterns of behaviour. Whereas the pilgrims pray and the secular visitors just visit, the mid-scale visitors take part in local folklore activities such as lighting candles, offering supplications and notes, and purchasing souvenirs such as holy water, pictures of the *tsaddik*, candles, greeting cards, pamphlets, amulets against the evil eye, and other things. Differences in visitors' attitudes toward the sites were found to depend mainly on their religious affiliation, and not on age, extraction or origin, socio-economic status, self-perception, or gender. Each pilgrim's location on the scale is personal and subjective, and a virtually infinite number of sacred-secular combinations exist between the two poles. The scale presented in this study supports the claim of an emerging connection between tourism and pilgrimage discussed earlier in the article (Smith, 1992).

It is difficult to discern any meaningful discrepancy between old-fashioned pilgrimages to the graves and modern day tourism, just as it is becoming impossible to differentiate between pilgrims and tourists. Both types of visitors are motivated by the desire for an experience that will add meaning to their life. Both leave their perceived periphery in order to find a centre that will offer them stronger belief and a new world. It is important to note that the groups are not homogeneous, but rather are composed of different types of people. For example, the secular group is highly diverse, ranging from visitors motivated by curiosity to visitors on a quest for new meaning in life, who are closer to the pilgrimage pole of the scale discussed above. Visitors from differing market segments visit and coexist at different sites, some of which are thought to be sacred and others which are not. Coexistence occurs despite the considerable variation in visitor motivation and visitor activities at the sites themselves.

The time has come for contemporary terminology (such as identifying "pilgrims" as religious travelers and "tourists" as vacationers) to accommodate broader interpretations in accordance with their Latin and Greek origins. The scale proposed here reinforces the emerging connection between the two mobilities of tourism and pilgrimage discussed above. It is difficult to distinguish between the pilgrimage of the past and today's tourism, as both phenomena may be motivated by a desire for an experience

that will ultimately add more meaning to life. Through its exploration of the complex subject of "pilgrimage tourism" in the Jewish Israeli context, this article offers a point of departure for future studies in other religious and geographical contexts throughout the modern world.

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Submitted: 04/10/2010

Accepted: 10/21/2010