

# Presence of meaning, search for meaning, religiousness, satisfaction with life and depressive symptoms among a diverse Israeli sample

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The present study explored the structure and correlates of meaning in life (MIL) among an Israeli sample. The sample consisted of 559 adults. The average age of participants was 48.24 and 61.3% of them were females. Participants provided demographic information and completed measures of MIL, satisfaction with life, and depressive symptoms. The MIL Questionnaire showed a very good fit for the proposed 2-factor model (i.e. presence of meaning, search for meaning) to the data collected from the current sample. Presence of meaning correlated positively with both search for meaning and satisfaction with life, and negatively with depressive symptoms. Search for meaning was positively and weakly tied to satisfaction with life, but was unrelated to depressive symptoms. Religiousness appeared as a significant moderator between the two meaning factors, and between them and life satisfaction. Specifically, as religiousness became stronger: (a) the link between presence of meaning and search for meaning became weaker; (b) the link between presence of meaning and life satisfaction became stronger and (c) the link between search for meaning and life satisfaction became weaker. The findings suggest that there are differential implications of presence search for meaning on the health and well-being, and the important role religiousness plays in this regard.

**Keywords:** Presence of meaning; Search for meaning; Religiousness; Satisfaction with life; Depressive symptoms.

Though the abstract and multifaceted nature of the construct of meaning in life (MIL) poses a conceptual and empirical challenge (George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016), there is a consensus that having a sense of MIL is a vital structure in human life (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992) and a cornerstone for an enhanced sense of well-being (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006). Frankl (1963) posited that the “will to meaning” is an innate urge and a major human goal; failing to actualize this urge will lead to psychological distress. Others have postulated that MIL constitutes a key component for positive functioning, especially in times of stress and threat. In these times, having a sense of MIL can be critical for reorganising the world, restoring a sense of security and relieving the anxiety involved in the process of coping with hardship (Park, 2010; Updegraff, Silver, & Holman, 2008). Empirical evidence has lent support to these theoretical assertions showing that having MIL is an important predictor of subjective well-being and mental health (Bonebright, Clay, & Ankenmann, 2000; Debats, Van der Lubbe, & Wezeman, 1993; Farber et al., 2010;

Hill & Turiano, 2014; King et al., 2006; Krok, 2015; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Park, 2010; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006; Updegraff et al., 2008; Wong, 1998).

Significant theoretical and empirical advancement in this field of study has led to diverse specific models of MIL (Newman, Nezlek, & Thrash, 2018). For example, *the meaning-making model* (Park & Folkman, 1997) refers to two levels of meaning: Global meaning, that is the individual’s general orientation system, and situational meaning that refers to meaning regarding a specific event. Another example is *the meaning maintenance model* (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006), which posits that humans have an innate need for meaning and when people’s sense of meaning is threatened, they reaffirm alternative representations in order to regain meaning. Yet most studies have failed to conceptualise multidimensional models of MIL and adapted a unidimensional approach that tends to focus only on “meaning” (Martela & Steger, 2016). This criticism has led researchers to suggest multidimensional approaches to study MIL (Steger et al., 2006). Among these approaches, one of

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the most accepted distinctions in the literature refers to search for and presence of MIL (Newman et al., 2018).

This investigation aims to test MIL from this conceptual prism. Specifically, it aims to test whether the distinction between search for meaning and presence of meaning is applicable to the Israeli population, and whether the links between these factors of meaning and between them and mental health and well-being, are shaped by the socio-cultural factor of religiousness.

### **The search for, and the presence of, MIL**

The search for meaning is an active, dynamic and intentional effort to establish or increase the sense of MIL. Presence of MIL refers to one's subjective feeling that his/her life is meaningful (Steger et al., 2006). Thus, the crucial difference between the terms "search" and "presence" is that the former refers to a process towards achieving a valued outcome, whereas the latter refers to the valued outcome itself. Theoretically, there are contradictory views regarding the importance of each dimension. Some theorists attribute greater significance to the process of searching itself and depict it as a healthy and positive process (Frankl, 1963), whereas others regard it as a symptom of lost meaning (Baumeister, 1991). Other theorists, on the other hand, consider obtaining the desired outcome (i.e. presence of meaning) as far more vital (Updegraff et al., 2008).

Empirically, in their effort to develop a multidimensional scale for measuring MIL (Meaning in Life Questionnaire; MLQ), Steger et al. (2006) found that the search and presence dimensions are distinct and relatively independent factors. In addition, they found that each dimension (i.e. search and presence) was differentially linked to health and well-being indicators. Specifically, presence of meaning was positively linked to subjective well-being indicators including life satisfaction and positive emotions and negatively linked to depression and negative emotions. On the other hand, search for meaning was positively linked to depression, and several negative emotions (i.e. fear, sadness and shame).

Additional empirical evidence confirmed the factor structure of the MLQ in Western (Park, Park, & Peterson, 2010; Steger et al., 2009; Steger & Kashdan, 2007) as well as in other socio-cultural contexts (Temane, Khumalo, & Wissing, 2014). Further, the findings of these studies have indicated that search and presence of MIL have differential implications for health and well-being. Specifically, presence of meaning has been consistently and positively linked to desirable indicators of subjective well-being including happiness (Steger et al., 2009), and life satisfaction (Steger, Kawabata, Shimai, & Otake, 2008) and inversely related to depression and anxiety (Steger et al., 2009). Findings regarding search for meaning, on the other hand, have been far less

consistent. Some studies revealed negative links between search for meaning and indicators of enhanced sense of well-being such as environmental mastery, relatedness and self-acceptance (Steger et al., 2008) and subjective well-being (Cohen & Cairns, 2012) and positive links with adverse mental health indicators such as depression (Temane et al., 2014), whereas other studies (Doğan, Sapmaz, Tel, Sapmaz, & Temizel, 2012) linked search for meaning to enhanced sense of subjective well-being.

This inconsistency of findings regarding the links between search for meaning and well-being suggests that there may be psychological mechanisms that may moderate these links. There is some empirical evidence to support this speculation. For instance, Steger et al. (2009) found that searching for meaning is more strongly associated with a lower sense of well-being at late-life stages than in their early counterparts. Russo-Netzer (2018) found that people who prioritise meaning in their daily life and actively search for its attainment, derive greater levels of well-being, including presence of meaning. Newman et al. (2018) found that the relationship between presence of meaning and search for meaning depends on the level of analysis. Specifically, they found that between persons, search was negatively related to presence, whereas within persons, search was positively related to presence. Park et al. (2010) found that search for meaning was negatively associated with life satisfaction, happiness and positive affect and positively associated with depression and negative affect. Yet among those who already had substantial meaning in their life, search for meaning was positively associated with well-being: greater life satisfaction, more happiness and less depression.

Following this line of thought, one direction that researchers have undertaken to clarify the nature of relationships between presence of MIL, search for MIL and well-being is to study them within a sociocultural context.

### **MIL in a socio-cultural context**

The socio-cultural context in which people grow directs and guides them on how to produce meaning from life (Steger et al., 2008) and strongly impacts the way they view and understand the world (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). Theoretically, then, it is likely that the socio-cultural context plays a role both in the relationship between search and presence of MIL, and in their links with indicators of health and well-being. Yet only a few empirical studies examined MIL cross-culturally (Newman et al., 2018). One of these studies (Oishi & Diner, 2014) has found that people from countries characterised with high socioeconomic status reported lower levels of MIL as compared to people from countries characterised with low socioeconomic status. Another study (Steger et al., 2008) showed that Americans scored lower on search, and higher on presence of meaning, compared

to Japanese people. Furthermore, in Japan, presence of meaning and search for meaning correlated significantly and positively, whereas in the United States, the link between these two dimensions was negative. In addition, whereas presence of meaning displayed similar links with well-being in both cultures, the relations between search for MIL and well-being differed greatly between the two cultures. Specifically, search for meaning was positively linked to purpose in life in Japan, and negatively linked to purpose in life and subjective happiness in the United States. These findings indicate that while presence of MIL seems to have positive implications for well-being in both cultures, the implications of searching for meaning might be culturally bound.

An important point to note here is that Steger et al.'s (2008) study compared between people from different countries. Things might be even more complex in a local, intercultural context. In such a context, some sociocultural aspects are shared by all society's sub-groups, while other aspects are unique to each sub-group. Moreover, socio-political parameters such as social status, identity and ethnic-religious affiliation may have implications pertaining to search and presence of MIL, and to their associations with health and well-being. Therefore, it is possible that examining MIL in the Israeli context, in which different cultural and religious groups coexist, may lead to some valuable insights to this domain of study. Specifically, it may help determine whether religious, political and sociocultural factors are predictive of search and presence of MIL, and whether these factors differently shape the links between search and presence of MIL and health and well-being.

### **MIL in the Israeli context**

Given how diverse its population, Israeli society constitutes a unique setting for cross-cultural research. A unique aspect of the Israeli context is the diverse religiousness levels that characterise its population. Four categories of religiousness are used generally when studying Israeli individuals (a) secular; (b) traditional; (c) religious and (d) ultra-orthodox. These categories depict the degree of adherence and observance of the religious laws and cultural lifestyle and may best be viewed as shades across sequence (Katz-Gerro, Raz, & Yaish, 2009). In general, "secular" refers to non-religious at all and "orthodox" refers to people whose lives are entirely subject to religious law. The category "traditional" refers to an inconsistent and unclear set of religious beliefs and practices, and for the most, it is used as an intermediate category between secular and religious (Yadgar, 2006). Recent data indicates that 45% of the Jewish population in Israel define their lifestyle as secular, 25% as traditional, 16% as religious/very religious and 14% defined it as Ultra-orthodox ("Haredi"). On the

other hand, 11% of Arabs define their lifestyle as secular, about 57% traditional and about 31% religious/very religious (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

A few studies on MIL and its association with mental health and well-being have been conducted in Israel (Russo-Netzer, 2018; Shrir, Palgi, Ben-Ezra, & Shmotkin, 2011; Wilchek-Aviad, 2015). The findings of these studies were consistent with those obtained from other samples linking presence of MIL to desirable outcomes such as satisfaction in life, positive affect, lower levels of suicidal ideations and lower levels of depression and anxiety. Yet none of these studies compared between groups in the Israeli society in this regard. In addition, to our best knowledge, no study has yet examined religiousness levels as a: (a) predictor of presence and search for meaning; (b) moderator between presence of meaning and search for meaning and (c) moderator between both presence of meaning and search for meaning and indices of mental health and subjective well-being.

The proposition that religiousness could play an important role in shaping MIL and its relationship with mental health and well-being is based on the following theoretical and empirical grounds. First, social scientists of religion agree that religion is an important meaning-making system and framework (Krause, Hill, & Ironson, 2019; Park, Edmondson, & Hale-Smith, 2013). It could be that meaning emerges from participation in religious rituals (Schnell & Pali, 2013), in the process of developing a deep sense of commitment to religion (Galek, Flannelly, Ellison, Silton, & Jankowski, 2015), from adopting security-focused religious beliefs, such as the belief in a caring God who protects the believer (Van Tongeren, Davis, Hook, & Johnson, 2016), or by shaping and promoting personal goals (Emmons, 2005). Religion taps also into the three agreed-upon components of MIL, namely purpose (i.e. direction in life), significance or mattering (i.e. the degree to which the individual believes his/ her life is valuable and important) and coherence (i.e. a sense of predictability and routine in one's life) (George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016). Indeed, empirical studies have established strong ties between different forms of religiousness and MIL (Krause & Hayward, 2012; Park et al., 2013; Shiah, Chang, Chiang, Lin, & Tam, 2015; Tiliouine & Belgoumidi, 2009).

Second, religion tends to play an all-encompassing role in the lives of religious individuals. Religious doctrines provide answers to the "big questions" in life such as where we come from, how we should live our lives and what our fate will be after death (Baumeister, 1991; Park, 2005). Religion seems to colour the life of its adherents with a sense of purpose, significance and coherence. Hence, it could be that once the person commits him/herself to a religious way of life, s/he finds answers to all fundamental questions in life and in this case, s/he feels no need for further searching. On the other hand, it could be that for the less religious, or secular individuals, even if

it is present, MIL is not as absolute, definite or ultimate as that of religious ones, a stance that propels them to keep searching. This speculation is consistent with the argument that experiences like a religious conversion, which in some cases includes a transition from a secular to a religious way of life, stems from the need to find an ultimate MIL, so there will be no longer need to further search for meaning (Köse, 1999).

Third, religiously-based meaning might have an added value in enhancing the health and well-being of its adherents. This added value might be derived from the metaphysical or sacred elements that religious individuals incorporate into their lives, elements that are less stressed, or at times absent, from the lives of secular individuals.

Yet, despite of all these compelling factors, except of one study (Hicks & King, 2008), which found that religiousness moderated the link between MIL and both positive affect and mood, no study had examined the role of religiousness as a potential moderator in the links between search and presence of meaning and their links with well-being indicators. It should be noted that the above-mentioned study did not distinguish between search and presence of meaning and focused on Christians only.

### The current study

This study has four goals: (a) testing whether the factor structure of the theoretically and empirically based MLQ (Steger et al., 2006) is applicable to the Israeli population; (b) testing whether presence of meaning and search for meaning are related, and if so, to examine whether their relationship depends on religiousness level; (c) testing whether presence of meaning and search for meaning are predictive of satisfaction with life and depressive symptoms and (d) examining whether religiousness level is predictive of the two meaning factors (i.e. presence of meaning, search for meaning), and whether it plays a moderating effect of the links between presence of meaning and search for meaning, and between the two meaning factors and both satisfaction with life and depressive symptoms.

## METHOD

### Sample

The sample consisted of 559 Israeli citizens, 18-year-old or above, who participated in two different research projects, which tested different indices of health and well-being among Israelis. The average age of participants was 48.24 ( $SD = 22.83$ ,  $R = 18-94$ ). As for gender, 61.3% were female and the rest male. Concerning marital status, 48.6% were married, 38.2% were single, 6.1% were widowed, 4.6% were divorced/separated and

the rest indicated “other.” With respect to national origin, 65% indicated being Jewish, 30% Arabs and the rest indicated “other.” Regarding education, 7.1% remarked completing elementary school, 20.2% reported completing high school, 62.9% indicated attending college or university and the rest did not report their education level. As for religiousness level, participants were asked to indicate whether they consider themselves secular, traditional, religious or ultra-religious. Because only 3.5% of participants indicated being ultra-religious, we decided to combine it with the “religious” category and call it “religious” to allow for meaningful analyses. Following this procedure, 48.9% of participants indicated being secular, 31.1% being traditional and 19.9% being religious.

## Measures

### Meaning in life

MIL was assessed via the MLQ (Steger et al., 2006). This instrument consists of 10 items that assess both presence of meaning (e.g. “I understand my life’s meaning”) and search for meaning (e.g. “I am always looking to find my life’s purpose”). Participants rated each item on a 7-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). Item scores on each subscale were averaged. Higher scores on the presence of meaning subscale indicated greater presence of meaning, whereas higher scores on the search for meaning subscale indicated a greater search for meaning.

### Satisfaction with life

To measure satisfaction with life, the five-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) was used. An example of item in this scale is “the conditions of my life are excellent.” Participants rated their agreement level with each item on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The index was calculated by summing the scores in this scale, with higher scores indicating a greater sense of satisfaction with life. A Cronbach’s alpha of .84 was found for this scale in this investigation.

### Depressive symptoms

To assess depressive symptoms, the 10-item version of the Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (Andresen, Malmgren, Carter, & Patrick, 1994) was used. An example of item in this scale is “I was bothered by things that usually don’t bother me”. Participants indicated how often they have experienced each symptom in the past week on a 4-point scale ranging from *rarely/none of the time* (1) to *most/all of the time* (4). Two of these items “I was happy” were reversed scored. The index

was calculated by summing the scores in this scale, with higher scores indicating a greater sense of satisfaction with life. A Cronbach's alpha of .82 was found for this scale in this investigation.

## Procedure

All key scales utilised in this investigation were developed in English but were translated by the first author and his research team in previous research. The data for this study was obtained from two different projects, which were approved by the Ethics Committee of the first two authors' academic institute. These two projects used the same measures. In both projects, a combination of convenience and snowball sampling techniques were used to collect data. Jewish participants completed the study's questionnaires in Hebrew, and the Arab participants did so in Arabic. The data was collected by 37 students participating in two research seminar classes. Each student collected between 10 and 20 surveys in his/her area of residence. It should be noted that students came from all geographic parts of Israel (i.e. north, centre, south), which was translated into a heterogeneous sample. All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. All participants in this study were adults. Informed consent was obtained from all of them.

## RESULTS

### Factor structure of the MLQ

To test whether the two-factor structure of the MLQ (Steger et al., 2006) fits the data collected from the current sample, we used AMOS version 25 to perform a confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) both for the whole sample and for each religious group (i.e. secular, traditional, religious) separately. Table 1 displays the fit indices of each of these analyses.

All in all, the model showed a very good fit to the data for the whole sample and for each religious group separately. Cronbach's alphas were .80 and .89 for the search for meaning and presence of meaning subscales, respectively.

### Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics (i.e. number of participants, mean, standard deviation, range) of the study's main variables (i.e. presence of meaning, search for meaning, satisfaction with life and depressive symptoms) are presented in Table 2.

**TABLE 1**  
Model fit for the confirmatory factor analyses

Group/Fit indices	CMIN/df	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
Whole sample	1.341	.971	.052	.049
Secular	1.292	.963	.051	.052
Traditional	1.353	.972	.048	.050
Religious	1.273	.981	.037	.038

CMIN/DF, CMIN/df: minimum discrepancy per degree of freedom; RMSEA, Root mean square error of approximation; SRMR, standardized root mean square residual.

**TABLE 2**  
Descriptive statistics

Variable	N	M	SD	R
Existence of meaning	550	5.01	1.16	1–7
Search for meaning	552	4.48	1.52	1–7
Satisfaction with life	549	24.84	5.87	7–35
Depressive symptoms	548	18.68	6.00	10–38

Note: N = number of participants; M = Mean; SD = standard deviation; R = range.

**TABLE 3**  
Correlation matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Presence of meaning	1			
2. Search for meaning	.27**	1		
3. Satisfaction with life	.43**	.11**	1	
4. Depressive symptoms	-.23**	.06	-.46**	1

\*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ .

Dependent sample *t*-test analysis revealed that participants scored significantly higher on presence of meaning than on search for meaning ( $t_{543} = 7.27$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Independent samples *t*-test ( $t_{702} = 2.02$ ,  $p < .05$ ) revealed that this sample's participants scored significantly higher on presence of meaning ( $M = 5.01$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ,  $N = 550$ ) than participants in the validation study of the MLQ ( $M = 4.78$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ,  $N = 154$ ; Steger et al., 2006). On the other hand, no significant difference was found between this sample's participants and those in the validation study on their scores on search for meaning.

To test whether religiousness level predicted presence of meaning and search for meaning, we conducted further analyses. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that there were significant differences between the groups in their scores on presence of meaning,  $F(2, 546) = 3.41$ ,  $p < .01$ . Specifically, religious individuals ( $M = 5.28$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) scored significantly higher than secular individuals ( $M = 4.90$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) on presence of meaning. On the other hand, religiousness level did not appear as a significant predictor of search for meaning.

## Correlational analyses

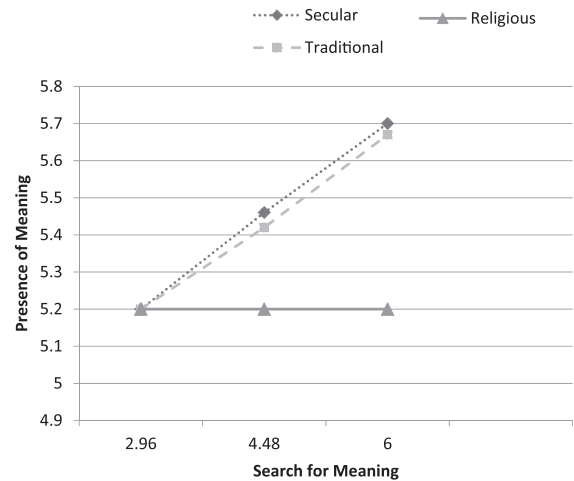
A correlation matrix including the study's main variables is displayed in Table 3. A significant positive correlation was found between presence of meaning and search for meaning. Though the magnitude of correlation differed, both presence of meaning and search for meaning correlated positively with satisfaction with life. On the other hand, depressive symptoms correlated negatively with presence of meaning, but were unrelated to search for meaning.

## Moderation analyses

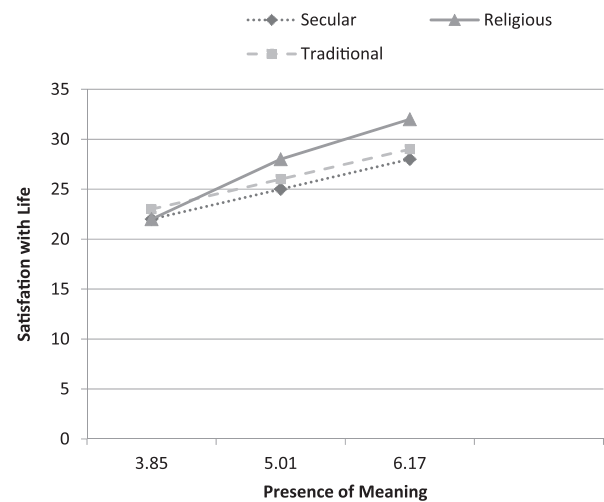
All the following analyses were performed using the SPSS's add-on PROCESS, developed by Hayes (2012).

To determine whether the link between presence of meaning and search of meaning is moderated by religiousness level, moderation analyses were performed. In these analyses, we entered presence of meaning as the dependent variable, search for meaning as the independent variable, religiousness level as a moderator and all other demographic variables (i.e. age, gender, marital status, education and nationality) as covariates. These analyses revealed that the interaction between search for meaning and religiousness level was significant,  $b = -.08$ ,  $t(536) = -2.21$ ,  $p < .01$ , in predicting presence of meaning. To determine the nature of this interaction, we calculated the correlation between search for meaning and presence of meaning separately for each of the three religious groups (i.e. secular, traditional, religious). These calculations revealed that whereas the magnitude and direction of correlation among secular ( $r = .31$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and traditional individuals ( $r = .29$ ,  $p < .01$ ) were similar to each other and the one obtained in the general sample, the correlation between presence of meaning and search for meaning was almost 0 ( $r = -.01$ ,  $ns$ ) among religious individuals. These results are displayed visually in Figure 1.

To determine whether the links between presence of meaning and satisfaction with life is moderated by religiousness level, moderation analyses were performed. In these analyses, we entered satisfaction with life as the dependent variable, presence of meaning as the independent variable, religiousness level as a moderator and search for meaning and all other demographic variables (i.e. age, gender, marital status, education and nationality) as covariates. The analyses revealed that the interaction between presence of meaning and religiousness level,  $b = .15$ ,  $t(536) = 2.61$ ,  $p < .01$ , was significant in predicting satisfaction with life. To determine the nature of this interaction, we calculated the correlation between presence of meaning and satisfaction with life separately for each of the three religious groups (i.e. secular, traditional and religious). These calculations revealed that whereas



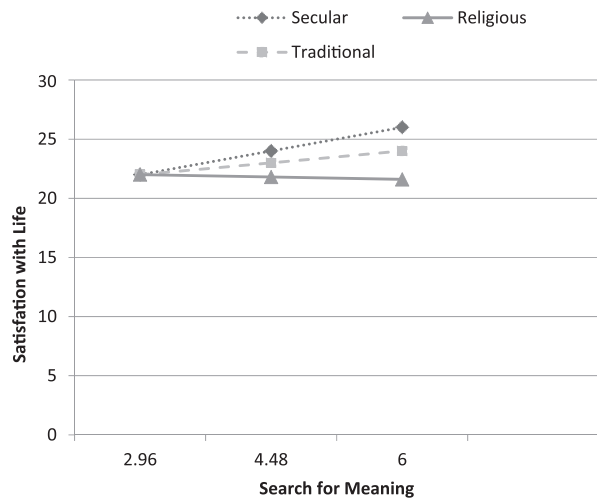
**Figure 1.** Simple slopes of presence of meaning on search for meaning for the three religiousness levels (i.e. religious, traditional and secular).



**Figure 2.** Simple slopes of satisfaction with life on presence of meaning for the three religiousness levels (i.e. religious, traditional and secular).

the magnitude and direction of correlation among secular ( $r = .37$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and traditional individuals ( $r = .42$ ,  $p < .01$ ) were similar to the one obtained in the general sample, the correlation between presence of meaning and satisfaction with life was much higher ( $r = .62$ ,  $p < .01$ ) among religious individuals. These results are displayed visually in Figure 2.

To determine whether the link between search for meaning and satisfaction with life is moderated by religiousness level, moderation analyses were performed. In these analyses, we entered satisfaction with life as the dependent variable, search for meaning as the independent variable, religiousness level as a moderator and presence of meaning and all other demographic variables (i.e. age, gender, marital status, education and nationality) as covariates. The analyses revealed the



**Figure 3.** Simple slopes of satisfaction with life on search for meaning for the three religiousness Levels (i.e. religious, traditional and secular).

interaction between search for meaning and religiousness level,  $b = -.07$ ,  $t(536) = 1.96$ ,  $p < .05$ , was significant in predicting satisfaction with life. To determine the nature of this interaction, we calculated the correlation between search for meaning and satisfaction with life separately for each of the three religious groups (i.e. secular, traditional and religious). These calculations revealed that this correlation was positive and significant among secular individuals ( $r = .15$ ,  $p < .05$ ), positive and insignificant among traditional individuals ( $r = .10$ ,  $ns$ ) and negative and insignificant among religious individuals ( $r = -.03$ ,  $ns$ ). These results are displayed visually in Figure 3.

To determine whether the link between presence of meaning and depressive symptoms is moderated by religiousness level, moderation analyses were performed. In these analyses, we entered depressive symptoms as the dependent variable, presence of meaning as the independent variable, religiousness level as a moderator, search for meaning and all other demographic variables (i.e. age, gender, marital status, education and nationality) as covariates. The analyses revealed that the interaction between presence of meaning and religiousness level was insignificant in predicting depressive symptoms.

Finally, to determine whether the link between search for meaning and depressive symptoms is moderated by religiousness level, moderation analyses were performed. In these analyses, we entered depressive symptoms as the dependent variable, search for meaning as the independent variable, religiousness level as a moderator and presence of meaning and all other demographic variables (i.e. age, gender, marital status, education and nationality) as covariates. The analyses revealed that the interaction between search for meaning and religiousness level was insignificant in predicting depressive symptoms.

## DISCUSSION

Four chief findings arose from the present study. First, the two-factor structure of the MLQ (Steger et al., 2006) demonstrated a very good fit to the data gathered from the present sample. This suggests that the theoretical basis of this measure (i.e. the distinction between presence of meaning and search for meaning) is also fitting to the Israeli population. This finding lends further support to the potential value of the MLQ as a tool for comparative studies of MIL and emphasises the cross-cultural, perhaps universal, nature of the theoretical distinction between presence of meaning and search of MIL.

Yet, though presence of meaning and search for meaning appeared as distinct factors, the correlational analysis revealed that they were positively correlated with each other. This finding indicates that for some individuals, both presence of meaning and search for meaning concurrently exist. Nuanced analyses pointed to the level of religiousness as a moderating factor between presence of meaning and search for meaning. Specifically, whereas among both secular and traditional individuals, a small-moderate correlation existed between presence of meaning and search for meaning, no correlation existed between these factors among religious individuals. In other words, a certain level of search for meaning is expected even in the presence of meaning among traditional and secular individuals, but among religious individuals, no search is to be expected if MIL is present. This fits well with the theoretical speculation that because of the all-encompassing role and ability to provide answers of the fundamental questions in life (Baumeister, 1991; Park, 2005), adopting a strict religious life renders the search for meaning unnecessary.

The second major finding of the study was that presence of MIL was positively linked to satisfaction with life and negatively linked to depressive symptoms. This finding is consistent with findings from numerous studies linking the presence of MIL with an enhanced sense of mental health and subjective well-being (Shrira et al., 2011; Steger et al., 2006; Steger et al., 2009). Yet the link between presence of meaning and satisfaction with life was significantly stronger among religious individuals than among their traditional and secular counterparts. This finding should be replicated in the Israeli and in other religious contexts, but it still suggests that religion might uniquely add to one's life satisfaction. This unique addition could be derived from metaphysical or sacred elements that a religious meaning-making offers, but secular meaning-making does not. This assertion is supported by empirical findings demonstrating that religious meaning-making (Park, 2005) and other forms of religious coping (Pargament, Magyar-Russell, & Murray-Swank, 2005) explain unique variance in

well-being, a variance that cannot be explained solely by “secular” methods of coping.

The study’s third main finding was that search for meaning correlated weakly but significantly with life satisfaction among secular individuals but was unrelated to satisfaction with life among religious ones. This finding could be explained by the prism through which secular and religious individuals view search for meaning. Given the presumably absolute nature of MIL, it seems that searching for meaning among religious individuals, while they are adhering to a religious system that apparently should colour their life with purpose and meaning, could be viewed unfavourably and be discouraged. On the other hand, one might expect that secular individuals who may perceive life as an active, on-going search of meaning, may view the process of searching for meaning as a more desirable process, something that could possibly contribute to life satisfaction among them.

Whatever the explanation for this finding is, the fact that the link between search for meaning and satisfaction with life was moderated by another factor (religiousness level in our case) may help clarify the inconsistency of findings of previous research regarding the role search for meaning plays in people’s lives. Specifically, the inclusion of religiousness in this study might be one explanation why searching for meaning in North American samples (Steger et al., 2006; Steger et al., 2009) is negatively associated with well-being indicators, yet in this sample and other Israeli samples (Russo-Netzer, 2018) was either not significantly correlated with them or was positively associated with some of them. It could be that if studies carried out among North American samples include religiousness, or other socio-cultural factors, as moderating mechanisms in the relationship between search for meaning and well-being, a different picture would emerge. At any rate, it seems that whereas the positive implications of presence of MIL are universal, those of search for meaning are more particularistic, and hence should be studied within a wide context while taking a variety of factors into account.

This leads us to the final major finding of the study. Search for meaning, which was positively linked to satisfaction with life, was not related to depressive symptoms neither directly nor in a moderated fashion via religiousness level. This finding suggests two things. First, it seems that when it comes to the health and well-being of Israelis, search for meaning does not have positive or negative implications; it is just “neutral.” Second, whereas religiousness level appeared as a moderator between both meaning factors (i.e. presence of meaning, search for meaning) and satisfaction with life, it did not play a moderating effect between these two factors and depressive symptoms. This finding can be explained by the fact that religiousness level appeared as a significant predictor of

satisfaction of life in this study, and as an insignificant predictor of depressive symptoms. This finding is consistent with findings of previous studies which linked religiousness more strongly to subjective well-being indicators (e.g. life satisfaction, positive and negative affect) than to mental health criteria (e.g. depression, anxiety) among both Israeli samples (Abu-Raiya, Sasson, Pargament, & Rosmarin, 2020; Russo-Netzer, 2018) and non-Israeli ones (for review, see Hood Jr, Hill, & Spilka, 2018). This finding suggests that whereas religion, at least in the Israeli context, might help its adherents to develop a general positive stance about their lives, it is unrelated to more specific behaviours and cognitions that are constitutive of mental health conditions. In other words, religious beliefs and practices might lead to a better subjective perception of life, but they are less related to more objectively defined or behavioural mental health conditions (i.e. depressive symptoms). Future studies may need to consider depression with different sources, that is, depression which is more cognitive-existential oriented (i.e. rooted in lack of meaning) and depression which probably reflects characteristics of an affective disorder.

### Implications for theory and research

The findings of the current investigation have three important implications for theory and research. First, taken with the findings of previous studies conducted among different groups and cultures (Oishi & Diener, 2013; Steger et al., 2008; Steger et al., 2009), the findings of the current investigation suggest that there is perhaps a universal applicability of the distinction between presence of meaning and search for meaning, encouraging its further use in future research with diverse populations. Second, the finding that there are cultural aspects which play an intervening role between both presence and search for MIL, and between them and satisfaction with life, accentuates the need for studying MIL and the MIL–life satisfaction connection within a socio-cultural context. Third, and perhaps more importantly, the findings imply that an important factor that should be taken into account when studying MIL and its connections with subjective well-being is the level of religiousness. This factor predicted levels of presence of MIL; moderated the links between presence of meaning and search for meaning; and moderated the links between presence of meaning and search of meaning and life satisfaction. In short, many of the study’s findings could not have been meaningfully comprehended without paying attention to religiousness level. Future research could determine whether this pattern of findings is unique to the Israeli context, or it can be applied to other sociocultural contexts as well. Yet we would like to tentatively submit, that when studying MIL, it might be useful to make the distinction between “religious meaning” and “secular meaning” which could vary



in their origins, underlying mechanisms of action, and consequences.

### Limitations and future directions for research

Though promising, the findings of the present study should be considered in light of the following shortcomings. First, the findings of the study are cross-sectional, and as such, they do not allow us to infer causality. For example, higher levels of presence of MIL/search for meaning might be the end-result as well as the cause of greater/lower satisfaction with life/depressive symptoms. One route that might be useful in addressing this limitation is the utilisation of longitudinal studies that assess all of the study's variables at least at two time points. Second, the lack of randomness in selecting the sample does not allow us to generalise the findings to the larger population Israeli population. Hence, there is a need in future research for a representative sample of Israeli adults for the findings to be replicated and more generalizable. Finally, only single index of subjective well-being (i.e. satisfaction with life), and single index of mental health (i.e. depressive symptoms) were used in this study. Further indices of subjective well-being (e.g. positive and negative affect) and mental health (i.e. anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder) should be used in future research.

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