Title

**Women’s Spiritual Tourism: Thematic Analysis of Semi-Structured Interviews with Israeli Women Who Traveled to Uman**

**Abstract**

Although spiritual tourism is an increasingly important niche within the global tourism market, women’s spiritual tourism has received little scholarly attention. This paper addresses this gap by examining the motivations for and impact of spiritual journeys by Israeli women to an important Jewish site in Uman, Ukraine. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 15 Israeli women who visited Uman. Thematic analysis was performed to analyze the interviewees’ motives and experiences, as well as the spiritual and social impacts of their journey. The journey to Uman was a means of seeking spiritual and personal transformation that situated interviewees at the center of a powerful religious and spiritual experience. The study expands upon existing scholarship on spiritual tourism, with particular emphasis on women’s experiences, presenting fresh perspectives on the significance of spiritual journeys for women’s lives and contemporary society. It sheds light on the social, cultural, and personal impacts of religious and spiritual tourism to understand the motivations of women tourists. The study offers theoretical and practical insights into the evolving role of women in spiritual tourism and provides recommendations for next-step research.

Keywords: spiritual tourism; pilgrimage; women’s experiences; Rabbi Nachman of Breslov; personal transformation.

“Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all.” (Proverbs 31:29, NIV)

**Introduction**

Spiritual tourism is a significant niche in the global tourism industry. Each year, some 600 million spiritual journeys are made worldwide (Manufahi & Iichaou, 2019). This trend has attracted significant scholarly interest in recent decades. Jewish pilgrimage to the tomb of Rabbi Nachman in Uman, Ukraine, is part of this burgeoning global trend, with increasing numbers of Jewish women making spiritual journeys there. In Israel, women’s spiritual tourism brings together a wide socioeconomic and religious spectrum of women who travel to religious sites abroad, often while observing Jewish dietary, Sabbath, and modesty rules.

Women’s tourism is a complex phenomenon. It is deeply influenced by social norms, aspirations for change and liberation, and the evolving nature of travel in the digital age (Nikjoo et al., 2021). It has attracted increasing scholarly attention over recent decades due to the recognition that women’s encounters with tourism involve distinct experiences, motivations, and patterns. This study addresses several lacunae in the literature. Most scholarship on religious pilgrimage focuses on male experiences (Marchenko, 2018). Research examining the intersection of spiritual tourism and gender is limited (Junek, 2006). Women’s increased participation in religious and spiritual tourism indicates broader shifts within religious communities (Quinn & Smith, 2022). Understanding the motivations and experiences of women undertaking a spiritual journey to Uman and the impact of the journey on their lives can help shed fresh light on evolving norms, beliefs, and customs among religious communities. From a Jewish perspective, pilgrimage to Uman has been male-dominated (Feldman, 2022). The growing number of Jewish women visiting Uman reflects a broader cultural shift in the Jewish-religious world, including the evolving roles of women in Hasidic communities. However, Jewish women’s spiritual tourism has received scant academic attention. Exploring women’s experiences of pilgrimage to Uman thus contributes to our understanding of spiritual journeys and challenges traditional patriarchal narratives.

The primary aim of this study is to understand Israeli women’s motivations for undertaking a spiritual journey to Uman, their emotions regarding the journey, and its short- and longer-term impacts on their social and emotional well-being.

**Literature review**

***Spiritual tourism***

Spiritual tourism is tourism that centers on a conscious project of spiritual improvement (Norman, 2011). Vukonić (1996) defines spiritual tourism as including traditional pilgrimages to religious sites and introspective personal journeys. Pilgrimage has a spiritual meaning and symbolic value. Pilgrims travel away from their homes to get closer to the foundations of their faith. The act is physical, but the goal is spiritual (Limor et al., 2014). Pilgrimages usually have three main stages: (1) separation and detachment from home and community; (2) the liminal phase, which occurs during the journey and the stay at the holy site; and (3) returning home and reconnecting with family and community (Turner, 1979). The second phase is the most significant and includes relinquishing social shackles, strong feelings of fraternity between co-travelers (*communitas*), and a tendency toward ascetic behavior and soul-searching. The pilgrimage experience is outside the pilgrim’s daily boundaries, and he behaves accordingly (Turner, 1973).

Contemporary spiritual tourism moves beyond pilgrimage to include various forms of profound searching for spiritual growth, self-fulfillment, and inner peace (Smith & Kelly, 2006). It has been bolstered by the decline in religious adherence and abandonment of formal religious institutions in the West, which has sparked a rise in personal spiritual fulfillment (Sharpley, 2016). Spiritual tourism is broad and can include holistic retreats like yoga, meditation, and mindfulness practices (“wellness tourism”), which help attendees connect with their inner selves, away from the chaos of modern life (Bone, 2013), and visits to sacred sites by nonreligious tourists motivated by curiosity, historical interest, or a search for inner peace (Shackley, 2005). Spiritual tourism has significant economic implications. Religious and spiritual attractions create jobs and boost local businesses (Egresi et al., 2012; Vukonić, 1996)

Spiritual tourists have diverse motivations. Dowson et al. (2019) identified five categories of spiritual tourists: (1) *Purposeful*, whose primary goal is spiritual and personal development; (2) *Sightseeing*, whose motivation is a search for spiritual growth, but places more emphasis on touring sites; (3) *Casual*, for whom personal development is a minor motivation; (4) *Incidental*, where spiritual growth has no influence on their decision to travel; and (5) *Serendipitous*, who did not consider spiritual development when deciding to travel, but by chance had a profound spiritual experience. Push factors for spiritual tourism include escaping routine, relieving stress, alleviating boredom, expanding cultural knowledge, seeking new experiences, and pursuing adventure (Matheson et al., 2014), a desire for personal growth and self-discovery, a search for meaning in life, emotional, physical, or spiritual healing and renewal, and an escape from Western materialism in favor of inner values (Haq & Jackson, 2009). Materialistic lifestyles, shifts in social values, lack of interpersonal trust, societal alienation, stressful urban living, mundane lives, hard work, loss of hope, routine social lives, and the decline of communities and traditions are also drivers of spiritual tourism (Güzel & Sariyildiz, 2019).

***Women’s tourism***

Women’s tourism has grown significantly since the early 2000s. In the United States, the number of solo trips taken by women increased by 45% between 2015 and 2017 (Karagöz et al., 2021). Key trends contributing to this rise include changes in family dynamics and attitudes toward women’s roles in family and society. Women’s solo travel is not seen only as a personal choice but as a political act that contravenes traditional gender norms (Yang et al., 2017). Improved economic capabilities and spousal support have also contributed to the rise in female tourism (Chiang & Jogaratnam, 2006). As more women enter the global workforce, their economic independence has translated into increased tourism and leisure spending (Swain, 1995). Online platforms like TripAdvisor and Airbnb provide previously unavailable information, reviews, and connection opportunities, making it easier for women to travel independently.

Women’s tourism contributes to women’s well-being. Women who travel are more physically active, more independent, dedicate more time to emotional and spiritual development, and experience a sense of authenticity compared to those who do not (Berdychevsky et al., 2013). For many women, trips, especially in nature, are journeys of self-discovery, empowerment, and personal growth. Dealing with travel challenges can enhance women’s self-esteem and confidence (Hosseini et al., 2022). Travel can serve as part of a healing process for women following trauma such as divorce, bereavement, or personal crisis, providing space for introspection, integration, and emotional healing (Poitevien, 2022).

**Spiritual tourism to Uman**

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810) was the founder and leader of the Breslov Hasidic movement. He was the sect’s sole spiritual leader and had no successor (Bar-Lev, 2017). Nachman moved to Uman before his death, choosing it as his burial place out of a belief that it was a gateway, or portal, for cleansing impure energy. Since Nachman’s death, Hasidic Jews (“Hasidim”) and other believers have made pilgrimages to his tomb. Tens of thousands of visitors visit each year. The pilgrimage reaches its peak at Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year), with around 40,000 Hasidic Jewish visitors, mostly men (Akao, 2007).

A study of male Breslov Hasidim from the United States (Marchenko, 2018) found that motivations for pilgrimage to Nachman’s tomb included general interest and curiosity, as well as a desire for a pleasant trip with good companions from the community. Many pilgrims faced a significant life change or important decision. Traveling to a new environment helped them break from their daily religious routine while remaining within the boundaries of their faith and community. The pilgrimage had a positive impact on pilgrims’ home lives, families, and parenting. Israeli male pilgrims to Uman expressed similar motivations (Weinstock, 2010). Male Hasidim from the United States who visited Uman were content to conduct their visit within a “bubble” around the tomb (Marchenko, 2018), which replicated community life back home, including kosher food and modest dress. Uman’s cafes, downtown, and heritage sites did not serve as tourist sites for these travelers (Marchenko, 2014).

**Methods**

This is an exploratory study. It uses a qualitative research approach to explore the experiences of the study participants. Qualitative methods permit the full range of views and perspectives of participants on the research topic to be explored in greater depth and detail (Cresswell, 2003) and are especially useful for studies focusing on personal and sensitive issues (Small & Darcy, 2011).

***Study population and sample***

The study population includes Israeli Jewish women aged over 18 who have visited Uman at least once in the last 10 years. Participants were recruited via the lead investigator’s social networks using the snowball technique. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling technique used primarily in qualitative research to locate and recruit participants. It is effective in cases where participants are required to be willing to discuss deep emotions and personal experiences (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Initial participants were asked to recommend further participants from among their acquaintances at school, work, local community, and from previous trips to Uman. Interviews were conducted until no further relevant information was forthcoming, and the main themes that emerged began to repeat themselves. The final sample consisted of 15 participants (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Profile of the Participants (Interviewees)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Name\* | Age | Personal Status | Profession | No. Trips to Uman |
| Nitzana | 40 | Married, 5 children | Playwriting and screenwriting | 1 |
| Anat | 33 | Single | Events and wedding planner | 1 |
| Meirav | 51 | Divorced, 2 children | Owns an office supplies company | 2 |
| Levana | ~40 | Single | Teacher | 1 |
| Liat | ~60 | Married, 3 children, 4 grandchildren | Medium | 15 |
| Tova | 27 | Single | Works for the National Insurance Institute | 1 |
| Hana | 65 | Married, 4 children, 3 grandchildren | Nurse and alternative therapist | 3 |
| Aviva | ~30 | Married, 2 children | Homemaker | 2 |
| Drora | 29 | Single | Art therapy student | 4 |
| Dorit | 35 | Married, 1 child | Social worker | 1 |
| Avigail | 52  | Married, 1 child | Artist and poet | 1 |
| Gail | 58 | Married, 3 children | Holistic medicine practitioner | 1 |
| Tamar | 24 | Single | Teacher | 15 |
| Revital | 48 | Married, 5 children, 4 grandchildren | Transcriber | 4 |
| Rivka | ~50 | Married, 2 children, 3 grandchildren | X-ray technician and coach | 1 |

\*All names used are pseudonyms.

***Research tools and analysis***

This study uses semi-structured in-depth interviews, a qualitative research method with a flexible interview protocol. This approach provides a framework for collecting information from participants, where conversations flow naturally, and participants share their perspectives and stories in their own words. Following Galletta (2013), several questions (discussion points) were prepared in advance, but the interviewer took the liberty to deviate from these to explore topics more deeply, clarify responses, or develop unexpected topics to explore participants’ individual experiences, beliefs, or perceptions.

Participants were asked to describe their journey to Uman in detail in their own words, including their motivations for making the trip, the reactions of their immediate social circles, and the impact of the visit on their quality of life. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. Interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed. To ensure participants’ anonymity, all recordings were deleted after being transcribed and analyzed, and interviews are not presented in full in the findings section. Interview transcripts were thoroughly analyzed using thematic analysis to compile and categorize textual segments that represented themes or specific patterns emerging from the participants’ statements (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Findings**

Thematic analysis identified several common threads and prominent trends relating to the interviewees’ personal and collective experiences before, during, and after the trip to Uman, including: motivations, experiences of the trip itself, thoughts and feelings about the tourist experience in Uman, longer-term impacts of the trip, and the reactions of participants’ close social circles.

***Motivations for visiting Uman***

For most participants, there was a significant element of spontaneity around their initial decision to visit Uman, which often followed encouragement from their close social circle or a partner or a sudden, unexplained impulse. Some participants have an observant or ultra-Orthodox background (although some became Orthodox later in life), and some enjoy a spiritual lifestyle (undertake regular spiritual leisure activities like channeling, meditation, mindfulness, etc.). Hence, their journeys to Uman were not entirely disconnected from their personal contexts. “Hana” reported that:

I was connected to this amazing Rabbanit[[1]](#footnote-1). I followed her to all kinds of healing treatments, and she told me she was going to Uman with a group of 10 women, and she recommended I come with. I just told her yes, I don’t know what [laughs], how it happened. Because I don’t travel anywhere without my husband. And – that was that, I just went with her.

This spontaneity, combined with spiritual and inner processes that the participants were experiencing at the time, prompted them to “take the leap” and travel to Uman. “Avigail” decided to visit Uman after seeing an advertisement for a trip:

It caught me at a particular moment in time, and something inside me opened up to the world of Hasidism, even though I didn’t know much about it. It just hit me that way…I don’t have that much of a logical explanation for this choice. I talked to some good friends, and asked if they wanted to join me on the trip. Just like that, without giving it that much thought. I distinctly remember it wasn’t even all that clear to me why I was taking this step… I’m not a halachic woman but I see myself as very spiritual, in this process of faith that is getting stronger and stronger, so it felt right for me. But you can definitely see it as one of those spontaneous unconscious choices…

Often, the catalyst for the interviewees embarking on a spiritual journey is a search for comfort, meaning, and understanding during times of trauma or crisis. A spiritual journey can offer a space for tranquility and relaxation, a place to process pain and trauma, and an opportunity to find inner peace. The decision to undertake a spiritual journey to Uman allowed the participants to address existential questions in a supportive environment and seek answers in tradition while gaining a new perspective on life, discovering fresh insights, and undergoing personal transformation. “Gail’s” decision to visit Uman came when she was separated from her son, who was serving on the frontlines as an IDF combat soldier:

Toward the end, I felt like I was done. I had no strength left. I don’t even know how it came out of my mouth, but I announced that I was making a vow to visit Rabbi Nachman. I said I wanted to see my son healthy, standing on his own two feet, to feel him and hug him, and I made a vow that if that happened, I’d go visit Rabbi Nachman. I cried out to the heavens, ‘Please, Rabbi Nachman, help me!’ Two days later, on Friday night, Itay called and he was okay and they were crossing back into Israel. The next day, I went to visit Itay. I said, well, I made a vow, so I’m going…

Some decisions to visit Uman, while having a significant element of spontaneity, were nonetheless purposeful, often connected with frustrations about late singlehood or difficulties conceiving a child. “Dorit,” for example, describes wanting to “do something” about her difficulty finding a partner:

I wanted to tell myself I’d made an effort…Anyway, the trip didn’t require me to do anything too complicated, because it was at a convenient time and I also found a travel partner easily. So, I said, let’s go…let’s give it a shot. I’ve got nothing to lose.

Similarly, “Drora” said: “All the times I went to Uman…it was actually from a place where I wanted some sort of change in my life…whether it was a relationship issue or another emotional difficulty I was feeling at that time.”

Most participants had high expectations before the trip for spiritual salvation and life-changing experiences. They believed the unique holy energy attributed to Rabbi Nachman’s tomb could bring healing, relief, renewal, or change. They hoped for profound and intense experiences – spiritual awakening, novel insights, and a sense of connection with the divine and the universe. “Anat” felt:

A certain need for renewal…and I thought that traveling to Uman was the right solution, because it’s well-known that many people go there and pray and their prayers get answered. I thought it would open the window of renewal that I was seeking back then.

Similarly, “Tamar” stressed that “there’s this expectation that something will open up for you there…that you won’t go and come back the same. That you’ll feel you are getting closer.”

Rather than conventional tourist motives, like entertainment, shopping, and other pleasures, the participants were focused on a deeper spiritual goal. They sought to connect with something greater than themselves, bolster their faith, and experience moments of transcendence. “Dorit” explained:

I wanted the trip to have meaning…there was a purpose to it. It wasn’t just a trip to have fun or to see some local folklore, not at all. It was to dedicate ourselves to prayer and something more spiritual, and to come back different from how we’d been before. We didn’t even include any nature trips or anything like that, although we did wind up going to this mall in Kyiv for like half an hour, but that was incidental.

Some participants only became aware of their expectations for the trip after returning home. “Avigail” said:

I don’t think I had any conscious expectations. A trip with friends, it’ll be fun. But I think, if you’d have grabbed me then and asked me, and I’d have reflected a bit, I think there was actually a quiet expectation for some sort of inner revelation…some deep impact from the prayer. Because if, for example, my friends were going to Greece, I wouldn’t have gone with them. My decision to go was related to the fact that it was a journey to the cradle of Hasidism…so there were definitely quiet expectations.

**The spiritual journey to Uman**

Participants related a wide range of personal reactions and experiences associated with their spiritual journey to Uman, reflecting the unique ways in which each contended with her quest for spiritual meaning. For many participants, the trip lived up to their high expectations. It proved an intensely powerful, significant spiritual journey that provided a sense of transcendence and a profound spiritual connection. These spiritual experiences were often accompanied by feelings of belonging and acceptance, which the participants perceived as being critical at that point in their lives. However, for some, acclimatizing to the unique atmosphere of Uman and connecting spiritually to the experience took time – sometimes even several return trips. Others had experiences in Uman that did not meet their spiritual expectations, causing disappointment. T. “Gail” describes her intense spiritual experiences in Uman:

At some point I felt like there was some sort of pipe above my head that was just washing me and cleansing all the fear, despair, and disbelief…I felt this pipe of light was purging me of prejudices and traumas. I felt enveloped in light. It was one of the strongest spiritual experiences of my life. I felt that I was sort of coming home to meet myself. Not me as a mom, not me as a woman, not me as Gail, but connecting to my greater existence.

Geographical distance from Israel and the distractions of their daily routines – news from Israel, cellphones, laptops, work, family – afforded participants the opportunity for a profound spiritual connection that would be impossible in their ordinary lives. The trip to Uman was seen as a journey through time and space – a “time and space capsule” where participants could disconnect from everyday reality, temporarily release themselves from the mental and emotional burdens of daily life, and become immersed in a different time and place. This significantly enhanced their spiritual experience, providing them with a “safe space” for introspection and a deeper connection to themselves and spirituality. “Anat” explained:

When I got into the taxi on my way to Uman, I remember really having tears in my eyes, like I was really crying on my way there, because I felt…it saddened me that I had to travel all the way to Uman to pray or find the renewal I sought. Looking back, I understood why this was something that could only happen in Uman and not in Israel. In Israel, no matter how much I’d pray, I’d still be tied to my phone, the news, my environment, in a place I know and the people around me. There, in Uman, there was none of that. Most of the time, I was truly in a state of contemplation, prayer, and writing…that couldn’t happen anywhere else.

Some participants wanted better material conditions in Uman, or for some traditional tourist activities to be included (although these were secondary to the spiritual aspects of the journey). However, a clear distinction emerged between the trip to Uman and other tourist experiences. Material conditions that would be perceived as inadequate or challenging on ordinary vacations were seen as integral to the Uman trip, even contributing to the intensity of the spiritual experience. The modest and simple conditions did not diminish the participants’ spiritual experiences, but sometimes made them feel they were undergoing a test of faith. This led to a deeper understanding of the self and the spiritual connection they sought. “Revital” said:

On a regular vacation, it’s obvious [I expect good conditions] because that’s what I’m paying for…here it’s different. I don’t expect a physical experience, but a spiritual one. That’s the difference. I still want a decent hotel and not a neglected one, but it’s less important to me than the spiritual experience. I come to get spiritual value, and physical conditions like bedding and food are less important to me. On a regular trip, I get to enjoy myself, but here it’s different. It’s not pleasure for the body at all…in Uman you switch off from all your concerns, they don’t even exist. You’re in another world, not connected to physical stuff at all. Food is secondary, sleep is secondary…

The process of spiritual connection in Uman was not always easy or immediate. It required a willingness to explore and address the inner self in a new way. Often, participants had to tackle feelings of embarrassment, release prejudices, and overcome mental and perceptual barriers to open up to a deep spiritual experience. This was a journey of self-discovery and connection, where confronting personal barriers deepened the spiritual experience. At the start of her visit, “Rivka” felt awkward and alienated, which made her judgmental and closed off. Only after shedding her judgmental attitude and overcoming her inhibitions did she feel a sense of connection and inner peace:

[At the start of the visit I saw] all kinds of prostrations on the tomb and women weeping and I couldn’t feel anything about that. I had a hard time connecting with that. After a while, I started to feel some sort of spark, not because I forced myself, but because I wanted to let myself break free and experience something different. I began to feel this fresh, pure place. You feel the tears, the laughter, from the bottom of your heart. You feel it’s real, and I really wanted to let myself touch it.

**Experiencing “femaleness” in Uman**

Femaleness was central to participants’ personal and collective experiences in Uman. The bonds of sisterhood and mutual support forged among women during the journey played an important role in shaping and enhancing participants’ overall experiences. The all-female atmosphere meant participants could focus on their personal needs and desires, including aspirations for a relationship, a family and children, or concern for family members. All-female activities like listening circles, communal prayer, and group singing, provided a safe and supportive space for women to express themselves, share experiences, and receive support from a sympathetic community. It allows women to experience a deeper connection to themselves and the wider female community. This experience was centered on the creation of a shared female space underpinned by mutual support, understanding, and love. “Avigail” said:

A whole new world of women opened up to me – so smart, deep, inquisitive…and innovative, and brave! These women enriched my world, and I saw the world in a way that brought me so much comfort and light. Women who are prepared to reflect together, practice deep listening, and hear every opinion and perspective. They’re willing to see the possibility that I’m spiritual but not observant… some women told me that I strengthened their faith…for me, that’s amazing. This openness is incredible.

Participants who traveled to Uman on organized tours noted the significant experience of sisterhood – mutual support, understanding, and deep bonds – that developed within their group, which had a positive and significant effect on the spiritual element of their journey. Emotional and spiritual sharing created a collective experience, where participants became part of a supportive and nurturing female community. According to “Revital,” “Women have the power of connection simply because they are women…women feel safe with each other and share personal stuff. Talking late into the night and not going to sleep at all.”

The all-female atmosphere created an inclusive, safe, and non-judgmental environment for women from diverse backgrounds and religious streams. Participants felt a sense of belonging and acceptance regardless of origin, faith, or life views. “Rivka” said:

I was privileged to share a room with this special woman and we stayed up all night. We just had this crazy out-of-body experience. I felt it was a space without judgment, and that there was a place for everyone…for observant women and those who are less so, for women who cover their hair and women who don’t. Everything was goodhearted.

Despite these descriptions of rich and empowering female experiences in Uman, the tomb of Rabbi Nachman is often perceived as a masculine and traditional sacred space. This is especially the case during the Rosh Hashanah holiday when the tomb complex is packed with Breslov Hasidim and other believers. The large crowds and strict religious atmosphere create an ambiance where the presence of women is not always welcomed. There is no specific prohibition on women visiting Uman at Rosh Hashanah. However, the prevailing perception is that the presence of women is inconsistent with the modesty necessitated by the holiness of the holiday and the tomb, particularly because of the large crowds of male visitors. This may make it challenging for women to experience the site in their own ways. “Aviva” described her experiences in Uman on the eve of Rosh Hashanah:

There were no other women there, and there were also some unpleasant incidents…stalls that refused to sell me things, people who made unpleasant remarks to me, but this didn’t really affect me all that much. I was very focused on myself and my experience.

**Effects of the journey to Uman**

Participants reported deep and lasting effects of their trip to Uman. For some, these resulted in positive, dramatic life changes like finding a partner or becoming a mother. These are described as personal salvations that occurred after visiting and praying at Rabbi Nachman’s tomb. Other profound experiences included a revitalized connection to Jewish heritage, a more positive and open approach to life, and being less critical of themselves and others. Although lasting just a few days, the journey was a spiritual “leap” that, for some, was a source of lasting inspiration, and emotional and spiritual support. “Tamar” said the trip “stayed with her” for a long time, and was “like a sort of box that you can just open and breathe the moments you had there, close it and keep going. [Like] a very meaningful gas station.”

“Liat” reported:

I know I came back from Uman much calmer, much more relaxed. Much more accepting. I don’t know…when you get back from Uman, there’s a different sort of light inside you. When you get back from Uman, you go through customs at the airport. There’s a sort of secret competition among the customs officers to spot who’s returning from Uman. They reckon there’s a different light in the faces of people coming back from Uman. They often stop people and ask, ‘You were in Uman, right?’

Sometimes, the effects of the spiritual journey to Uman found expression in attempts to bolster a connection with Judaism by deepening observance of *mitzvot* (Jewish commandments), expanding knowledge through study, and increasing participation in religious activities. One of the most noticeable spiritual changes was a deepening interest in learning about and exploring Hasidic Judaism and the lives of the *tzaddikim* (righteous Jews). This interest was not only theoretical but impacted participants’ daily behaviors and personal and social choices. They gained a stronger connection to Jewish tradition and heritage and discovered greater value in spiritual life. “Avigail” said:

I only became aware of the impact [of the trip] after a while…because right after I got back – it was wonderful, amazing, but I got on with my life without paying much attention. It took me a while to notice that something from that spirit, something my soul had encountered, was continuing to work inside me. I noticed that something in my speech had changed. I noticed I wanted to go…. read about Hasidism, meet *tzaddikim,* and hear about them. I noticed I was taking part in more panels and conferences in the religious community. Later, I noticed that something was changing in my perspective, in my outlook. In my choices. I’m not observant, but suddenly, I didn’t want to travel on Shabbat…My Jewish identity expanded, not because someone imposed it on me. Something inside me said – ‘yes, being Jewish is part of your identity.’

However, many participants did not experience fundamental changes or personal breakthroughs immediately after returning from Uman. “Drora” reported that, despite high expectations for changes in her personal life after the trip, “nothing happened, everything seemed the same. At least for me…[looking back] today, it seems very naïve and detached to me [to think that something would happen after the visit]. I’m not in that place today.”

“Dorit’s” experience also stands out:

I don’t know if the visit made any significant contribution to me, although I’m glad I visited Uman. The truth is, two of my friends from the flight got engaged and married a few months after the trip, but for me apparently, it didn’t work that fast...like, it just took a bit longer. So, I didn’t feel like it changed anything in my life at the time, let’s say for two or three years after the trip. I also can’t say it's what made me get married four years later… I don’t see a direct connection.

**Stereotypes and social reactions**

Participants reported various reactions from their immediate social circles regarding their journey to Uman. Some enjoyed support and acceptance, while others encountered condescension and criticism. “Rivka’s” social circle was divided between those who saw her trip as some bizarre act of idolatry and those who saw it as a wonderous contact with the sublime. Concerns about negative reactions from friends, colleagues, and relatives led some women to conceal or play down that the real purpose of their trip was a pilgrimage to Rabbi Nachman’s tomb. Participants had to deal with these reactions against a background of stereotypes and prejudices about Uman pilgrims, who are sometimes seen as extremists, cultists, or just “crazy”. Those who were aware of these stereotypes found themselves embroiled in a cultural and social battle to defend their choices and the personal and spiritual meanings they attributed to their trip. “Meirav” shared:

My family thought something was wrong – why is she going there? My daughters understand. My girls know it’s important to me. I didn’t mention Uman at all at work, I said I was going on a trip to Ukraine. I didn’t talk about *tzaddikim* and all that…it wouldn’t be accepted, they wouldn’t get it, and I don’t want to be in a position of having to explain it. I didn’t feel…let me put it this way – I didn’t feel the need to share. Even when I got back, they asked me what Ukraine was like and I said it was really nice and the scenery was really pretty. That’s what I shared – the scenery is lovely.

Some participants partially internalized these negative stereotypes. “Drora” was highly critical of pilgrimage to Uman, despite having traveled there four times. Her case illustrates the tension between the desire to maintain authenticity and the need to contend with others’ perceptions:

I’m generalizing and being harsh now…but it’s true. There is a stereotype about women who travel to Uman…that they are women in distress or seeking salvation, that Rebbe Nachman will redeem them. Then some charismatic person comes along and tells them, ‘Come on, there’s this group, you’ll witness miracles, you’ll feel amazing sensations, you’ll be on a spiritual high…’ Then they bake *challah* and you’re sort of high…and you believe and get into it because you want to cling to something, something that can help you…there’s some truth in this stereotype, because at the end of the day, to believe in it and connect to it, you need to be in a certain situation in life and a certain mental state, and it attracts certain people in certain situations. It’s no coincidence that you get to the tomb and see all kinds of bewildered women.

**Discussion and conclusions**

The spiritual journey to Uman was a significant experience that offered the participants of this study the opportunity to strengthen their religious and personal identities. The study shows how the journey contributed to a sense of community and belonging among them, and the different ways in which they addressed associated social and personal challenges. It allowed them to express their thoughts and feelings in a supportive and inspiring environment, helping them explore and deepen their connection with spirituality and themselves. The participants’ unique reactions to the journey, from feelings of transcendence and belonging to disappointment, indicate the multifaceted, pluralistic nature of spiritual experiences and the search for meaning, and reinforce the need to treat each spiritual journey as a personal and unique experience.

The findings of this study emphasize the importance of exploring women’s experiences of spiritual journeys to understand the unique dynamics and internal processes that women undergo on these journeys. Women-only activities, like listening circles and prayer groups, provided a safe and supportive space for women to express themselves and experience a deep connection to themselves and the community. These insights provide a deeper understanding of the need to develop programs and policies that support women’s spiritual experiences and include women’s perspectives in spiritual tourism research and practice.

The study’s findings corroborate previous work showing how spiritual tourism extends beyond classical pilgrimage or religious tourism to encompass a deeply personal search for spiritual growth, self-fulfillment, and inner peace (Smith & Kelly, 2006). Nachman’s tomb, an Orthodox Jewish religious site, had an alternative spiritual function for the participants, allowing them to reconnect to themselves away from the chaos of everyday life.

Following Dowson et al. (2019), the participants can be considered “purposeful” spiritual tourists. Their main motivation for visiting Uman was to strengthen their spiritual and personal development, and typical tourist experiences, such as entertainment and culture, were secondary to their spiritual quest and often did not form a significant element of their trip.

Like a retreat, which offers solitude and inner focus (Bone, 2013), the journey to Uman enabled participants to connect to their inner selves and disconnect from modern life. However, unlike retreats, which are usually held in quiet and peaceful natural environments, Nachman’s tomb and the crowded communal space of Uman facilitate a different experience. There, disconnection from the everyday occurs through traditional Jewish communal life (and for the women also the opportunity to create an all-female safe space with close emotional bonds), which, in turn, confers a sense of belonging and (re)connection to Jewish tradition and history.

The interplay between spontaneity and spiritual need in the participants’ decision-making processes offers insights into spirituality and human behavior. For some, the decision to travel to Uman stemmed from an inner urge or spontaneous inspiration. However, that decision led to a profound experience that dovetailed with their spiritual backgrounds and quests for personal growth, suggesting that spontaneous decisions can be profoundly related to ongoing spiritual processes. This challenges traditional dichotomies between rational planning and intuitive action, and encourages a broader view of spirituality as integral to everyday decision-making. Spontaneous impulses are not meaningless, and spontaneity and spirituality are not opposing forces, but complementary aspects of a holistic human experience.

For many participants, the journey to Uman was an opportunity for self-discovery, emotional strengthening, and personal development. Several participants reported experiences of emotional healing and enhanced personal growth, reflecting the unique role spiritual journeys play in helping people contend with difficulties and achieve personal development. These findings are consistent with insights from previous research, which found that women use travel as a means to cope with challenges, and as a platform for healing and emotional renewal (Hosseini et al., 2022). RSimilar to the findings of Berdychevsky et al. (2013), who showed that those who traveled on all-women trips found a sense of freedom from social structures and gendered expectations, the participants were able to experience and express themselves more authentically in Uman, something they found difficult in their everyday lives.

The journey to Uman was a “meaningful travel” experience, where participants connected with other women, built female fellowship, and experienced a sense of shared identity. They could transfer the meaning and benefits from their travel experiences upon returning home within their everyday lives and contexts(Wilson & Harris, 2006).

**Limitations and next-step research**

This study has several limitations. The exploratory approach generates insights and questions for next-step research, rather than definitive conclusions. Qualitative research allows for greater depth and detail but limits the ability to establish the external validity of the findings. The snowball sampling method could have recruited a study population that is not representative of all Israeli women who visit Uman, and may have introduced biases into the sample. Participants were recruited through social networks and recommendations by earlier participants, which may limit the sociodemographic diversity of the sample. The study is based on in-depth interviews and is highly dependent on the quality and sincerity of participants’ responses.

These limitations should be taken into account when considering the study’s findings. They may also serve as a basis for next-step research. Follow-up studies could use a larger, more representative sample of Israeli female visitors to Uman to enable a broader generalization of findings and incorporate quantitative methods to enable statistical analysis and establish external validity. The longer-term impact of spiritual journeys to Uman on women’s quality of life, personal development, and mental health could be investigated through longitudinal studies that track participants over time.

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1. An honorary title for a woman who leads, teaches, or educates the Jewish community. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)