

# Israeli Backpackers

From Tourism to Rite of Passage



Chaim Noy and Erik Cohen, editors

# Israeli Backpackers

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Russell Stone, editor

# Israeli Backpackers and their Society

*A View from Afar*

Edited by  
Chaim Noy and Erik Cohen

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## *Contents*

<b>Introduction: Backpacking as a Rite of Passage in Israel</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>Chaim Noy and Erik Cohen</i>	
Preamble	1
Background: Backpacking in Contemporary Society	1
<i>The Israeli Context: Tarmila'ut</i>	4
A Cultural Rite of Passage	5
The Historical Development of Israeli Backpacking	7
<i>The Drifters of the Seventies</i>	8
<i>Backpacking and Military Service</i>	11
From Sites to Enclaves	14
<i>The Enclave Out There</i>	14
<i>Ambivalence toward the Enclave</i>	16
The Enclave as Frontier	17
Contemporary Backpacking Sites and Routes	18
<i>Sites in the Homeland</i>	18
<i>Routes and Sites Abroad</i>	19
Sites in Asia and the Pacific	20
Sites in South and Central America	21
Categories and Subcultures of Israeli Backpackers	22
<i>Categories</i>	22
Collective versus Individual Backpacking	22
Ethnic and Socioeconomic Background	23
Variations of Military Service Prior to the Trip	23
Religious Background	24

Age Cohorts	24
Gender	25
Backpacking in Asia versus South and Central America	26
<i>Subcultures</i>	27
<i>Kovshim</i> (conquerors) versus <i>Mitnahalim</i> (settlers)	27
Karhanim or Manali versus Issta'im	28
"The Wave"—Itineraries and Sites among South American <i>Mochileros</i>	29
Contrasting Modes of the Quest for Identity among Israeli Youth Tourists	29
The Backpackers and their Researchers	31
Review of the Contributions to the Volume	33
Notes	35
References	37
 <b>Chapter 1 Next Year in Kathmandu: Israeli Backpackers and the Formation of a New Israeli Identity</b>	 <b>45</b>
<i>Ayana Shira Haviv</i>	
Introduction	45
<i>A Note on Methods</i>	48
A New Identity	49
<i>"Heart of Darkness": The Older Generation's View     of the Backpackers</i>	49
<i>"A Case of Israeli-itis": The Israeli Backpacker Stereotype</i>	53
<i>"Out of the Pressure Cooker": Escape from Israeli     Society and Politics</i>	56
<i>"Where Do We Eat Lunch Today?": Freedom and the     Extension of Youth</i>	58
<i>"If My Parents Knew ...": Rebellion against Authority</i>	60
<i>"The Kosher Banana Pancake Trail": Conformity with     the Israeli Youth Culture Movement</i>	62
<i>"I Don't Have to Start from Nothing": Jewish Religious     Services on the Trip</i>	67
<i>"It Was Like My Real Self Coming Out": Individualism     and Self-Discovery</i>	70
<i>"The Only Country Where We Have Ever Felt Rich Is     India": Leisure and Consumption</i>	72
<i>"Now We Do Drugs and Make Parties": Drugs,     "Full-Moon Parties," Trance Music, and Consumption     in the Third World</i>	73

<i>"Untouched by Western Culture": Othering the "East"</i>	78
<i>"That Something in the Air": Spirituality and Antimaterialism</i>	80
Conclusion	82
Notes	83
References	84
<i>Primary Sources</i>	84
<i>Web Sites for Israeli Backpackers</i>	86
<i>Secondary Sources</i>	86
 <b>Chapter 2 "Traveling Cultures": Israeli Backpackers, Deterritorialization, and Reconstruction of Home</b>	<b>89</b>
<i>Lisa Anteby-Yemini, Keren Bazini, Irit Gerstein, and Gali Kling</i>	
Introduction	89
<i>Methodology</i>	90
Homing Devices: Re-creating Israeli Locality	92
<i>Israeli Backpackers' "Home Territories"</i>	92
<i>Making a Foreign Space into an Israeli Place</i>	94
<i>A Global Home</i>	96
Building an Israeli Community	97
<i>Communication Networks and Information Exchange</i>	98
<i>Endosociality and Communitas</i>	99
Maintaining Cultural Identity Abroad	101
<i>Reproducing Israeliness</i>	101
<i>Erecting the Community's Borders</i>	102
Conclusion	105
Notes	107
References	108
 <b>Chapter 3 Israeli Backpackers: Narrative, Interpersonal Communication, and Social Construction</b>	<b>111</b>
<i>Chaim Noy</i>	
Introduction	111
Narrating Backpacking: From Communication to Storytelling	113
Narrative Identity: Storytelling Experience	117
<i>Interviewing Israeli Backpackers</i>	120
A Story's Cycle: The Story of the Journey and the Journey of the Story	121



<i>The Origin of the Story and the Beginning of the Trip:</i>	
<i>Listening to the Stories of Veteran Backpackers</i>	122
Excursion Narratives	127
<i>The Reiteration of the Stories and the Conclusion of the Trip: Narrating Stories and Narrative Rites</i>	131
Backpackers' Preference for Oral Narrative:	
Informality, Recency and Reliability	135
<i>Alternative Guidebooks and Lectures</i>	136
<i>Informality and Spontaneity</i>	139
<i>Recency</i>	140
<i>Reliability or Trustworthiness</i>	141
Israeli Stories of a Rite of Passage	142
<i>The Dugri Style of Communication and Storytelling</i>	143
Informal Interpersonal Communication	145
Informal Interpersonal Storytelling	146
Conclusion	148
Notes	151
References	152
 <b>Chapter 4 Young Adult Israeli Backpackers in India</b>	 <b>159</b>
<i>Darya Maoz</i>	
Introduction	159
Young Adulthood	160
<i>Characteristics</i>	160
<i>The Age-Thirty Transition Stage</i>	162
<i>Backpacking by Young Adults</i>	164
Backpackers in this Study: Socioeconomic	
Background	165
The Timing of the Journey	166
<i>Prior to the Journey</i>	166
<i>The Timing of the Journey and Its Aftermath</i>	168
Motivations for the Journey	170
<i>Alienation from Israeli Society</i>	170
<i>Slacking Off while Amassing Energy for the Future</i>	171
<i>Deferring Decisions versus Making Decisions from Afar</i>	173
<i>Fear of the Future and of Adulthood</i>	174
<i>The "Settlers"</i>	176
<i>The "Conquerors" and the "Manalis"</i>	179
Conclusion	181
Notes	184
References	184

<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>Young Israelis' Long Trip Abroad, Backpacking in Asia and "Dwelling-Tourism" in Japan</b>	<b>189</b>
	<i>Dalit Bloch-Tzemach</i>	
	Introduction	189
	<i>Methodology</i>	190
	Background: Backpacking Trip through Asia and the "Trip" in Japan	191
	<i>Dwelling-Tourism: A Working Definition</i>	193
	<i>Traveling versus Dwelling</i>	194
	<i>Change versus Routine</i>	194
	<i>Feelings of Belonging versus Feelings of "Strangeness"</i>	195
	<i>Instrumental versus Emotional Approaches to the Dwelling Experience</i>	196
	Dwelling-Tourism in Japan versus Backpacking in Asia	197
	1. <i>Backpacking as a Group-Oriented Experience versus Dwelling-Tourism as an Individual Experience</i>	197
	2. <i>Backpacking in Asia and Work Stopovers in Japan as Masculine Experiences</i>	201
	3. <i>"Feminine" Characteristics of Dwelling-Tourism in Japan</i>	207
	Conclusion	211
	Notes	211
	References	213
 <b>Chapter 6</b>	 <b>In Search of the Beautiful Land of Israel: Israeli Youth Voyages to Poland</b>	 <b>217</b>
	<i>Jackie Feldman</i>	
	Pilgrimages to the Jewish Past/the Shoah	217
	The Cultural and Historical Context of the Poland Voyages	220
	Student Selection and Preparation	222
	The Shape of the Voyages: Constructing the Environmental Bubble	225
	Inside the Bubble: Expectations and Cognitive Dissonance	228
	<i>The Appearance of the Site</i>	229
	<i>Students' Expectations of the Sites</i>	230
	<i>Tour Guides' Narrative Strategies</i>	230
	The Elision of Significant Others: Poles and Diaspora Jews	231

<i>Demonization of the Poles</i>	232
<i>The Marginalization of Diaspora Jews</i>	233
<i>The Role of the Witness</i>	234
Ceremony Structure and Embodiment	236
Individual Needs and Group Dynamics	238
<i>Channels for Individual Expression</i>	239
<i>Resistance and Accommodation</i>	240
Conclusion: The Messages of the Voyage	241
Notes	244
References	246
 <b>Conclusion: The Backpackers and Israeli Society</b>	 <b>251</b>
<i>Erik Cohen and Chaim Noy</i>	
The View from Afar	251
Israeli Youth Journeys: Hegemonic and Nonhegemonic	252
Distanciation and Communality among Israeli Backpackers	253
Backpackers' Rites of Passage and Identity Formation: Between Collectivism and Individuality	255
Varieties of Israeli Backpacking	257
Conclusion	259
Notes	260
References	260
 <b>Contributors</b>	 <b>263</b>
 <b>Index</b>	 <b>265</b>

## *Introduction: Backpacking as a Rite of Passage in Israel*

Chaim Noy and Erik Cohen

### PREAMBLE

These names articulate a sentence that his steps compose without his knowing it ... What is it then that they spell out?

—Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

Cuzco. Manali. *Habait shel Fistuk* [Fistuk's home]. Koh Phangan, Annapurna Circuit Trek, the Khao San Road, and the Salar Desert. All are names of sites and attractions along the beaten track of Israeli backpackers, and all are names in a myth both pursued in and embodied by a collective, a myth this volume tries to “spell out.”

Spelling out this cultural phenomenon lingers for a while—as the backpackers do—at the sites and attractions mentioned above, but soon returns to consider the social and cultural conditions in the home society, that is, the Jewish Israeli society, in a perspective we termed “outside-in.” Though this volume primarily explores the backpacking experience of Israeli youth, and delineates the process of its development and gradual routinization, we also need to examine it as a reflection of current processes of change the Israeli society is undergoing.

Thus, this collection relates to the studies of Israel society and culture through investigating a unique touristic practice: the backpacking trip that is a common custom, nearly normative, among Israeli youth in the period soon after the military service.

### BACKGROUND: BACKPACKING IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Backpackers—also variously referred to as “drifters,” “wanderers,” “travelers,” “budget travelers,” “modern nomads,” “tramping youth,” and so on (Adler

1985; Cohen 1973; Elsrud 2001; Murphy 2001; Riley 1988; Vogt 1976) are a ubiquitous and growing phenomenon on the contemporary tourist scene that has recently attracted increased attention in sociological, anthropological, and psychological research (Desforges 1998; Elsrud 2001; Firth and Hing 1999; Hampton 1998; Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995; Ross 1997; Scheyvens 2002).

Though there exist some significant differences between various kinds of backpackers—partly reflected in the different terms by which they are called—authors tend to agree on some general characteristics of this kind of tourist: “backpackers” are seen as a subcategory of “youth tourists” (Aramberri 1991), on an independently organized, relatively long trip, with a flexible itinerary; they are budget conscious, preferring cheap accommodations and services (Hampton 1998; Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995; Sørensen 2003); they seek to penetrate beyond the boundaries of the established tourist system—but owing to the “massing” of similarly minded individual backpackers, a separate, lower-cost tourist-system tends to appear on the more popular backpacker itineraries and destinations, catering to their specific needs and preferences (Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995; Riley 1988). Due to the backpackers’ suspicion of formal tourist material, a marked feature of this system is a heightened pattern of the informal communication and narration among the travelers (Elsrud 2001; Murphy 2001).

“Drifters” (Cohen 1972, 1973; Uriely et al. 2002) are backpackers who have the most flexible timetables and itineraries, and who avoid even the backpacking tourist-system, preferring to travel by themselves in uncharted territory; but most contemporary backpackers appear to prefer the company of other backpackers and seek little personal contact with the local population at their destinations (Hampton 1998; Murphy 2001; Riley 1988).

The relationship between the contemporary modern (or postmodern) world and the motivation and mode of backpacking travel has been little explored, though the relation between modernity and tourism constitutes the principal theoretical axis in the sociological study of tourism (from MacCannell 1973, 1976, to Wang 2000). Cohen (1973) suggested that “drifting” is closely related to alienation from “ordinary” society and associated with the counterculture, but there is little information in the later empirical research that supports—or disproves—that suggestion (with one notable exception, see Uriely et al. 2002). However, the relationship between the place of the youth in their society of origin and their choice of backpacking as a mode of travel, remains largely unexplored. It is this topic that lies at the heart of this collection of articles, with special reference to the relationship between the tensions and problems experienced by Jewish youth in contemporary Israel and the patterns of their backpacking travel.

In that respect this collection differs from other backpacker studies: it is not merely dealing with the conventional topics of the motivations, itineraries, experiences, destinations, and modes of interaction of backpackers and their economic and other consequences for the host society; rather, it is also, and perhaps primarily, a contribution to the study of Israeli society, by way of an analysis of the modes of conduct and motivations of those youths who temporarily move away from it.

This collection thus stresses an aspect of backpacking tourism research that was largely overlooked in most other studies: the context of the society of origin from which the backpackers depart. It is suggested that backpacking from different societies, though it may take superficially roughly similar forms, may be motivated by very different problems and tensions experienced by the young people in those societies; and these problems and tensions, as we shall see in this volume, may endow backpacking from a given society with a particular dynamics and a peculiar subculture of its own.

Backpacking appears to be primarily, but not exclusively, related to “early youth,” the period between adolescence and adulthood—falling in most modern societies in the early twenties of the individual’s life. For most modern youth this is a transitional period of life, marked in various societies by studies, occupational training, temporary occupations and, in Israel, also by a period of prolonged military service. After this period many youth depart on one or several extended backpacking trips; however, only few are able to repeat—or even start—such an undertaking at a later, more sedate period in their life, when occupational, domestic, and other obligations constrain their freedom of travel (but see Maoz 1999, and this volume). Backpacking can thus usefully be approached in terms of the wider anthropological model of the “rite of passage” (van Gennep 1908/1960; Turner 1967, 1973), which is indeed widely used in the studies presented in this volume. It is here formulated in terms of the particular Israeli situation, as a ritual bridging the transition from obligatory military service and the reentrance into civic society, whether by way of studies or of employment. The ritual may be differently located in the biography of backpackers in other societies, and therefore lead to different varieties of backpacking. Since the ritual marks different kinds of transitions, it may also have different short- and long-term consequences for the biography of individual backpackers (Desforges 1998; Heichal 2000; Noy 2004), which are well worth further detailed exploration.

Finally, it should be noticed that backpacking may for some individuals become, not merely a pattern of travel characteristic of a transitional period of their lives, but a way of life in itself; such backpackers tend to become lifelong wanderers traveling in an “experimental mode” (Cohen 1979), in quest for an “elective center” that they might embrace as an

alternative to their society of origin. Such individuals are hard to locate and have been rarely studied. The fact that they are absent from the studies here presented does not mean that there are no Israelis around in remote localities of Asia, South America or even Africa, who have forsaken their country of origin in quest of a more fulfilling existence elsewhere.

### The Israeli Context: *Tarmila'ut*

Backpacking (*tarmila'ut* in Hebrew) became an increasingly popular tourist activity among Jewish Israeli youth in the last two and a half decades, which has caught the attention of both the popular press,<sup>1</sup> as well as a growing number of researchers, some of whom are represented in this volume. Such a large-scale phenomenon necessarily raises the question of the basic motivation that induces so many youth to depart on such a long journey abroad, and more broadly, of the relationship between that journey and their place within contemporary Israeli society and attitude toward it. Considering earlier theorizing on this question, the main research problem is whether these extended journeys signify a high degree of alienation of the youths from Israeli society and a quest for an alternative “elective” center abroad (Cohen 1979), or, rather a “time-out,” a moratorium during which the youths need to re-create themselves after the toils and restrictions of military service, as well as reflect on their society and their own place in it? This problem tacitly underlies most articles in this collection.

In order to find an answer to this question close attention should be paid to the prevailing behavior patterns of Israeli backpackers, as revealed in the various studies. This reveals a paradox found in many of them: a gap between the purported purpose of the trip and the actual conduct of the Israeli backpackers. Many wish initially to get far away from Israel and Israelis to remote and nontouristic areas. In fact, however, they follow similar itineraries, find themselves, or seek, the company of other Israelis, and spend a good deal of their time in Israeli “enclaves” in popular destinations of youth tourists, engaging much of the time in conversations on issues of common interest in their home society. This paradox may not be unique, and commonly found among contemporary backpackers, but it appears to be more salient among the Israelis, who, while projecting an image of daring adventurers, insulate themselves more exclusively in their own “enclave” than do backpackers from other nations. While this can be partly explained by a lack of linguistic and social skills, it also indicates a greater concern with the complexities of contemporary existence in Israel and their future in it.

In this regard, Uriely et al. (2002) have recently pointed out that at least as far as their travel experiences and motivations are concerned (which

they term the “type” dimensions), backpackers are quite a heterogeneous population. The research, which was based on Israeli backpackers, suggested that while some of the backpackers’ experiences may be still be easily classified into previously theorized categories and typologies, most move between categories, and within the same trip experience different “modes” (Cohen 1979) of experience. The heterogeneity is manifested thus both between different backpackers, as well as within the experiences individual backpackers attest to along the extended trip. For example, what Uriely et al. (2002: 530) term “humanistic backpackers,” are travelers who, while searching for meaningful experiences in the centers of other cultures, are not alienated from the centers of their own culture. Thus the supposedly dissimilar categories of backpacking phenomenology in fact coincide, and produce a rich and complex experience, on both the individual and the collective levels (see also Wickens 2002).

### A CULTURAL RITE OF PASSAGE

Contextualizing Israeli backpacking requires that we briefly consider the development and maturation processes that are characteristic of this period in the individual’s “life cycle” and that take place within a given social and cultural background.

The backpacking journey represents a distinct developmental subphase in the participants’ youth and early adulthood,<sup>2</sup> and has been viewed by researchers as a rite of passage, that is, a meaningful moratorial and liminal developmental phase in the lives of the participants (Avrahami 2001; Jacobson 1987; Mevorach 1997; Noy 2002). In general, the trip is undertaken soon after military service and lasts from several months to several years. It is a phase during which young Israeli adults take “time off” from the structured course of their obligations, after having fulfilled their duty to the state, and before pursuing higher education or entering the labor market.

Exact figures on the number of backpackers are not available since it is difficult to extract the number of backpackers from general tourism statistics (see Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995). According to Maoz (1999), about 20,000 visas for India are requested by Israelis every year, with an estimated annual growth of about 10 percent. Since Asia, and in particular India, is a “must” destination in a backpacker’s itinerary, this figure can be used as an estimate of the numbers of Israeli backpackers visiting Asia. Since South and Central America are also common destinations, visited by approximately half the number of backpackers who visit Asia (Mevorach 1997), we estimate the total number of Israeli backpackers at approximately 30,000 a year (some estimations are considerably higher, see Moaz in this volume).<sup>3</sup>



These figures indicate that backpacking in Israel is a significant social phenomenon, that embraces a significant percentage of the twenty-to-thirty age cohort of Israeli Jewish youths. We suggest that these youths pass through a moratorial phase, typically after completing their military service, entering a liminal period in which they undergo personal change, form or consolidate their identity, and eventually reorient themselves to Israeli society.

Moratorium is a stage of socialization experienced by the adolescent or the young adult, in which a meaningful connection is established between the individual and the society he or she will soon join (Erikson 1955, 1959, 1968). This occurs in a state in which social constraints and obligations are temporarily suspended, a state that encourages skepticism and a search for a personal identity (Rapoport 1986:9–10; also Kahane 1997:28). Thus, extended backpacking trips, which take place in distant locations remote from the social and cultural centers of Israel obliquely facilitate in fact *socialization* into Israeli culture and society. Yet this process occurs under the distinct social conditions of moratorium (“informal conditions,” Kahane 1997; Lamdan 1991) and liminality.

In the rite of passage model that Victor Turner adopted from Van Gennep (1908/1960), liminality is the middle stage, situated between the separation of the adepts undergoing the rite from their community and their reaggregation in it. It is a stage at which the assembled adepts lack structure and tend to create spontaneously a closely knit *communitas*. Their “antistructural” state is symbolized by spatial separation from their usual place of abode. In the exalted state of liminality, the adepts undergo deep personal experiences and learn the secrets of their culture, which entitle them to a new, adult status on reentering into their community (Turner 1969, 1973).

Indeed, on their return from the trip, backpackers repeatedly claim that they have undergone a deep personal change and maturation related to their autonomous assumption of heavier responsibilities. This claim indicated the fulfillment of their wish for independence and personal growth repeatedly voiced by backpackers prior to their trip. While such accounts have been observed among backpackers in general (Hampton 1988; Riley 1988; Vogt 1976), they are accentuated and carry a particular cultural shade unique to Israelis (Heichal 2000, chap. 3; Jacobson 1987, chap. 4; Mevorach 1997, chap. 4; Noy 2004).

Such a shade stems from the fact that the trip is preceded by a lengthy period of military service in Israel, which has a significant influence on the youths’ transition from childhood to early adulthood. Psychologist Amia Lieblich (1989:186) states that “military service in Israel, often including the experience of war, provides the specific cultural context for the Israeli

transition to adulthood.” She concludes: “The general conclusion I have drawn regarding the influences of military service on personality development is that the pattern of transition to adulthood during military service in Israel is different from that described in Western literature” (193).<sup>4</sup>

Military service in Israel constitutes a developmental phase in the individual’s life, due to the convergence of three primary factors: (1) compulsory military service is nominally obligatory for all citizens and pertains to the *entire cohort* of young (Jewish, nonultraorthodox) Israelis (Horowitz and Kimmerling 1974); (2) an extended period of service—a minimum of two years for women and three for men. Such a long period of service, with the diverse and often harrowing experiences involved, engenders profound psychological and psychosocial processes (e.g., see Ben-Ari 1998, 2001; Sasson-Levy 2000); (3) the military service is embedded in the wider culture of which the military, and to some degree militarism, are crucial components (Almog 1997:124–215; Almog 2000; Ben-Ari and Levy-Schreiber 2000; Lomsky-Feder and Ben-Ari 1999b; Maman, Ben-Ari and Rosenhek 2001).

Finally, backpacking as well as some of the activities typical to this kind of travel (especially hiking and trekking) are contemporary reflections of some of the constitutive ideas of the Zionist ethos of the “Sabra” and are therefore charged with additional cultural significance (Almog 1997:324–350; Katriel 1995). Strenuous trekking in the “wilderness,” mostly in high-altitude mountain terrain (Noy 2003) echoes “hiking in the Land of Israel” prior to the establishment of the state, which was considered an important means for creating a bond between the young Jewish Pioneers and the Land of Israel (Ben-David 1997; Katriel 1995). Backpacking itself, with its simplicity (of clothing and appearance) and parsimony, its emphatically gregarious character, and its relationship to the “authentic,” also reflects a nostalgia for the romantic and “authentic” past of the Israeli pioneers (Almog 1997: 324–350; Katriel 1999; Katz 1985). These activities can be seen as a universalization of the pioneering Zionist *tiyul* (hike), which emphasized some highly valued qualities of the Israeli Pioneer.

Related to cultural perceptions of toughness and endurance are risk-taking undertakings, typical of this form of travel (Elsrud 2001; Mevorach 1997). The Israeli backpackers may engage in “sensation-seeking” and “risk-seeking” behaviors, which are culturally patterned (Mevorach 1997; Noy 2003).

## THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF ISRAELI BACKPACKING

The evolution of Israeli backpacking (*tarmila’ut*) spans a period of approximately thirty years. During this time, backpacking has developed into a

widely popular venture and became a meaningful rite of passage for most participants.

In this section we will consider some of the sociohistoric circumstances that have shaped the current role of *tarmila'ut* in Israeli culture. We will consider the cultural and sociohistoric origins of Israeli backpacking to two major destinations: Asia and South America and will examine the relationship between military service and *tarmila'ut*.

### The Drifters of the Seventies

Although there is very little documentation or research on the origins of *tarmila'ut*, it is our contention that Israeli backpacking, particularly to Asia (India, Nepal, and Thailand) and South America, probably began sometime during the mid-seventies.<sup>5</sup>

During that period, these factors came to play a role in popularizing backpacking as a socially acceptable activity. The first factor was internal: from the mid-sixties until the mid-seventies Israel was involved in two major wars that had a crucial impact on Israeli society and culture: the Six-Day War, 1967, and the Yom Kippur War, 1973 (Horowitz and Lissak 1989; Lissak 1984). Israel was undergoing profound social changes, and—after the 1973 war—an acute internal crisis, which seems to have provoked new spiritual longings and thereby encouraged young Israelis to travel abroad.

The second factor is global and concerns the protest movements of the sixties, whose ideas had begun to reach Israel by that time. The beliefs held by the youth of the sixties included an exoticized and spiritualized image of the “East” (particularly India). We believe that such images have influenced young Israelis and motivated them to join the international backpacker movement.

The third factor was economic: the seventies were a period of robust economic growth, which created the material circumstances enabling parents to support the travel of their offsprings.

It is the convergence of these factors in Israel during the mid-seventies, that led backpacking, originally in the form of drifting, to become an increasingly socially acceptable form of travel of young men and women following military service.

Resembling the changes that occurred in Western backpacking between the decades of the sixties and the seventies, and the decades of the eighties and nineties (Riley 1988), the early Israeli backpackers differed considerably from contemporary ones. While Israeli backpackers during the seventies traveled mostly on their own and resembled the “drifters” of the period (Cohen 1972, 1973), contemporary routinized (or “massified”) backpacking

is considered a normative act that does not reflect an adherence to counter-culture or even alienation from Israeli society. In fact, Heichal (2000) suggests that during the trip feelings of commitment and of identity with Israel are, eventually, strengthened. Backpackers who left Israel for a long trip in the seventies, when collective beliefs were still the dominant norm, represented a nonconformist, individualist, and alienated reaction to Israel. Many appear to have been moving “away” from the local cultural center toward “elective centers” abroad (Cohen 1979).

It is possible that this act of distancing oneself—backpacking—had its origins in the kibbutz and in the tensions and changes the kibbutz has undergone. The kibbutz has initially been an intensely closed and cohesive social system, but after the establishment of the state it was increasingly marked by tensions and internal crisis. It was the kibbutz that initially allowed the younger generation to take a “year off” (*shnat hofesh*), after having completed their military service and prior to becoming kibbutz members (Jacobson 1987; Lamdan 1991). The institutionalization of the “year off” from the kibbutz, which entailed working within Israel or traveling abroad, especially in Asia and South America, appears to have set the pattern for other Israeli youth.

Backpacking became more widespread when veterans of the traumatic Yom Kippur War of 1973, reacting to the posttrauma experienced by Israeli society came to engage in it. The reaction of alienation and disenchantment with Israel and with the collective founding beliefs encouraged the development of backpacking as a form of drifting, a travel abroad and a distancing from Israel, both concretely and metaphorically. Drifting allowed young Israelis to distance themselves from their native society, but at the same time, since this practice entails a limited stay afar from one’s home society and culture, it allowed the youths to reevaluate their attitude toward and their place in Israel, and thus helped in the formation of their identity.

The drifters of the seventies hailed from the socioeconomic “centers” of Israeli Jewish society and were reacting against the hegemonic social control of the time by the traditional establishment. Members of disadvantaged groups in Israeli society, such as Jewish youth of Asian or African origin, or Israeli Palestinian citizens, chose other ways to express their resentment, such as social and political protest (e.g., the Black Panthers; see Bernstein 1977; Cohen 1972) or emigration from Israel, especially to the United States (Kimmerling 1989; Shokeid 1988; Sobel 1986).

In choosing their destinations in the Third World rather than in the First World, the drifter tourists leaving Israel temporarily contrasted sharply with the emigrants, leaving indefinitely to the West. The drifters usually traveled as individuals in quest of experiences and adventures, while emigrants sought economic relief and usually took their families with them. The drifters

were seekers, and thus their concerns were intellectual and experiential, while immigrants were motivated by practical concerns of work and income.

These individuals were alienated from the hegemonic political “center” of the time and reacted to it by traveling to cultural “elective centers” abroad. As pioneers of Israeli backpacking, they established the popular itineraries and destinations followed by the growing number of other Israeli backpackers in the eighties and in the nineties.

Israeli backpacking gradually shed its individuality and alienated character, which have marked the early drifters. Though the participants still favored individuality ideologically, Israeli backpacking became increasingly a collective phenomenon. The “elective centers” lost much of their salience, and the trip served increasingly as a means of the youngsters to distance themselves physically from Israel, while preoccupying themselves continually with its problems.

Thus the drifters of the early seventies became the role models of those of the nineties. Even the parsimonious shoestring budget of the early drifters was imitated, though contemporary backpackers, who come mostly from the middle and upper-middle-classes (Mevorach 1997), do not necessarily suffer from a lack of funds.

Since the 1970s backpacking was further encouraged by changing social circumstances in Israel. There was a continuing erosion in the hegemonic collective beliefs that have been dominant since the establishment of the state, and a strengthening of diverse new subcultures and diverse individual worldviews. The growing and political heterogeneity increased the public tolerance to the pursuit of individual life-prospects, thus granting backpacking trips and the emergent backpacking subcultures growing legitimating.

Later on, political events, such as the peace treaty with Egypt in 1977 and the Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula, and the Lebanon War (1982), also contributed to the rapid growth of Israeli backpacking during the eighties (Cohen 1987). In this regard, the evacuation of Sinai, which took place in 1980–1982, had both a dramatic effect on the size of the territory under Israeli control (the Sinai peninsula is some three times the size of Israel) and a symbolic effect on Israeli morale. The evacuation affected the image of Israel as a country of great size and power, and created the feeling that other occupied territories would eventually be abandoned. Moreover, Sinai had played a prominent role for young Israeli tourists. Its primordial landscapes, imbued with mythical significance in the national memory, had been a popular destination for trekkers and backpackers. Its spectacular beaches served as places of escape for many youths during the years of the occupation (1967–1982).<sup>6</sup> Young Israelis have since begun increasingly to look abroad for new destinations, especially in Asia and South America (see below).

Backpacking still encompasses primarily secular Jewish youths of European parentage (Heichal 2000; Mevorach 1997), although a growing number of youths of Asian or African background, as well as youths affiliated with the Zionist religious movement *kipot serugot* (knitted skullcaps, see Heichal 2000) presently backpack. Yet, very few recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union or from Ethiopia participate in backpacking. Nor do Israeli Palestinian youths show much interest in this type of travel. However, Jewish Afro-Asian youths, some religious Jewish youths, and Arab youths seem to engage increasingly in travel abroad, which sometimes carries the symbolic meaning of a rite of passage, though their destinations and travel styles differ quite significantly (this has been scarcely researched, see Lomsky-Feder and Rapoport 1999).

### Backpacking and Military Service

The changes that occurred in the meaning of military service over the last two and a half decades are essential to our understanding of Israeli backpacking. Military service is seen in Israel as one of the principal civic obligations, the performance of which is a condition for full inclusion in the society (Horowitz and Kimmerling 1974; Lomsky-Feder and Ben-Ari 1999a; Maman, Ben-Ari, and Rosenhek 2001). This duty, however, is fraught with ambiguities: the service is both aspired to and avoided; it is a source of pride but also a burden; it is a contribution to society and also a constraint on individual freedom. The service thus engenders a desire for compensation. Indeed, departure on a backpacking trip normally occurs shortly after demobilization, and is often referred to as the “long trip after military service” (Mevorach 1997).

The proximity between the two time frames (Elsrud 1998) supports the common notion that the massive participation in backpacking expresses the demobilized soldiers’ need to “relax” and “unwind” following the intense years spent in the army. But while this compensatory role of the trip may justify it in the eyes of parents and others, the trip has also a deeper significance that we hope to unveil in this book.

The “long trip after military service” has also been mentioned in the recent professional literature that dealt with the experience and the meaning of military service in Israel (Lieblich 1989:189; Lomsky-Feder 1996:57). While some of the authors view the trip as a *reaction* to military service, along the lines of the above discussion, others view it as expressing *continuity*. In his discussion of soldiering in the Israeli army, Ben-Ari (1998) writes:

Yet there is an interesting point to these [backpacking] journeys, which can be seen as a sort of rite of separation from the compulsory

part of military service. These travels very frequently include treks that are carried out in a “military” mode including precise planning, walking in small cohesive groups, and repeated tests of people’s abilities to withstand hardship and take risks. (p. 116)

Ben-Ari’s observation reflects a basic tension in the relationship between military service and the backpacking trip. Participation in the trip is viewed as a “rite of separation” from military service, but at the same time, the trip is conducted in a “military mode,” thus reflecting continuity in the behavioral and social patterns that were acquired in the army. (Note that in the general backpacking research literature, Israelis as a collective are depicted as “fresh out of the military service” [Sørensen 2003:848]).

We suggest that this tension, which is constitutive and pertinent to the Israeli backpacking experience, is expressed in a *ludic manner* by the backpackers (Cohen 1985). Such exclamations as “We conquered Cuzco!” or “Thailand is in our hands!” represent a ludic (and perhaps parodic) mode of perception of the trip. It extends the “military mode” and reacts against it at the same time. This volume seeks to cast light on these dialectics, which are unique to Israeli backpackers.

While in the past military service was held in high esteem within Israeli society, which allowed it to function as a rite of passage, a gradual but continuous decline in this status has apparently reduced its transitional significance. The change in the meaning of military service over the last two decades has often been regarded as an indicator of wider processes of social and cultural change in Israel.<sup>7</sup> This change had a significant impact on the scope and meaning of backpacking, which has thus acquired the status of an independent moratorial phase in the youths’ development.

While elaborating in detail on the changes in the status of military service is beyond the scope of this chapter, some of its aspects have direct implications for the backpacking trip: The decline in the status of the military, which has brought about a gradual but eventually far-reaching change in the relationship between the army and other civic institutions, particularly the family and the legal system. These institutions have become increasingly involved in military affairs, as soldiers’ families launched an unprecedented number of complaints in the legal system (predominantly through the High Court of Justice) concerning such issues as soldier’s rights, sexual harassment, and so forth. This has forced the military to review its system of rules and norms on a variety of issues, reflecting some of the processes by which the aura the military had enjoyed in Israeli society is dimming as other issues are gaining precedence.

The strong emotional ties between soldiers and their families has received considerable attention in the literature on Israeli army (Azarya

and Kimmerling 1985–1986). Liebllich, a developmental psychologist, attests to the close connection between adolescents and their families during military service (Liebllich 1989):

This transition into adulthood is not accompanied by the breaking, or even the weakening, of family ties ... military service in Israel often removes men from their parents' home, but emotionally they remain highly attached to their parents. (p. 190)

The unprecedented involvement of the soldiers' families in military affairs has been facilitated by the increasing use of cellular phones, which made communication between soldiers and their families frequent and unmediated. While a decade ago soldiers' families regularly met their children at or near their army base, in what was designated by the sociologist Tamar Katriel (Katriel 1991:71–91) as “weekend picnics in military zones,” the current extensive usage of cellular phones, which allows both parties to call each other from *anywhere* in Israel in *real time*, problematizes and undermines the notions of a military “zone.” Now, the soldier and his family are constantly “accessible” to one another (the word *zamin*—*accessible* in Hebrew—is used by the cellular phone service, meaning “in service”).

The role the military service played in the past in creating a distance between the soldier and his or her home and family, thus in furthering the process of separation and individuation, has diminished in recent years. In contrast, the backpacker until recently often traveled to areas beyond the cellular phone's range and beyond the family's direct reach. It has been a journey to the “*lo zamin*” (“out of service”) zone, distant and inaccessible. It thus provided the conditions for separation and individuation processes (as evident from backpackers' frequent reports of homesickness; see Mevorach 1997; Simchai 1998:99–114). However, recent developments in cellular technology, that is, the availability of cell phones that have worldwide accessibility, suggests that the possibility to locate themselves beyond the family's direct reach is questioned once again.

It should also be mentioned that during their military service, many young Israelis had frequent contact with the Arab population, in the occupied territories.<sup>8</sup> The continuous encounter between the army and a civilian population in a situation of conflict and hostility has reinforced the sense of separateness of “us” from “them” and enhanced the saliency of the Israeli collective identity. This dichotomization is carried over to the trip and is reflected in the backpackers' jargon. For example, the word *mekomiyim* (locals), is used in both military jargon, in reference to the local non-Jewish occupied population and in backpackers' slang in reference to the native peoples of “Third World” countries. Since both institutions—the (Israeli)



army and (backpacking) tourism—are expansionist, it might not be surprising to find analogies and a carryover of images, terminology, and frames of reference from the first to the latter (Noy 2003, 2004).

## FROM SITES TO ENCLAVES

The steady growth of Israeli backpacking and its expansion into farther areas in Asia and South America has gradually led to the emergence of popular itineraries along which most, if not all, backpackers travel. Eventually, at the most popular sites along these itineraries, where Israeli backpackers tend to stay for relatively extended periods of time, from a few days to a few months, Israeli “enclaves” appeared, in which young Israelis meet and socialize. Such enclaves are distinct “environmental bubbles” (Cohen 1972), offering the visitors cheap and familiar amenities and services. They are usually based on a guest house or a restaurant, frequented primarily by Israelis. The restaurants often feature menus in the Hebrew language, which list what are considered to be “typical” Israeli dishes, such as “hummus,” “shakshuka,” and Israeli-style salad. Some travel companies cater specifically to Israelis, often advertising the quality of their services in the show windows in Hebrew. Waiters and other service personnel in some enclaves speak the Hebrew language. The information about these enclaves spreads by word-of-mouth (Elsrud 2001; Murphy 2001; Noy 2002), via backpackers’ logbooks (*siphrei metaylim* in Hebrew) kept at the Israeli embassies and in guest houses in the enclaves, and, of late, by electronic mail.

These enclaves play an important role in the backpackers’ experience and accounts of their trip. They are aware of the high visibility of fellow Israeli travelers on the routes, which are often a butt for ironic comments and jokes.

In the following we shall discuss the process of transformation of the sites that Israeli backpackers regularly visit, into Israeli social and cultural enclaves and its implications for the backpacking experience of Israelis.

## The Enclave Out There

The emergence of Israeli enclaves in remote sites is a distinct feature of Israeli backpacking. The fact that Israeli backpackers travel *away* from their socio-cultural center (Israel), but at the same time gravitate *toward* such ethnic enclaves, has a formative affect on the experience of the trip, and endows it with a distinct character.

Most backpackers appear to desire at the outset of their trip to travel to sites and destinations not visited by other Israelis. However, a number

of related circumstances lead them eventually to sojourn, at least for a while, in Israeli enclaves or to travel with other Israelis, whom they have met on their trip. Most Israelis use the same sources of information on their trip—backpacker guidebooks, information found in equipment stores in Israel (Jacobson 1987; Salmon 1998), or travelers' logs found at Israeli embassies abroad (particularly in South America, Noy 2002). They are thus enrouled along similar paths. Many, especially newcomers, suffer from limitations and difficulties encountered when traveling alone or with a single partner in an unfamiliar environment—especially since many lack a sufficient competence in spoken English. They therefore seek assistance from other Israelis met on the trip, who gradually socialize them into the Israeli backpackers' enclaves. Many eventually end up by spending a good deal of their time—perhaps even the majority—in the familiarity and security of these enclaves. The enclaves reflect in important respects the cultural and social “center” of the backpackers' homeland, Israel (Cohen 1992a, 1992b; Turner 1973; Turner and Turner 1978).

The unique fact about the “enclave-out-there”—to paraphrase Victor Turner's “the center out there” (Turner 1973)—is that although Israelis do not necessarily reside there on a permanent basis, Israeliness does thrive there permanently. Nonetheless, there are a few sites that have become enclaves as a result of the presence of permanent Israeli residents, which further demonstrates the semi-institutionalization processes Israeli backpacking is currently undergoing. For example, there is a growing number of guest houses and various agencies (such as jeep rental and insurance agencies), which are run by Israelis who live in both Asia and South America.

Another example of such Israeli permanence can be found in the “traveling Hebrew library,” located in enclaves, a library that backpackers often mention in their stories. This term refers to books that circulate among backpackers. The books are mostly in Hebrew and play an integral role in the recreational and leisure activities during the backpacking trip. They are brought by backpackers from Israel and are passed from one backpacker to another. In addition to such books, guest houses and restaurants often hold a large library of Israeli videos.

Not only Hebrew books and videos are passed around the backpackers in the enclaves, but also audiocassettes and foods. Israeli music is very popular among backpackers, and some contemporary singers, such as Shlomo Artsi, are mentioned quite frequently in their accounts (Noy 2002). Foods, and especially snacks (such as *Bamba*), are brought from Israel as well, mainly by backpackers who keep *kashrut*, the Jewish dietary rules. Such music cassettes and foods, brought on the trip, metonymically represent Israeliness.<sup>9</sup>

## Ambivalence toward the Enclave

The existence of Israeli enclaves in remote localities endows the backpackers' trip with some ambiguity: as we have pointed out above, they may travel far away only to find themselves in a bubble of their homeland. Their trip thus constitutes not just a movement "out" or "away" from the center to otherness, but also a move *between* ethnically, socially, and linguistically *familiar* enclaves or, more precisely, between the center and its partial reflections abroad. It is time spent "away" (from the center) *but also* time spent "within" (the enclave).

This ambiguity affords the backpackers the possibility to reflect on their own society in a far-away enclave, which at the same time partially reconstitutes it. The backpackers are often ambivalent toward the enclave (which they themselves are a part of)—an ambivalence reflecting their broader ambivalence toward their homeland.

The "push" and "pull" factors affecting tourism in general and backpacking in particular, acquire an additional complexity here. This duality frames the Israeli backpacker in a unique and paradoxical context. It affords the backpackers the possibility to relate to their own culture through its (translocated) reflection that they themselves create and sustain. In fact, observations made by backpackers frequently reflect their *ambivalence* toward the center and the society of which they themselves are a part.

The enclaves enjoy great popularity among Israeli backpackers, many of whom spend a good deal of their trip in them and in their vicinity. They are also fairly visible, manifesting the Israeli presence in often remote localities. The backpackers themselves are sometimes aware of the contradiction between their alleged desire to get away from other Israelis while they cluster in the enclaves, and tend to refer jokingly to their contradiction.<sup>10</sup>

Though they stay in the enclaves, backpackers repeatedly complain that "there are too many Israelis there," and that Israelis are typically "loud" and "noisy." At the same time they are also depicted as "trustworthy," and as a "reliable" source of information. Backpackers are thus situated in a loop in which they themselves are the "them" to whom they refer. A common question asked in stores selling backpacking equipment, during backpackers' gatherings before the trip is, "Where can we travel to in order to *avoid* Israelis?" The paradox of Israelis asking other Israelis where there are places with *no* Israelis, indicates the perception that one can hardly avoid Israelis or the Israeli enclave on the trip.<sup>11</sup> Even backpackers who claim to have been innovative in choosing their itineraries and routes on their trip, compare them and locate them *in relation* to the standard and normative itineraries and sites followed by Israeli backpackers, rather than by other tourists.

The question that preoccupies many backpackers throughout their trip concerns the desirable "distance" from the Israeli enclave, that is, from

fellow Israeli backpackers and sites of Israeli culture and ambience. Finding one's optimum distance and relationship with the enclave is a significant factor influencing one's sense of satisfaction from the trip. In fact, although the trip predominantly serves as a rite of passage, its salient initiatory role involves the search, conducted under moratorial circumstances, for one's optimal interpersonal distance in relation to the Israeli collective, and the search for one's identity in relation to one's *own* cultural center.

### *The enclave as frontier*

We would like to suggest an additional and complementary conceptualization that addresses issues involving the notion of territory and the somewhat militaristic and colonialist character of some parts of the backpackers' discourse.

Following sociologist Baruch Kimmerling's observation regarding the transformation of the Israeli "borders" into "frontiers,"<sup>12</sup> we would like to suggest a view of backpacking in a colonialist light, as a reflection or a projection of territorial issues that feature prominently in popular political discourse in Israel. Kimmerling (1989a), Gurevitch and Aran (1991), and Ben-Ari and Bilu (1997) point to the expansionist character dominant in Israeli Zionist social and cultural discourse.

Our contention is that the Israeli backpacking community, and the Israeli enclaves, are sometimes metaphorically perceived as a third "frontier," in addition to the two already existing ones, namely, the Israeli Diaspora and the Israelis living in occupied Palestinian territories that are geographically contiguous to Israel (Kimmerling 1989a:274–278). Hence, a third frontier seems to be collectively perceived by the backpackers, reflecting symbolic components of the other two; it is neither a Diaspora nor is it geopolitically contiguous to the homeland.

The possibility of imagining such a frontier derives from the notion of the "negotiable" borders or boundaries of the State of Israel. As mentioned earlier, hardly a decade has gone by during over fifty years of statehood in which the boundaries of Israel have not changed. The indeterminate character of Israel's boundaries is perceptible both on the national-territorial plane and on the collective narrative level, as it is reflected in ongoing public discourse.

These territorial aspects in the collective identity of Israelis are in backpacking "played out" ludically rather than addressed seriously. (The terms "colonialism," "frontier," and "pioneers" are not understood in their literal meaning but rather, they are used playfully or metaphorically). The commonly used terms, such as "settlers" (*mitnahalim* in Hebrew), denoting Israelis who are living in the occupied territories, or "conquerors" (*kovshim* in Hebrew), as well as the assertions "We conquered Cuzco," or "Bangkok is