

Psychedelics in Israel: A Brief History / Ido Hartogsohn, Itamar Zadoff

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As of 2021, Israel is positioned at the forefront of a global revival of psychedelic research and culture. The small Middle Eastern country hosts clinical trials with psychedelics, generates multiple psychedelic start-ups, and hosts a pioneering psychedelic therapy training program. Popular interest in psychedelics is surging throughout the country as well, with multiple conferences, podcasts, magazines, and online communities dedicated to the subject. This vibrant scene reflects the radical transformations underwent by the formerly conservative and socialist country over the past half-century, as it grew increasingly receptive to global influences.

This chapter examines the growth and evolution of psychedelic culture in Israel, showing how historical and sociocultural conditions molded the reception of psychedelics into Israeli society. It focuses on the period between 1960–2000, when psychedelics first appeared in Israel, concluding with the rapid evolution and growth of the Israeli psychedelic scene since the turn of the millennium.

This research contributes to a nascent but growing body of literature that provides global perspectives on psychedelics by portraying how the political, ethnic, and sociocultural dynamics of Israeli society produced a distinct psychedelic culture mixing both global and local trends. It thereby provides a compelling example for the sociocultural embeddedness of psychedelics.

Early Experiments with Psychedelics in 1960s Israel

Israel's foundation in 1948 was the crowning achievement of the Zionist movement, a nationalist Jewish renewal movement that emerged in nineteenth century Europe, advocating for the "return" of the Jews to their biblical homeland. The intensity of antisemitism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, culminating in the Holocaust, catalyzed the success of Zionism, which promised an old-new homeland where the Jewish people would be free of persecution. Zionist settlement in Palestine, however, was riddled with violent confrontations

with the native Palestinian population, which viewed the Zionist project as colonialist and racist.

At the center of the Zionist project stood the ambition to mold a new Jewish identity. Unlike the rootless diaspora Jews, the new Jews proudly worked the land and defended their new borders. Values of agrarianism, socialism, and military strength were central in the country's first decades of existence.¹ By the end of the twentieth century, however, the country had opened up to global currents promoting Western liberal values and a post-Zionist perspective.² This perspective, nevertheless, competed with other religious, nationalist, and ethnocentric forces within Israeli society. Like much else, this intricate interplay of both global and local forces has shaped the reception of psychedelics in Israeli society and culture.³

Psychedelics first appeared in modern Israel as psychiatric drugs. During the 1960s two Israeli psychiatric institutions engaged in psychedelic research and therapy: the Geha Mental Health Center in Petah-Tikva just east of Tel Aviv, and the Talbieh Psychiatric Hospital in Jerusalem.

A 1960 paper by psychiatrists Henricus Wijssenbeek and Ruth Landau detailed an LSD trial conducted at the Geha Center,⁴ briefly surveying the experimental use of LSD, which they described as a psychotomimetic or psychosis-inducing drug.⁵ The investigators explored the drug's therapeutic potential, offering it on multiple occasions to ten patients diagnosed with diverse medical conditions including schizophrenia, neurosis, depression, anxiety, and hysteria. They concluded that LSD exacerbated psychotic symptoms in schizophrenics but were impressed with its effectiveness in treating neurosis.

The same year David Karsilovsky published about LSD experimentation at Talbieh Psychiatric Hospital in *Medical Pages*, a bi-monthly journal published by the Israeli Labor Union (Histadrut Haovdim Beretz-Israel).⁶ Karsilovsky warned against simply equating the "LSD psychosis" with schizophrenia—a position that echoed prevalent discussions in psychotomimetic psychiatry in this period.⁷ Karsilovsky's subjects included psychotic patients, epileptics, and healthy volunteers (medical students). The psychiatrist kept the setting as natural as possible allowing the subjects to write, draw, lie down, or sit and found the drug's effects to be dependent on the personality of the participants and their specific experimental situations.

The use of LSD for therapy at the Talbieh Psychiatric Hospital continued during the early to mid-1960s. The story of Israeli poet Yona Wallach (1944–1985), who was hospitalized in Talbieh in 1965, illustrates the transition from

psychiatric uses of psychedelics (which were soon discontinued) to their emergence outside the clinic. Much like elsewhere, psychedelics attracted cultural figures. Wallach's experience at Talbieh produced the first Israeli psychedelic cultural artifact.

An icon of twentieth century Israeli poetry, Wallach is known as the *enfant terrible* of Israeli literature. In 1965 the young poet admitted herself into the Talbieh Psychiatric Hospital, reporting hallucinations and horrible homicidal impulses. She was diagnosed as exceptionally creative yet unruly and suffering from compulsive anxieties, hallucinations, and substance abuse disorder.⁸

Wallach later admitted that she had hospitalized herself out of curiosity for drugs. "I had a book about drugs, and I thought I'd take drugs there. . . . I had a doctor there that did me a favor and performed all sorts of drug experiments with me. Anything I wanted."⁹ Marcel Asael, a psychiatrist at the hospital, eagerly helped and was fascinated by the young, unconventional, and exceedingly bright patient. Wallach's first experience with LSD, described in the journalist Igal Sarna's biography of her, began beatific and became horrific. The poet received 100 micrograms of LSD. Soon, she glanced out the window and was moved to tears by the beauty of it all. Later, however, she opened a tap and saw blood coming out, cascading over the sink and towels. Looking out the window again, she now saw a guillotine, and became convinced that she was about to be decapitated for an unknown crime.¹⁰ Wallach continued her experimentations with LSD and other drugs during her three-month stay at the hospital. She later described these LSD experiences as "wonderful";¹¹ however, her best-known poem on the subject "if you go tripping on LSD," is overwhelmingly grim.

During the 1960s, the literary scene was liberating itself from the collectivist and nationalist discourse that dominated Israeli literature.¹² Writers embraced a growing willingness to explore subjective experience, which bred new pharmaco-literary encounters. Modernist David Avidan (1934–1995), considered one of the three big poets of Israel's state-founding generation, also experimented with LSD. In 1967 Avidan went on an extended LSD trip (involving multiple ingestions amounting to about 400 micrograms) accompanied by a Dictaphone that he used to record the events of his trip. These recordings were later transcribed in the book *Personal Report on an LSD Trip* published in 1968.¹³

Avidan's account showed awareness of the American psychedelic scene by referencing Timothy Leary and the US counterculture but was critical of the unbridled hippie enthusiasm for the drug. One potential application the author suggested was to use LSD for military purposes. LSD, he argued, could be given

to generals to orchestrate minds together and produce superior military performance; indeed, the book evinced a bellicose spirit. A recurring theme was Avidan's attempt to overcome the effects of LSD using the power of language. He portrays his mind as a battlefield between the disorienting, ominous forces of the feminine "drug array" and the discerning, control-oriented forces of the masculine "verbal array." Battling the psychedelic effects with all his manly and poetic might, Avidan resisted the LSD experience rather than surrender to it. His psycho-literary experiment therefore feels botched. As literary critic Nadav Neuman has recently written: "If we were to examine the result based on the poet's ability to 'overpower' the drug and produce coherent poems carrying Avidanic poesy, the result is a resounding defeat for Avidan at the hands of the drug array. In fact, it is difficult to call the fragments in 'Personal report on an LSD Trip' poems. These are better characterized as schizophrenically tinged murmurs and fragments of interesting ideas incessantly diverted by bizarre associations."¹⁴ Misguided and flawed as it may be, the book nevertheless remains a landmark in the cultural reception of psychedelics in 1960s Israel.

Birth of an Israeli Counterculture

In summer 1967, the psychedelic movement reached an international cultural prominence. In Israel, the period coincided with a war that changed the history of Israel and the Middle East. On June 5, 1967, after months of escalating tensions, Israel embarked on an extraordinarily successful military campaign. In less than a week, it had defeated and seized control over territories formerly belonging to Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, including the old city of Jerusalem, the Temple Mount, and other biblical holy sites. While Americans allegedly bathed in a "summer of love," for Israelis this period led to a swell of national pride and messianic dreams. The young country was suddenly a regional power enjoying international admiration.¹⁵

This military success expedited the percolation of international liberalizing influences, including that of the hippie movement. "After the Six-Day war, proud soldiers traveled to Europe like backpackers today travel to India and Thailand. It was a cultural shock that would influence us for our entire lives, releasing us from the Israeli khaki uniform to colors we didn't know, the psychedelia of King's Road and Cranberry Street," writes Israeli author and songwriter Yehonatan Geffen (1947 –).¹⁶ Young international volunteers—many of them hippies—traveled to Israel from Europe and North America carrying

countercultural ideas, pulling the young country out of its former isolation, and ushering in a torrent of Western, liberalizing and oftentimes psychedelic elements. Drugs like hashish, formerly condemned, suddenly appealed to Israeli bohemia.¹⁷ “It is doubtful whether the average Israeli would have been tempted to indulge in a psychedelic experience if he had not found overseas teachers and instructors who had taught him to take full advantage of [these drugs]” noted one observer.¹⁸

Two prominent bohemian groups were active in Tel Aviv during the late 1960s and early 1970s whose psychedelic use presents interesting counterpoints. The Lul Group, consisted of culturally prominent filmmakers, songwriters, and musicians (e.g., Arik Einstein, Uri Zohar, Shalom Hanoach, and Boaz Davidson) who produced an impressive flow of iconic films, television shows, and albums. Its members came predominantly from the cohorts of Israeli Defense Force (IDF) bands that dominated Israeli music up until the 1970s, and embodied the iconic figure of the *Sabra*, the new, locally bred Israeli: proud, self-confident, and cheeky.¹⁹ The group was a culturally updated version of the Israeli institution of the *Chevre*, a term that dates to pre-independence Zionist pioneers and paramilitary groups like the Palmach and connotes intimate group camaraderie and cheerful fooling around.²⁰

In the early 1970s, members of Lul presented classic Palmach-style *chevre* humor with a psychedelic tinge on Israeli TV programs that became instant classics. Inspired by Bob Dylan, the Beatles, and Pink Floyd, Lul members integrated psychedelic elements into Israeli music and culture, mixing them with distinct local flavors. The group occasionally promoted countercultural ideals but stopped short of withdrawing from state obligations. “We talked of love and peace, but we never stopped serving in our combat units,” writes Geffen. “We were a company with multiple personality. A soldier lying in an ambush on the Dead Sea or crawling towards an Egyptian sniper in the Suez Canal listening to ‘Imagine’ and ‘Give peace a chance’ on his radio earphones. [Israeli prime minister] Golda Meir and John Lennon raging in one head, but a few tokes [of hash] will sort that too.”²¹

Importantly, the group’s primary drug of choice was not psychedelics but hashish, as the title of Geffen’s book, “Good dope” (*Chomer Tov*) indicates. Though many of Lul’s members experimented with psychedelics, they did so only casually, haphazardly, without ascribing much importance to the experience. The Lul Group’s interest in psychedelics was not spiritual, political, or even creative. Their trip adventures sound more like a *chevre*-style fooling around, and

hardly distinguishable from their tales of cocaine use. Hashish and psychedelics functioned mostly as an escape from the dreary, uninspiring, and sometimes oppressive reality of Zionist society.

A contrasting case is found in the Third Eye Group, active in Tel Aviv around the same time. If Lul were the proud embodiment of the locally grown *Sabra*, the Third Eye Group represented a mixture of newly arrived immigrants with a yet unsettled relationship to Israeli society. The leader was artist and filmmaker Jacques Katmor (1938–2001). Born into a wealthy Jewish family in Cairo, Katmor received a cosmopolitan education, was well read and acutely aware of the international world of art and culture.²²

Katmor had his first taste of psychedelics at age nineteen, when he ingested mescaline after reading Henry Michaux's *Miserable Miracle* (1956).²³ He became interested in the writings of William S. Burroughs, Aleister Crowley, Aldous Huxley, and Timothy Leary. After emigrating to Israel in 1960 and serving in the Israeli army, Katmor moved to Tel Aviv and immersed himself in local bohemian circles. The handsome, charismatic, young man soon emerged as the leader of a dissident cultural group.

The Third Eye Group focused on self-liberation and transformation through art. Its members spent days and nights debating philosophical issues, making art, and consuming vast amounts of drugs. Unlike the Lul Group, theirs was markedly international both in biographical origins and in artistic influences. They also approached drugs differently: “[Katmor's] understanding of drugs as spiritual tools catalyzed perpetual exploration” writes his biographer, Ori Dromer.²⁴ “Drugs were central to the ideology,” said Katmor's wife Ann Tuchmeyer, “they were meant to open up the mind and help people become artists.”²⁵

In 1969, Katmor's film *A Woman's Case* was the first Israeli film to screen at the Venice Film Festival. Drawing from the avant-garde style of French New Wave directors like Jean-Luc Godard, the film features extensive nudity, and Israeli psychedelic band The Churchills (which gained international success under the name Jericho Jones). Katmor's short film, *The Hole* (1973) was created under the influence of LSD. The film featured Katmor himself, digging a burial hole in a field, cut with blurred, broken images. It offered a “Jewish, hippie, psychedelic combination within a theological model.”²⁶ While Dromer interprets the film as an excavation dismembering Jewish-Israeli identity, it could alternatively be understood as symbolizing psychedelic ego-death. Either way,

the experience of digging his own grave while on acid appears to have shaken Katmor for months following the event.

Kamor and his group were challenging Zionist morals. They traveled to socialist Kibbutzim, small intentional communities with socialist-Zionist principles that emerged around the turn of the century, and challenged Kibbutznik mentality using sensory bombardment, avant-garde theatre, nudity, and psychedelic visuals. In one particularly notorious event in Tel Aviv's Artists House, the group combined deafening noise cascades, psychedelic lighting, and dildo wearing female models as Katmor moved through the crowd riding a heavy motorcycle. These provocative exhibitions elicited public outrage. The Israeli press covered the events with a mixture of voyeurism and condemnation. The spartan Israeli society did not buy into the ideas of peace, love, sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. Interest in hallucinogens was frowned upon as symptomatic of an individualist inward turn that threatened to undermine Zionist ideals.

In 1972, following economic hardships, the group opened an alternative cultural center. The Third Eye shop in central Tel Aviv, functioned as an embassy for the international countercultural movement. Merchandise included rock albums, Indian incense, mystical titles, and books by countercultural favorites like Carlos Castaneda, Timothy Leary, Jerry Rubin, and Herman Hesse.²⁷ Persistent police raids, burglaries, and a steady stream of unwanted, non-paying visitors led to its closure.

The Lul Group and the Third Eye Group symbolized two divergent approaches to drugs and culture and were generally disdainful of one another. Lul members considered Third Eye members to be pretentious and weird. Third Eye members viewed Lul members as parochial ignoramuses. One group, based in local *Sabra* culture and lore, regarded psychedelic use as a mere pastime. The other, orienting itself towards international cultural movements, regarded them as spiritual, creative, and mind-expanding tools.²⁸

Psychedelics after the Yom Kippur War

In 1973, Israeli's confidence received a fatal blow after a near defeat in the Yom Kippur War. At a time when the American counterculture was facing a War on Drugs, Israel's cultural high and lows were again dictated by the results of military confrontations. The 1973 war shook the integrity of the Lul Group. Members of the Third Eye Group refused to join the military effort and later emigrated to San Francisco, to "the heart of the movement we tried so hard to

import.”²⁹ Katmor eventually moved to the Netherlands, ending his life embittered and dependent on narcotic drugs.

In 1977 Israel elected the nationalist Likkud party, replacing the socialist Mapai party that had ruled the country in its first thirty years. Supported by non-European ethnic minorities, the new ruling party challenged Israel’s power structures. For many in the old elite, the loss of political control and fears of cultural decline led away from political engagement and towards an esoteric search for spiritual redemption. Author Gabi Zohar speaks of a crisis of Zionism that emerged identifying participants in new sects and religious movements as coming from the old elite: “those young people whose world descended into the twilight of a profound crisis. Their identity twitching and bleeding. Their fate in the traditional leadership unsettled. They search meaning for their lives.”³⁰

Psychedelics converged with these new cultural trends. Poet and later-day cult leader Rina Shani (1937–1983) was a bright and charismatic poet in 1960s Tel Aviv bohemia. In 1973 Shani had a revelatory LSD experience radically shifting her perspective of the world. “An explosion of consciousness . . . I feel and know everything,” she wrote. “LSD enlightened me. That’s how it happened to the Baal Shem Tov [founder of Hasidism], to Shimon Bar Yochai [second century AD Jewish mystic]. I was out of the cave. I found my true self which is God.”³¹ Shani felt reincarnated. She renamed her newly transformed self Rain Shine. The beautiful, charismatic leader whose teaching merged Buddhism, psychoanalysis, and hippie counterculture together with Jewish concepts and symbols soon attracted a following. She believed in the transformative power of LSD, and the liberal use of cannabis. Police identified the group as the first Israeli cult.³²

The suicide of a group member, who was also a Kibbutz member, led to growing public scrutiny and condemnation. Shani traveled to India, where she died alone at age forty-six. Like Katmor, Shani’s encounter with the Zionist establishment was crushing. After becoming a spiritual leader, her writings disappeared from bookstores. “Zionist Bolshevism erased her,” says Yaakov Rotblitt, her former lover.³³ Rotblitt, a member of Lul Group, characterized Shani’s engagement with LSD as another example of the versatility of psychedelics in Israeli bohemia. “If Uri Zohar and Lul did it for the laughs, Katmor used it as a tool for inner and artistic exploration, and Rina, she used it for her spiritual development, to talk with god.”³⁴

By the end of 1970s, the cultural prominence of psychedelics in Israel waned. As 1960s flower power became passé, new cultural movements gained

popularity in Israeli society, from disco to punk. These new movements had new non-psychedelic drug preferences.³⁵

One noteworthy exception that brought psychedelics back to the limelight and linked revelatory hallucinations with modern Jewish trauma was the LSD treatment of author and Holocaust survivor Yehiel De-Nur (known by his pen name Ka-Tzetnik). A Polish-born Holocaust and Auschwitz survivor, De-Nur was Israel's most respected Holocaust author, with multiple works exploring the horrors of the Nazi death camps.

In 1976 De-Nur traveled to Leiden, Holland, and went through a series of LSD treatments under the supervision of Dutch psychiatrist Jan Baastians.³⁶ Baastians had treated traumatized Holocaust survivors since the 1960s; however De-Nur was his most prominent patient. After the treatment De-Nur declared himself cured from his persistent nightmares. Using LSD, he had been able to heal the traumatic wounds of the Holocaust. The event did not, however, become publicly known until 1987, when De-Nur published a book detailing his LSD therapy. The October 6 issue of the controversial but influential weekly *HaOlam Haze* featured De-Nur on the cover with a headline reporting the miraculous healing of Holocaust trauma using LSD. A copy of the De-Nur's book *Shivitti: A vision* was included.³⁷ The book was also later included in collection of KaZetnik's Holocaust books produced by the Israeli ministry of education and aimed at teachers and students.

De-Nur's early writings refer to Auschwitz as a "A different planet"—a parallel reality beyond the laws of this world. Following De-Nur's LSD experiences, he reversed his perspective on Auschwitz. In a 1988 interview he famously stated: "Neither Satan nor God built Auschwitz, but I and you."³⁸ Holocaust memory in Israel historically veered between the universalist humanist perspective, and the particularistic, nationalist perspective. Through LSD, De-Nur came to embrace a wholly universalist interpretation of Auschwitz.³⁹

The 1990s Israeli Backpackers and the Trance Scene

By the late 1980s a new global psychedelic subculture was brewing. *Psytrance*, a musical style that developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s on the Indian coasts of Goa, soon reached Israeli shores.

The background for this new emerging phenomenon was a growing movement of Israeli backpackers who travelled to the Indian subcontinent seeking adventure and spiritual fulfilment. Israeli backpacking culture has been linked to Zionist traditions running all the way to 1940s *Palmach*,⁴⁰ and indeed,

early travelers belonged to socially strong elements of Israeli society, including Kibbutz members, and veterans of elite IDF units. Many of these backpackers immersed themselves in the Goa trance scene, becoming successful DJs, producers, and label owners. They carried the new culture back to their homeland during the 1990s and 2000s as backpacking spread across the different strata of Israeli society.

Israeli backpackers' penchant for mind-altering drugs has often been tied with the oppressive experience of two-to-three years of compulsory military service mandated for all Israeli citizens.⁴¹ Israeli youth, having sacrificed several of the most crucial years of their young adulthoods inside an authoritarian system, rushed to India and south-central America to make up for lost time and medicate the traumas of their military service.⁴² Their gung-ho approach to risk-taking and desire to use up a preciously short period of liberty from life's obligations led them on the path to devil-may-care drug adventures. A 2008 BBC program titled "Flipping Out: Israel's Drug Generation" investigated "why so many young Israelis use their National Service discharge bonus to go backpacking in India, with a high proportion experimenting with drugs."⁴³ Many dealt drugs to finance their travels, earning reputations as resourceful, reliable drug dealers.⁴⁴ Backpacking anthropologist Tamir Leon writes that when asking Israelis in India how to recognize a drug dealer he received the answer: "Approach an Israeli. Every Israeli is a dealer. (Meaning that in every Israeli social circle there is a person with access to commercial quantities of drugs.)"⁴⁵

With the break of the first Intifada (1987–1993), Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza sent many young men to participate in patently unheroic missions of policing civilian populations. This led to an intensification of the internal discussions about the need for an Israeli-Palestinian peace treaty (leading to the Oslo peace process, starting 1993). By that time, parts of Israeli society were entering a post-Zionist phase.⁴⁶ Israeli sociologist Oz Almog speaks of a disengagement from the old Zionist model and an "implosion of Zionist Charisma" leading to greater willingness to engage with Zionism critically.⁴⁷ "It was under the pressure of these traumas [Lebanon war, Intifada, the Gulf War, and suicide bombings] that a sense of impotence began to take hold, a disbelief in the possibility of having an impact on political and societal realities," writes scholar Assaf Sagiv who describes the rise of an Israeli Dionysian culture embracing mind-altering drugs. "These sentiments left deep scars, especially among veterans of combat units . . . one result was the steady

withdrawal of young adults from engagement in national concerns and their retreat into the sphere of the exclusively private.”⁴⁸

Sagiv blamed the vulnerability of Israeli youth to the allure of drugs on the failure of Israeli society to “provide its young with a viable alternative ethos.”⁴⁹ Like their bohemian predecessors in the 1970s, Israeli youth wished to disengage from the collectivist burden of Zionism and Israeli reality. Drugs, again, provided a way.

The founders of the Israeli psytrance scene were recently discharged male soldiers.⁵⁰ Many of them were disappointed with their experiences in the Israeli military and felt a strong need to revolt. The reception of trance culture into Israeli society was facilitated because it contained many cultural components that resonate with Zionist youth movements and military life—camping in nature, navigation, and male camaraderie. Trance founders repurposed practices acquired during their army service towards their participation in the new psytrance culture.⁵¹

By the mid-1990s Israel was becoming a psytrance powerhouse. Artists like Astral Projection, Infected Mushroom, Skazi, Sandman, Chakra, and Oforia became major names in the psytrance world. Israel was becoming not just an importer but also an exporter of psychedelic culture.

“It would be hard to overstate the extent of the ‘trance’ phenomenon in Israel” wrote Sagiv in 2000. “In the last few years, this country of six million has become a major focus of the global rave culture.”⁵² The prominence of psytrance in Israel society, he argued, is without parallels. “Trance has taken over the streets. It bubbles out from passing vehicles, is heard in the kiosks and grocery stores and deafens us in the boutiques. It is in television commercials, fashion shows, malls, half-time shows at football and basketball games, at bar and bat mitzva celebrations, circumcision rites and weddings . . . Its sound is now localized and familiar” wrote Shor.⁵³

If the 1960s and 1970s psychedelic wave in Israel was confined to bohemian circles, the 1990s brought the democratization of psychedelia, as it spread across many sectors of Israeli society. “Trance cuts across ethnic and economic classes. . . . Druggies from India and greasers from the suburbs, girls from development towns with their tank tops and platform shoes dancing alongside buttoned-up BA students” reported the Tel Aviv weekly *Ha’ir*.⁵⁴ The Israeli “Drug-War Authority,” established in 1988, soon turned its attention to this new psychedelic underground.

Drug sociologist Hagit Noah-Boni describes a moral panic campaign launched against the psytrance movement, culminating in 1995 with public warnings that “thousands of Israelis getting stoned on the coasts of Goa are an immediate moral threat to Israeli society.”⁵⁵ The prospect of ex-soldiers ingesting psychedelics was recast as a security threat. The newspapers warned that thousands of young Israelis will drug themselves at Goa’s new year’s celebrations and the head of the Drug-War Authority urged Israeli parents to organize a charter flight and bring their kids back home. The flight never took off, however (no parents signed up). Noah-Boni links the moral panic around backpacker drug use with the November 1995 assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, which occurred a month earlier, creating moral confusion and fomenting a search for a scapegoat.⁵⁶ Ironically, trance scholar Elinor Carmi convincingly shows that the entire media drama was orchestrated by the Drug-War Authority itself to secure funds in upcoming parliament discussions.⁵⁷

Confrontations between the authorities and the raging trance scene continued throughout the mid-to-late-1990s. Police routinely raided psytrance parties and even homes of psytrance DJs and party producers.⁵⁸ Newspapers reported horror stories of soldiers driving 160 kph on the freeway while on acid, and elite IDF pilots tripping on LSD.⁵⁹ Israeli media, meanwhile, referred to psytrance parties as “acid parties.” In 1996, a judge was called upon to decide whether psytrance parties should be banned categorically. The judge rejected the equation of psytrance and drugs, declaring, “drugs can be taken in a rock concert, listening to oriental music and possibly even while listening to classical music.”⁶⁰ Then, in July 1998, 40,000 Israelis attended a massive rally in Tel Aviv's Rabin Square, protesting the repression of the Israeli trance scene. The event was viewed as an impressive triumph for the local scene that led to its wider acceptance.⁶¹

The Israeli trance scene has continued to thrive in the past two decades with the theme of escapism to an alternate psychedelic reality pervading scholarly accounts of the subject.⁶² Alongside its attraction to the global, Israeli trance is firmly rooted in its local culture.⁶³ Scholars note the ubiquity of Jewish-Zionist motifs in psytrance parties (incandescent Chanukah candelabras, dayglo fluorescent stars of David) and that despite the inclusive PLUR (Peace-Love-Unity-Respect) rhetoric of trance culture, the social structures of trance parties often end up replicating deep-seated divisions within Israeli society.⁶⁴ Anthropologist Joshua Shmidt concludes that Israeli psytrance culture presents essentially different features than its overseas counterparts that have been

associated by researchers with “insubordination,” “dissent,” and “cultural subversion.”⁶⁵ This is perhaps to be expected in a country where thousands of soldiers go on psychoactive adventures each weekend only to then return to their military units and fulfill their mandated roles. Either way, Israel remains a unique and intriguing test case for thinking about the political and social context of psytrance and psychedelic use.

The Israeli Psychedelic Scene since the Millennium

During the early 2000s, rumors of ayahuasca and peyote rituals from the West started to hit the beaches of Goa and the ashrams in Puna, a three-hour drive southeast of Mumbai. Israelis who were a dominant part of the international trance scene, started participating in psychedelic medicine circles there and in Europe. Initially inviting South American musicians to conduct rituals in Israel, by 2002, some Israelis were leading the rituals themselves, adjusting them to fit Israeli and Jewish sensitivities, while keeping original cultural frameworks. These pioneers were again shifting the Israeli context for psychedelic experiences, from the rowdy, high bpm, hardcore trance environment, known in Hebrew as *Karahana*, to a framework for healing and sacred medicines. While the ayahuasca crowd was at first predominantly from secular, liberal backgrounds, the movement soon generated surprising social mixtures involving both Palestinians and orthodox populations.⁶⁶

The 2010s saw the growth of an integrated and committed Israeli psychedelic community. If previous local movements involving psychedelics repeatedly distanced themselves from drug associations, the new movement declared clearly: it *is* about the drugs. In 2009, the first Hebrew book dedicated to psychedelic culture and ideology was published,⁶⁷ and in 2013 the Israeli psychedelic magazine *LaPsychonaut* appeared. Attempting to provide “a home for the psychedelic community” the crowd-funded magazine includes stories about harm reduction, psychedelic integration, and coming out of the psychedelic closet. Several psychedelic harm-reduction services emulating the practices of international organizations such as Zendo and Cosmicare (Anashim Tovim, Hof Mivtachim, Safezone) began operating at psytrance parties.⁶⁸ The first Israeli psychedelic conference Altered Minds (Meshanim Toda'a) took place in the American Zionist House in 2017. The event sold out, attracting over 500 individuals, and featuring a cadre of Israeli and international speakers.

In 2017 the international organization Students for Sensible Drug Policy (SSDP) launched an Israeli chapter, and an Israeli psychedelic podcast “Todaa

Raba” started featuring local guests. The prominent daily *Haaretz* began covering the subject with surprising tenacity, sometimes publishing two or three items on the subject on the same weekend, and even featuring a regular column about the subject. A growing number of local books and movies on the subject have also appeared, as well as several social media groups counting dozens of thousands of members, suggesting that psychedelics have moved into the mainstream.

Professional work in psychedelic spaces has developed rapidly. In 2007, psychedelic research returned to Israel. The Be’er Ya’akov Mental Health Center became one of few international sites for the Phase I MDMA trials conducted by the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS). During the 2010s Israeli researchers became regular speakers in the international psychedelic conference scene, universities began offering courses, and the first Israeli program training psychedelic therapists launched. Twenty-first century Israel prides itself on being a *Start-Up Nation*.⁶⁹ In the early 2020s, as international psychedelic corporations began making headlines, Israel too generated its first batch of psychedelic start-ups including Nextage, PsyRx, and Pharmocann, capitalizing on the success of the local cannabis industry.

Conclusion

The story of psychedelics in Israel was shaped by the country’s culture and history, reflecting both its local conditions as well as its outward-facing stance. Throughout the decades, psychedelics have been repeatedly used by Israelis as cosmic escape paths out of the oppressive reality of a geographically isolated, ideologically charged country under constant security threats. They played a role in cultural movements that challenged Israeli social norms, leading to scandal (and outward getaways) at times, but mostly staying within bounds, conversing with local culture, and eventually gaining growing acceptance. Over the past thirty years, as Israel grew increasingly assimilated into global markets and discourses, Israel’s relationship with these drugs has been shaped by growing inward and outward flows of individuals, culture, knowledge, and capital leading the country to become a psytrance powerhouse and significant psychedelic research center. Finally, building on a local culture of entrepreneurship and the country’s growing reputation as a start-up hub, this has led to the emergence of a local psychedelic industry. Today, the influence of psychedelics crosses social and cultural boundaries, as the drugs are spread across diverse groups in Israeli society to include liberals, west-bank settlers, ultra-orthodox Jews, and

Palestinians, acquiring diverse meanings, and reflecting the disparate faces of contemporary Israeli identity.

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- ² Tom Segev, *Elvis in Jerusalem: Post-Zionism and the Americanization of Israel*, trans. Haim Watzman (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002); Oz Almog, *Goodbye to Shrutik: Changes in the Values of Israeli Elites [Hebrew]* (Haifa: Haifa University & Zmora Bitan, 2004).
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- ⁵ Ido Hartogsohn, *American Trip: Set, Setting, and the Psychedelic Experience in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2020), chap. 1.
- ⁶ David Karislovsky, “Clinical Observations on the Effects of LSD-25 [Hebrew],” *Dapim Refueeim* 19, no. 1 (May 1960): 28–39.
- ⁷ Hartogsohn, *American Trip*, 40–43.
- ⁸ Yigal Sarna, *Yonah Wallach [Hebrew]* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1993).
- ⁹ *The Seven Tapes*, Documentary, 2012.
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- ¹⁵ Anita Shapira, *Israel: A History* (UPNE, 2012).
- ¹⁶ Yehonatan Geffen, *Good Dope [Hebrew]* (Kineret-Zmora Bitan, 2001), 72.
- ¹⁷ Haggai Ram, *Intoxicating Zion: A Social History of Hashish in Mandatory Palestine and Israel* (Stanford University Press, 2020).
- ¹⁸ Quoted in Ram, 153.
- ¹⁹ Oz Almog, *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew* (Univ of California Press, 2000).
- ²⁰ Geffen, *Good Dope [Hebrew]*, 117.
- ²¹ Geffen, 80.
- ²² Uri Dromer, *Jacque Katmor Is Wishing You a Good Death* (2012: Nahum Gutman Museum, 2012).
- ²³ Dromer, 46.
- ²⁴ Dromer, 46.
- ²⁵ Etti Avramov, “Ann Legend (Hebrew),” *Tel Aviv Newspaper*, April 6, 2004, 57.
- ²⁶ Dromer, *Jacque Katmor Is Wishing You a Good Death*, 41.
- ²⁷ Dromer, 88.
- ²⁸ While this chapter focuses on the prominent Tel Aviv scene, psychedelic use was also happening in other parts of Israel. In the early 1970s early Zionist settlement Rosh Pina, in northern Israel, became inhabited by hippies living an off-the-grid lifestyle and making frequent use of drugs, including psychedelics. (Mariana Ruah-Midbar and Tali Aluhav, “The Hippie Colonie in Rosh Pina,” *Ofakim Begeografia* 97 (2019): 107=135. The Northern city of Haifa also had a psychedelic scene, with dozens of youth reportedly tripping together every weekend on the Rotschild House lawn (some of whom later becoming figures of cultural prominence). (Interview with Amit Daniel).
- ²⁹ Dromer, *Jacque Katmor Is Wishing You a Good Death*, 89.
- ³⁰ Gabi Zohar, *Happiness Has No End: On Mystical Sects, New Groups and Psychological Marathons in Israel [Hebrew]* (Tel Aviv: Sahar, 1992), 44.
- ³¹ Zohar, 43.
- ³² “Israeli Police Report on Sects,” 1982, <https://web.archive.org/web/20060707015551/http://www.katot.org/Files/KatotPage.asp?katotpage=36#RinaShani>.

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- ³³ Noya Kochavi, “Rina Shani Is Not a Friend [Hebrew],” *Haaretz*, August 9, 2008, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/1.3361009>.
- ³⁴ Yakov Rotblit, December 10, 2020.
- ³⁵ Oded Heilbronner, “‘Resistance Through Rituals’—Urban Subcultures of Israeli Youth from the Late 1950s to the 1980s,” *Israel Studies* 16 (October 1, 2011): 28–50, <https://doi.org/10.1353/is.2011.0027>; Nissan Shor, “Dancing with Tears in Our Eyes: History of Club and Discotheque Culture in Israel,” *Tel Aviv: Resling [Hebrew]*, 2008.
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- ³⁸ Udi Meller, “‘It Wasn’t the Devil Who Created Auschwitz but Man’: Twenty Years since KaZetnik’s Death [Hebrew],” *Makkor Rishon*, July 14, 2021, <https://www.makorrishon.co.il/news/374439/>.
- ³⁹ For readings of De-Nur’s LSD experiences see Erika Dyck and Chris Elcock, “Reframing Bummer Trips: Scientific and Cultural Explanations to Adverse Reactions to Psychedelic Drug Use,” *The Social History of Alcohol and Drugs* 34, no. 2 (2020): 271–96; Iris Robeling-Grau, “How to Understand Shivitti?,” in *Holocaust History and the Readings of Ka-Tzetnik* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018).
- ⁴⁰ Nasia Shafraan, “From Palmach Travels to the Mochileros [Hebrew],” *Panim: Quarterly Journal for Culture, Society and Education* 35 (n.d.).
- ⁴¹ Elinor Carmi, *TransMission: The Psytrance Culture in Israel 1989-1999 [Hebrew]* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2013); Daria Maoz, “Drug Use among Young Israeli Backpackers in India [Hebrew],” in *Backpackers and Drugs*, ed. Hagit Boni-Noah (Jerusalem: The Israeli Anti-Drug Authority, 2008), 169–89.
- ⁴² Maoz, “Drug Use among Young Israeli Backpackers in India [Hebrew].”
- ⁴³ *Flipping Out - Israel’s Drug Generation*, n.d., <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00bbxqt>.
- ⁴⁴ Joshua Schmidt, “Full Penetration: The Integration of Psychedelic Electronic Dance Music and Culture into the Israeli Mainstream,” *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 4, no. 1 (2012): 39.
- ⁴⁵ Tamir Leon, “Israeli Travelers in India and Drugs [Hebrew],” in *Backpackers and Drugs*, ed. Hagit Boni-Noah (Jerusalem: The Israeli Anti-Drug Authority, 2008), 190–226.
- ⁴⁶ Segev, *Elvis in Jerusalem*; Almog, *Goodbye to Shrulik: Changes in the Values of Israeli Elites [Hebrew]*.
- ⁴⁷ Almog, *Goodbye to Shrulik: Changes in the Values of Israeli Elites [Hebrew]*, 21–23.
- ⁴⁸ Assaf Sagiv, “Dionysus in Zion,” *Azure: Ideas for the Jewish Nation* 9, no. 155–178 (2000): 170.
- ⁴⁹ Sagiv, 173.
- ⁵⁰ Carmi, *TransMission: The Psytrance Culture in Israel 1989-1999 [Hebrew]*, 36.
- ⁵¹ Carmi, 92–93.
- ⁵² Sagiv, “Dionysus in Zion,” 167.
- ⁵³ Quoted in Joshua Schmidt and Liora Navon, “‘In Dance We Trust’: Comparing Trance-Dance Parties among Secular and Orthodox Israeli Youth,” *Israel Affairs* 23, no. 6 (2017): 1127.
- ⁵⁴ Quoted in Sagiv, “Dionysus in Zion,” 167.
- ⁵⁵ Hagit Boni-Noah, “The Construction of a Social Problem among Drug Using Backpackers: The Development of Advocacy, Prevention and Treatment of Backpacker Drug Casualties in Israel [Hebrew],” in *Backpackers and Drugs*, ed. Hagit Boni-Noah (Jerusalem: The Israeli Anti-Drug Authority, 2008), 18.
- ⁵⁶ Boni-Noah, “The Construction of a Social Problem among Drug Using Backpackers: The Development of Advocacy, Prevention and Treatment of Backpacker Drug Casualties in Israel [Hebrew].”
- ⁵⁷ Carmi, *TransMission: The Psytrance Culture in Israel 1989-1999 [Hebrew]*, 154.
- ⁵⁸ Carmi, 56.
- ⁵⁹ Lior Elhai, “We Drove 160 Kph High on Acid,” *Yediot Ahronot*, October 19, 1997; Yoram Yarkoni, “In the Acid Parties I Met Combat Pilots and Other Officers,” *Yediot Ahronot*, July 7, 1993.
- ⁶⁰ Dorit Gabay, “It’s Official: An Acid Party Is Not Necessarily a Drug Party,” *Maariv*, July 21, 1996.
- ⁶¹ Carmi, *TransMission: The Psytrance Culture in Israel 1989-1999 [Hebrew]*.
- ⁶² Schmidt and Navon, “‘In Dance We Trust,’” 1128.
- ⁶³ Schmidt and Navon, “‘In Dance We Trust.’”
- ⁶⁴ Schmidt, “Full Penetration.”
- ⁶⁵ Schmidt and Navon, “‘In Dance We Trust,’” 1141.
- ⁶⁶ Mishor reports on ultra-orthodox (Haredi) ayahuasca circles operating in Northern Israel: Zevic Mishor, “Digging the Well Deep: The Jewish ‘Ultra-Orthodox’ Relationship with the Divine Explored through the Lifeworld of the Breslov Chasidic Community in Safed,” 2015.. Roseman et al. tells of the intricacies of bi-national ayahuasca rituals bringing together Israeli and Palestinian participants and including icaros in both Hebrew and Arabic Leor Roseman et al., “Relational Processes in Ayahuasca Groups of Palestinians and Israelis,” *Frontiers in Pharmacology* 12 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fphar.2021.607529>.
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⁶⁸ Yahav Erez, "Safe Zones in Recreational Settings in Israel: The Emergence of Psychedelics Expertise" (Master's Thesis, Ramat Gan, Israel, Bar Ilan University, 2020).

⁶⁹ Dan Senor and Saul Singer, *Start-up Nation: The Story of Israel's Economic Miracle* (Twelve, 2011).

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