REGULAR ARTICLES

THE JOURNEY OF LEAVING AN INSULAR COMMUNITY: THE CASE OF ULTRA ORTHODOX JEWS

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Abstract

This article describes a study that used a qualitative methodology to capture the lived experience of individuals who grew up in Ultra Orthodox and Chasidic communities and left to explore a new path. A target sample of 19 individuals, mostly from the New York area, was used. Non structured individual in-depth interviews were conducted to learn how these individuals perceive, describe, and interpret their experience. Thematic analysis of the interviews was conducted. A major theme that emerged in this analysis referred to the process of leaving. Four phases were identified in the process: 1) initial questioning; (2) growing doubts; (3) beginning to share selectively with a small group of trusted others; (4) revealing a new and altered identity. These phases are discussed and illustrated. Implications for intervention and for future research are suggested.

Keywords: Leaving orthodoxy, ex-orthodox, exiters, ex-haredi, off the derech,

Insular communities follow a separatists segregationist strategy, involving positive attitudes to own culture and negative attitudes to the culture of the wider society (Berry, 1997). They are often religious and include Mormons, Amish, new religious movements, cults and Ultra-Orthodox Jews (also called Haredi). These communities try to maintain their distance from the larger society and their traditional way of life as the world around them is changing drastically and fast. All aspects of life are highly structured and regulated by clear guidelines, ideas and practices, to which total conformity is demanded.

Specifically, Ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities were described by Davidman and Gareil, (2007) as follows:

* Support for this study was provided by an institutional grant from Adelphi University. Help with recruitment of participant was given by Shulem Deen, Unpious.com Editor and Founder.

> Jews, like other highly encapsulated groups provide environments that are insulated from secular life in a variety of ways. Education, worship, food, dress, and observance are all governed within the community. Rules pertaining to every aspect of life are clearly and strictly outlined by religious texts and reinforced by the rabbis, who lead, teach, and shape their communities. The communities themselves are geographically isolated; haredim [the concept that literally translated "anxious ones" refers to Ultra Orthodox Jews] generally live within their own distinct neighborhoods and rarely interact with those whose secular lives they disdain (p. 205).

These tightly knit communities are characterized by large families as birth control is resricted, high rate of poverty, a restrictive life style and dress code enforced by a "modesty patrol", rigorous social control with strict separation between men and women until they are married, typically in an arranged marriage at the age of 18-19. Exposure to radio, television, non-religious media, movies, literature, art, music, and the web is strictly limited. Orthodox education consists almost exclusively of religious content and the Jewish scriptures. Boys and men spend most of their time in prayers and religious studies whereas the focus for women is on family matters. Everyday language is often Yiddish. In some sects, women are not allowed to drive.

Individuals who explore life out of these communities, especially the more extreme sects, are like new immigrants who step into a foreign world often demonized by their community of origin as negative and dangerous. They often lack basic education, language proficiency, vocational training, and marketable skills necessary to function in the modern world. They also lack knowledge of norms of behavior with respect to dress and interpersonal behaviors; particularly with the opposite sex (they do not get education regarding sexuality, sexually transmitted diseases, and safe sex). Having been raised to believe that the nonobservant live utterly meaningless lives, their values, worldview, and identity are also challenged. Consequently, they become culturally disorientated.

While converts into strict religious groups have considerable institutional support, the same is not true for those who choose to transition into secular society. They are frequently stigmatized, rejected, and publically humiliated by their friends and communities. Stigmas and social punishment may extend to their families, who often ostracize and disown them and they may lose contact with children, parents, and siblings. Consequently, "transgressors" often face the challenge of navigating an unfamiliar outside world with little preparation and no

financial, psychological, or social support. This may beget loneliness, stress, depression and self-harming behaviors.

Research about insular communities is limited as accessibility is challenging because they tend to isolate themselves and minimize interaction with the outer world for fear that secular modern ideas influence their beliefs and way of life. Available studies have focused on the likelihood of seeking screening for medical conditions, the association of religiosity with mental health and attitudes toward mental illness, some aspects of marital and child-adult relationships and residential relations between different religious groups (Albert, Harlap & Caplan, 2004; Bartz, Richards, Smith & Fischer, 2010; Blumen, 2012; Flint, Benenson & Alfasi, 2012; Goldberg & Yassour-Borochowitz, 2009; Pirutinsky, Rosmarin, & Pargament, 2009; Schnall, Pelcovitz & Fox, 2013).

Leaving religion was conceptualized by Roof and Landers (1997) in three typologies. *Disengagement* is the rejection of external religious authority while maintaining theistic beliefs and redefining the relation of the individual to religious institutions. It includes moving from one religion to another, eroding of traditional beliefs and institutional loyalties, moving into and out of active religious participation and exploring alternative religious and spiritual possibilities (often called New Religious Movements). *Dissent* refers to opposition to religion as a bureaucratic organizational structure such as the church but not necessarily losing faith. *Defection* means rejection of religion all together and opting for a secular viewpoint and life styles. Defecting can occur publicly (Bar-Lev, Breslau, & Ne'eman 1997; Peter et al. 1982; Wright, 1984) or privately, while maintaining the appearance of being Orthodox (Barzilai 2004).

Most studies about leaving insular communities documented socio demographic characteristics of those who left a church or a cult (Albrecht, Cornwall & Cunningham, 1988; Balch, 1985; Roozen, 1980; Solomon, 1981), diverse aspects of the process of defecting and contextual factors that shape it (Albrecht & Bahr, 1983; Bar-Lev, Breslau, & Ne'eman 1997; Brinkerhoff & Mackie, 1993; Bromley, 1991; Jacobs, 1987), and post-leaving reflection on the experience (Rothbaum, 1988; Wright, 1984). Many of these studies focused on "deconversion" i.e. people who joined an encapsulated community and then returned to the secular world from which they originally came rather than disaffiliation by those who were born into enclave communities and left them (Shaffir, 1997). In addition, personal memoirs are available that report the experience of crossing over (Auslander, 2007; Brown Taylor, 2007; Feldman, 2012; Garrett & Farrant, 2003; Schachtmen, 2006).

Studies about leaving religion focused on Christianity. A couple of studies were about conversion out of Islam (Khalil & Bilici, 2007), where leaving is considered an extremely serious crime. A handful of studies examined disaffiliation from Orthodox Judaism and its psycho-social implications (Attia, 2008; Davidman & Gareil, 2007; Winston, 2005). Some of these studies included participants who grew up "with one foot out the door" as they came from families that were less embedded in the community (e.g. one parent was less or not religious, there were relationships with non-orthodox relatives) and others focused on specific sub-populations such as adolescents who ran away from mostly abusive dysfunctional families (Attia, 2008). No distinction was documented between Chasidic and non-Chasidic Ultra-Orthodox communities relative to the findings in these studies. Except for the accounts of persons that have left the Haredi world (e.g. Feldman, 2011), there is a scarcity of scholarly knowledge about the lived experience of those who grew up in a community that meticulously observes the Halakha (Jewish law) and decided to leave it.

Previous efforts to document experiences of those who left (e.g. Shaffir & Rockaway, 1987) were few and far between. As the development of technology continues to crack dents in the attempts to maintain the insulation of the Ultra-Orthodox community, this study sought to capture and document how individuals who grew up in Jewish Ultra-Orthodox and Chasidic communities and opted to explore a new path, perceive, interpret and make meaning of their lived experience.

Method

To examine the lived experience of those who chose to go "off the derech" (OTD) [literally means "straying from the path" and is used to describe individuals who digress], a target sample of 19 formerly Chassidic and Ultra-Orthodox men (n=12) and women (n=7) was interviewed. Participants were recruited through postings on web sites of two not for profit organizations serving "exiters" as well as snow ball (i.e. participants referring other potential participants). Criteria targeted were: 1. Self identification as having grown up in an Ultra Orthodox community; 2. Self identification as having left this community to pursue any other type of life and affiliation (e.g. modern Orthodoxy, non-orthodoxy, secular); 3. Ability to speak English or Hebrew; 4. Consent to participate in the study and be interviewed. The original single posting produced two dozen responses within several hours, followed by requests to be interviewed that came from all over the country. This overwhelming

response may suggest that individuals in this population group feel not being heard and are anxious to share their stories.

Seven of the interviewees were separated or divorced, one was married, and 11 were never married. Seven had children and one had grandchildren. Participants reported being raised in Ultra-Orthodox or Chassidic communities of various sects (Lubavitcher, Satmar, Litvish, Belz and non- specified) in Williamsburg, Crown Heights and Boro Park in New York City. As those who abandon a religious affiliation tend to be young adults (Albrecht, Cornwall & Cunningham, 1988; Bromley, 1991; Hoge, 1981; Need and de Graaf, 1996; Roozen, 1980), most participants were 18-30 year old. However a few were in their 30's, 40's or older. Quite a few were attending college at their 20's or 30's. Several attended an all-male or all female college, or a co-ed college with a large Orthodox Jewish student body. Because the process is gradual, they could not identify a specific date of leaving; however, with a few exceptions, most dated their leaving within five years prior to the interview. Individuals who contacted the researcher by email or by phone were screened for meeting the inclusion criteria. For those who qualified, an interview time and location were negotiated at their convenience.

While those who leave are often collectively portrayed by the community as marginal, troubled, and problematic, participants varied in their personal and familial backgrounds. No confirmatory statements from others is available; however, many self described as compliant, well embedded in the community, obedient, model "top of class" students and "good kids" when they were growing up. Their families were reported as intact, divorced, or remarried. With the exception of a few families described as abusive or dysfunctional and a couple of parents (especially fathers) reported to have alcohol problems, most stated that their families were functional, warm, and "normal". Sample statements were "I was very close to my parents, I was the oldest and everybody loved me, I was a good boy and I was perfect", "My family is a pillar of the community".

Data were collected by means of individual, in-depth, non-structured interviews designed to capture participants' perspectives on their journey away from Ultra Orthodoxy. Such interviews are often used in "discovery" qualitative research to allow participants tell their story. The interview started with a brief explanation of the purpose of the study (I am interested in anything you care to share about your experience moving away from the way in which you grew up to where you are today), did not follow any pre-conceived interview guide and included probing for examples, elaboration and clarification as the individual told the story. Thirteen interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed; notes were taken for six interviews because of participants' request or due to

conditions not conducive to recording. It became increasingly clear quite early in the process of data collection how eager people were to share their stories, as interviews quickly became monologues of sharing narratives. One participant explained his motivation for sharing his story "I want that people on the inside will be less afraid of the outside and people on the outside be less ignorant of inside".

Thematic analysis was conducted to identify main themes within the data. Specifically, an inductive 'bottom up' method was employed, i.e. themes were identified from the data themselves rather than driven by any specific theoretical framework. This type of analysis provides a flexible approach that allows for a rich, detailed, and complex interpretation of the data in search of certain patterns across the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Two foci informed the analysis. First, the data set that was chosen for analysis included those parts of the interviews that had relevance to the journey away from Ultra Orthodoxy. Second, the analysis focused on the content of the narrative (conceptualized by Braun & Clarke 2006 as a semantic or explicit level) and did not include sociolinguistic aspects (such as laughter and other emotional expressions, pauses and pitch of voice), nor looking beyond what a participant has actually said. Topics were then clustered in a cross case comparison into common core themes.

The method used for this study presented some limitations. First, because of the self-selected nature of the sample, generalizing its conclusions must be done with caution and is limited to those similar to the sample in the current study. Second, while the subjective report met the goal of gaining in-depth understanding of the lived experience of participants, there is a potential risk that social desirability and unresolved emotional issues relative to their decision to leave may color participants' perception, interpretation, and reporting of their experiences. Thirdly, most participants have left fairly recently and thus it is not clear how the process will evolve in the long range. Future research may be helpful in addressing this gap by targeting "veteran exiters". Finally, as in all qualitative research, characteristics of the interviewer may affect the interaction and what the interviewee chooses to share. The researcher is a secular Jew who shares cultural though not religious background with participants and in a way represents the world towards which they are heading.

Findings

The analysis yielded six themes, i.e. patterns that emerged across interviews. However, presenting and illustrating all of them is beyond the

scope of this paper. Therefore the current report is focused on the theme that appeared in all interviews and referred to trajectories of transitioning out of the Ultra-Orthodox world. The decision to limit the discussion to this specific theme allows for a more detailed and nuanced account (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Participants described a long, gradual, oscillating, slow, "bumpy", "complicated" and for a few as "relatively smooth" process of transitioning from Ultra Orthodoxy. They often reported oscillating back and forth, experimenting with OTD, going back to what is considered proper behavior and away again in continuing circles. Participants were at different phases of the journey and included in the words of one man, "people who have done it, who want to do it, who are in the middle of doing it". The self exploration of where they were was manifested by numerous emails sent by some to examine if they indeed fit into the category of those who left. A typical comment was "I am still at struggle with finding my place in religiosity". That the process often continues was apparent both from verbal statements that this is always work in progress and from interviewees' search for accurate words (as evident from numerous pauses, repeating words, leaving sentences unfinished, and starting again).

While every individual journey was unique, four pivotal milestones were common in the narratives: (1) initial questioning; (2) growing doubts; (3) beginning to share selectively with a small group of trusted others; (4) revealing a new and altered identity.

Initial questioning. The journey varied in terms of when and how it started. With a few exceptions of those who began "straying" at very early ages (five and nine) or later in life (20's to 40's), for most participants, the process began at adolescence. Two major types of beginnings were cited. One was the emergence of cognitive doubts and the other was emotional-relational dissatisfaction. Men more often reported the former whereas women reported more of the latter. However, no clear dichotomy existed between these groups of beginnings; rather, participants reported a combination of both with diverse degrees of emphasis or dominance of one or the other.

Emergence of cognitive doubts. Intellectually motivated beginnings were described as "things began to not make sense". One young man who became involved in learning philosophy reached the conclusion through his studies "once that argument [regarding the existence of god] was dropped, I decided that there is no reason to believe". The idea was mirrored in another statement. "The more I read, the more I realize how

illogical all this is. It just did not make sense philosophically to me that god stands behind my back and watches if I turn on the light on Sabbath and if I do, he will punish me". A cognitive dilemma aroused between what they were told in their traditional education and information that they began to gather from other sources. For example, one man stated

> Scientists were saying the earth is four and a half million years old and now they can prove it; he [the rabbi] told me in yeshiva it's six thousand years old and period, end of story. So, I am doing more and more research and become much more curious as I want to find answers because I know I am right and the more I read, the more unclear it becomes. I am not finding the right answers.

One woman felt increasingly frustrated as "I gradually began to realize that the way I am being brought up is biased, bigoted and lacks social conscience as everybody who is different is looked down at". Several interviewees described a feeling of living a lie, which was emotionally challenging. Some struggled to maintain a co-existence between the knowledge that they started to acquire and the belief that they continued to hold; however, intellectual doubt often led to losing faith followed by changes in practice, which changes appeared slowly and to various degrees.

Emotional-relational dissatisfaction. Two types of dissatisfaction emerged from interviews. First, the discontent with an environment that they described as "run by arbitrary rules", "extreme", "non-compromising", "prison-like", "boot camp, like a cult, run harshly", "controlling", "like a glass bubble, living on an island that did not allow you to touch the real world". Demands on individuals often felt intensive, pushing them to the edge beyond what they could tolerate and failing to accommodate their particular needs and challenges. For example, "After getting up early for Shacharit [the Morning Prayer], we had to learn non-stop until close to midnight". One participant stated "in secular education, they would have given me accommodation [to his learning disability] but not in the yeshiva". It was the absolute demand for obedience that "broke me… when they tried to push me to a place that does not fit my needs, that is where the friction began". Another man in his 20's identified the pressure, which started when he was 19, to find a "shiduch" [match] and get married as the straw that broke the camel's back. "Once you get engaged, you are stuck and I was afraid to be stuck; so I had to make an irreversible decision to leave or to stay".

A second relational-triggered beginning was abuse by parents or spouses or suffering a loss (such as the death of a brother of leukemia). Those individual described wondering "why did god do it to me", which became "If there was god, he would not have allowed this to be done to me; since it did happen, there is not god". One women in her 20's who was married in an arranged marriage advocated by her father said "From the outside he [husband] appeared religious but when I realized how he treated me, I decided that if this is what religiosity means, I do not want it". Several participants described verbal, physical abuse and molestation. One interviewee in her late teens shared that she started to rebel and test the limits at a very young age by exercising forbidden behaviors such as turning on the light on Sabbath and consuming dairy products lacking proper certification that the product was made from milk, milked under the supervision of an observant Jew. This type of milk is defined in the US and other countries as "Cholov Yisrael", which literally translates as "milk of Israel" and loosely means "milk by a Jew", and is the only type of "legitimate" milk in Ultra Orthodox groups. She reported being physically abused by her parents, forced to leave her home and becoming homeless at age 15. She felt that the community ignored her situation and scolded her for "informing" the abuse to the authorities (reporting of child abuse to secular authorities is viewed negatively by certain Orthodox Jewish communities) pushing her even further away as "this is against Jewish values to throw out someone who has nowhere to go". Another man in his 30's shared that he always associated sexuality with "Avodah Zarah" [Hebrew; literally translates as "foreign worship", meaning idolatry] and "here was my uncle who is Jewish being sexual with me; how is this possible?"

Several women reported gender discrimination as the trigger to the beginning of the process; e.g. "My father would tell me that I cannot do such and such and then find for himself some permission to do it". One young woman was furious about lucrative celebration of rituals of passage for boys [Bar Mitzva] but not girls, the line in the daily morning blessing said by men (but not by women) expressing gratitude to God for not being created a woman ["baruch shelo asani isha", which translates "thanks for not making me a female"] and the prohibition of women to sing to a gender-mixed audience. Female interviewees claimed that while men can be unnoticed as they lead a double life, go to movies, eat non-kosher, and sleep with other women, women are under constant scrutinizing and "stuck" with family responsibilities. Three women cited becoming aware of their sexual orientation as the beginning of the process. While there is a clear biblical prohibition of homosexuality in men as an abomination, the same is not true regarding lesbianism. Nevertheless, the women described

being made uncomfortable and eventually pushed to leave, if they insisted on openly pursuing their sexual orientation.

External push and pull forces often played a role in initiating the process of leaving. For one man who was enrolled simultaneously in a yeshiva, where he pursued religious education, and a college, where he wanted to gain education for a professional career, the demand by the head of the Yeshiva to choose one or the other led him to opt for the non-orthodox route. Another man became disenchanted with his rabbi's constant threatening "if you do not learn [the torah all day long], you burn". People who were critical in setting off the process included extended family members such as an older relative, teachers, and friends. Typical was attributing the beginning of leaving to the encouragement by an older cousin to "listen to your inner voice; what you think it right and what you think is wrong"

Growing doubts. The initial questioning was typically followed by a period of contemplating the budding doubts. Most participants reported deliberating privately whether things are indeed as definite as they were raised to believe or is the picture more complex and diverse factors need to be considered. "The more you study, the more you see that things are contradictory". Compatible with the Talmudic teaching of "Seek not that which is beyond you; do not question that which is hidden" (Vol. chagigah, chapter 13, p 1), one man in his 30's who is completing a doctorate in neuroscience in a prestigious university interpreted his doubts as evidence to the limited ability of the human brain to understand things that are above them. He reported having a "eureka" moment "it hit me that if it does not make sense, why should I believe in this religion?" One woman in her 20's described a vague sense of uncertainty "Many people were off the derech and I felt a connection to them but the community denigrated them. I saw in them a lot of sadness and I thought that it is because they strayed and went off the right path".

At this phase, eager, fervent often non-selective consumption of "secular" information occurred. Some described visiting homes of friends whose parents were more lenient and permitted secular books and many reported sneaking into the public library. Several participants described waiting until it was almost Sabbath to decrease the likelihood of being seen, going into the library and "packing" as many books, DVD's and other material as they could and spending most of the weekend listening, reading and watching movies to learn about the outside world.

One participant related the effects of this immersing in "swallowing" the information "The more I read, the more I started to have questions about everything I thought were the facts of life". As doubts increased, an

internal dialogue about a needed change began to sprout. Some described a feeling of total collapse of their world "…everything I know, my entire world is this. I work in this community, I live in this community". Yet, there was a growing sense of split between the internal and the external. A frequent comment was "I felt like I had two personalities". For one man, who waited until he was in his 40's to begin to leave, this phase was especially long because he did not want to "shake the tree" and cause his children confusion and emotional issues as they were growing up. Participants reported that changes in behavior were slower than in thinking and giving up mandated rituals were deserted before breaking "do not do" rules. Thus, men stopped putting on tefillin (leather boxes containing scrolls with passages of scripture worn by observant Jewish men weekday morning prayers) before they began to eat non kosher food.

For those who began straying away very young (at their pre-teen years), the first phase was mostly testing by committing forbidden acts such as using electricity on the Sabbath, eating a dairy pizza shortly after they had meat rather than waiting the required six hours or discovering the sweet taste of candies not acceptable in their community and realizing that no divine punishment followed. While they gradually expanded their rebellious acts, these young deserters typically did not leave formally until they were 18 and felt independent. In the absence of financial resources they sometimes committed petty crimes to survive. A couple of interviewees described shoplifting food in supermarkets and one man reported stealing from charity boxes to pay for train rides.

Emotionally, this phase was described by many as very stressful. Several individuals reported feeling so distressed that they contemplated suicide as they were struggling to find their way "it drove me crazy", "I was dying inside". Others talked about the amount of anxiety involved in every little step they made on their way out and yet others stated "they [the Ultra orthodox community] broke me". Mostly, this phase was very lonely "I thought that I am the only one to whom this happens", confusing "I thought that I am either crazy for thinking these thoughts or I am a brilliant genius discovering something nobody else did" and tormenting, "I just could not be intellectually dishonest, it was killing me". Several participants pictured this phase as colored by fear instilled in them by years of warning and frightening. For example, "I was afraid that if I leave religion, I will also lose all the morale that I grew up with and I will deteriorate to drugs. Fear kept me in the community for a while". However, there were exceptions like one man in his 20's who posited "None of this was very difficult. I never felt guilt. It was easy to eat bread on Passover or to eat pork". For parents, an added source of agony was the

concern that their access to children, and in one case grandchildren, will be blocked

Beginning to share selectively with a small group of trusted others. Discussions about issues related to Judaism without revealing their personal doubts often constituted the next phase. Without sharing their inner conflict, participants initiated dialogues about questions such as critique of the non-humanitarian nature of kosher slaughter and the relationships between scientific knowledge and religious beliefs. In spite of keeping quiet about the personal nature of the discussion, interviewees tended to limit it to a few whom they felt that they could trust. Participants reported that when they were involved in the discussion of questions that troubled them relative to God and religion, they made the effort to keep the appearance of a "philosophical inquiry" rather than admitting the personal struggle that it disguised.

Some described seeking help from rabbis in resolving his questions because "they are supposed to know". He became quickly disappointed and disillusioned as "…they all ended up with the same thing – why are you asking questions? … Are you smarter than your father? Than your grandfather? Leave it alone". Others sought for answers in books "I had no doubt that everything I was told and everything I knew was true. I just had to find the right book". This phase often begot a sense of awakening – "…eventually it just dawned on me – they are wrong. The first twenty or so years of my life were based on false premises".

This phase was often characterized by a struggle, described by one interviewee "So I was getting more and more disconcerted and disillusioned with Orthodoxy. Still, I was scared. I wanted to fit into the community and I wanted my family to like me" and by another "For some time I was going back and forth. Sometimes wanting to be a good Lubavicher but it did not last long".

Gradually, the indirect disguised sharing became more open as interviewees began to discuss their searching with somebody close whom they felt that they could trust. Although they shared the decline of their faith with selected others, many remained mostly "closeted". One woman described coming out to a rabbi and asking him to show her places in the Torah that mention a problem with her behavior, refusing to accept blindly his statement that her actions are forbidden.

Revealing a new and altered identify. Some continued gradually the process that they called "coming out", "drifting" or "straying" by beginning to present external manifestation of the change such as shaving the beard and adopting a dress style that was typical of the dominant culture. Several participants would change their appearance and behaviors

as they moved between the Orthodox and non-orthodox worlds such as observed dietary rules in the neighborhood but not elsewhere and wearing shorts and tee shirt under the traditional Chassidic outfit and taking off the top layer when they left the community. “I bought nice cloths and as soon as I was on the train and there were no other [Orthodox] Jews around, I would take off my yarmulke, change my cloths and pass for a non-Jew, maybe Catholic school student”. Women wear long dresses to cover the knees, elbows, and collar bone around their neighborhood but change to forbidden jeans and sleeveless tops elsewhere. This led to a feeling of living a “double life” with a discrepancy between the inner world “in my head” and the external appearance.

Some described a bold coming out fully and publically, “…and at that point I said I’m done with the hiding. I’m done with the shame. We’re going public. This is who we are and the community is going to have to deal with it. This is the reality”. Others never made their transformation known for fear of hurting relatives and losing relationships with parents, friends, and children. That these fears were not unfounded was demonstrated by a participant who reported loosing custody of her children because she left.

Those who left because of their sexual orientation experienced a “double coming out” as gays and as non-orthodox. These two processes exacerbated each other. One woman stated “I suddenly realized that hiding was making me act out and be somebody I wasn’t comfortable being. The guilt and the shame came from the hiding. I didn’t want to hide”.

When they no longer belonged to the community, participants had to reinvent themselves and develop an alternative to the prescribed identity that they once held. One man expressed this “When you do not fit into the box any longer, you must find your own way”. Self examination mounted at this stage as many were contemplating how they felt about themselves and the world that they left. One young man expressed feeling lost, confused, and desperate, as on one hand “the extreme orthodox environment never catered to my needs” and on the other hand “I lack too much to be able to integrate in the non-orthodox world because of all the years that I lost”. The absence of clear directives was cited by several as a hardship. One woman stated “everyone who tries to leave is lost; there are no guidelines how to do it [leave]”, which is especially challenging for individuals raised in a prescriptive environment where all is dictated and one does not have to find one’s own way.

Acquiring a new identity did not come easily and many reported inching their way in their new world “one day at a time”. One young woman described trying on different identities “Do I want to be modern

orthodox? I tried that for several months; do I want to be conservative? It does not feel like the real thing". A young man spoke about "developing a personality…we [he and his wife who joined him on the journey] first started discovering ourselves" to describe the move from a way of life where all is prescribed and personal decisions are limited to a reality where options are available and one must weigh alternatives and make choices. Another man described his route as "first I became non-Lubavicher; I did not like the Messianic spirit and, then non-religious because I did not like the Yiddishkeit [i. e.Jewishness, Jewish way of life]".

Leaving the community did not necessarily mean leaving religiosity or spirituality. While they may need to develop an identity that does not include affiliation with the Ultra Orthodox community, it still may be that of a religious individual. Thus, some maintained religiosity that was less strict than when they were growing up; for example, "I am now a very traditional Jew but do things my Jewish way", or "For me not to be a Jew is like to be amputated. I want to be a Jew but in a different way; in a way that works for me and fits me". One young woman stated "I am very religious and traditional but not Orthodox… I want to become a rabbi" (which is possible in some streams of Judaism such as Reconstructionist, Reform, and Conservative; recently one orthodox institute became the first to ordain women as spiritual leaders and halakhic authorities). Another stated that god is and will always be part of her life; that she did not leave religion, god, or spirituality; rather, she left the pressuring religious community and yet another said "I am a cultural Jew". However, most participants left religion and the community to become as they self-described "not religious", "between agnostic and atheist", goy (Hebrew and Yiddish for a non-Jew) or "atheist"; one woman stated "My relationship to religion is pretty antagonistic". Several became activists for causes such as broader education, gay rights, and social justice.

One aspect of developing the new self was completing a GED [the acronym stands for General Educational Development, which is the process of earning the equivalent of a high school diploma for those who failed to complete high school] and going to college to acquire the type of education that they did not received within the Orthodox educational system and that is necessary for modern life. Some felt forced to opt for "degree mills" because they could not meet the requirements of a school with high admission standards. One young man who tried to apply to modern orthodox programs but was rejected because of the lacuna a in his secular education in subjects such as math and science, explained "I missed too much in terms of background knowledge; therefore, I cannot

achieve a high school diploma and must go to a college that does not require it, thus compromising my chances for any serious education".

As in most cases families would not support them, exiters were lacking resources to pay for the education. Thus, they sometimes found themselves in a bind. They could not afford basic education, without which they could not get a job that will generate funds to pay for school. This conundrum bred all types of strategies such as joining the army, which two male participants did.

As they were struggling to create their new identity, exiters had to do so both in the secular world they were entering and in their families and previous community that they left. In the outside world they were learning to navigate, assess possibilities and make decisions rather than follow prescribed routes as well as struggling to get rid of their inherent sense of "otherness". One man stated, "I just wanted to fit in… I wanted to be able to walk anywhere in NY city and just fit it, not stick out". However, even when they changed their appearance, they still felt in a strange land because they carry a gap and lack social references and cultural concepts that other children acquire growing up. One man in his 30's stated "I wanted to know what any American youth my age knows" and "my new friends could not believe that I did not know who Pink Floyd were".

In their families, interviewees tried to re-create a relationship, reach compromises and reason with parents and with children in a way that is respectful to their wishes and yet compatible with their own new reality and beliefs. Parents struggled to remain part of the life of children and find new ways of parenting. Custody battles were reported by several mothers. Once it became public that a mother was no longer Orthodox, some fathers, irrespective to how absent they were from their children's life, initiated fights to gain custody and were often supported financially by the community, leaving mothers to face alone a battalion of lawyers, rabbis, and sometimes their own families.

Several participants reported that coming out to family was difficult because of the pain they caused, "I felt like I am killing my father". One woman could not stop talking about her experience "I had a verbal diarrhea about the community and leaving it". Some were frustrated because their families did not accept them unconditionally. One young man stated "I expected rather than superficial relationships with my mother, that she fully accepts me for who I am" and a young lesbian mother of three posited "I begged my mother to fully accept me".

Emotionally, some felt anger towards the Orthodox community and especially the rabbis for siding with families who were non supportive of them and with ex-spouses who remained in the community, including two abusive ex-husbands. The anger was sometimes exacerbated when they

realize how much the path forced on them may interfere with their future out of the insular community. One woman stated,

> I'm angry. I'm angry at the way religion is hurting people … I'm angry at the people who don't even have a chance to see the world the way I see it. I'm angry for my sisters who think they're happy and don't know that they have the right to the same level of knowledge, the same level of world experience as the men in their lives. I'm angry for children, who are denied the chance to a proper education and to living whole and expressing their full selves.

Another cause for anger was expressed by a woman in her 20's relative to the absence of symmetric in the relationship between the Ultra Orthodox community and the exiters "we [those who left] try very hard to accommodate the community when we go back to visit the families by dressing and acting religious whereas the same is not true relative to the community's way of treating us".

When mothers were able to maintain custody, they faced the challenge of helping children make the change as painlessly as possible. One woman's narrative about her struggle to explain the shift to her three school age kids captured the story of several mothers who left

> We started talking seriously. We're going to switch out of these schools. The children adopted secular names, they played around with this and nicknames. …I bought them little clothes that they could wear in the house to play around with and when they were wearing the jeans at home, all of a sudden, when they saw a person in jeans on the train, it wasn't that other. It was, Oh, would that styles of jeans look nice on me? I realized…my children can make this shift. They can come out on the other side whole

Helpful in the struggle to reinvent themselves were the Internet and other social media, organization that cater to this population and sometimes a teacher, a relative and friends who left Orthodoxy and served as role models for the possibility to leave without getting lost and adopt other positive ways of being.

Discussion

Findings of this study confirm previous research that examined defection from religious insulated communities and add more nuanced understanding of the phases in the transition process and the experiences associated with each phase. In agreement with previous research, the

process of transitioning from an insular community to the modern main stream world emerged as multi-faceted, multi-stage, oscillating and complex. Davidman and Gareil (2007) found that “exiters” from Orthodox Judaism described their transition as long and torturous, involving pushes and pulls in both directions and Shaffir (1997) posited that typically a decision to exit follows an intense internal debate over the period of years. The current study identified pivotal points in this process and their individual challenges. Future research should seek to examine if these phases are universal or whether inter-group variations exist and how the nature and sequence of phases among those who leave Chasidic compare to leaving non-Chasidic Ultra-Orthodox communities.

Most, though not all, participants in this study were what Roof and Landers (1997) identified as defectors, i.e. they rejected religion all together and became non believers. However, a few chose the road of dissent and maintained the faith while distancing themselves from the Ultra Orthodox community and establishment whereas others chose to disengage by choosing a less restrictive and more main stream type of religiosity such as modern orthodoxy.

While combinations of multiple reasons can drive leaving religion, the current study identified two main types of beginnings triggered by cognitive or by emotional-relational motivations. This confirms previous literature. For example, Mauss (1969) conceptualized theoretically and documented empirically three dimensions of defecting religion among Mormons in the East Bay Area of California. First, an intellectual dimension, i.e. disinvolvement that is based upon disbelief of certain central tenets of a religion; second, a social dimension, which refers to leaving because of the disintegration of social bonds or as a consequence of unsatisfying social experiences; finally, an emotional dimension, i.e. defection as a manifestation of a psychological issue. Wuthnow and Glock (1973) conducted a longitudinal study of a large cohort of students most of whom were raised Christian and concluded that defection from religion was driven mostly by a general disenchantment with the conventional and psychological stress. Not surprisingly, several participants in the current study reported that their families and the broader Orthodox community often viewed the desire to OTD as a manifestation of a mental illness.

A more elaborate typology of reasons for leaving Orthodoxy was offered by Barlev, Breslau and Ne’eman (1997). They identified six clusters of factors that play a role triggering the decision to leave the Jewish religion: intellectual and cognitive factors such as the encounter with and exposure to philosophies and consciousness of the holocaust, emotional factors including traumatic experiences related to religiosity (“how can god allow his to happen?”), familial factors such as seeing

parents' religiosity as faulty and rebelling by rejecting it, social/cultural and educational factors, and, materialistic and hedonistic concerns. Participants in the current study tended to identify two of these six clusters but not the others. One reason may be the nature of the sample, which was mostly urban and young. Shaffir (1997) reported in a similar sample that the decision to leave was fueled mostly by curiosity, desire to reach intellectually beyond what is prescribed, and objection to imposed restrains as well as reluctance to remain within a perceived oppressive closed community.

Need and De Graaf (1996) approached the study of leaving religion from a different perspective and examined personal attributes and situational factors associated with the decision to leave and found that education, parental education, and marrying a non-religious spouse significantly increase the likelihood of becoming "unchurched" as did a general secularization of the social environment. This seems less applicable to the current sample as all interviewees grew up within similar insular, urban Ultra Orthodox communities.

Irrespective of the initial trigger, like Alice after she fell down the rabbit hole, "exiters" reported finding themselves in a new world, governed by unfamiliar rules and social codes, which may beget a sense of disorientation, distress, and loneliness. Similar experiences were discussed by Beckford (1976, 1978) who examined accounts of leavers in the context of Jehovah's Witnesses and Shaffir and Rockaway (1987) who studied leavers of Haredi Judaism. Beckford (1978) posited that members of the Watchtower Society internalizes specific views of their organization and that these views informed their accounts of conversion. While this type of analysis was not part of the current study, it might be helpful in the future to examine if the same is true for those who left Ultra Orthodox Judaism. Shaffir and Rockaway (1987) focused on the motivation for leaving, the process of the departure and the difficulties of transitioning to a secular world. In spite of the almost three decades that have since passed, some of the findings in the current study agree with and reaffirm theirs. Specifically, the enormous efforts required by former Ultra Orthodox to adjust to the lifestyle of secular Jews as no guidance exist to help them navigate the unfamiliar territory.

The absence of a cultural map was a source of stress. Similar to other transitions such as becoming a parent, immigration or changing sex, leaving Ultra Orthodoxy includes multiple losses. Major among them are the loss of self identity and of social support. Those who leave must revise their sense of self to meet their new ambiguous and self-constructed

reality and develop their new identity (Frankenthaler, 2004). Unlike Christians who typically leave their religion to become members of another religious group such as another type of Christianity, non Christianity or new religious/spiritual movement, Jews who leave their religious identity do not necessarily desert the cultural and social Jewishness (Bar Lev, Breslau & Ne'eman, 1997). Thus participants in this study had to negotiate a new Jewish identity as an alternative to the Ultra Orthodox one that they left. For the most part they had quite a clear sense of who they are and who they want to be. These perceptions varied greatly reflecting where they were on the road of leaving, their characteristics, and circumstances. Future research may help clarify the dynamics and correlates of diversity in the struggle with the issue of identity among "exiters". For example, are there sect, age, and gender- based differences in the journey? How those who leave non-Chasidic Orthodoxy compare to the exiters from Chasidic sects and how the experience of leavers of different sects within the Chasidic world (e.g. Belz, Bobov, Breslov, Ger, Lubavitch, Munkacs, Puppa, Sanz, Skver and Satmar) compare to each other?

The task of recreating their identity became even more challenging in light of the consistent finding in studies of exiters about the absence of ready-made society-wide public narrative and guidelines for those who leave to draw upon. The lack of previous experience in autonomous thinking as they come from communities that demand following dictates, further exacerbates the difficulty. Previous studies of those who left Jehovah's Witnesses (Beckford, 1978) and Haredi Judaism (Shaffir, 1997) emphasized a pronounced sense of "scriptlessness" and participant in the study by Davidman and Gareil (2007) tended to portray themselves as "actors without a script", who "have had to improvise new identities" (p. 204). Similar to other minority populations, some of the interviewees in the current study felt that the system failed them, deprived them of the opportunity to acquire the tools necessary to function successfully in modern society. These reactions may lead to feelings of anger, sadness and sometimes hopelessness (Maier et. al., 2009).

To battle the stress involved in the transition and be successful in the task of developing their new identity, social support is of utmost importance. That the availability of such an "anchor" support is critical have been demonstrated relative to the struggle with diverse stressful situations (Berger, 2014; Rosenfeld & Tardieu, 2000). However, compatible with the results reported by Davidman and Gareil (2007), very little structural support is available for addressing the aftermath of disaffiliation. The narratives revealed how crucial it was to have along the way at least one supportive "other" such as a parent, spouse, relative,

teacher or friend and what a major challenge in the struggle of interviewees was the loss of support from their communities and often their families. In the absence of such support, participants used coping strategies similar to those reported in previous research such as reading books sneaked from the library and hidden under the mattress, wearing 'secular" cloths under their "religious" outfit and changing to go to a bar, hiding long side locks behind the ears or under a hat (Davidman & Gareil, 2007) . These strategies are often deserted as "coming out" becomes more public and individuals more confident in their new self.

In spite of its limitations, this study offers several possible implications. First, the finding that with a few exceptions, the absence of support was cited as a major characteristic of the transition process, suggest the need to develop support services for "exiters". That social support plays a critical role in helping negotiate stressful experiences has been abundantly documented (Berger, 2014; Trickey et. al., 2012) suggesting that creation of such support services is of utmost importance. Services may include concrete help such as temporary housing, educational and job preparation, guidance in all details of the new life such as what to wear (one participant named among her beginner's mistakes wearing fishnet pantyhose for a job interview) and how to interact with individuals of the opposite sex as well as emotional and psycho-social support. Specifically, groups may be helpful as they can provide role models, information, and mutual validation and create a sence of belonging to compensate for the loss of the natural peer group caused by leaving their original community. In addition, a hotline may be very useful to offer advice. Given the extensive use that this population group makes of the web and the need of some to maintain confidentiality, social media offers an excellent platforma for information and spport services.

In addition, that public libraries emerged as a critical source for learning to navigate the new territory of the secular world, suggests that branches close to concentrations of Ultra Orthodox communities may consider expanding sections relevant to this audience and tailored to address their needs. This may include a combination of guidebooks on practical topics such as achieving a GED and applying to college and resource books, as well as collections of classics that the general population is exposed to throughout elementary, middle and high school but the religious education forbids. In addition, it may be useful to train library personnel to be equipped to effectively help those who seek information to facilitate their journey.

Like families of other population groups out of the mainstream consensus such as GLBT, families of those who leave Ultra Orthodoxy

are often confused, angry and at a loss, struggling with what they view as a betrayal and a major dangerous mistake by their offspring. Guidance and support for families may be useful in helping them develop a way of making meaning of the situation and coping with it effectively, as families of some interviewees demonstrated feasible.

As with all services designed to address the aftermath of stress and crisis, services must be culturally-informed. Therefore, to maximize their effectiveness and minimize the potential for a destructive tear, planning, and delivery of services for those who leave and their families can be best developed in a collaborative dialogue with religious leaders of the communities of origin. While some may find these recommendations to be unrealistic, they were met with positive reactions in a recent presentation of the study to the staff in an organization that serves this population and helped recruit participants. It thus appears that the question of applicability of these recommendations remains to be evaluated in a future action-research study.

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