

# The Only Legitimate Reason to Leave Orthodoxy

By Zalman Newfield

**Do people leave *frumkeit* primarily for intellectual or for emotional reasons? Is one “better” than the other? Or are all reasons “legitimate?”**

The teachings of the *Tanya* permeated my thinking for the first two decades of my life. Like every good Lubavitcher, I studied the *Tanya* in high school, memorized chapters of it in summer camp, and stayed up late at *farbrengens* (devotional gatherings) grappling with its implications for my life. The *Tanya*, the foundational theological text of Lubavitch first published in 1797, teaches that it is a person’s obligation to ensure that his mind always controls his heart. This is to prevent his emotions from leading him to temptation and moral ruin. *Mo’ach shalat al ha-lev*: the mind must control the heart. The mind is more valuable, more true than the heart.

Though I left the community in my twenties and ultimately earned a PhD in sociology—studying others who had left Ultra-Orthodoxy, and tracing the lingering effects of their upbringings, no less!—much of my upbringing has lingered on in my own heart and mind. As I interviewed scores of former Hasidim, I was mindful of what I had in common with them and of how my story differed from theirs. One of the more surprising things I learned about myself was the extent to which I had internalized the *Tanya's* teaching that the mind must take precedence over the heart. I had unconsciously brought this assumption with me into my social science research.

In my first year of graduate school, I wanted to investigate why others left the religious community. Was it usually for intellectual reasons, or for emotional ones? I consid-

ered myself one of the intellectuals: I had found my way into a prestigious graduate program after having learned English on my own as a teenager. I naturally privileged the experiences of those whose narrative involved intellectual breaks with the community and cerebral, logical calculations about the merits and demerits of remaining “in the fold.” They were the “real” *apikorsim* (heretics). They had left religion because they had

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ways to resolve any apparent contradictions, these *apikorsim* were going to be the heroes of my story. After all, *mo'ach shalat al ha-lev*: The mind must control the heart.

But as my research deepened, it became difficult to disentangle the intellectualist narratives about leaving from other elements that emerged from the dozens of interviews I was conducting. Yaakov would start out with intellectual questions, but then would veer to his feelings of emotional isolation and alienation due to the questions that occupied his mind. Shaindl would describe experiencing emotional trauma in her community,

but would draw a direct line from that emotional trauma to her intellectual questions about how the social rules and moral standards of her community had allowed or even fostered the abuse she suf-

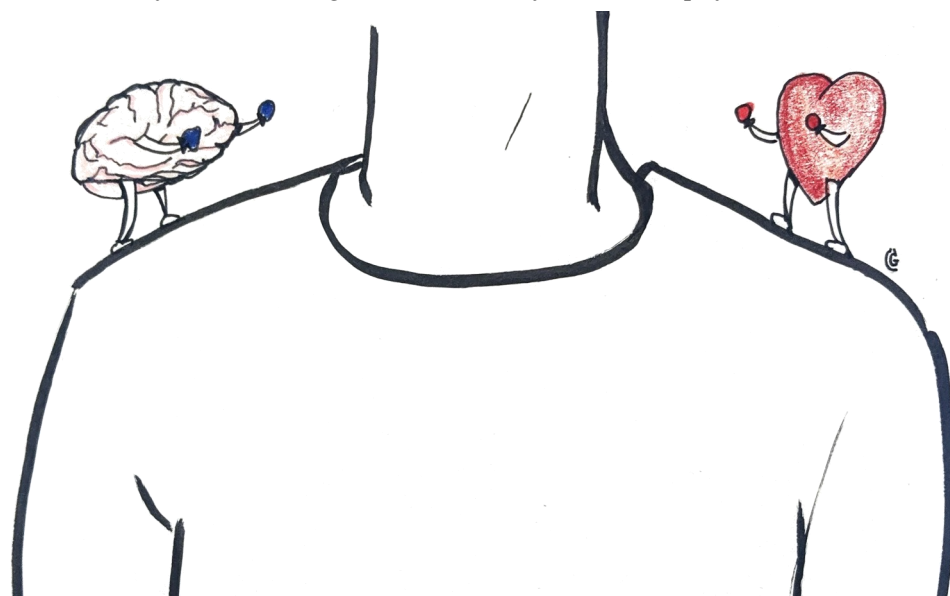
fered.

Once I opened the door to the legitimacy of emotional elements in my interviewees' narratives, it wasn't long before I questioned whether any particular aspect of these narratives could ever actually be considered the cause for leaving. None of what my interviewees offered as “reasons for leaving”—be they intellectual criticisms, physical and sexual abuse, or emotional trauma—were

necessary or sufficient conditions for leaving. Some people leave without having profound intellectual disagreements with their community and without experiencing profound personal trauma. Likewise, there are people who have profound questions or experienced trauma and still decide to remain in the community (either secretly leading a “heretical” life or still holding on to the beliefs

and practices of their community). Having a reason for leaving is a far cry from actually leaving.

I gradually shifted the focus of my research and writing to other aspects of the journey out of Orthodoxy. At the same time, I became increasingly aware of a pitched battle over what counts as a “legitimate” reason



discovered the contradictions within the religious texts or between the texts and external bodies of knowledge such as science. While those they left behind in their families and yeshivas may have considered them *amharatzim* (ignoramuses) who were too uninformed or too impatient to plumb the sources well enough to find

for leaving. Of course, inside the religious community, there is no legitimate reason for leaving. Those who leave are routinely understood as lacking self-control and being overwhelmed by their “*tayvas*,” their base instincts. They are described as *meshuga*, crazy. The religious community even takes the claim of mental illness to court to argue against the exiter having custody of his or her own children.

Exiters naturally reject this narrative, but that doesn’t mean that, among themselves, they accept just any reason for leaving. Exiters argue a great deal about the “correct” reason for leaving. In the interviews I conducted some went so far as to denigrate and attack the narratives of those who claim to have left for different reasons from their own. Those who gave intellectual reasons argued that if one doesn’t leave for intellectual reasons, they are not really “*frei*,” free of Orthodoxy. They claim that if the exiters do not have “real” problems with their community, then as soon as they realize how hard it is to start over in mainstream society, they will come running back to the community to be readmitted. Conversely, those who consider their reasons for leaving to be emotional or social often ridicule the “intellectuals” for their self-deception. They say things like: *“These people think that they are so smart and so much better than the rest of us. Really, they left for the same reasons that we left, but they don’t want to admit it, so they protect themselves by claiming intellectual reasons.”*

Sigmund Freud wrote about the “narcissism of small differences,” the need to create and emphasize differentiation among those who seem similar to each other. The most poignant form of this differentiation that I found in my seventy-four interviews of former Hasidim revolved around exiters’ supposed reason for leaving.

The irony of all this is that by demanding allegiance to one narrative for exiting, we exiters are transposing the fixation on purity within Orthodox society, the need to adhere to the one “true path” or perspective, onto our freely chosen lives. We should be vigilant against recreating the kinds of divisions and subdivisions so prevalent in our communities of origin. If there are “seventy faces of the Torah,” there are certainly at least as many faces of heresy.

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