

Degrees of Separation: Identity Formation While Leaving Ultra-Orthodox Judaism

by Schneur Zalman, Newfield, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2020,
xiii + 210 pp., \$34.95 (paperback), 978-1-4399-1896-8

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BOOK REVIEW

Degrees of Separation: Identity Formation While Leaving Ultra-Orthodox Judaism, by Schneur Zalman, Newfield, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2020, xiii + 210 pp., \$34.95 (paperback), 978-1-4399-1896-8

Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Judaism, which in the mid-twentieth century was thought by many outside observers to be essentially moribund, has by the early twenty-first century demonstrated considerable vigour. In particular, communities of Hasidic Jews have increased greatly both in population and in their impact on the wider Jewish community as well as in the discourse of the societies in which they live. Since Hasidic Jews (particularly males) are easily distinguishable by their dress, they have come to symbolically represent Jews as a whole in cinematographic productions and in other contexts. Because of this increasing impact, a number of social scientists have begun paying close attention to these communities and several important studies of Hasidic communities have been published in recent years.

Schneur Zalman Newfield has made a significant contribution to the body of social scientific analysis of contemporary Hasidism through his book, *Degrees of Separation: Identity Formation While Leaving Ultra-Orthodox Judaism*. Newfield's book examines those who have chosen to leave the Hasidic communities in which they have lived all their lives and analyzes their attempts to create new identities for themselves. Newfield has taken on an important subject, one that has often been sensationalized in the media and in dramatic presentations such as the recent TV mini-series "Unorthodox" (2020).

His book is based on a series of in-depth interviews with men and women who have left their Hasidic communities. The author counts himself among them, having left a Lubavitcher Hasidic community to pursue a doctorate in Sociology. This circumstance brings with it advantages. He is able to easily connect with his interviewees and he literally speaks their language (Yiddish). He remains aware of both the great advantages and the potential pitfalls facing an observer of a social group who is himself a member of that group.

There are a number of key findings presented in the book. One of the most important is that, despite general opinion, and, indeed, despite the often-expressed opinions of his interviewees, those who leave Hasidic communities generally do not face total rejection by their families. Family relations are most certainly strained by the circumstances of a family member leaving the community, but almost never to the breaking point. This conclusion is of great importance, because it means that contemporary Hasidic communities, despite their theoretical ability to "excommunicate" dissidents, are in fact choosing not to do so (though they generally make great efforts to retain within their communities the children of those who have chosen to leave).

Another interesting conclusion of the book is that those who leave Hasidic communities seldom if ever make a complete and clean break with those communities. There are numerous significant continuities reported by Newfield's interviewees between their former Hasidic life and their present lifestyle. Many of these involve foodways. For example, some of Newfield's subjects cannot bring themselves to eat pork, a forbidden food in halakha (Judaic law), even though they have generally emancipated themselves from the complex halakhic structures of their former communities. Even those who now eat pork products regularly remain conscious of the significance of their actions. A bacon cheeseburger can never be just a bacon cheeseburger for them.


In other words, the liminal status of those who choose to leave Hasidic communities is not short-lived. On the contrary, it tends to last a considerable time and to involve multiple carryovers in habitus from Hasidic life, such as reading secular texts with the swaying motion inculcated in Hasidic classrooms for the reading of sacred literature. Newfield's contention is that his research demonstrates that the sociological definition of liminality, generally understood by scholars to constitute a relatively short period, needs to be nuanced to encompass a much more extended period of time.

Beyond shedding considerable light on the specific phenomenon of those who choose to leave Hasidic communities, the book also offers the reader important insights into the communities they have left. These include the efforts of these communities to limit exposure to non-Torah education to the utmost extent possible, at least for boys. They include as well perspectives on insider Hasidic attitudes toward those outside their communities, Jews and non-Jews alike.

The methodological aspects of Newfield's research are contained in three appendices. These appendices are well worth reading and it may be regretted that they were not included in the main body of the book, because it is often the fate of appendices not to be read and these are essential for the understanding of the study as a whole. Newfield also does not examine in any detail Jews who choose to exit from non-Hasidic ultra-Orthodox (Yeshiva) communities, and a social-scientific examination of people who have chosen to leave those communities would afford an interesting comparative aspect missing from this study. Nonetheless, this book goes a long way towards filling a significant gap in our knowledge of communities whose increasing presence and importance make them well worth knowing on a more than superficial basis.

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