

Book Review

Review of Degrees of Separation: Identity Formation while Leaving Ultra-Orthodox Judaism

By Schneur Zalman Newfield
Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2020, 228 pages.

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Although contemporary Jewish community leaders fret about younger generations marrying “out” and losing interest in their roots, they have but to look back to previous generations to realize that different forms of exiting and of redefining “how to be Jewish” have been a source of dispute and agonizing over many generations responding to successive crises and revolts. But each generation brings new issues, and if they were to ask themselves whether it is different today, they could not do better than to consult Zalman Newfield’s excellent analysis of exiting from ultra-Orthodoxy.

Uncountable contemporary scarcely observant Jews will tell you of a grandparent or great-grandparent who was brought up religious, or came from a Chassidic family, and then drifted away without leaving a legacy of trauma in the family. But today, because of the ever thicker frontiers setting apart ultra-Orthodox (*haredi*) society, it cannot be denied that it is different. In the first chapters of his book, Newfield enumerates the infinity of micro-controls that shape the *haredi* habitus almost from the moment of birth, and his description of the indoctrination of children through folk wisdom and formal schooling about the deep and irreconcilable differences separating them from non-Jews and from other Jews, is surely troubling to even the mildly liberal sensibility.

So leaving—or “exiting” to use Newfield’s word—is usually a big deal and quite distinctive in the panorama of religious sociology where some might classify it together exiting from sects and cults. Paths of departure are quite different from those if only because for the most part members are born into this culture and grow up deeply embedded in a thick network of near and distant kin and in families with an average of five to six children. Although some of the seventy-four people (including thirty women) Newfield patiently and expertly interviewed were born to “newly religious” parents, none of them had themselves adopted the ultra-Orthodox way of life in maturity. Sects and cults consist predominantly of people who have converted as mature adults and unlike the Haredim, they are known to exhibit a high “throughput”. The notion of a “total institution” (used in one of the back-cover endorsements) also does not fit because of the paramount importance of gossip and *omertá* (the wall of silence encountered by prying outsiders in Sicilian towns and villages) in the

control of ultra-Orthodox behaviour. As Newfield says, there are few formal institutions to exercise power or impose sanctions, yet the influence of leading and dynastic Rabbis is palpable and the power of gossip, in an environment where people live in close proximity to one another and where families are so large, is fearsome. The pandemic has revealed the impossibility of privacy in the *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) world, which has borne notoriously disproportionate losses.

Exiting rarely constitutes a total rupture. Exiters seem for the most part unwilling to cut themselves off from their parents and on their occasional visits they take care not to offend them. The unending succession of weddings and circumcisions, all of which (especially the weddings) involve several hundred people, are central to *haredi* life—as again revealed by the pandemic—and exiters often want to attend, even if they can be made to feel uncomfortable, as in the example of a teenager being admonished for talking to them. Most interesting is Newfield’s account of the durability of automatic, almost subconscious patterns of everyday behaviour that persist long into a person’s newly secularized life—and it seems that few are drawn to liberal synagogues where they would likely feel they had landed in a completely foreign culture. Some readers may be surprised by the ritualization of even the most insignificant daily, even hourly, routines.

In Newfield’s description of “intellectual” and “socio-emotional” exiters, their disagreements resemble the classic everyday disputatiousness of tightly-knit societies. “Each group vigorously rejected the other group’s narratives”. The intellectuals (mostly male) seem to use the same hair-splitting logic applied to Torah study (from which women are usually excluded) to question the community’s doctrines. The contrasting “social-emotional” narrative emphasized dysfunctional families, abuse, intrusive, almost prurient, control of young women’s deportment and clothing and the like. Although such dysfunctions are hardly unknown in the wider world, the difference is in extreme *haredi* defensiveness (the *omertá*) and the extremes to which Rabbinic authorities have been known to go to cover up abuse. (In Israel when the police come to conduct an arrest in such cases they have been known to be received with a hail of dirty diapers thrown from apartment windows).

The appendices provide a meticulous description of his methods and reproduce a kilometric first-interview protocol of seventy-three questions. I would urge Newfield in future to extend the scope of the study to include the evolution of the exiters’ families as they cope with the reputational damage, and as they and their children respond to the “loss” of one or more of their children. In Israel the ultra-Orthodox are numbered at 12 per cent of the Jewish population—but if all their children were to remain in the *haredi* world that number would be much higher. The existence of a balancing factor in the very significant *t’shuva* (literally “returnee” or “repentant”) phenomenon of newly religious Jews who renounce a secularized lifestyle to join *haredi* society, reinforces that hypothesis. There must therefore be a constant “leakage” and the “exiting” phenomenon must be more common than is usually thought: the best (2013) estimate in the US is that 6.5 per cent of those raised in ultra-Orthodoxy exit their communities.

At a time when the haredi world has aroused widespread fascination in the media (cf. the TV series shows *Unorthodox* and *Shtisel*) and controversy in the political realm, especially in Israel, this is a most opportune book. As an exiter himself Newfield has gained access to an unusually large number of subjects, and as a skilled interviewer he has gained their trust to the extent that they even tell him about their experience with online pornography. He is to be congratulated on this exemplary work of scholarship and also on his contribution to public sociology.