



Schneur Zalman Newfield, *Degrees of Separation: Identity Formation While Leaving Ultra-Orthodox Judaism*, Temple University Press, 2020, 210 pp, Price: \$34.95

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In an exchange between Lynn Davidman and Hella Winston in *Contemporary Jewry* about her 2015 study *Becoming Un-Orthodox: Stories of Ex-Hasidic Jews*, Davidman speaks of the “disrupted biographies” (Davidman 2015, p. 183) of “exiters” from ultra-Orthodox Judaism, those self-uprooted souls who have gone “OTD”—“off the derech” (path, way)—in the familiar, if contested popular acronym. In their passage out, from an enclaved world bound by religious ritual and strict social structures to what Davidman calls the “scriptlessness” (p. 187) of secular society (there are “no guides for defectors” [p186], she observes), her exiters “talk about being lost and overwhelmed” (p. 187) in the fraught encounter with a new world, without the comfort of scripts. To go “off the derech,” to be “suddenly unmoored,” in Shulem Deen’s phrase (Deen 2015, p. 259), leaves exiters betwixt and between, in transition between identities. The anthropologist Victor Turner famously called this potentially regenerative stage in identity formation the “liminal.” To cross into “liminality” means to pass into a zone of pure potentiality, a creative space where the self, now awakened as critic of society, might be remade. The challenge—or, better, invitation—religious exiters face is navigating this fluid social and psychological landscape without a map, without a guiding life script. For most, the liminal remains an uncharted, bewildering territory.

Zalman Newfield’s *Degrees of Separation: Identity Formation While Leaving Ultra-Orthodox Judaism* draws on Turner’s model of liminality as he seeks to revise recent studies of “leaving the fold.” Newfield, it turns out, examines this currently popular subject (see the recent anthology *Off the Derech: Leaving Orthodox Judaism* ed. Ezra Cappell and Jessica Lang) with double authority, as both insider and outsider: raised in Lubavitch Hasidism, Newfield is now an academically trained sociologist, versed in the literature of religious movements, learned in the canon of social theory (Durkheim, Simmel, Park, etc.). He is, of course, an expert on the closed world of ultra-Orthodox Judaism and its scripted ways of being. *Degrees of*

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Separation thus provides an intimate report from the field by a scholar uniquely positioned to empathize and interpret.

In this respect, Newfield emerges as both an analyst *and* engaged therapist. An attentive listener, he transcribes portions of deeply reflective testimonies from 74 exiters, composed of “thirty-nine Lubavitchers, twenty-four Satmars, and eleven members from other Hungarian Hasidic communities” (p. 175), and divided between 44 men and 30 women. Interestingly, many exiters are the children of *Ba'al Teshuvot* (BTs), returnees to the Jewish fold. *Degrees of Separation* charts their journeys, in the form of “exit narratives,” stories that seek to explain an exiter’s altered relation to community, family, and faith. In the process, Newfield adjusts, in significant ways, our understanding of what it means to “go” OTD.

Newfield’s most important claim is that, as a social and psychological phenomenon, exiting needs to be reimagined, retheorized. Rather than interpreting religious “turns” as an irreversible break, *away* from a former enveloping world—in his view, a limiting “binary” model of religious movement, akin to earlier “straight line” theories regarding ethnicity and acculturation—Newfield argues that the *processual*, following Turner’s notion of ritual, informs the passage itself. “Exiting,” Newfield thus asserts, “is an ongoing process of becoming” (p. 4).

Negotiating a new identity is always fraught. Newfield’s exiters, it turns out, remain attached to scripts that mark their former Orthodox selves. Residual behaviors—a sort of Hasidic return of the repressed—continue to determine OTD behavior. Nor can ultra-Orthodox families completely shun (“cut off,” in Newfield’s refrain) their apostate children. Among the findings in *Degrees of Separation*, contrary to previous research or popular assumptions, the vast majority of Newfield’s exiters (55 to 65 of the 74 interviewed) continue to maintain *some* relationship with their families (p. 63), even if parents remain bewildered, aggrieved, or (most often) shamed by the apocalyptic “rupture” (p. 63) induced by an OTD child’s inexplicable (in their view, of course) secular turn.

In Newfield’s OTD taxonomy, exiters can be grouped into “trapped,” “disconnected,” and “hybrid.” “Trapped” exiters appear the saddest and suffer the most from the shock of departure; for all their desire and effort to adjust to secular society, they remain attached to the Orthodox world they seek to escape. Constantly looking back, they “feel a consuming need to keep up with” the strictly observant world they’ve left behind. The result is a “tearing opening [of] deep wounds and causing them to relive their earlier internal debates and religious doubts” (p. 13). By contrast, “disconnected” exiters may feel that they have broken free from their ultra-Orthodox origins, but they, too, remain haunted by their *frum*-marked past, by memories which continue to weigh them down, despite efforts to “repress feelings and behaviors that express a connection to it” (p. 13). The largest group, perhaps the most interesting, are those Newfield labels “hybrids,” exiters who are able to “adopt new goals and means while simultaneously incorporating a limited amount of their former community’s means/goals into their new lives” (p. 12).

At its most compelling, *Degrees of Separation* offers numerous inside(r) portraits of the emotional cost of exiting. There’s “Yechiel, a Lubavitcher in his early thirties,” who, after taking college courses, begins to question his religious world: “To me it does not make sense” (p. 84); as a result, “[my religiosity] faded very slowly”

(p. 85). Or there's "Mendy," "a Lubavitcher in his late twenties," who begins to doubt the interpretations of the rabbis; looking back, he movingly reflects that "learning was my downfall" (p. 85). Then there's "Chavi, a Lubavitcher in her early thirties" (p. 146) who has embraced "liberal Judaism"; when visiting her observant parents, she participates in a "conspiracy of silence" (p. 146), outwardly performing the rituals of ultra-Orthodoxy. "It was a huge emotional ordeal," Chavi confesses. "We were doing this emotional tiptoe pretending to be something that we were not" (p. 150). "Passing" as "Orthodox" exposes Chavi to her own bad faith, even if she tries to be a dutiful Hasidic daughter. Almost none of Newfield's exiters leaves the Orthodox fold unburdened, unscathed.¹

Of course there remain various shadings among exiter groupings. Newfield invites his participants to reflect on various themes: "The Outside World," "Doubts," "Self-Transformation," "Adaptation to the 'Outside' World," among them. On the evidence of their oral histories, Newfield identifies a core of residual habits that continue to bind exiters to ingrained ultra-Orthodox modes of thinking. For all their desire to forge a new life, breaking away proves difficult. Newfield shows how exiters' thinking and feeling are mediated by habit ("habitus," in Newfield's terminology, following Bourdieu), by the unconscious residues of Orthodoxy's "pathologies." "Some habits," Newfield reflects, "remain long-term and perhaps forever in the lives of exiters" (p. 136). These hardwired behaviors include attitudes towards dissent (which the Orthodox community thwarts via rituals of shaming and the threat of expulsion), race (an inveterate racism carries over in many exiters, a shameful inheritance that Newfield duly acknowledges), gender and sexual hierarchies, and rejection of liberal Judaism, which remains, it seems, anathema for most formerly Orthodox. "These habits," Newfield argues, "are concrete evidence of the persistence of the 'old' life in the new" (p. 161). For Newfield, the labor of detachment is "never complete" (p. 168); the passage to a secular life leaves them straddling a social and psychic edge ("edgemen" is how Turner referred to undergoing the pilgrimage-like ritual process), a space of perpetual, but also potentially enabling liminality.

Degrees of Separation should be received as a significant contribution to the emergent field of OTD studies. In light of the current vogue of memoirs, novels, film, and television shows by and about the so-called formerly Orthodox, Newfield cautions against partial or breezy generalizations; his intervention highlights the limits of our current understanding of what "going OTD" represents in its religious, sociological, and psychological dimensions.

Degrees of Separation also invites us to reconsider the other side of exiting, the phenomenon of *teshuvah*, of returning to the Orthodox fold. BTs exist, in my view, in dialectical tension with OTDs, a contrapuntal rhythm of "escape" and "return," of Jewish pilgrims driven by alternating strophes of history and memory. According

¹ At some level, *Degrees of Separation* might be considered Newfield's own "exit narrative." His intellectual journey reveals the influence of an array of secular authorities (rebbe's?), including Rushdie, Faulkner, Whitman, Marx, Brecht, and Michael Corleone. It would be interesting, one day, to read about his own passage from the ultra-Orthodox world to the academy.

to Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, a BT's "return" to a Jewish world imagined as "authentic" requires the "renunciation of a regretted past"; yet Rabbi Steinsaltz cautions—echoing, yet also *complicating* Newfield's haunted exiters—"there is no way to escape the past and be reborn completely anew" (Steinsaltz 1987, pp. 4; 15).

An uneasy relation to Jewish memory and ritual practice haunts the imagination of BTs and OTDs. In this regard, the liminal status of Newfield's exiters recalls Jewish American literature's most famous portrait of liminality, Abraham Cahan's David Levinsky. An exiter from the Old World, Levinsky remains forever unsettled in the New, unable to forget his shtetl past, longing for his old life in Antomir: "You will not be able to erase the old home from your heart," Cahan warns his homesick hero. "Your heart will be drawn elsewhere. And in your solitude, images will rise up and stare in your faces with eternal sorrow" (Cahan 1960, p. 61). Like Levinsky, Zalman Newfield's ultra-Orthodox exiters undergo a version of Levinsky's immigrant return of the repressed: they remain suspended, in an uncertain liminal zone, searching for a heimische, familiar place, somewhere haunted Jewish souls can call "home."

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