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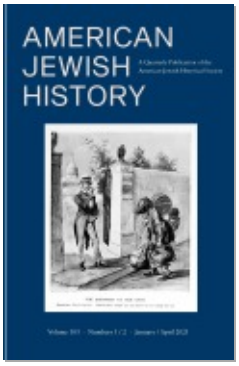
Degrees of Separation: Identity Formation while Leaving Ultra-Orthodox Judaism by Schneur Zalman Newfield (review)



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Koffman is a sophisticated, theoretically-informed and careful historian. He writes engagingly and straightforwardly. His book, filled with valuable original research and findings, material that will be new to most readers, fascinating linkages, colorful anecdotes, and analytical insights, is important and welcome, an intervention that re-envisions central aspects of American Jewish history from the perspective of the seeming margins.

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Degrees of Separation: Identity Formation while Leaving Ultra-Orthodox Judaism. By Schneur Zalman Newfield. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2020. xiii +210 pp.

Schneur Zalmon Newfield's book on the exiting of Ultra-Orthodox Jews from their communities is a welcome addition to the sparse literature on this topic. Based on a qualitative research study of Jews who left Satmar and Lubavitch communities in New York, it provides an in-depth view of the past and present experiences of interview participants. The book is informed by sociological theory and concepts and describes the historical context of these two Hasidic movements. Throughout this volume Newfield compares the experiences of the two groups of exiters within the additional context of his own decision to leave the Lubavitch community in which he grew up.

Newfield describes the boundaries the Satmar and Lubavitch establish between themselves and the outside, a means of maintaining their own communities. The sects draw sharp distinctions between Jews and gentiles, Ultra-Orthodox Jews and non-observant Jews, Ultra-Orthodox Jews and other Jewish religious groups, and among Hasidic sects. Viewing exiters as a threat, they denigrate them. Yet the exiters and their families do not break off all ties.

The leading concept Newfield uses is "liminality." Based on the writings of Victor Turner, Newfield defines it as a state of being in-between, neither here nor there. When one leaves an insular community like Satmar or Lubavitch, one is neither "in" nor "out" of the community in which one was raised and the one he or she is joining. In contrast to Turner's view that liminality is a temporary stage, Newfield sees it as a

state that persists indefinitely. Along the same lines, Newfield is critical of the binary thinking he considers to be the dominant way of regarding leaving a religious group. He views exiting as a process that is complex and lengthy. He does not identify an endpoint when one enters a different status and becomes something else.

In keeping with his perspective on liminality, Newfield uses evocative quotations to show how the behaviors and attitudes acquired from the community of origin continue. In his illuminating chapter, "Habits of Action and Habits of Thought," he offers poignant examples of how body movement and cultural patterns and ideas learned in the past persist in daily life. This includes finding chicken soup comforting and pork revolting, swaying one's body when reading, and cutting one's nails in a certain prescribed sequence. Thoughts such as believing in God and revering the late Lubavitcher rebbe, and attitudes such as racism, sexism and disapproval of liberal Judaism remain in their consciousnesses. Newfield draws from Helen Rose Ebaugh's concept of a "residual role" to explain the persistence of these behaviors and attitudes.

Like Lynn Davidman's earlier work on those who left Orthodoxy, Newfield uses the exit narrative to illustrate how exiters justify the decision to leave. Newfield also shows how members of the two Hasidic communities create their own critical narratives about exiters to delegitimize them. Newfield classifies his narratives as "intellectual" and "social-emotional," allowing for overlap. Intellectual narratives are characterized by criticism of the limits placed on questioning basic ideas in the study of classical texts, and social-emotional narratives are characterized by criticism of the community's disregard of personal needs, differences, and abuse. Individuals who emphasized one were critical of those who used the other.

The author conducted in-depth interviews with 74 exiters, including 39 Lubavitchers, 24 Satmars, and 11 from other Hasidic sects. Among these participants, 44 were men and 30 were women. The average age was 25, but a few were middle aged. The author conducted all the interviews either in person or through Skype, speaking in English or Yiddish. Newfield recruited participants through personal contacts, snowball sampling, and publicity provided by Footsteps, an organization that provides support, social activities, and services to those who are contemplating leaving or have left their Ultra-Orthodox communities. The author's similar background and experience as an exiter enabled him to gain access to interviewees and fostered trust. He was reflexive during the study, checking himself for potential bias.

Newfield posits that the exiting process is prolonged. That is understandable, as the exiters need to attain the secular education and

socialization they did not receive growing up Hasidic. He did not, as far as I could discern, interview people who had left their communities 20 or 30 years ago; his interview sample seemed skewed toward those who were young and early in their process of becoming integrated into the larger society. Furthermore, he does not give attention to the other side of exiting—joining—in their case, whatever communities or groups the exiters choose. In my book *The Spiritual Transformation of Jews Who Become* Orthodox (2019), interviewees expressed a great deal of anxiety over becoming part of a religious community. This was because they lacked the academic and social skills needed to navigate their new communities. Newfield suggests that some of the participants had a difficult time initially, but he does not expound on their struggles. It appears that the liminality that Newfield attributes to the exiters has much to do with uncertainty about the competencies, knowledge, and social "know-how" they need to find their place and "make it" in secular society.

This book provides a good introduction to the workings of Satmar and Lubavitch and is a commendable contribution to the literature on Jews who leave Hasidic sects for the larger, more secular society. Considering that most contemporary Jews are successors of previous generations of Orthodox or Ultra-Orthodox Jews, it offers a glimpse into a process one ordinarily does not see. The book is well conceptualized and contains rich examples of the reported experiences of exiters. It calls for a sequel on the later lives of those who left their Hasidic communities.

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No Place in Time: The Hebraic Myth in Late-Nineteenth Century American Literature. By Sharon B. Oster. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2018. 368 pp.

The old Jewish joke goes something like this: two Jews are sitting on a park bench on New York City's Lower East Side reading newspapers. Shmulik holds a copy of the *Forverts* and is shocked to see his friend Yankel engrossed in reading *Der Stürmer,* the Nazi propagandist newspaper. Shmulik turns to his friend and says:

"Yankel, what's the matter with you that you read such trash?"