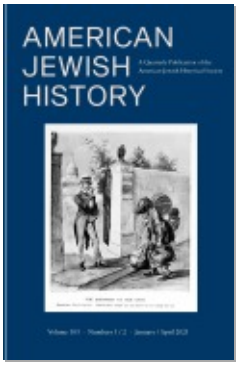
Hidden Heretics: Jewish Doubt in the Digital Age by Ayala Fader (review)



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be a fine addition to advanced graduate classes focused on Holocaust memory, as well as for scholars in the field of linguistics. The way Costello connects often separate concepts of gender, performance, and rhetoric offers an original lens through which to consider Holocaust memory.

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Hidden Heretics: Jewish Doubt in the Digital Age. By Ayala Fader. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. xii + 270 pp.

With the proliferation of cultural representations of people leaving the Hasidic community—such as Netflix's miniseries *Unorthodox*—and scholarship on the subject, one is left to wonder about the fate of those who are discontented by their Hasidic life but unable or unwilling to leave it. Ayala Fader's fascinating work fills this gap in the literature by introducing the reader to what she calls "double lifers," people whose "life-changing doubt" has caused them to reject some or all of their community's beliefs and values but who nonetheless continue to outwardly conform to Hasidic norms of behavior.

Fader makes clear that life-changing religious doubt is rarely only "theological disagreement or rejection of certain religious texts" but also includes emotional and social disconnects with established community norms, institutions, and leadership hierarchies (124). In addition, there is a continuum of doubt, and men and women, due to their different social responsibilities and engagement with the outside world, have unequal opportunities to participate in online exchanges and in-person activities that give expression to their doubt.

By deftly melding together a plethora of diverse sources—WhatsApp text messages, posts to private Facebook groups, posts from the Orthodox Jewish blogosphere, cartoons from Orthodox community circulars, Orthodox anti-internet children's playing cards, interviews with and participant observations of double lifers, along with public pronouncements by and interviews with ultra-Orthodox rabbis, activists, and therapists—Fader brings to life the milieu and inner turmoil, as well as the humor and playfulness, of the double lifers. This diversity of sources highlights Fader's belief that scholars of religion cannot simply consult the doctrines and publications of leaders but must also analyze the material culture the religious community produces.

Fader details the phenomenon of the ultra-Orthodox "jblogosphere," which had its heyday from 2002 to 2009 and functioned as a "heretical counterpublic," allowing Hasidic men (and some women) who had religious doubts to connect with similarly-minded others (32). It gave these double lifers a venue to express discontent with their communities, voice their opposition to religious stringencies, mock the pieties of their leaders and neighbors, and debate possible reforms to the "system" in which they were all raised. It also provided a sense of comradery that often remained online but sometimes transferred to in-person interactions and always made these doubters feel "normal" and accepted, allowing them to enact their life-changing doubt while remaining in their communities.

Mostly writing in Yiddish under pseudonyms such as Hasidic Rebel and Shpitzle Shtrimpkind (an allusion to part of married Hasidic women's head coverings), these bloggers rejected the ultra-Orthodox narrative that they were lazy or lustful and instead positioned themselves as critical thinkers saving Orthodox Judaism from extremism. These bloggers consciously modeled themselves on the *maskilim*, the intellectuals of the Jewish Enlightenment of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Central and Eastern Europe who challenged religious authority figures. Fader notes that the jblogosphere replicated gendered hierarchies in the Hasidic community, including viewing female bloggers as less serious than their male counterparts.

The popularity of the jblogosphere, along with its anonymity and accessibility, was deeply troubling to the ultra-Orthodox rabbinic leadership. They responded by denouncing the internet and smartphones as the "*nisoyen ha-dor*," the challenge of the generation, and sought to outlaw them within the confines of their communities. The ultra-Orthodox leadership claimed smartphones were polluting the innate purity of the Jews, that they were the embodiment of the evil inclination, and that they were an addiction and a disease. Some even took to calling smartphones "*shmad*phones," playing on the similarity between the name of the device and the Yiddish word for converting to another religion. The ultra-Orthodox rabbis organized massive anti-internet public gatherings, and when that failed to achieve the desired compliance, they appealed to the piety of women to control the internet use of their children and husbands. Ultimately, community schools required that parents install "kosher filters" on their smartphones on pain of their children being expelled.

Fader describes the general response of the ultra-Orthodox to religious doubt. The first line of defense on the part of outreach rabbis, self-appointed community activists, and life coaches is to claim that doubters are either spiritually sick or suffer from emotional or mental

illness. According to this line of argument, no healthy person would doubt the Torah or stop wearing tefillin, and since these people were doing just that, they must be mentally or spiritually ill. The second line of defense is to encourage the doubters to consult Orthodox therapists who triangulate care with a referring rabbi, often violating the confidentiality of the patient; these therapists pathologize religious doubt and often overmedicate those in their care.

Double lifers engage in internal moral compromises as they balance their newfound morals and values—heavily influenced by the liberal ideas of pluralism and autonomy widespread in American culture—with those of rabbinic authority and Orthodox tradition accepted within their Hasidic communities. In one particularly extreme case, a married female double lifer, who was having an affair with another married double lifer, would go to the *mikvah*—the ritual bath for purification after menstruation—before having sex with her husband, notwithstanding the fact that she was, during the same time, being unfaithful to her husband. She felt that since her husband would be outraged to have sex with her if he knew she had not gone to the *mikva*, it was the right thing for her to do, regardless of the sexual activities she was engaged in on the side.

Fader's book explores, with great insight and sensitivity, the complex existence of double lifers and the conditions under which they live. Her engaging style makes this fascinating work appeal both to scholars of contemporary Orthodox Judaism and those who study the relationship between technology and society, as well as to the general reader interested in gleaning an understanding of an inaccessible but intriguing facet of current Orthodox reality.

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The Movement and the Middle East: How the Arab-Israeli Conflict Divided the American Left. By Michael R. Fischbach. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020. xi + 297 pp.

University trends come and go, but spirited, regularly agonized, discussion of Israel, Zionism and Palestine abides. Recent years in particular have seen waves of activism on a number of campuses under the banner of the movement urging Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel. While the BDS Movement has, for now, singularly failed to achieve