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*Degrees of Separation: Identity Formation While Leaving  
Ultra-Orthodox Judaism* by Schneur Zalman Newfield, and:  
*Hidden Heretics: Jewish Doubt in the Digital Age* by Ayala  
Fader (review)

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## BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Schneur Zalman Newfield, *Degrees of Separation: Identity Formation While Leaving Ultra-Orthodox Judaism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2020. 228 pp. Hardcover \$99.50, paperback \$34.95, eBook \$34.95. ISBN: 9781439918951, 9781439918968, 9781439918975.

Ayala Fader, *Hidden Heretics: Jewish Doubt in the Digital Age*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. 288 pp. Hardcover \$29.95, paperback \$19.95. ISBN: 9780691169903, 9780691234489.

In the Spring of 2020, Netflix released *UnOrthodox*, the dramatic retelling of Deborah Feldman's exit from Hasidic Brooklyn. In a matter of weeks, Esty, played by Shira Haas (who has been nominated for a Golden Globe for this role), left her family, her home, her religious observance, her wig, and her clothing as she became an ostensibly secular woman in Berlin. This version of Feldman's story obfuscates the years that she spent trying to live within a religious context, despite her misgivings, and as such, the Netflix version reinforces a popular image of leaving a religious community as both abrupt and final. In two recent books, Ayala Fader and Schneur Zalman Newfield present meticulous social science research that complicates the dominant understandings about those who leave ultra-Orthodox Judaism.

Fader and Newfield present nuanced characterizations of their research subjects and about the many ways people struggle with their religious identity. *Degrees of Separation* draws on interviews with 74 Hasidic ultra-Orthodox Jews who have left their religious communities. Newfield uses the term "exiters," or often refers to his research subjects by the religious affiliation of their youth: Lubavitch or Satmar. These terms reflect Newfield's broader claims about exiting as a process that is ongoing and religious identity as being constantly renegotiated. He writes, "Exiting is an ongoing process of becoming" (4). Elsewhere he refers to exiting as "residing in a liminal state for a prolonged period of time" (30). In *Hidden Heretics*, Fader presents an ethnographic account of 24 "double lifers," those who practice ultra-Orthodoxy in public (and at home) but violate commandments in secret due to their doubt about the veracity of the religious claims that underlie them. Fader focuses on individuals who have experienced "life changing doubt" but remain significantly tied to their ultra-Orthodox community. These individuals refer to themselves as "hidden heretics," which leads to the title of

Fader's book and reflects their own attempts to keep their double lives secret from their families and their communities (2). Taken together, Newfield and Fader demonstrate that religious identity is not a clear category that can be easily discarded.

While one might be tempted to see these two books as existing along a continuum of leaving a religious community, Fader and Newfield reject any classification that indicates an evolution among their research subjects toward secularization. Fader explains that for those in her book, "there were more incremental changes over the years, a process of making ethical compromises . . . but ultimately remaining in their ultra-Orthodox communities" (14). Fader brilliantly traces how double-lifers are simultaneously engaged with the ultra-Orthodox and secular worlds. First, a young man or woman (often a man, married with a few young children) might begin to question some of the tenets of their religious faith. With access to the internet through a smartphone or a computer, that individual can find the Jewish blogosphere. Fader explains that, beginning in 2002–2003, the Jblogosphere "gave anonymous public voice to a range of private, interior life-changing doubt" (32). These blogs are produced by other hidden heretics who use familiar language and concepts while producing an ultra-Orthodox counterpublic, ultimately threatening rabbinic authority offline. Someone experiencing doubt may comment on these blogs and eventually move over to private Facebook or Whatsapp groups. Hiding behind profile pictures that obscure their true identities but indicate a shift away from ultra-Orthodox norms of facial hair or hair covering, an individual experiencing life-changing doubt may ultimately begin meeting others who share their concerns. Fader's rich ethnographic research allows readers to see how these individuals gather with each other at a Purim masquerade ball, a *leyl shishi* (Thursday) party, and at bars, among other social gatherings geared only to those who are living a double-life. In these social spaces, their language, their dress, their music choices, and their food indicate the staying power of the ultra-Orthodox habitus. Fader explains that "secret double life worlds were mash-ups of the intimacy of ultra-Orthodoxy and ultra-Orthodox stereotypes of how the rest of New York lived" (152).

Most of Fader's research subjects remain double-lifers for significant periods of time, while Newfield's interviews present a picture of those who consider themselves to have left entirely. In Chapters Three and Four, Newfield meticulously illuminates the various ways that exiters remain embedded in the communities from which they came even as they discuss their own process of exiting and change their actions significantly. For instance, Lubavitch and Satmar Hasidim have two primary narratives they use to explain why they left: Newfield refers to these as "intellectual" and "social emotional." The intellectual narrative is one wherein an exiter has identified a "problem with the community's beliefs or practices and responds rationally" (75). The social-emotional narrative, however, is "highly personal," privileging individual needs over the community's requirements (75). Most of Newfield's interviewees maintained some combination of these two ap-

proaches in their exit narratives, and Newfield himself is wary of drawing any conclusions about why an individual leaves the community. Instead, he offers an intriguing analysis of how exiters denigrate each others' exit narratives. "To the extent that each group of exiters imagines themselves as *authentic* exiters who had *legitimate* reasons for exiting, they incorporate into their new identity . . . concepts of superiority and practices of boundary maintenance that are familiar to them from their upbringing" (97, italics in original). In other words, even in the way they talk about why they left we see that they are still using the tools of their Hasidic communities. Elsewhere, Newfield addresses the actions of exiters. As an extreme example, he notes one who intentionally eats bacon on Yom Kippur. This exaggerated defiance of Jewish law is part of what makes exiting a liminal process. As Newfield poignantly states, "the value system of their community still preoccupies them, even as they defy it" (108).

Instead of viewing exiters and double-lifers as outside a religious tradition, Fader and Newfield think about their research subjects as those on the margins of ultra-Orthodoxy. In so doing, these books complicate the boundaries between "insider" and "outsider" and present a more expansive understanding of ultra-Orthodoxy. The ultra-Orthodox religious identity is one that remains, even years after shaving one's beard, removing one's sheitel, wearing jeans, and eating non-kosher food. It remains even after one doubts and rejects their deepest faith in the tradition. While reading Fader, I wondered how these individuals and their community could still see them as "inside" ultra-Orthodoxy. As Fader demonstrates throughout the book, their deviance is not as hidden as they may want it to be. Several of the "hidden heretics" struggled with family who knew that they were on the phone on Shabbat, and others struggled with schools that demanded parental conformity in order to accept children. As I felt the urge to proclaim that these individuals, living separate non-Hasidic lives, doubting the central tenets of Hasidic belief, were no longer Hasidic, Fader explains that doubt is a central part of religious life (10). In that way, Fader demonstrates that Orthodoxy itself contains those who have deep doubts about its claims. Additionally, I was reminded of Newfield's insight that although Hasidic communities have erected strong boundaries to maintain distance from non-Jews, they have constructed a much more flexible and informal boundary that is "designed to keep members inside" (44). In this way, exiters of ultra-Orthodoxy have not necessarily exited and may never be fully on the outside. Exiters, like doubt, are part of religion as well.

Fader and Newfield's books contribute significant detail and analysis to a topic that is well-known both within ultra-Orthodox communities and in the wider Jewish public but that has received less scholarly attention. While sociologist Lynn Davidman's (2014) work was among the first to consider ultra-Orthodox exiters, Fader and Newfield present innovative findings, likely due to the timing of their research. Fader's focus on the internet as a medium of living a double life would surely not have been a significant part of exiting narratives for those who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s. Fur-



thermore, as Newfield points out, coming of age at this time likely shaped the feminist inclinations of Davidman's research subjects, which Newfield did not find among the women he interviewed (29). In order to continue expanding and improving our knowledge of this phenomenon, I suggest a few more areas of research for interested scholars. Although some of Fader's interviewees were Yeshivish, the focus on Hasidic exiters in these two books raises questions about how Yeshivish/Litvish (non-Hasidic ultra-Orthodox) and Sephardi ultra-Orthodox individuals struggle with doubt or desire to leave their communities. Additionally, we need to know more about doubters and exiters in Europe and elsewhere. This comparative data might tell us more about whether the process presented by Fader and Newfield is more about leaving ultra-Orthodoxy or more about *being* Hasidic in North America. Fader and Newfield have also highlighted the importance of belief and doubt in religious identity. These theologically and psychologically oriented areas deserve more attention in the anthropological and sociological study of Judaism. Fader and Newfield offer important analyses of the role of embodiment in Jewish religious identity, even among those who are often described as people of the book. More research is needed in this area as well. *Hidden Heretics* and *Degrees of Separation* demonstrate that we can learn a lot about Jewish identity by studying those who struggle with theirs.

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Davidman, Lynn. 2014. *Becoming Unorthodox*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.