



Exiting Orthodox Judaism

Schneur Zalman Newfield, Sara Feldman

LAST MODIFIED: 25 SEPTEMBER 2023

DOI: 10.1093/OBO/9780199840731-0238

Introduction

The question of the nature of the boundaries between the Jewish community and the outside world is present throughout Jewish history. So too is the related question of the status of those who leave the Jewish community. However, the motivation for exiting, the nature of the exiting process, and the options available to the person once they exit are shaped by the particular historical period in which they live. For example, some young Jewish women in Western Galicia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who felt trapped in their community and were desperate to escape unwanted marriage arrangements took refuge in a Kraków convent and sometimes converted to Christianity. Similarly, those leaving Orthodoxy in Europe in the early twentieth century often did not find a welcoming secular world ready to embrace them. This is one of the reasons many Jews joined secular Jewish political movements like the Bund in Poland. The situation today for those who exit—a process often referred to by members of the Orthodox community as going “off the derech,” off the correct path, or simply going “OTD”—is drastically different. Given the secular and multicultural nature of most countries where contemporary Jews reside, once an Orthodox Jew decides to leave his or her community and upbringing, the “outside” world does not place formal barriers in the way of the exit. Rather, outsiders are often intrigued by exiters and tend to try to help those exiting. These days, the major barriers are the structural ones created by the Orthodox communities themselves to try to prevent exit, such as the threat to intervene in custody battles should one parent exit and the other remain in the community. There are also internal psychological barriers each exiter faces consisting of the negative depictions of the outside world, the taboo against leaving one’s community, and the dire predictions of the life trajectory of those who do leave. Exiters must also confront the practical challenges of becoming accustomed to new styles of clothing, food, and popular culture previously strictly forbidden to them. Once exiters leave their community, they must also negotiate their relationship with their Orthodox family, who often feel betrayed and ashamed of them. A note on language: although some contemporary Orthodox exiters consciously embrace the term “OTD” to destigmatize it, given that it can be perceived as condescending it will generally be avoided throughout this entry. Also, following the limitations of contemporary scholarship, this bibliography primarily cites works on exiters from Ashkenazi Judaism.

Social Science on Exiting

In the rich extant social science literature on Orthodox communities, the subgroup historically most often overlooked consisted of exiters. That is, most of the literature on Orthodox Jewish communities tended to focus on those members who stayed and largely ignored those who left. This omission may possibly be explained by the fact that until recently the size of the exiter population was relatively modest. It is also possible that these scholars were drawn to the question of how after the Holocaust and in the midst of flourishing secular societies small enclave communities with strict rules of conduct and belief could survive and even thrive. Decades later, once these Orthodox communities have securely established themselves in their American, European, and Israeli environments, scholars have become intrigued about those individuals who grew up in these communities and chose to leave them. The first book-length treatment of Orthodox exiters, Winston 2005 and Winston 2006, gained a lot of attention and stimulated both popular and academic interest in the subject. Davidman and Greil 2007 and Davidman 2014 each added to scholarly understanding of exiters by highlighting the role of narrative and embodiment in the exiting process. Topel 2012 enhanced the field by contributing an analysis of the Israeli exiter experience, which invited scholars to think about how the exiter phenomenon may be significantly different in different countries and societies. Cappell and Lang 2020 demonstrated the breath of scholarship on exiters. Fader 2020, which explores the experiences of those who appear to be living Hasidic lives but are secretly violating its norms, highlights the complex array of choices for those who are discontented with their upbringing and may or may not eventually leave it entirely. The authors of Newfield 2020 and Engelman, et al. 2020, both of whom were raised Hasidic and left their respective communities, underline the expansion of the ranks of scholars on exiters to include those who personally underwent this process. Unlike most of the scholarship on exiters to date, which consists of qualitative studies, Trencher 2016 provides a comprehensive quantitative analysis of the subject.

Cappell, Ezra, and Jessica Lang, eds. *Off the Derech: Leaving Orthodox Judaism*. New York: SUNY Press, 2020.

The first edited volume exclusively devoted to the topic of contemporary Orthodox exit. It contains both academic analysis and personal narratives regarding leaving Orthodox Judaism. The scholarly chapters of the book analyze the role of embodiment in the exiting process, the struggle of exiters to obtain a secular education, the representation of exiters in the mainstream media, and the social practices of Israeli exiters (*Shababniks*) who reside in Brooklyn.

Davidman, Lynn. *Becoming Unorthodox: Stories of Ex-Hasidic Jews*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014.

Davidman introduces to the study of religious exiting the importance of the body as a locus of transition. Davidman argues that bodily inscribed habits are the most difficult to relinquish, recurring unexpectedly in the lives of exiters even years after leaving. Davidman’s focus on the body tries to correct the near-exclusive focus on the exit process as it relates to belief and intellectual argumentation found among many scholars.

Davidman, Lynn, and Arthur Greil. “Characters in Search of a Script: The Exit Narratives of Formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46.2 (2007): 201–216.

Religious exiters face the daunting existential task of creating a new identity, a new “script” or “narrative” for themselves. Those joining enclave communities (*baal teshuvahs*) are given a prepared script including gender roles, behavioral norms, and religious beliefs. Those leaving these communities are at a loss for how to define themselves. Both the community they are leaving and the outside world they are joining fail to adequately assist them.

Engelman, Joel, Glen Milstein, Irvin S. Schonfeld, and Joshua B. Grubbs. “Leaving a Covenantal Religion: Orthodox Jewish Disaffiliation from an Immigration Psychology Perspective.” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 23.2 (2020): 153–172.

Applying insights from the study of immigration, this work describes and quantifies the psychological experience of leaving Orthodoxy and investigates both factors that push people away from their community of origin and factors that pull them toward the outside world. Using survey data from 222 exiters, the authors explore the reasons people leave and their sense of wellbeing after leaving. They also consider gender differences among exiters.

Fader, Ayala. *Hidden Heretics: Jewish Doubt in the Digital Age*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020.

Based on her analysis of social media messages, Jewish blogosphere posts, community circulars, and personal interviews, Fader illuminates the secret world of “double lifers,” Hasidic men and women 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 describes in depth the general response of the Orthodox to religious doubt.

Newfield, Schneur Zalman. *Degrees of Separation: Identity Formation While Leaving Ultra-Orthodox Judaism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2020.

Employing data from seventy-four in-depth interviews with Hasidic men and women, Newfield explores the lives of those raised in these communities who leave that way of life. Newfield presents a comprehensive portrait of the prolonged state of being "in-between" that characterizes transition out of a totalizing worldview. In their thinking and behavior, exiters express both a sense of independence and a persistent (sometimes unwanted) connection to their past.

Topel, Marta F. *Jewish Orthodoxy and Its Discontents: Religious Dissidence in Contemporary Israel*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2012.

Topel analyzes the life of Orthodox exiters in Israel (*yotzim leshe'elah*) and the crucial role that nongovernmental organizations, including Hillel and Dror, play in their exit process, especially early on in their journey away from their communities when they are desperate to find a new community and to obtain assistance with establishing their new identity. Topel found that many Orthodox families break off all contact with their exiter family members.

Trencher, Mark. "Starting a Conversation: A Pioneering Survey of Those Who Have Left the Orthodox Community." Nishma Research, 21 June 2016.

Trencher is a market researcher and not a scholar, but this report, based on survey data from 885 Orthodox exiters, is the largest quantitative study to date. This report is full of important information on why people leave Orthodox communities, how exiters identify Jewishly after leaving, their relationship with their families post exit, and the kinds of support they need to flourish in the outside world.

Winston, Hella. *Unchosen: The Hidden Lives of Hasidic Rebels*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2005.

This book is a popular retelling of the dramatic and sometimes tragic stories of Hasidic rebels that Winston discovered while conducting her doctoral thesis on the subject. The reader is introduced to rebels from various Hasidic communities, including Malkie Schwartz, who was raised Lubavitch, left her community, and went on to found Footsteps, a NY-based organization that helps Orthodox exiters.

Winston, Hella. "Edgework: Boundary Crossing among the Hasidim." PhD diss., CUNY Graduate Center, 2006.

Winston describes the social control mechanisms operating inside Hasidic society to prevent rebels from leaving. The most common form of pressure the community placed on her subjects was the fear that their "deviant" behaviors would tarnish their siblings' or children's marriage prospects. Winston details the great pain and suffering such individuals endure trying to make the transition to the outside world, sometimes leading to drug and alcohol abuse.

Exiter Memoirs

The small but growing contemporary cannon of Orthodox exiter memoirs contains a considerable degree of diversity. The authors of Auslander 2007, Mann 2007, and Mirvis 2017 may be considered to have been raised Modern Orthodox. The other memoirists were raised ultra-Orthodox. (The author of Lax 2015 is the one exception who was raised non-Orthodox and joined Orthodoxy as an adult.) For the Modern Orthodox memoirists raised in communities that are more lenient than their ultra-Orthodox counterparts, leaving these communities remains painfully destabilizing. Still, their experiences differ in a key way. The Modern Orthodox memoirists struggled with remaining Orthodox while immersed in the secular world. The ultra-Orthodox struggled with feelings of claustrophobia and their desire to join the forbidden secular world. How reflective are the experiences captured in these memoirs to the broader population of Orthodox exiters? Although common themes exist, each exiter's journey contains unique aspects and dynamics. In addition, memoirists by definition are not typical in that most people are not racing to share their most secret actions along with their deepest fears and desires with the reading public. Ultimately, the public reads exiter memoirs because of their gripping narrative and distinctive voice, not their representativeness. How reflective are the memoirs as published to the life of the memoirists themselves? Memoirs are intended for a broad audience and go through a deliberate revision process to appeal to the non-Orthodox (and possibly non-Jewish) public. This process often focuses attention on scintillating or salacious aspects of a memoirist's story. The memoirs with the most explosive or sexual content are often the ones receiving the most popular attention. No surprise that Feldman 2012 and Vincent 2015 (dealing with their authors' sexual experiences), and Deen 2015 (dealing with the author's child custody battle) received much publicity, whereas memoirs lacking explosive content, in the rare cases that they get published, such as Deitsch 2015, garner little attention. Interestingly, aside from Auslander 2007 and Deen 2015, written by men, and Stein 2019, written by a trans woman, all the other memoirs in this section are written by cisgender women, even though there are probably roughly an equal number of men and women who leave Orthodoxy. One possibility is that since women receive more extensive secular education in ultra-Orthodox communities, they are better prepared to write memoirs in English. In addition, women in general are often allowed more expressions of emotions—key aspects of memoirs—and are therefore better suited to write in this genre. It should be noted that there are numerous examples of memoirs written by those who left Orthodoxy in prior centuries; a particularly famous and engaging instance is Maimon 2019 (1792–1793).

Auslander, Shalom. *Foreskin's Lament: A Memoir*. New York: Penguin, 2007.

An angry and hilarious chronicle by a Modern Orthodox-raised sex-death-and-god obsessed man. Son to a violent alcoholic father, as a child Auslander sinned hoping God would kill his father as punishment. In adulthood, Auslander no longer observes Jewish law but believes in the existence of a vindictive god and is terrified that for his sins the heavenly "Department of Ironic Punishment" will arrange the gruesome death of those he loves.

Deen, Shulem. *All Who Go Do Not Return: A Memoir*. Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2015.

A "heretic" who no longer believes in the faith of the "village," New Square, in Rockland County, New York, in which he was raised, challenged by a father physically and mentally ill, unprepared for adult financial responsibilities, intoxicated by secular knowledge, and stuck in a loveless marriage, he eventually breaks with his community and divorces his wife. Deen's community punishes his rebelliousness by severely limiting his contact with his children.

Deitsch, Chaya. *Here and There: Leaving Hasidism, Keeping My Family*. New York: Schocken, 2015.

Raised by affluent and loving parents in New Haven, Connecticut, Deitsch attends a coed Orthodox school with classmates from diverse Jewish backgrounds. Her family has deep roots to Lubavitch in Russia before the Holocaust but her parents are moderate in their commitment to the Lubavitch lifestyle. Her parents begrudgingly agree to let her attend Barnard College, and she maintains a close and supportive relationship with her family after leaving Orthodoxy.

Feldman, Deborah. *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots: A Memoir*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012.

The child of a divorced Williamsburg Satmar family, Feldman feels misunderstood and mistreated by relatives and oppressed by the modesty rules of her community. She secretly reads forbidden books from the public library and imagines herself a heroic character like in the books. Once married, Feldman experiences difficulty having sex, which causes her great anxiety. Nonetheless, she has a child and when she leaves Satmar gains full custody.

Lax, Leah. *Uncovered: How I Left Hasidic Life and Finally Came Home*. Berkeley, CA: She Writes Press, 2015.

The daughter of dysfunctional secular Jewish parents, Lax is desperate to find a stable home so joins Lubavitch in the 1970s. Lax describes both emotional and intellectual discontents with her Lubavitch existence. Her husband is emotionally unavailable, and the community focuses too much on the cold law rather than the warmth of spirituality. Openly gay, Lax is still in touch with her children and a part of their lives.

Maimon, Solomon. *The Autobiography of Solomon Maimon: The Complete Translation*. Translated by Paul Reitter. Edited by Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Abraham P. Socher. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019.

Solomon Maimon, an 18th-century Lithuanian-born Talmud scholar, joined the circles of the Haskalah (the Jewish Enlightenment movement) in Berlin and became a philosopher. Although intellectually gifted and an avid reader of German literature, he struggled to gain acceptance in cultured Berlin society. In the early 1790s, he published his *Autobiography (Lebensgeschichte)*.

Mann, Reva. *The Rabbi's Daughter: A Memoir*. New York: Dial Press, 2007.

Mann is the daughter of an English Orthodox rabbi and granddaughter of a chief rabbi of Israel, Isser Yehuda Unterman. Her sister is intellectually disabled, which destroys both her parents. Mann feels ignored and rebels by engaging in risky sex and drugs. She eventually becomes a *balat teshuvah* at an Israeli girls' yeshiva and marries an American Hasidic *baal teshuva*. Unsatisfied in her marriage, and with three children, she divorces.

Mirvis, Tova. *Book of Separation: A Memoir*. Boston: Mariner Books, 2017.

Mirvis grew up Modern Orthodox in Memphis, had three children, and divorced after almost seventeen years of marriage. She met and dated her husband while they both attended Columbia University. Her marriage and her Orthodoxy were intertwined; leaving one meant leaving the other, too. Struggles with how to manage her religious identity and children after divorce. Continues to perform some Jewish rituals with her children but on her own terms.

Stein, Abby Chava. *Becoming Eve: My Journey from Ultra-Orthodox Rabbi to Transgender Woman*. New York: Seal Press, 2019.

Abby was raised as a boy in Williamsburg in a family with thirteen siblings that was affiliated with the Viznitzer Rebbe. She struggles with her gender identity, which causes repeated cycles of depression and physical ailments. She studies kabbalah and takes comfort from the teaching that female souls could end up in male bodies. Her exit from the Hasidic community is intertwined with coming out as a trans woman.

Vincent, Leah. *Cut Me Loose: Sin and Salvation after My Ultra-Orthodox Girlhood*. New York: Penguin, 2015.

Born into a large Pittsburgh yeshivish family with a distant mother and busy father, Vincent feels unloved. Desperate for affection, especially from men, she describes in harrowing detail her many instances of sexual abuse and the time she tried to have sex for money. She bravely recounts the numerous times she cut herself and her suicide attempt. Vincent articulates a desire to refashion her Jewish past into a usable future.

Scholarship on Exiter Memoirs

Although the contemporary phenomena of exiter memoirs is relatively recent, it has already inspired scholarly commentary and analysis. Skinazi 2018 challenges the idea that Orthodox exiter memoirs represent a rejection of Judaism—and even less so of Jewishness—but rather a particular form of Judaism, the strict Orthodoxy of their authors' youth. The author notes that at least some memoirists (such as Shalom Auslander) are not even atheists (although they may wish they were!). Seidman 2020, while commenting on the portrayal of the "outside world" captured in the hit Netflix miniseries *Unorthodox*, notes that the biases of secular triumphalist outsiders go completely unaddressed. This insight can apply with equal force when considering published exiter memoirs and the extent to which their authors fail to subject the outside secular world to the kind of rigorous examination they perform on their own native communities. So too can the discourse on exiter memoirs benefit from the astute commentary of Masel 2020 regarding the need to make space for contradictory impulses when exploring the portrayal of exiters in the media. Lang 2020 highlights the role of intimacy in female Orthodox exiter memoirs, and Schwartz 2020 provides a philosophical exploration of the category of Orthodox exiter identity, which enriches the discussion of exiter memoirs.

Lang, Jessica. "Between Us: Intimacy in Women's Off-the-Derech Memoirs." In *Off the Derech: Leaving Orthodox Judaism*. Edited by Ezra Cappell and Jessica Lang, 177–195. Albany: SUNY Press, 2020.

Lang maintains that female exiter memoirists use their explicit discussion of their history with physical intimacy as a means of creating symbolic intimacy with the reader and as a way to challenge the obliteration of the divide between public and private domains caused by rabbinic male intrusion. Lang also argues that female exiter memoirists recognize books and secret reading as one means of evading rabbinic male authority.

Masel, Roni. "Going Off Script: The Contradictory Pleasures of Unorthodox." *In geveb*, 29 June 2020.

Masel encourages readers to discard the either/or view of Orthodoxy commonly perpetuated in mainstream media: either Orthodoxy represents oppression, or the secular gaze is simply triumphalist and out to tarnish Orthodoxy. Masel argues that it is possible to contain contradictory impulses while also enjoying aspects of the media portrayal of Orthodox exiters.

Schwartz, Shira. "In Terms of OTD." In *Off the Derech: Leaving Orthodox Judaism*. Edited by Ezra Cappell and Jessica Lang, 249–274. Albany: SUNY Press, 2020.

Schwartz presents a linguistic and phenomenological analysis of the bodily and spatial experience of Orthodox exiters. Schwartz questions what identity is for Orthodox exiters, given that it is fundamentally a negative identity, that one is no longer Orthodox.

Seidman, Naomi. "My Scandalous Rejection of Unorthodox." *Jewish Review of Books*, Summer 2020.

Framed as a response to the Netflix miniseries *Unorthodox*, Seidman chastises the media portrayals of Orthodox exiters and suggests that they are commonly based on secular triumphalism, the need to view Hasidic communities as backwards and "otherworldly," while presenting the "outside world" in unrealistic uniformly positive terms. The secular gaze of the media "sees everything except its own hungry eye at the keyhole."

Skinazi, Karen. "A G-d-Fearing Woman, She Should Be Praised: Exposure, Dialogue, and Remedy in Off-the-Derech Narratives." In *Women of Valor: Orthodox Jewish Troll Fighters, Crime Writers, and Rock Stars in Contemporary Literature and Culture*. By Karen Skinazi, 30–74. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018.

Readers typically see female exiter memoirs as simply narratives of Orthodox abuse, of women who "suffered under the weight of their wigs and their wombs" (p. 30). Skinazi argues these memoirs have a didactic intent. They seek to reclaim a more expansive and inclusive form of Judaism and create a dialogue with those still in the community to bring attention to communal problems so they can be rectified.

Novels on Exiting

There are many examples of historical precursors to contemporary novels of Orthodox exiters. Interested readers could consult the Talmud, or the Steinberg 1996 (1939) retelling, as well as much of modern East European Jewish literature. Grade 1976 (1967)—its author's magnum opus and one of the most powerful and literarily sophisticated expressions of the struggles of Orthodox exiters—is unusual in its popularity among contemporary Orthodox exiters as they make their journey out of Orthodoxy. Grade's own yeshiva background as a student of the Chazon Ish and the novel's ample references to classical rabbinic texts are particularly appealing to contemporary yeshiva students. More recent novels on the topic are distinct from these, reflecting dramatic changes in Jewish life and the modern world: Holocaust memory along with the relative acceptance of Jews by surrounding societies, the reduced role of Yiddish as a means of secular Jewish literary self-expression, and the new opportunities for liberation from cis-hetero-patriarchy that the non-Orthodox world can offer. Since the mid-twentieth century, exiters often seek their futures outside of Jewishness, rather than try to refashion it. (With Orthodoxy constituting only a fraction of the Jewish community and exiters being often isolated from one another, a movement like those of previous decades is unlikely.) Appearing in language understood by the surrounding non-Orthodox and non-Jewish society, overwhelmingly in English, novels must render Orthodox experience legible while avoiding, if not fetishization, antisemitic interpretations. Inside and outside Orthodoxy, women have more educational opportunities. Historically marginalized in the Jewish literary world, women find a broad market for English-language books about their exit from traditionalist societies, which may account for the larger role they play in the production of novels about leaving Orthodoxy. Modesty rules for marriageability's sake are thus a nearly universal conflict. Women and girls secretly enjoy lesbian connections in Abraham 1995 and Alderman 2018, and adultery occurs in Markovits 2012. Education is a major theme of Orthodox exit novels. Potok 2016 and Halberstam 2009 tell stories about Hasidic rabbis' sons leaving Orthodoxy for secular life and education. The draw of both religious and secular knowledge, combined with the problem of an Orthodox upbringing which prepares girls to be helpful wives of scholars and not become scholars themselves, is explored in Abraham 1995, Alderman 2018, Goldstein 1983, Markovits 2012, and Ragen 2013. Holocaust trauma shadows up in nearly all the novels, especially Markovits 2012. Eshes Chayil 2010 addresses sexual abuse of children.

Abraham, Pearl. *The Romance Reader*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1995.

As the eldest of seven Satmar children in a resort town, the protagonist spends her childhood performing domestic and childcare duties, earning money, and escaping into novels which propose a life different from her mother's. Through her adolescence, this indispensable daughter struggles with her parents over modesty, education, reputation, and arranged marriage, her secret sins unpunished and her sexual desire unsatisfied.

Alderman, Naomi. *Disobedience*. London: Penguin Books, 2018.

A novel about a rabbi's daughter visiting her birth community in London as it mourns her father's death. Communal politics, traditional Jewish thought, and psychotherapy are major themes of the novel, which leverages a story of lesbian desire to hint at the rebellious protagonist's lingering ambivalence toward the community she left behind. Originally published in 2006.

Eshes Chayil [Judy Brown]. *Hush*. New York: Walker, 2010.

This young adult novel tells the story of a child whose friend is being sexually abused and whose community fails to prevent it. While the protagonist herself is eventually able to live a happy Hasidic life, her best friend commits suicide as a child and the story is critical of Orthodox culture. The novel constituted a scandal which contributed to the author's estrangement from Hasidism (she remains Orthodox).

Goldstein, Rebecca. *The Mind-Body Problem: A Novel*. New York: Random House, 1983.

The protagonist, a Princeton philosophy PhD student, was compelled to leave by her intellect, but struggles to escape the traditional gendered framework of how she could matter, seeking self-worth through men's sexual attraction to her and an unsatisfying marriage to a mathematical genius.

Grade, Chaim. *The Yeshiva*. Vols. 1–2. Translated by Curt Leviant. Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976.

Originally published in Yiddish in two volumes as *Tsemakh Atlas* in 1967–1968. Two of the main protagonists are immersed in the Lithuanian yeshiva tradition, steeped in the Musar movement, and tormented by religious doubt. The novel is semi-autobiographical. The work has a strong Talmudic inflection and is replete with references to rabbinic texts. Leviant's translation valiantly tries to retain the flavor of the original, notwithstanding many untranslatable yeshiva-specific terms.

Halberstam, Joshua. *A Seat at the Table: A Novel of Forbidden Choices*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks Landmark, 2009.

Like the author of this *Bildungsroman*, Elisha (as in Elisha ben Abuyah) is a scion of Hasidic rabbi. Quotations and stories from this tradition accompany the narrative of Elisha's estrangement from traditional Hasidic life not out of rebelliousness toward a loving family and tradition, but rather out of his desire for secular knowledge, jazz, and romance with a non-Jewish student who instructs him in these.

Markovits, Anouk. *I Am Forbidden*. London: Hogarth, 2012.

A multigenerational Satmar saga beginning in the Holocaust, this novel spans Transylvania, Paris, and New York City. Characters accept or confront Satmar beliefs: the Rebbe's escape from Europe, gender and family law, attitudes toward outsiders and exiters. When a rebellious girl leaves, the focus remains with her family and their efforts to preserve their postwar community. The author portrays Satmar Hasidism sympathetically yet suggests it relies on impossible contradictions.

Potok, Chaim. *The Chosen*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016.

The story of a Hasidic rabbi's errant son in an unlikely friendship with a Modern Orthodox boy coming of age in the 1940s as American Jews struggle to come to terms with the Holocaust. Instead of becoming a brilliant Torah scholar and inheriting his father's leadership role, he is drawn to secular knowledge and pursues a doctorate in psychology. Originally published in 1967.

Ragen, Naomi. *The Sisters Weiss*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013.

The intersecting story of two runaway brides from different generations of an ultra-Orthodox family. Both long for education, lovemaking, and freedom of choice. The author writes from a Modern Orthodox or religious-Zionist perspective, and the novel's clear message is that it is not lack of faith which drives religious girls away, but ultra-Orthodox modesty rules and arranged marriages.

Steinberg, Milton. *As a Driven Leaf*. West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1996.

A historical novel published in 1939, based on the life of the heretical Talmudic figure Elisha ben Abuyah or "The Other." Part of the ancient cohort of rabbis under the Roman occupation, he converses with other great rabbis of the Talmud but is drawn to Hellenism and ultimately Epicureanism while his friends face Roman persecution. The author was a Conservative rabbi involved in early Reconstructionism.

Films on Exiting

Exiting Orthodoxy has been a topic of film since the silent era. Early films represented modernization or Americanization, marked at times by nostalgia for the old ways of life. After Orthodoxy became a minority expression of Jewish identity, the tone and meaning of the films began to change. The filmmaking on this topic is the work of people who are not themselves Orthodox Jews, and sometimes not Jewish, giving some films an Orientalist and anthropological perspective in depictions of the Orthodox community or a clear message in favor of exogamy and casting off tradition. However, other films express suspicion of the world outside of Orthodoxy or bemoan what is lost. By the twenty-first century, these films came to represent Orthodoxy as a peculiar and at times nefarious phenomenon which oppresses women and suppresses sexual desire. The appearance of documentary films during this period reflects the recent fascination with leaving Orthodoxy.

Feature Films

Regardless of whether they were made by Jewish filmmakers, early films about exiting Orthodoxy typically contrast the shtetl or urban Jewish "ghetto" mindset with a more enlightened, open-minded one through stories of romance, intergenerational conflict, or other interactions with outsiders. The older generation is traditional, challenged by a younger generation that seeks education or falls in love with a non-traditional choice: a non-Jew or, more commonly in films made by Jews, a Jew who is farther from tradition. A prominent example of intergenerational conflict in pre-Holocaust film is *Tevya* (1939), a US-made production, set in the shtetl and highly critical of intermarriage. In post-Holocaust film, the theme of exiting Orthodoxy reemerged. As the children and grandchildren of immigrants continued to portray stories about leaving Orthodoxy for audiences who were generationally removed from the immigrant experience, they recalled Orthodoxy and the European past with nostalgia and myth. *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971) evokes ambivalent nostalgia for traditional life even as characters inevitably move away from it. *The Chosen* (1981) is a period piece, yet its focus on intellectual transformation, its vague and dim view of Orthodoxy, and the de-emphasis of immigration issues in its story anticipate a new era in filmic treatments of exiting Orthodoxy. The American *A Price Above Rubies* (1998) is one of the first films to present a contemporary exodus from Orthodoxy, followed soon by *Kadosh* (1999) in Israel. Both of these films present the impossibility for women to live within Orthodoxy in their local contexts: the New York film promotes multiculturalism, while the Jerusalem film expresses resentment toward ultra-Orthodoxy and Mizrahi Jews. Like the later *Felix and Meira* (2014) they are outsider, male perspectives on women in Orthodoxy. The authenticity of motion pictures about leaving Orthodoxy varies according to geography, language, and the level of involvement of exiters in the filmmaking process. *Mendy* (2003) pioneered the depiction of the male exiter experience, followed most notably by *Romeo and Juliet in Yiddish* (2010), a film which is the most informed by exiter participants' feedback and experiences. *The Vigil* (2019) and *Disobedience* (2017) both depict Orthodox exiters' return to Orthodox spaces.

Annenberg, Eve, dir. *Romeo and Juliet in Yiddish*, 2010. DVD. Oakland, CA: Nancy Fishman Film Releasing, 2011.

The filmmaker, not a former Orthodox Jew, made the film together with former Hasidim. She imagines Satmar Hasidim as the Montagues and Chabad as the Capulets of Shakespeare's play, but their perspective on Hasidism and men's exit narratives makes this a particularly informative and relatively accurate feature film about Orthodoxy—by differentiating different sects—and ex-Hasidim, by telling the story from their perspective. Cast includes Melissa Weisz, Luzer Twersky, and other exiter actors.

Giroux, Maxime, dir. *Felix and Meira*, 2014. DVD. New York: Oscilloscope Laboratories, 2015.

The childlike protagonist of this Canadian film is an artistically inclined Hasidic woman who leaves her husband and community to run off with a French Canadian. Scripted and directed by French Quebecois men with echoes of the French film *Amélie*, the film gazes not into her, but upon her and her community. Some of the actors are former Hasidim. Cast includes Luzer Twersky in a starring role and Melissa Weisz in a minor one.

Gitai, Amos, dir. *Kadosh*, 1999. DVD. New York: Kino Video, 2007.

An expression of secular Israeli antipathy toward the Orthodox community, this film depicts two sisters who suffer within a fictional, grotesque Orthodox community. The elder sister is divorced by her loving husband in an unlikely interpretation of Jewish law, while the younger is forced into an arranged marriage with a violently abusive imbecile and eventually escapes the community.

Jewison, Norman, dir. *Fiddler on the Roof*, 1971. DVD. Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth-Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007.

Inspired by Sholem-aleykhem's *Tevye the Dairyman*, the musical's nostalgic portrayal of East European Jewish intergenerational conflict maintains the story of political radical Hodl's warm relations with patriarch Tevye, but rewrites the story of Khave's marriage to a Christian as sustainable and allows for the couple to reconcile with her father.

Kagan, Jeremy Paul, dir. *The Chosen*, 1981. DVD. Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth-Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003.

Based on Potok 2016, cited under Novels on Exiting. A Modern Orthodox youth watches the transformation of a Hasidic rabbi's son from Torah scholar to Columbia University psychology student in the 1940s.

Lelio, Sebastián, dir. *Disobedience*, 2017. DVD. Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, 2018.

An Orthodox rabbi's rebellious daughter revisits the Orthodox community in London for his funeral, arguing with relatives about their beliefs and temporarily resuming her romance with a friend who is now married to a man. Though the representation of Orthodoxy contains noticeable inaccuracies, the film stands out for its lesbian storyline and arguments over religion. Based on Alderman 2018, cited under Novels on Exiting.

Schwarz, Maurice, dir. *Tevya*, 1939. Blu-ray disk. In *The Jewish Soul: Classics of Yiddish Cinema*. New York: Kino Classics, 2020.

Khave falls in love with a Christian and converts to marry him. The sorrow kills her mother. Khave lives among a grotesque and antisemitic Christian family which treats her as a despised servant, and escapes back to her father despite the love between her and her husband. Tevye had sat shiva for her, but other family members convince him to take her back.

Thomas, Keith, dir. *The Vigil*, 2019. DVD. Los Angeles: Shout! Factory, 2021.

Informed by ex-Hasidic cast members, this Yiddish and English Brooklyn horror film focused on the exiter experience of personal trauma and communal Holocaust memory and guilt. Forbidden technologies play an active role in the horror as the protagonist Yakov, struggling with his identity and mental health after leaving Orthodoxy, takes an overnight gig watching over a dead body.

Vardy, Adam, dir. *Mendy: A Question of Faith*, 2006. Parsippany, NJ: Lifesize Entertainment, 2007.

The first 21st-century film on this topic to be made by formerly Orthodox Jews and to show the emotional, social, and intellectual aspects of leaving, including exiter community, attempts to participate in the economy, and romantic relationships with fetishized non-Jewish people of color.

Yakin, Boaz, dir. *A Price Above Rubies*, 1998. Miramax, 2011.

Though created from an outsider, reductive perspective, this film pioneered the storyline of the artistically inclined woman leaving behind an intolerably sexist Orthodox community. The protagonist, a young mother who yearns for sexual and aesthetic fulfillment, finds it away from the Hasidic community. The talented Puerto Rican jewelry designer from a Catholic background who becomes her lover represents the cosmopolitan, open outside world to which she is drawn.

Documentary Films and Television

Production of documentaries about exiting Orthodoxy follows, rather than precedes, the production of fiction films. This is likely due to the fact that until somewhat recently, "Orthodox exiter" was not a distinguishable identity. A few generations after the problem of immigration and adaptation to new societies, the identity became more visible. This is evident in the progression of documentary films on the topic, which arguably begin with *Trembling Before G-d* (2001), a film about Orthodox gays and lesbians which includes some who necessarily had to leave Orthodoxy. *Divan* (2004), a very personal film by someone who left Orthodoxy, tells a story of her relations with family and heritage after she has already left. *Leaving the Fold* (2008) and *One of Us* (2017) set out to explore the process of leaving itself, and other documentaries, including *Code of Silence* (2014), reveal aspects of it while focusing on another specific topic, that of abuse. While *Leaving the Fold* (2008) focused on queer identity, *One of Us* (2017) censored it out. *Unorthodox* (2015) is uniquely focused on Modern Orthodoxy. Television has offered only a few stories about people who leave or left Orthodoxy, and even fewer full-length series on the topic. Two notable exceptions are the wildly popular Netflix productions, *Unorthodox* (2020) and *My Unorthodox Life* (2021), which highlight aspects of the exiting process while fostering charges of sensationalism and inaccuracy.

Ben-Moshe, Danny, dir. *Code of Silence*. Streaming video, Amazon Prime, 2014.

Australian documentary about child sexual abuse in a Chabad school, told from the perspective of a victim who left Orthodoxy and his family, who suffered ostracism for attempting to hold perpetrators accountable.

Dubowski, Sandi Simcha, dir. *Trembling Before G-d*, 2001. DVD. New York: New Yorker Video, 2003.

Features gays and lesbians born into the Orthodox community, including some who stay Orthodox and some who left Orthodoxy.

Ewing, Heidi, and Rachel Grady, dirs. *One of Us*. Streaming video. Netflix, 2017.

Follows two men and one woman who left the Hasidic community in Brooklyn. Interviewees discuss domestic violence and sexual abuse within the community, and one of them struggles with drug addiction. Includes a close look at the organization Footsteps. The woman interviewed in the film later spoke out about how Netflix censored out all references to her lesbianism.

Gluck, Pearl, dir. *Divan*, 2004. DVD. New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2005.

The ex-Orthodox Pearl Gluck searches in Europe for an heirloom divan upon which Hasidic rabbis slept, to return it to her Hasidic family.

Mayes, Joshua, dir. *My Unorthodox Life*. Streaming video. Netflix, 2021.

A reality television program featuring fashion CEO Julia Haart and her children, who are in different stages of exiting the Orthodox Monsey lifestyle. With imagery of unattainable wealth, contrasted with exaggerated denunciations of Haart's Orthodox background, the show presents lavishly expensive, revealing fashion as her philosophy of feminist liberation.

Oertelt, Nadja, and Anna Wexler, dirs. *Unorthodox*, 2013. DVD. Cambridge, MA: The Orchard, 2013.

The only documentary featuring the formerly Modern Orthodox, based around the question of why so many rebels become religious again after spending a gap year in Israel. While the gap year is effective in making her subjects religious, the filmmaker references her own explorations of sex, drugs, and travel as well as her decision to move to Israel while remaining secular, and records some of her arguments with Orthodox people.

Schrader, Maria, dir. *Unorthodox*. Streaming video. Netflix, 2020.

Based on Feldman 2012, cited under Exiter Memoirs, this miniseries portrays the protagonist's exodus from Orthodoxy as a quest for artistic achievement in the form of musical education, echoing that of classic films. It depicts Hasidic sexuality as a painful and awkward practice and includes a multigenerational exodus storyline. Includes exiter actors in minor roles and bit parts, including Malky Goldman, Melissa Weisz, Eli Rosen, Abby Stein.

Scott, Eric, dir. *Leaving the Fold*, 2008. DVD. Los Angeles: Seventh Art Releasing, 2009.

A documentary which features interviews and scenes with men and women who left Orthodoxy in the United States and Israel. Includes Basya Schechter, who became a successful musician after leaving the community, where she could not sing in public.

Exiters Building Support Systems

What is the internal culture among Orthodox exiters? Some of the most raw and unvarnished expressions of exiter angst as well as some of the most heartfelt expressions of solidarity and community are today taking place on social media. Using hashtags such as #OTD and #offthederech, posters are sharing with their fellow exiters their fears and joys related to their unorthodox experimentations. Some of these posts describe the "firsts" that exiters often struggle with, such as women wearing jean pants or men shaving their beards or eating non-kosher food. Exiters also discuss at length how to set boundaries with Orthodox family and friends, and how to handle Orthodox community members who seek to pressure exiters to rejoin their communities. Facebook has also enabled the dissemination of the "It Gets Better" campaign, a short video highlighting the professional achievements and career aspirations of a slew of exiters, effectively challenging the dire warnings of the Orthodox community for anyone who leaves it. In addition, from 2002 to 2009, there was also an active and popular Jewish blogosphere with Hasidic bloggers using names like Hasidic Rebel (the nom de plume of Shulem Deen) and Shtreimel. They wrote in Yiddish and positioned themselves as critical thinkers honestly interrogating Orthodoxy (see Fader 2020, cited under Social Science on Exiting). Some of these Hasidic bloggers ended up leaving their community, including Shulem Deen. In recent years, some exiters have performed in stage productions of classic Yiddish dramas, thus making use of the Yiddish they acquired from their upbringing while giving

them a chance to expand their cultural horizons and job opportunities. These Yiddish performances (such as the New Yiddish Rep's 2017 restaging of Sholem Asch's *God of Vengeance*) have also proved popular with exiter audience members who appreciate their familiarity with the language and its subversion on the stage from a sacred tongue to a secular one.

Organizations

Some Orthodox exiters view organizations that cater to them as unnecessary and potentially even counterproductive, as a social network that focuses on their past and holds them back from integrating into the broader society. Nonetheless, for many exiters such organizations offer urgently needed support and guidance in an unfamiliar and confusing world. For some exiters these organizations can even prove life-saving, allowing them to connect with others who identify with their personal struggles and provide them with hope and confidence to continue on their exiter journey. Starting in the early 1990s with Hillel in Israel and a decade later with Footsteps in New York, and more recently with Mavar and Pathways, organizations have been founded with the express goal of assisting Orthodox exiters and those thinking of leaving their native communities. These organizations typically provide essential educational, social, and legal services to those in need. They also arrange for cultural programming that allows their members to enjoy themselves while learning about the outside world. In addition to formal organizations, some informal groupings have developed, such as Freedom, that seek to provide comradery and social support to exiters.

Footsteps.

Founded in 2003 by Malkie Schwartz, an exiter from the Crown Heights Lubavitch community, the Manhattan-based nonprofit has for years been expanding its scope and potential to help. With a staff of over twenty and a budget of over a million dollars, as of 2022 Footsteps has assisted more than two thousand individuals since its founding.

Freedom.

Founded in 2012 by Gene Steinberg, an exiter from the Satmar community in Kiryas Joel, Freedom is an informal New York-based organization that has as of 2022 hosted 650 events and boasts over 1,000 members. Freedom events include watching films, visiting museums, book talks, nature walks, and communal meals.

Hillel.

Founded in 1991 by Shai Horowitz, an Orthodox exiter, the organization has grown exponentially in the following decades. As of 2022, it has thirty-two paid staff along with over seven hundred volunteers. It operates four centers across Israel, as well as residential housing and an emergency shelter. It serves two thousand and five hundred people each year.

Mavar.

Founded in 2013 by Linda Turner, a secular Jewish woman, Mavar (which in Hebrew means transitions) is based in London and Manchester. As of 2022, it has provided services to over 120 people.

Pathways.

Pathways was founded in 2017 by Leah Boulton, a secular Jewish woman. As of 2022, the Australian organization has three part-time employees and approximately seventy members.

Publications

There have been several attempts to produce publications specifically for the Orthodox exiter community. These publications are intended largely, if not exclusively for exiters themselves, rather than the broader society. However, given the limited resources of this community as well as the focus of many of its members on "moving on" and putting their Orthodox association behind them, these publications, such as the OTD Manual and *Apikorsus Magazine*, have enjoyed only limited success.

Apikorsus Magazine. 2020.

Apikorsus was a short-lived publication written by and for Orthodox exiters. The three issues of the magazine included personal essays, poetry, book reviews, cartoons, stories, and philosophical reflections on the exiter phenomenon and related themes.

OTD Manual.

This represents a collaborative effort on the part of individual exiters to provide in a single location practical advice and information on a host of concerns to those considering leaving or who have newly left their communities. This database covers such topics as accessing government resources, college admission, and birth control.

[back to top](#)

You are browsing courtesy of: **Oxford University Press – Main Account**

Copyright © 2023. All rights reserved.