



ON THE MARGINS OF ORTHODOXY

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Introduction: The Paths That Rise to Meet Us

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A long, rich documentary and narrative history memorializes the departures of individual Jews from their tradition-bound Jewish communities. These stories reveal the gradual, often incomplete process, and the deeply complex factors, which lead to the relinquishment of long cultivated Jewish practices and beliefs. This volume documents the weightiness and challenges associated with leave-taking, its fraught nature, and the varied constructions of a post-Orthodox way of life from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives.

The conscious decision to mentally and physically depart from a Jewish collective bound by legible practices and beliefs becomes particularly salient after the onset of the Enlightenment, with its premium on individual autonomy, rationalist self-fulfillment, and individual and societal improvement. While there is little doubt that premodern Jews also experienced doubt, or in Weberian terms, “disenchantment,” the post-Enlightenment world created a space for its lived expression and, most importantly, offered the promise of a new, human-formed redemption. Indeed, exit from tradition is arguably a defining event of Jewish modernity.

Individual abandonment of religious practices during the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment-based reform), which began in the late eighteenth century, was realized by attaining Western-based knowledge and manners. These newly acquired practices would (presumably) yield respect among Enlightened non-Jews and broad social acceptance—in a word: secular redemption. Haskalah proponents, such as Solomon Maimon and Moses Leib Lilienblum, were motivated not only by skepticism but by a promise of self- and societal emancipation. With the increase of migration away from Central and Eastern Europe, the birthplace of the Haskalah, to the Americas and Western Europe, integration accelerated on a global scale.

During the next phase, which historians have termed the New Jewish Politics, redemption would ostensibly be won by means of nationalism and revolution. Zionists, for example, believed that with Jewish sovereignty an autonomous nation-state would curtail antisemitism and anti-Jewish violence; socialists and communists, in contrast, were sure that strikes, demonstrations, and revolution would liberate workers of all nationalities and abolish all ethnic and religious-based hatred.¹ Orthodoxy adapted as well, creating new political forms that used modern political methods to advance rabbinic power specifically and Orthodox interests more generally.² Today, the process of exit from Orthodox communities seems primarily defined by identity politics, that is, self-actualization by means of changes to one's education, gender, sexuality, and other essential identities. While currently freedom from Orthodox belief systems is conceived of as deeply personal and psychological, it still retains many of the markers that defined earlier traditions of exiting.

Each phase of exit might seem, in its redemptive impulse, to resemble precisely the traditional messianism it sought to displace. Indeed, each entails a spectacular optimism, resilience, and tolerance for sacrifice; casualties could include personal relationships, social and economic networks, marriages, and even custody over children. Yet *Haskalah*, New Jewish Politics, and contemporary identity politics depend a great deal more on individual human initiative than on an inscrutable divine will or messianic figure. Modern exiters tend to nourish a dream of empowerment and freedom from suffering by means of their own practices and self-development. Consequently, they too often are alone in bearing responsibility for success or failure. What we learn from much of the research found in this volume is that despite the isolation documented by many exiters, many retain practices and dispositions—one might call them faith-based habits—that connect them to their childhood homes and communities. As a result, rather than conceiving of exiting or departure as a bright line separating the before from the after, modern exiters tend to conceive of exit as a persistent and sustained act of connection and disconnection.

To establish exiting from Orthodoxy in numerical terms, according to Mark Trencher's 2016 survey, globally there are over ten thousand individuals who have left Orthodox Judaism in recent years.³ To focus on the American context, according to the Pew Research Center's 2020 study, of the approximately 7.5 million American Jews, 9 percent identified as Orthodox, compared to 37 percent Reform and 17 percent Conservative.⁴ Assuming a significant proportion of the total population of Orthodox exiters live in America, this would still not amount to a large proportion of the total Orthodox population in the US. However, as Newfield has noted,⁵ given the tight-knit nature of Orthodox communities, the

fact that so many members are leaving has had a significant psychological impact within Orthodox communities and they have undertaken numerous steps to try to halt this exodus.

In this volume, readers will discover scholarly analyses of religious exit from a wide range of academic disciplines and perspectives. The opening two chapters present historically informed understandings of the origins of leaving Orthodoxy. Naomi Seidman offers a manifesto for the burgeoning field of ex-Orthodox studies, which she argues is not simply derivative of the study of Orthodoxy or secularism. Seidman urges those who would engage in the “contested territory” of ex-Orthodox studies to avoid the competing dangers from Orthodoxy and the secular world. From Orthodoxy one must avoid its defensive ideologies which see all religious deviation as morally bankrupt and indicative of mental illness; from secularism one must avoid the voyeurism and triumphalism that refashions all religious exit into its own self-serving narrative.

In the second chapter, Glenn Dynner outlines three phases of religious exit in recent Jewish history, from pre-World War I to the interwar period, through the post-Holocaust years, and three distinct forms of exit—the *Haskalah*, political activism, and self-actualization through identity politics. This analysis highlights the absence of a single ahistorical form of exiting. Rather, each historical context produces its distinct form of leave-taking. Dynner highlights that exiting from a strictly religious way of life often entails its own leap of faith, an act that requires—or is symptomatic of— a specific kind of optimism. If exiters did not fundamentally believe that things had the potential to radically improve, they would never undertake the hardships that exiting almost always entails.

Providing a personal exploration of contemporary Lubavitch Hasidic life and thought, Joshua Shanes’s essay employs a sociologically informed ethnography that combines lived experiences with a broader scholarly analysis of the community. Shanes’s analysis includes discussion of Lubavitch outreach practices, the attitude of Lubavitch towards Zionism, Israel, and messianism, among other vital issues. Shanes combines his intimate knowledge of the community within an interrogative framework.

Two chapters in the volume address the issue of gender and exiting Orthodoxy. Jessica Lang, in Chapter Four, highlights the transgressive hidden performance of difference by religious exiters, their resistance to hierarchical norms that are both physical and, for some, spiritual. Trans theory offers a lens that centers an understanding of the process of transitioning (also known as “trans-ness” or “trans-ing”) as an act of self-definition that is continually at

work. An identity formed by difference and differentiation connects trans theory to the exiting documented in OTD narratives. Rooted in a feminist understanding that gender in general is a performance, religious exiters often mimic the gendered performance of religious and secular people in order to pass without being noticed in their native communities and in the secular spaces they begin to occupy. Miriam Moster, in the fifth chapter, investigates the challenges Hasidic mothers face when leaving their Hasidic community due to the deeply rooted and intertwined definitions of womanhood and motherhood within the Hasidic community, and the often conflicting understanding of gender in broader secular society. Moster documents the use of the American judicial system by Hasidic communities to reassert religious status quo, thus often securing rulings that pit religious expectations of women against those found in secular society.

Yehudis Keller and Estee Hirsch explore the psychological role of doubt in religious communities, and connect their findings to the impact that doubt has on peoples' decision to exit their communities. They identify an anxiety regarding religious doubt or uncertainty within Orthodox communities. The response of the Orthodox community is to intentionally suppress doubt whenever possible, often by portraying it as "immature." The consequence of this unwillingness to engage with those experiencing religious uncertainty tends to be isolation. The questioner is often left—abandoned, really—to work out their religious struggles on their own without the communal support that is in fact fundamental to the identity of the community.

Chapters Seven, Eight, and Nine center their focus on post-Orthodox life. Rona Miles and Alla Chavarga encourage readers to think of religious disaffiliation as a continuum rather than a dichotomy. That is, they establish a need to restructure the insider/outsider dichotomy that has long been imposed by the community and instead to chart a spectrum of religious disaffiliation. The authors focus on survey data they collected from over three hundred respondents regarding three variables: religious observance levels post-exit, the continued use of distinctly Orthodox first names post-exit, and the disclosure of their religious transformation to their families. The data reveals the retention of many religious-identity factors by exiters in their post-Orthodox lives.

Reinforcing some of the conclusions found in the research of Miles and Chavarga, David Belfon, in Chapter Eight, examines the idiosyncratic ex-Orthodox identities cultivated by exiters in the Greater Toronto Area. Belfon determines that notwithstanding the profound transformations of many aspects of their identity, exiters often retain the internalized hierarchies with which they were raised, in part because they understand these systems as the most

authentic form of Judaism. Belfon explores the persistence of these views among his interviewees and the means by which they negotiate their feelings associated with them.

Social media is the focus of the concluding chapter of the volume. Alexandra Stankovich interrogates the concept of marginality through an analysis of the representations of Orthodox exiters on social media. Stankovich considers the experience of peripheral living for exiters both in connection to the Orthodox communities they have largely left behind, and to the broader secular society they are still in the process of joining. Stankovich focuses her analysis on the #itgetsbetter movement on social media and the intermarginality of their position, located at the intersection of the tradition marking the past and the emancipation of the present.

As this volume explores, exiting is not simply an act of closing one set of gates and opening another. Rather, the push and pull of tradition, modernity and post-modernity; community, individuality, and family; identity, belonging, and difference, all contribute to the richness of the OTD experience, its history, presence, and future.

Notes

- 1 See Jonthan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862–1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- 2 Gershon Bacon, *The Politics of Tradition: Agudat Yisrael in Poland, 1916–1939* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1996). Glenn Dynner, *The Light of Learning: Hasidism in Poland on the Eve of the Holocaust* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2024), ch. 2–3.
- 3 See Mark Trencher, “Starting a Conversation: A Pioneering Survey of Those who have Left the Orthodox Community,” Nishma Research, June 21, 2016, http://nishmaresearch.com/assets/pdf/Press_Release_Survey_of_Those_Who_Left_Orthodoxy_Nishma_Research_June_2016.pdf.
- 4 See “Jewish Americans in 2020,” Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/>.
- 5 See Schneur Zalman Newfield, *Degrees of Separation: Identity Formation While Leaving Ultra-Orthodox Judaism* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2020).