



Becoming Un-Orthodox: Stories of Ex-Hasidim.

By Lynn Davidman.

**New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 272. \$29.95.
ISBN: 9780199380503.**

CHAYA R. NOVE

Graduate Center, City University of New York, New York, NY, United States

E-mail: chayarnove@gmail.com

In July 2015, around the time I received this book for review, a young woman in New York City made her way through the evening crowds of a popular rooftop bar on Fifth Avenue, climbed over the barrier, and jumped twenty stories to her death. Patrons in the bar, according to news sources, remained unaware of the tragic incident. Not so for the community of formerly Orthodox Jews, where the suicide of this woman generated ripples of anguish and saturated the internet with discourses of recrimination and reflection. This personal tragedy, the fifth suicide in this community in as many years, once again brought to the fore the themes of independence and angst that so often color the narratives of those raised ultra-Orthodox, who leave their highly bounded Jewish communities to embrace a secular lifestyle.

Davidman, who grew up in a Modern Orthodox Jewish home, is familiar with the struggle of leaving, or “defecting,” a term used similarly by William Shaffir, *Leaving Religion and Religious Life* (Greenwich, CT, 1997). Her understanding of the religious lifestyle and her sensitivity to the emotional challenges inherent in leaving it are evident in every aspect of this book, built upon case studies of forty Hasidic (ultra-Orthodox) defectors. In this sociological account, Davidman departs from what she sees as a Christian-centric perspective in the field, that of religious faith as a mental state. Instead, *Becoming Un-Orthodox* views Hasidic identity as an embodied practice and defection as a transformation that requires the discarding of deeply inscribed practices. The concept of embodiment is both natural and illuminating as a framework for examining this culture, which is highly ritualistic and focused on the physical being—natural because the idea that the external state shapes the internal state, often articulated in Hebrew as *hishoniot meorer et ha-penimiot*, is infused throughout traditional Jewish thought; and illuminating because when socialization is considered through a lens of physical inscription, it becomes clear why identity change can be a lifelong struggle.

Chapter 1 introduces the reader to the highly circumscribed and gendered Hasidic lifestyle. For men, membership in the religious community crucially includes wearing the requisite beard, *peyos* (sidelocks), and clothing and donning *tefillin* (phylacteries) daily. For women, *tsniyus* (modesty) in clothing and physical comportment is key. Dietary restrictions, ritualistic hand washing, a rigid division of gender roles, and a variety of behaviors conducted under the intense scrutiny of the community ensures that early on, one's body remains central to, and becomes inscribed with, religious observance. Against this context, Davidman portrays the cognitive dissonance that can motivate members to leave. Here, analogies drawn from the LGBTQ community and the trope of "coming out" are useful ways of depicting both the urgency and the anguish of the exiting process.

The following chapters unfold like the chronological stages of defection, although these phases may be less discrete in real life. Chapter 2 explores the question that is inevitably raised by both insiders and outsiders of the community: "Why do they leave?" For Davidman and her informants it is about more than losing faith. The author unifies the ideological catalysts for leaving into a single theme, which she describes as "tears in the sacred canopy." This is when community members discover conflicts between Hasidic values and their own lived experiences. Frequently these will be individuals raised in non-normative households, that is, in families that do not fit the narrow Hasidic mold, or in which there is abuse or neglect. A second factor she cites is exposure to the outside world, via books or other media and/or association with secular relatives, which presents members with new ways of seeing the world. Finally, Davidman shows how a member's feminist views can collide with the gender biases in the Hasidic community. Over time and with sufficient momentum, any of these factors, or a combination of them, can topple the religious ideology upon which the Hasidic lifestyle is built.

The shift from thought to action is explored in chapter 3, where Davidman reveals how ideological, physical, and social boundaries are breached. Here members' accounts of their first transgressions are highlighted: for example, visiting prohibited places, pursuing forbidden knowledge, and violating gender taboos. Early experimentation often takes place "backstage," or in private spaces, before moving into the public sphere. Chapter 4 discusses what Davidman calls "passing": existing in a liminal state or inhabiting a "double life." In this stage, individuals are already acquiring the cultural tool kit to fashion a new identity, but they are doing so while still living inside the Hasidic enclave. The theme here is cultural resocialization, a process that may involve mentorship as well as experimentation with various selves. This phase may be a necessary part of the transition, but it is highly difficult to maintain. Invariably, "passers" become overwhelmed by the psychological bifurcation. They report feeling anxious and depressed, not from guilt but

from the “loss of a stable self” (149). It is this cognitive dissonance that finally prompts them to “step out.”

In chapter 5, Davidson considers exit strategies and experiences. Here the excruciating process she describes as “disinscription,” the physical shedding of Hasidic practices and the rewriting of the “script” that constitutes the ultra-Orthodox worldview, begins. As one participant concedes, “leaving [the Hasidic community] was going into exile” (159). Paradoxically, along with liberation and rebirth come feelings of loss: loss of purity, of innocence, and of certainty. Shedding her research persona in chapter 6, Davidson briefly revisits her personal story and shows how it aligns with the narratives in her book. Underscoring the collectivist versus individual value clash that underlay her intense desire to leave, she admits, as other defectors do, that leaving the community constituted a “loss” and that the narrative of leaving has no real closure: “I have learned that I, too, could never uproot my early foundations. They remained a part of me no matter what my conscious volitions intended” (182).

Although the phenomenon analyzed in *Becoming Un-Orthodox* is hardly new, awareness of it has been increasing recently, its amplitude heightened via representation on internet forums, blogs, Facebook groups, and real-life support networks. A common term for those who leave—not invoked in this book but used frequently both inside and outside the Orthodox community—is *off the derech* (path), or OTD. Several recently published autobiographical books have captured the gratification and grief of the OTD experience. By most estimates, the ranks of defectors are now growing disproportionately to the size of the Orthodox community. *Becoming Un-Orthodox* contributes to this conversation by offering important insights into the causes and consequences of leaving ultra-Orthodoxy, without reducing those who do so to stereotypes. Exploring reasons for leaving offers new ways of looking at the Hasidic world, including how it sustains itself through rituals and embodied narratives. Furthermore, by focusing on identity transformation or identities in the making, the book adds insight to theories of socialization on both the institutional and the individual levels. Readers interested in the latter topic are encouraged also to read Sarah Bunin Benor’s *Becoming Frum: How Newcomers Learn the Language and Culture of Orthodox Judaism* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2012), which looks at socialization practices associated with joining, as opposed to leaving, the Orthodox community.

The thoughtful treatment of the subject matter in the book overall makes it easier to forgive an occasional inaccuracy, the most baffling of which is the assertion that the village of Kiryas Yoel has but “one road leading into and out of the community. On the Sabbath, the gates at the entry (and exit) of this street are locked” (10). Anyone who has ever visited or bothered to inquire about Kiryas Yoel knows that there are many roads leading into and out of the village and that there have never been any gates.

Moreover, the lack of social support that Davidman and some of her informants lament is no longer necessarily the case for people leaving ultra-Orthodoxy. Footsteps, a New York-based organization, offers a wide variety of well-publicized programs and assistance to those transitioning out of these communities. Virtual forums and organized activities that offer social and psychological support also abound. While these networks may not have been available to Davidman and her study participants, they are an important part of the contemporary OTD experience. Failure to mention them makes the book feel a bit dated.

Finally, readers like me with an interest in sociolinguistics or linguistic anthropology may be enticed by the section entitled "Language" in the final chapter, which appears to promise a systematic analysis of the narratives that are the basis for this book. I was hoping for references to such theories as indexicality, stancetaking, linguistic repertoires, or speech communities, but I was disappointed in this regard. The observations on language use are cursory, sometimes extrapolatory, and shed little light on the complex identity issues that are the topic of this book.

Davidman's interpretation of religious practice as a physical inscription draws on recent claims in neuroscience that locate moral behavior firmly in the realm of biology. By viewing religious socialization as a "hardwiring" of the psyche, we can begin to appreciate what identity transformation entails. For those who have left, the question of what to do with a core identity that is forever at odds with the reinvented self remains. Some, like Davidman, transform it into a professional interest. Others may find artistic outlets for self-expression. But every now and then we are reminded that severing the ties to a former self is hardly ever conclusive. Orthodoxy remains a phantom limb, and for most defectors, the throbbing persists.

