Characters in Search of a Script: The Exit Narratives of Formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews

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We use a case study of individuals who leave ultra-Orthodox Judaism to illustrate that essential characteristics of the institutions they leave, such as their degree of encapsulation, shape both processes and narratives of identity change. Through examining the narratives of these exiters and comparing them to the literature on conversion into strict religious groups, we find that there is more institutional support for conversion into a group than for disaffiliating from a group. In conversion, recruits are provided with institutional scripts that shape their narratives; those who leave strict religious communities have no parallel ready-made accounts. Those that leave ultra-Orthodoxy state that they did not have a language to guide them in their transition into secular society. Nevertheless, despite their presentation of themselves as “scriptless” they also present themselves as brave individuals who are proud of their ability to leave a community that had encompassed all aspects of life.

When I made a telephone call on [a Jewish holiday] I felt as though I was tearing apart one of my vital organs. I felt as though I was foolishly opening the door to hell and sending myself into a wilderness where hope for survival was grim. I felt as though I was standing on the tallest bridge and I was jumping off to a sea filled with sharks and deadly fish. I felt as though I was separating myself from a group I had grown to love, which raised and supported me.

INTRODUCTION

These words were spoken by a young formerly Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Jewish woman who had moved out of her family, although she worked hard to maintain contacts with them. Haredi communities engage in a daily round of life that is immersed in Jewish tradition and that takes place to a large extent within the Haredi community. Haredim try to keep themselves isolated as much as possible from the larger society: they do not send their children for secular education; expose themselves to mass media; or participate to a great extent in the mainstream secular consumer culture. This article is based on the analysis of narratives told by men and women who grew up in Haredi families in the United States and Israel and who, at some point in their lives, left the encapsulated communities in which they were raised (hereafter referred to by the Hebrew term, yotzi’im, those who leave, or ex-Haredim).

The exit accounts of ex-Haredim provide us with an excellent opportunity to illustrate our argument that social structural context shapes both the process of identity change and narratives of identity change. We suggest that the conversion process (in which individuals join a sectarian group) can be profitably distinguished from the disaffiliation process (in which individuals leave a sectarian group) in that there is less structural support for the disaffiliation process. This lack of structural support for the identity change process makes it a slower, less straightforward, and more idiosyncratic route than is the conversion process. Exit narratives also differ from conversion narratives in that exiters are less likely to be provided with readily available scripts with which they may tell their stories. We argue that it is profitable to distinguish among exiting processes between “deconversion,” which involves leaving a group one has joined as an adult, and “defection,” which

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involves leaving a group in which one grew up. We claim that defectors have even less institutional
guidance for the identity change process; this lack of assistance is reflected in their exit narratives.

**THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

The 1970s and 1980s saw a sharp increase in scholarship on the identity change process, largely as a result of increased sociological interest in new religious movements (Greil and Rudy 1984a; Richardson 1978; Snow and Phillips 1980; Snow and Machalek 1984). Most sociological studies of identity change have focused on converts, individuals who have left the loosely structured role options of modern society for the more tightly structured roles of a sectarian religious group (Barker 1984; Davidman 1991; Galanter 1989; Richardson, Stewart, and Simmonds 1979). While earlier studies concentrated on developing “process models” of the stages through which converts typically pass (Downton 1979; Lofland and Stark 1965), more recent studies have focused on the micro-structural dynamics of the conversion process. People who join new religious movements or sectarian groups generally engage in intensive interaction with members of the group and limit their contact with those outside the group; thus, a change in reference groups is a key dynamic in the conversion process (Greil and Rudy 1983, 1984b; Snow and Machalek 1984). Greil and Rudy (1984b) describe groups that try to change people as “social cocoons” that endeavor to encapsulate their members physically, socially, and ideologically in order to shield them from outside influence and foster identity change within the confines of group boundaries. At the same time that they recognize the importance of structural factors, students of conversion have emphasized that converts must be regarded not as passive objects of structural conditions, but as active agents in their own conversions (Balch 1980; Bromley 1997; Bromley and Shupe 1979; Richardson 1980; Straus 1976, 1979).

Although most studies have focused on the processes of conversion, there have also been studies of disaffiliation from religious communities (Beckford 1978a; Bromley 1991, 1997; Jacobs 1984, 1987, 1989; Lewis 1986; Rothbaum 1988; Sknord 1983; Solomon 1981; Wright 1984, 1988). As Shaffir (1997) has pointed out, much of this work has centered on people who grew up in the open secular society, joined an encapsulated group, and then returned from the tightly structured roles of the group to the loosely structured choices with which they grew up. In our terms, these studies have focused on “deconversion,” rather than “defection.” Only a few studies of disaffiliation have focused on ultra-Orthodox Jews and others who have been born into enclave communities (Albrecht and Bahr 1983; Bar-Lev, Breslau, and Ne’eman 1997; Peter et al. 1982; Barzilai 2004; Shaffir 1997).

In many ways, the process of disaffiliation, which depends upon a breakdown in encapsulation, is the structural mirror image of conversion, which involves insulation from the outside world (Wright 1987). Conversion entails identification with group members and the goals of the group; disaffiliation requires disidentification from group members, goals, and leaders. The different structural contexts in which the process of affiliation and disaffiliation take place result in some systematic differences in their dynamics. The process of identity transformation that takes place during conversion is typically preceded by involvement with a group; in contrast, in disaffiliation, withdrawal from the group typically follows disillusionment, sometimes by quite a long while. Members of encapsulated groups find it very difficult to leave because of their high levels of personal, social, and material investment. Most importantly for our purposes, whereas the process of affiliation is generally highly structured by the organization, disaffiliation is usually carried out by the individual with much less organizational guidance. Accordingly, as Beckford (1985: 174) writes: “There is little in the way of a cultural script for the passage of a person from being a member of an intense religious group to being a nonmember.” This sense of proceeding without institutional guidance is quite pronounced for Haredi defectors and others who have never been a part of secular society. Here, defection involves unlearning lifelong roles and the community’s idiomatic ways of speaking, thinking, and acting and learning new, unfamiliar ones.
Research on the identity change process typically involves the analysis of retrospective accounts after the fact (Davidman 1991; Greil and Rudy 1984a, 1984b; Lofland 1978; Snow and Machalek 1984). Yamane (2000) has argued in the more general context of the study of religious experience that it is important for scholars to recognize that conversion accounts must not be understood as literal descriptions of what has actually happened but as narratives, stories constructed to explain and present one’s experience of transition in a meaningful way to one’s self and to others (cf. Beckford 1978b:260).

Some scholars have gone so far as to argue that we can learn nothing about the actual process of conversion from narratives. In the view of these scholars, conversion narratives are not referential, but constitutive; they should be viewed not as a description of conversion, but as an enactment of conversion (Stromberg 1993). Rephrasing this argument in Somers’s (1994) terms, these authors are making the claim that conversion narratives should be read not as a “mode of representation” but only as an “ontological act” by which individuals constitute their social identities. In contrast, we argue that although narratives of identity change are properly understood as creative constructions, they nevertheless provide insight into the actual process of identity reconstruction.

If narratives were useless as guides to the identity change process, we would be forced to acknowledge that it is impossible for social scientists to have any access at all to these and other social processes (Woolgar and Pawlach 1985). Ewick and Silbey (1995) suggest that narratives may be legitimately used not only as the objects of sociological research, but also as the means for making inferences about structural and processual realities. When examining the literature on those who voluntarily leave new religious movements, we find that their accounts do not disagree from the reports of anti-cult activists all that much when it comes to the descriptive details of life within the group. The important differences between those two perspectives, however, are the valences placed on the experience and the metaphors used to characterize it. Therefore, we feel confident that the narratives of yotzi’im are not only idiosyncratic accounts that reveal the structure of a particular kind of exit narrative, but that they can also give us evidence about the process of exiting a Haredi community and the ways in which their exit narratives respond to the social context in which identity change takes place.

We argue that narratives of identity change are texts that can shed light on the micro-structural context in which identity change occurs. In the process of converting into a group, individual narratives are shaped according to the key ideas and values of the new community. New members are presented—sometimes in actual texts, more generally by modeling by members—with stories that reflect and support the ideology of the group (Beckford 1978a, 1978b; Snow 1976). For example, when Jewish women convert to Orthodoxy, they learn to tell listeners that they were always interested in Orthodox Judaism, thus suggesting that becoming Orthodox is appropriate for them and does not represent a significant disruption in their biographies (Davidman 1991). With regard to disaffiliation, Bromley (1998a, 1998b) has convincingly argued that different structural settings give rise to different types of exit narratives. We can see how social contexts shape narratives by comparing women who join a modern Orthodox synagogue with those who join a Lubavitch Hasidic community. In keeping with the teachings of that community, the modern Orthodox converts did not emphasize God in their conversion narratives, in contrast to those who became members of the Hasidic group, who were taught to emphasize that they were following God’s will.

There is considerably less structured support for leaving religious groups than there is for joining them. Exiters are not provided with scripts in which to formulate their de-conversion narratives, giving rise to accounts that emphasize themes of scriptlessness, anomie, and a lack of a readily available language with which to tell one’s story (Bromley 1997; Jacobs 1989; Lewis 1986; Solomon 1981; Wright 1984, 1987, 1991). We can further see the relationship between social context and narrative in the comparison between the accounts of those who disaffiliate from new religious movements with the aid of the anti-cult movement and of those who do not. Those
whose departure is mediated by the anti-cult movement tell “captivity narratives” that employ metaphors of warfare and hostage rescue (Bromley 1998a, 1998b; Wright 1998). In contrast, those who exit without the involvement of the anti-cult movement often find it difficult to construct viable narratives and have ambivalent feelings about their former group for quite a long time. The accounts of the defectors from Haredi communities cannot rely on language provided by the anti-cult movement, for example. Thus their stories emphasize how they felt lost, anomic, and scriptless. In fact, however, a deeper reading of their stories reveals that these individuals construct narratives that emphasize their individual heroism in surviving departure from a community that emphasized how leaving would involve personal and group danger.

The existence of tightly knit communities in the Haredi world makes it difficult for yotzi’im to construct exit narratives: there are neither ready-made organizational nor ready-made society-wide public narratives for yotzi’im to draw upon. Yotzi’im, like others who leave encapsulated, tightly structured enclaves, must construct their own accounts of identity out of the more general public narratives available to them in the larger society, such as the narrative of the autonomous individual who thinks on his or her own rather than following the dictates of others. The conversion accounts of former Haredim are stories of individual triumph against the odds. The yotzi’im present themselves as individuals who have struggled to see the truth behind the ultra-Orthodox “matrix.” They portray themselves as “actors without a script,” who have had to improvise new identities with a minimum of social support. The narratives yotzi’im tell do not convey a sense of progression from chaos to certainty but rather a movement from a false certainty to a more ambiguous and self-constructed reality. The ex-Haredim describe their transition as a long, torturous, process, involving pushes and pulls in both directions. Ultimately, comparing the narratives of yotzi’im with what we have learned from the literature about narratives of those who disaffiliate, as well as those who have joined encapsulating groups, allows us to better appreciate the importance of institutional context in the study of conversion, disaffiliation, and exit accounts.

**METHODS**

This article is part of a larger project that analyzes the narratives told by people who grew up Orthodox and at some point in their lives moved outside of the religious communities in which they were born and raised. Its goal is to explore the various ways that exiting an intensive religious community, as it is experienced within diverse social contexts—Israel and America; modern Orthodox, Haredi, and non-Haredi, and the cultures of masculinity and femininity within these groups—shape the narratives people construct about their lives. We left respondents free to define “leaving Orthodoxy” for themselves and let our definition evolve from the ground up (Glazer and Strauss 1967); thus, respondents range from those who have continued many or some traditional practices to those who have become entirely secular. Most of our respondents narrated their religious transformation as a process of biographical disruption3 (see Becker 1997; Bury 1982; Davidman 2000) that they continually attempted to repair.

Davidman began this research late in the summer of 2003 and is continuing to interview. So far the sample consists of over 50 interviewees, half in the United States and half in Israel. In the United States, she located her respondents in several ways: word of mouth, snowball sampling, advertisements in Providence, RI and Boston, MA newspapers, an ad in The Village Voice, and postings on the website H-Judaic, an Internet list serve for people interested in any aspect of Jewish studies and/or life. Several of the Israeli respondents were found through the H-Judaic website, a few through word of mouth, and half through Hillel, an organization set up with the sole purpose of helping Haredim leave Orthodoxy. In the United States, Davidman conducted the interviews in English, whereas nearly all interviews in Israel were conducted in Hebrew. She did not ask questions in a set order, but used an interview guide in order to ensure that a certain set of issues were addressed in each interview. The interviews lasted between two and six hours; generally they were completed in three hours.
The sample contains roughly equal numbers of men and women. Interviewees range in age from 19 to 60, although the majority is under 40 years of age. Those who left modern Orthodoxy are nearly all college educated and are currently employed or are graduate students, whereas those who left Haredi communities are not college educated and are often struggling to find suitable work.

The data for this article are drawn from a subset of Davidman’s sample, comprising 22 former Haredim in the United States and in Israel. These 22 respondents are all of the ex-Haredi in our sample. Of the respondents, 13 were living in the United States at the time of the interview; nine were living in Israel. The sample includes 12 men and 10 women. Twelve of the respondents were raised in Hasidic communities, including six former Satmars, five former Lubavitchers, and one who had been raised in the Belz community. The remaining nine had not been raised as Hasidic Jews, although several described their parents as having had some contact with Hasidic communities. The majority of the American ex-Haredim had defected from Hasidic communities, while half of the Israelis described themselves as having been raised in non-Hasidic communities.

For this discussion of exiting Haredi communities, we have chosen to highlight the narrative of one former American Hasidic woman. We have chosen to highlight one narrative in order to better capture the back and forth, push and pull, ambivalent and ambiguous nature of the exiting process. Yotzi’ims’ accounts of the unscripted, unsettled, unstable quality of their lives can be best appreciated by following a detailed narrative of this process. Analyzing an individual narrative in depth yields thick description of how exiters understand and construct the details and parameters of their stories of leaving Orthodoxy. At the same time, however, we have provided numerous quotations from other yotzi’im in order to provide evidence that the account we present is not idiosyncratic but rather similar to those of others in the larger group.

**The Haredi World**

Rich, thick accounts of the worlds of Haredim and Hasidim can be found in the work of Heilman (1992) and others (Friedman 1987, 1993, 1998; Stadler 2002, 2003, 2005; Uretsky 2002). Here, we want to provide a brief introduction to Haredi life so that the process of exiting from such a community can be better appreciated. Haredi (including Hasidic) Jews, like other highly encapsulated groups, provide environments that are insulated from secular life in a variety of ways. Education, worship, food, dress, and observance are all governed within the community. Rules pertaining to every aspect of life are clearly and strictly outlined by religious texts and reinforced by the rabbis, who lead, teach, and shape their communities. The communities themselves are geographically isolated; haredim generally live within their own distinct neighborhoods and rarely interact with those whose secular lives they disdain. In Greil and Rudy’s (1984) article on social cocoons, they refer to the impact of these community boundaries as physical encapsulation.

Kosher laws, rules about appropriate clothing, prescriptions for modest behavior and appearance, and males’ necessity to pray in a group of 10 men three times a day all have the effect of focusing members’ lives within the community and demarcating the boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Fear of the immodest and corrupting influence of the secular world has resulted in prohibitions against watching television, going to the movies, reading secular literature, listening to secular music, use of the Internet, and participation in other secular activities. Another mechanism of physical encapsulation is the provision of separate education for children, ensuring that they are not exposed to secular influences in the public schools. Haredi education is sex-segregated and focused on Jewish law with very limited exposure to science, secular literature, history, or other worldly subjects. Within school, family, and the community in general, children are socialized into every aspect of life throughout their early years: they are shown, by constant example, how to dress, what and when to eat, how to pray, and what their roles are within the family and the world.
Rigid gender separation is a central organizing principle of Haredi existence. From childhood, young boys and men are led down a path of study and worship while girls and young women are encouraged to embrace a role within the home, and limit their attention to family matters. There is much less focus on the importance of worship and study for women; their intellectual curiosity is often dismissed or even discouraged. Modesty is a value instilled within men and women alike, as is manifest in distinctive styles of dress and demeanor; the norms of modesty for women are particularly constraining and involve more aspects of their lives. For example, they are not allowed to sing in public because their voices might be sexually distracting to men. Discussion of sexuality and sexual identity is prohibited. The principles of modesty and the separation of the sexes serve as mechanisms of social encapsulation (Greil and Rudy 1984), which limit interaction not only between the sexes within the community, but also with outsiders, Jewish and Gentile. In some groups, where Yiddish rather than English or Hebrew is the primary language of everyday life, language, too, can contribute to boundary maintenance.

Social encapsulation in this community is accompanied by ideological encapsulation: strong religious beliefs are inculcated and serve to maintain boundaries between insiders and outsiders (Greil and Rudy 1984). Parents and elders encourage Haredi youth to avoid the society around them by stressing the emptiness of secular society. Nonobservant Jews are depicted as living like fools with no future, while Haredim are privileged because they know the truth. The nonobservant are seen as free but living utterly meaningless lives; in contrast, Haredim are taught that their more restricted lives are ultimately more rewarding because their behavior will result in the coming of Moshiach, the Messiah. In Haredi communities, the concept of the fear of God is used both to regulate behavior and to limit the influence of the behavior of those outside the community.

Greil and Rudy (1984) point out that it is quite difficult for groups to build and maintain an encapsulated environment. Even such an enclave community as the Haredim cannot build impervious walls to keep members in. Members of the community can gain exposure to secular society through books (which some would-be defectors sneak out to the library to read), music, movies, or contact with nonreligious relatives. In this way, individuals can come to question the taken-for-granted nature of the Haredi world and its beliefs. Those who find the restrictions in Orthodoxy stifling and/or are attracted to the secular world may decide to undertake the challenges that accompany attempts to leave Orthodoxy and reconfigure their identities. However, would-be defectors often experience a tension between their dissatisfaction with the rigidity of the Haredi lifestyle and their comfort and familiarity with its stable structure. As illustrated in the epigram to this article the dangers of leaving the community can seem great, involving fear of punishment by God, loss of family, community, social support systems, and a secure sense of identity.

Leah: An Illustrative Narrative

We will present one narrative, that of Leah, in depth in an attempt to provide readers with a sense of the texture of these narratives. We have chosen to highlight Leah’s narrative because she was particularly articulate and because her story contains all the themes we encountered in the narratives as a group. We also illustrate our basic points with comments from other Haredim in order to demonstrate that Leah’s account is typical.

Leah grew up in a prominent Lubavitcher Hasidic family in a Hasidic enclave in Brooklyn that was insulated from what she called “the real world” and in which secular society was presented as wholly negative and dangerous by her family and schools. Her father was Hasidic, although she noted that, unlike many other members of his community, he loved America. He fought on the American side in World War II and “he was very interested in American ways.” Perhaps his affection for the United States already provided a bit more openness for her to see beyond the Hasidic world than might otherwise have been possible for girls in her community. In addition, he married a woman from a more secular background, which Leah suggested resulted in a family structure in which the rituals in the household were not particularly fulfilling. Leah’s mother was
not able to teach the children to say *brachot* or to sing *zmirot* around the table.\(^6\) We note at the outset here that Leah’s narrative reveals that in some ways she was born and raised with “one foot out of the door”; rather than in a totalistic encapsulated environment. This factor, however, does not weaken our case for using her as our exemplar; rather, her account demonstrates how difficult it is for any group in contemporary society to reach a state of full encapsulation, a characteristic that we saw in many other narratives of yotzi’im.

Like Leah, other ex-Haredim, especially those who had grown up in Satmar communities, described themselves as having grown up in an encapsulated world. Sherry, who grew up in an American Satmar Hasidic community, reported that Yiddish was her only language until she was six. Yankl, another American Satmar, described life in the Yeshiva as follows: “you study, and study, and study, and know nothing about the outside world. It’s like you go into a shelter.” Ruthie, another American Satmar, described the power of the worldview she grew up with in the following terms:

Shabbos\(^9\) was like if I would put on a light, not purposely, you know if I were to walk into my room and put on the light, I would feel very guilty. It was always guilt trips, everything was guilt trips. Shabbos was something—I wouldn’t even think about breaking Shabbos because it was so instilled in me that Shabbos is like the foundation of Judaism. If you don’t keep Shabbos, it’s like you’re not a Jew, you know. That’s what I was brought up with.

Despite the community’s attempts at physical, social, and ideological encapsulation, many yotzi’im, like Leah, described themselves as having more exposure to outside influence than one might expect of Haredim. Joel, who grew up in an American, non-Hasidic household, narrated that his father did not fully participate in the Haredi round of life and that “during the week he did not go to synagogue. He always left for work very early and went to sleep very late.” Yehuda, an Israeli who was raised in a Belz Hasidic community, said that his father was not raised in a Hasidic family and did not seem as committed to the Haredi lifestyle as his mother was. Avi, an Israeli ex-Haredi from a non-Hasidic background, had a mother who seemed less committed. Although both of D’vorah’s non-Hasidic parents were Haredi, her uncle’s family was Conservative. Although Yankl was from a Hasidic family, he reported that he grew up with a VCR in his home. Danny, an Israeli citizen who described his family as non-Hasidic but as influenced by Hasidism, grew up in an area of France with few Jews. Danny describes experiencing his life as “running on two parallel tracks,” one revolving around his secular high school and the other focusing on the rebbe. Many of these yotzi’im, then, lived within an encapsulated world but grew up with one foot out of the door. Dov, an Israeli raised in a Lubavitch community, spoke for many when he said, “we lived in an . . . open yet secluded society.”

Leah presented herself as someone who recognized flaws in the Hasidic round of life from an early age. She narrated, “Shabbos was kind of a wash in general. My father was tired. My mother was fighting. Shabbos seemed to be just for eating candy and sleeping.” Leah felt that perhaps if Shabbos had been more spiritual, communal, and fun, she might have received the proper “brainwashing” that would have kept her in the community. Leah identified this lack of Shabbos warmth in her own household as a key factor in her beginning to search outside of Orthodoxy. Many other respondents expressed a lack of identification with the Haredi way of life at a very early age. Sherry related, “I just couldn’t understand my way of life; I couldn’t understand the ways they’re teaching us, and I had so many questions I knew I couldn’t [ask].” Similarly, Joel recounted, “I didn’t get it. I felt for years that they cheated me because always in the school they said, ‘Talmud is like math. It’s very logical, it’s rational.’ And I never saw what is logical and rational about it.” Significantly, most of these respondents do not describe themselves as having become disillusioned after having had a traumatic experience but rather as just being able to see the holes in the worldview that others in their community did not see.

A major lack in her world presented itself in Leah’s early education, where she perceived her gender as an intellectual and spiritual impediment in the Orthodox world. While her brothers
were sent to male Yeshivas in which they received a very intensive, serious education, Leah, like other ultra-Orthodox girls, went to an all-girls’ school where she was taught what she described as “Judaism light.” For example, she and her classmates “learned the Torah over and over and again. There was no Talmud at all. And, they taught us only their particular interpretation of the Torah and did not expose us to the entire real thing.”

Leah told Davidman that her ability to see weaknesses in the social structure and culture of her world derived from her early recognition that as a girl she was excluded from the central Orthodox institutions, norms, values, and behaviors. She related that when she reached the age of seven or eight she was told she could no longer go with her father to the little synagogue she so enjoyed. “I loved it there. It was fun. The guys would give us candy and the Rebbetzin would give us food. And so once I was not allowed to go with my father, I did not go at all. My mother would make me set the table or just do stuff in the house, and it was boring and stupid.” She explained that at that point there was no more participatory religion for her, “it was over for me, basically.” Other ex-Haredi women also reported feeling restricted by the circumscribed roles assigned to women.

Despite Leah’s description that she was able to see serious problems with the Orthodox world and her place in it beginning at age five or six, she nevertheless clung on to it, partly because in her youth she felt she had no other place to go. She also attributed her reluctance to rebel to her deep fear of God:

> I was much filled with fear. The famous thing that they would tell you is that all your sins go to your father until you are twelve years of age and I loved my father and I thought, “Oh my God. All my sins are going to him and he’s going to die”

Despite growing up in a family with several children, and in a tightly knit community, Leah’s narrative was permeated with a sense of being alone in her inability to fit in. As she said: “Well, let’s see. I’m a woman but I don’t want to do that role. I don’t want to be like my mother and not go to shul so I can stay home and cook. I just did not feel that there was a place for me in the religious world. There was nobody else like me.” Leah stated that from an early age she could no longer rely on her family or community, nor could she find her place within the culture.

At around age eight or nine, Leah started to question outwardly, perhaps hoping to get answers that would satisfy her and help her stay in the community, thus avoiding the anomie and homelessness a radical departure would cause. She reported that when she began asking the rabbis at her school serious questions, they simultaneously complimented and condescended: “You’re such a nice girl, such a sweet girl. Why are you going crazy asking all these questions?” Leah explained:

> [I] would get confused. He would say complimentary things. So [I] would forget for a minute that he [was] not answering [my] questions and I would feel that perhaps I am the one who is at fault; I just have to try harder.

Her doubts about her questions and the rabbi’s responses further reveal how difficult it was for her to trust her doubts, given the closed social system and tightly woven worldview in which she had been raised. Leah’s story reveals her sense of a lack of a script for expressing her serious challenges to the ideas and norms and behavioral expectations of her culture. “I did not know even how to speak it. I would be crazed, and it was so frightening.” As she recounts her story, her fright was born out of the glimpse of loneliness and displacement that would be the result of her questioning, illustrating how difficult it was for her, as for other Haredim, to make a break from her settled life.

Even though as a young teenager she was still living a relatively established life within the Haredi world, Leah reports that she slowly became exposed to another culture (a secular world where feminism was a legitimate option), which led her to question her own. One powerful
stimulus for her exposure to feminism was actually provided in school, where her “English” teacher assigned Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* to her class.

I remember reading it then and I loved that book! I found it so unbelievable that I had found my book! I was crazed but in school they just spoke about its literary dimensions and they did not get how deeply and profoundly a book like that could be to someone like me!

Leah’s recognition of her own story in *A Doll’s House* reveals her sense that her loneliness in and emotional alienation from the Haredi world was deepened by her growing awareness of alternative worldviews. Other interviewees also reported the importance of books in introducing them to the outside world. David, a non-Hasidic American, recounted that he

read like a maniac... I read Bertrand Russell. What was his book? Why I am an Atheist or something. And I can remember reading it, in fact, at a funeral for a rabbi. The eulogies were going on and on and I was a rotten little rebel back then. I was sitting there reading. But I still looked like I belonged.

Spending time with secular relatives was mentioned by several *yotzi’im* as a source of their exposure to the secular world. Leah said that the movement back and forth between worlds that characterized her exiting process began when she visited with her secular cousins.

They were introduced in a positive way to us—“they’re your cousins and you’re supposed to love them”—and they were just normal, suburban kids. Not only did they have more money than we did and did many exciting things, like skiing and going to the Grand Canyon, it was so interesting to see that they were living with sin but without dying or something. They seemed to be doing all this stuff, and there was no sign of illness or death. So I thought that maybe what we had been told was a little wrong or something, or maybe that there is just a delay in the punishment.

Other *yotzi’im* recounted finding a variety of ways through which they were exposed to outside influences. Sherry reported how important it was to her when she first saw a television at a neighbor’s house. “[S]o I go to this neighbor’s house, and I come back to my mom, and I say, you know what I saw? Something really interesting, a blue box with people playing ball, football or something. It was a game on TV. A blue box. My mom forbid me from ever visiting that friend again.” Similarly, Ruthie discovered the Internet:

So I got on to the web, and I started chatting around. I started realizing that there’s interesting stuff out there. I started going into chat rooms. I started talking to people, and I felt safe to talk about anything because nobody knows who’s sitting behind the screen and talking. And I would talk to people about where I come from, and people would be interested in finding out about me. And I’d be interested in finding out about the outside world. I started talking to gentiles. You know, God forbid you talk to a gentile.

Leah described that as she went through adolescence, she felt caught between two worlds: she saw that what she was told within her tightly knit, strict community was not the only valid way of life, but she did not feel steady enough in a new, different world to entirely discard her past. Other interviewees, too, told of a time when they felt “betwixt and between,” no longer satisfied with the world in which they had been raised but not yet ready to venture out. As Danny, an Israeli, exiter, put it: “I tried to find some kind of way to accommodate both my questioning and my desire to stay within the borough or whatever the word is in English, *lehisha’er ba-telem, nu?”* Some experimented with small acts of rebellion. Linda, who grew up in a Satmar community in Brooklyn, recounted: “I must have been fourteen, fifteen, and I went out of the house for the first time with different socks. Socks that were considered very modern (i.e., made of thinner threads) that only people in Flatbush [largely a non-Haredi section of Brooklyn] wore.” Yitzhak, a non-Hasidic Israeli, narrated:
One day I’d put on tefillin, one day I wouldn’t; one day I’d pray, one day I wouldn’t. But then I’d say to myself, like why am I not doing it? It only takes five minutes, like what do I care? Like little by little it was this feeling of like, as if, like, it’s like you’re riding down a slope and you see ahead of you that the path splits into two and you have time, but you have to choose. And the car’s driving, but you have to decide. You have to choose.

Emotionally, socially, and physically, Leah recalls being quite frustrated about her lack of knowledge about and experience with boys: “From the sexuality point of view you are completely repressed. There is just nothing happening. I mean, like even, your vagina is not given a name . . . . You’re just like you don’t have anything, and the boys have something. And that is it.” A lack of acknowledgment of or information about her body and its processes further alienated Leah from her cultural surroundings. She pushed at the boundaries by wearing shorter skirts, spending more time among secular or rebellious young people, and asking more pressing questions about the rules of her community. Men also complained about the Haredi silence concerning sexuality. Like most other Yeshiva-educated male interviewees, Chaim, the son of a Lubavitcher Ba’al T’shuvah, reported that as an adolescent he found it difficult to reconcile his natural impulses for sexual self-exploration with the stringent prohibition of masturbation in the religious texts he learned in school. “I’m supposed to feel all guilty about all of this . . . . I had my body, I had my natural urges, and . . . they were telling me that this is wrong.”

Leah represented her late teenage years (ages 17 to 19) as the time when she began to learn enough about feminism to have a language with which to express revolutionary ideas concerning women’s freedom of choice:

I was talking, you know, liberation. They wanted girls to just shut up, look pretty, and get married. And I was saying stuff like, “but why? Why should we do the dishes?” And this talk became very disturbing to everybody. I did not know if I meant it, but still, I still felt compelled. I felt like I was . . . you know, that I wanted to belong, and I didn’t know how and I had no other place to belong. So even though I was saying what I didn’t want, I did not know what I wanted.

Such cognitive, social, and emotional questions led to radical changes in her behavior: she stopped observing Shabbos altogether:

It just became claustrophobic and I could not stand it anymore. I just hated, you know . . . the countdown, and when it started. I did really bad things . . . like, I lived in Boro Park [an ultra-Orthodox section of Brooklyn], and on the edge of Boro Park there were these bars. And at some point, I just needed to go to a bar . . . [to] feel like an international adventuress or something . . . . Like in the movies [that she had snuck out to see], Bette Davis or something. That is who I was. Lauren Bacall or Katherine Hepburn. I would tuck some money into a pocket and I would sneak out of my house on a Friday night with pants under my skirt, remove my skirt as I approached the bar, and then there would be all these drunken Irishmen or something. Luckily no one ever talked to me because I would have been so dumbfounded. And after I had my drink and paid for it, I left the bar, put my skirt back on, and returned to my house, crept into bed and went to sleep.

Here, Leah is describing the transitional stage of “passing” between two worlds; in essence she is living the contradiction of being in both the Haredi and the secular worlds at once. Both her religious and her secular identities co-existed at this point, accounting for why her struggle was so intense and her narrative so dramatic. Yankl recounted a similar incident of passing:

Now I think when I was like fifteen years old, I and two or three other guys went to like clubs, dancing clubs. I was never really into dancing clubs because we still had the curls [the long side locks Hasidic men and boys wear]. And I mean I always hung out with a lot of my friends, but they had their curls down. So I didn’t like the idea of going to a club and people like staring at us. Instead of staring at the girls dancing; they were staring at us. So whenever I went outside the village, I just put my curls behind my ears. I tried to hide them.

Leah was unusual in her community; she refused to have an arranged marriage at age 18 and instead enrolled herself at Brooklyn College. There she had her first experience of daily existence
in a social structure and culture that differed from the cocoon in which she had grown up. She reported that she hated Brooklyn College because of the predominance of Orthodox (generally non-Haredi) Jews; most of the young women were concerned about finding a *shidduch*\(^{15}\) and less interested in their intellectual development. She subsequently arranged her own transfer to Hunter College in Manhattan. There, Leah began to meet some “cool” people who introduced her to rock music, marijuana, and ideas of radical individualism. She began dating a man she met at Hunter; he was from Brooklyn and he was “also leaving the Orthodox world, but, you know, cheating.” Leah’s report that her boyfriend was “cheating” suggested that he, too, was passing in both worlds and reveals how the Haredi discourse of prohibitions is so deeply internalized by its members. She described her marriage to this man (notwithstanding their eventual divorce) as her “exit ticket” out of the intensely closed Orthodox world. Her explanation that her way out was with a young man from the same background serves as an example of how hard it is to completely leave the social cocoon that is Orthodoxy. And although she and her new husband were not practicing Jewish traditions and rituals, they remained connected with their families:

We moved to a place in Brooklyn that was far enough from our parents that they could not walk on Shabbos. And that was a key thing. But we could walk to see them on Shabbos, which we did sometimes. … At the time it was good for both of us … You know, on my own I wouldn’t have known where to go … like, it was so hard to make sense of the world.

Although she and her husband lived secular lives, Leah claimed that she nevertheless found it difficult to understand what ordinary people were doing on the weekend and how they spent time in their houses. “I felt I had no commonality; no idea what to say to them.” Not only was it still difficult to enter into new social relations, she still felt unsure of her footing in terms of daily life:

I think that the hardest thing to believe is that you have to make up each day as it goes along; there is simply no routine of davening in the morning, and you wash your hands or whatever, and then you say this bracha\(^{16}\) and then that bracha and you have to keep track of all the brachot and the bathroom and did you eat bread? So did you wash your hands? Did you eat fleishig\(^{17}\) or did you eat milchig\(^{18}\) and how long to wait between them. So you’re just so busy all day with all these rules that it fills your day and it gives a great structure, which is very comforting to many people, though not to me. But this life is not easy either!

Although Leah had clearly and successfully transitioned out of the Haredi community in which she grew up, she found herself uncertain about how to live a secular life. Her narrative describes the arc of her progression into the secular world. When she was in her mid-20s, her marriage failed, and she began traveling around in Europe: “I wanted the world!” she exclaimed and described that through her travels she began to feel more sophisticated and more comfortable in speaking to others. Ironically, her journeys exploring various secular worlds helped her put the Orthodox world of her background into a larger context. Although she had intensely disliked the conformity Orthodoxy required, she found that everywhere she went conformity was the norm. Every society had its own repertoire of values, norms, and behaviors that it expected of its members; recognition of this allowed her to see the intensely regulated Hasidic world as just one among many structured societies and cultures.

Today, Leah has a young daughter and it is important to her parents, and to her, that her daughter has a relationship with her grandparents. Although she has found a place in the “outside world,” a significant and successful career, a satisfying marriage with a non-Jewish European man, and does not observe any commandments, cultural elements from her former life continue to influence her post-Orthodox identity. She described her life at the time of the interview as a somewhat precarious balance of some elements of the cultural tool kit of her childhood with a larger percentage of the language, culture, values, and individualism of the secular world. She occasionally takes her daughter “shul shopping,” for example, hoping that perhaps her
daughter might be more successful than she was at developing a strong sense of herself as a woman within some Jewish context. Leah still feels enough of a pull from her past, and enough of a sense of the fluidity of the boundaries (something she had not seen as a child), that she maintains contact with her parents, moving back and forth between her secular and their Hasidic worlds.

**Conclusion**

Although one voice, Leah’s, is predominant in this narrative, we have included many excerpts from other narratives in our sample to illustrate that Leah is, in fact, quite typical of the ex-Haredi interviewees. Our purpose in highlighting one account was to be better able to show in one in-depth case study how social structure can shape both the exiting process and the exiting narratives, to show how narratives can be read as simultaneously ontological and referential, and to show that a focus on structure need not conflict with a focus on agency.

From a structural perspective, Leah’s narrative, as well as the narratives of other yotzi’im, demonstrates that encapsulation is much harder to achieve than one might expect. Even in encapsulated communities, it is difficult to prevent individuals from being exposed to outside influences. Leah was, in a sense, born with one foot out the door: her mother was raised in a secular environment, and she had an ongoing relationship with her secular cousins. She may, then, have been more exposed to the secular world than other Haredim, making it easier for her to see pathways out of the community. Nevertheless, every one of our interviewees reported awareness that other lifestyles were available and found ways to expose herself/himself to the secular world.

Other studies of those who leave Orthodoxy, one done in the United States (Uretsky 2002) and one done in Israel (Barzilai 2004), show that those most likely to leave are somehow less embedded in the community in the first place. Nevertheless, the particular details of their families of origin cannot fully account for why these particular people left the community. Leah had several siblings who did not question Orthodoxy and have stayed within the Haredi community. That Leah left and her siblings did not highlights the point that a focus on the structural context of identity change does not take away from the agency of those who seek to change themselves.

The study of yotzi’im narratives supports the findings of other students of de-conversion that the exit process is accompanied by disillusionment and disidentification with group norms. Leah found the rituals she grew up with unsatisfying and the gender roles restrictive. But these narratives also reveal that it is not enough to simply point to personality, motivational, and other individual factors that lead to particular people’s decisions to leave Orthodox Judaism or other religious communities. Narrative analysis can build upon these studies by offering us the opportunity to see the complexity of interwoven factors and the processes of learning and unlearning, push and pull, that reveal the dynamic, nonlinear process that people reported in their accounts of leaving. Narrative analysis can also highlight the co-existence of structure and agency. These respondents’ accounts of “role exiting” (Ebaugh 1988) suggests an ongoing and creative use of culture as a “tool kit” (Swidler 2000) they employ as they borrow from the old and invent the new scripts they need to help them reconstruct and represent their new identities.

This article has looked at individuals who grew up in Haredi Jewish communities and who at some point left the Orthodox way of life. We have argued that their narratives differ from those of converts into an enclave group because the latter are able to make use of scripts and narratives provided by the group. The plot line here, unlike in conversion narratives, is not so much “I once was lost, but now I’m found,” as it is “I once was found, but now I’m lost.” Even someone like Leah, who has seen the attractions of the outside world, still struggles to make sense of her transition and still employs a language of loss and confusion.

These narratives also differ from the escape narratives recounted by those whose exit from encapsulated groups is facilitated by individuals associated with the anti-cult movement. The ex-Haredi narratives have much more in common with the narratives of those who leave encapsulated
groups voluntarily. In both the exit narratives of ex-Haredim and the exit accounts of voluntary exitors from new religious movements, the main theme of the narrative is the theme of scriptlessness. Both yotzi'im and ex-“cultists” tell stories in which the difficulties of forging a new life take center stage. They both provide accounts in which doubts take root and blossom slowly, in which there is a long liminal period where the narrator is caught between an old reality he or she no longer accepts and a new reality he or she does not understand. The narratives of yotzi'im and other voluntary leave-takers reveal not a straightforward linear path from a false reality to a true one, but an unsettled, meandering journey. Yotzi'im tell stories of pushing away from the expectations of Orthodoxy and being pulled toward various secular ideas and practices even as they felt repelled by aspects of the secular world and were pulled back by the allure of the safety of Orthodoxy. This complex dynamic was often described as a painful, dizzy spinning back and forth between “settled” and “unsettled” lives (Swidler 2000).

But, if the yotzi'im’s narratives resemble the narratives of voluntary defectors from new religious movements in some ways, they differ in several structural respects. Those who leave “cults” report feeling a great deal of ambivalence about their experience in the group and say that they continue to weigh the benefits of being in the group against the costs. Because they have become disillusioned with a group that they joined voluntarily, these ex-members must construct a new identity that incorporates something they now consider to be a mistake into their biographies. In contrast, the ex-Haredim display relief and pride that they had the courage to leave the confines of the group. Although yotzi'im construct narratives about the ambivalent push and pull process of exiting, their narratives are not ambivalent narratives. Rather, they are heroic accounts told by people who have persevered against the odds. Because they have left a group into which they were born, rather than a group they joined voluntarily, ex-Haredim are not faced with the need to incorporate a mistake into their biographies. Ex-“cultists” and yotzi'im both tell tales of biographical disruption, but there is a huge difference between a disruption presented as a mistake and a disruption presented as an accomplishment.

Another difference between the structural context of the narratives of ex-Haredim and those of voluntary defectors from new religious movements is that voluntary defectors are returning from the tightly structured roles of the group to the more loosely structured roles of mainstream society, while ex-Haredim are entering the more loosely structured roles of secular society for the first time. Both transformation processes have an element of scriptlessness to them. Ex-“cultists,” too, talk of difficult changes and a sense of having to navigate uncharted waters, but their fundamental identity task is one of biographical reintegration. On the other hand, the fundamental identity task for yotzi'im is one of biographical reinvention. As Shafir (1997) has pointed out, it seems reasonable to expect that their sense of scriptlessness would be even more pronounced.

Intensive religious communities provide a unifying belief system that members attempt to apply to all aspects of their daily lives. Orthodox Judaism provides a clear set of guidelines, ideals, and practices for the social organization of all aspects of life from one how goes to the bathroom and blesses food, down to the minutest details of permitted and forbidden sexual behaviors. Such groups also provide new members with scripts for expressing to themselves and others how their lives have changed now that they have found the group. Those who are born into such groups and then leave them, like the ex-Haredim discussed here, see themselves has having to write their own scripts. The main character in this article, Leah—clearly a very articulate woman—reported that at the time she began questioning, she felt that she was “speechless.” This appears to be her way of saying that there were no scripts available to help her learn how to undergo such a radical transformation of self and world, whereas the culture she was brought up in provided scripts for every aspect of her life. By focusing on Leah’s account, we have tried to show how both the exiting process and exit narratives are shaped by structural factors. We have also tried to demonstrate the methodological point that narratives are useful for learning about the influence of particular social structures on individual accounts, as well as for what they can tell us about actual social processes.
NOTES

1. Haredi (singular, used as a noun and as an adjective; Haredim in plural) is a term that applies to Hasidic and ultra-Orthodox Jews who live within enclave communities in an attempt to reduce the influence of secular society. Not all Haredi Jews are Hasidic. Hasidism refers to a revitalization movement in Europe in the 18th century that placed an emphasis on piety and joyous celebration instead of the Scholasticism advocated by the elite, educated rabbis who were known as Mitnagdim, Litvaks, or Lithanias. The Hasidic movement is made up of small groups of disciples focusing on a charismatic leader, usually called a rebbe. These groups generally take their name from the town in Eastern Europe where the founding rebbe lived. Lubavitch Hasidim differ from other Hasidic groups in that they are much more focused on outreach to nonreligious Jews in an attempt to attract them to traditional Jewish observance. Belz and Satmar Hasidim are more concerned with maintaining distance from secular society. Belz Hasidim endorse a certain level of engagement with the secular Israeli state, but the more conservative Satmars are staunchly opposed to Zionism.

2. The term “yotzi’im,” exiters, is another way of referring to people who in Israel are sometimes referred to as hozrim be Shealah, meaning “return with questions.” This latter phrase is a spinoff of the earlier term, hozrim betshuvah, meaning those who “return” (even if they were not brought up that way) to orthodox religious observance. Another meaning could be “the process of leaving.”

3. Whereas all individuals experience many biographical disruptions in their lives, such as entering kindergarten, graduating from medical school or college, or moving households, this article rests on the assumption that there is a difference between those disruptions that are experienced by many people as typical aspects of human life and other disruptions that take their lives in unanticipated, entirely new directions. One example of these kinds of major biographical disruptions would be taking on an entirely new religious worldview and set of practices, a process described in the first author’s first book, Tradition in a Rootless World (1991), which was about Jewish women who grew up secular, or with minimal knowledge and practices, who became Orthodox as adults. A different example of this process can be the death of a parent, an experience represented in Davidman’s book Motherloss (2000), which focused on adults who had lost their mothers when they were adolescents. Greil’s (1991) book, Not Yet Pregnant, deals with the biographical disruption of infertility. In these works and in the present one as well, we are working with narratives of biographical disruption and people’s attempts to come to terms with these disruptions.

4. Within the Haredi and Hasidic communities, the term “nonreligious” refers more to one’s level of observance than to the nature of one’s beliefs. “Nonreligious” Jews are those who do not maintain the strict levels of observance called for by the Orthodox tradition.

5. This name, like all names that appear in this article, is a pseudonym.

6. Blessings. The Lubavitchers are a Hasidic group, headquartered in Brooklyn, which has become well known in recent years for its outreach to nonreligious Jews. Chabad is the outreach movement associated with the Lubavitchers.

7. Songs.

8. We are not arguing here that her mother’s native unfamiliarity with the blessings is causally related to Leah’s leaving. After all, she has siblings who do not leave. We are simply reporting on the linkages Leah made herself in her account.


11. Rabbi’s wife.

12. A powerful play by Henrik Ibsen about a 19th-century woman rebelling against her husband’s dominance.

13. Usually translated into English as “phylacteries.” They are small boxes, containing Hebrew prayers, which Orthodox Jewish men attach to their arms and foreheads for morning prayers.

14. “Returnee,” or convert to Orthodoxy.

15. Matches for marriage.

16. Blessings.

17. Meat.

18. Dairy.

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