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Becoming Un-Orthodox: Stories Of Ex-Hasidic Jews



Synopsis

Leaving a religion is not merely a matter of losing or rejecting faith. For many, it involves dramatic changes of everyday routines and personal habits. Davidman bases her analysis on in-depth conversations with forty ex-Hasidic individuals. From these conversations emerge accounts of the great fear, angst, and sense of danger that come of leaving a highly bounded enclave community. Many of those interviewed spoke of feeling marginal in their own communities; of strain in their homes due to death, divorce, or their parents' profound religious differences; experienced sexual, physical, or verbal abuse; or expressed an acute awareness of gender inequality, the dissimilar lives of their secular relatives, and forbidden television shows, movies, websites, and books. *Becoming Un-Orthodox* draws much-needed attention to the vital role of the body and bodily behavior in religious practices. It is through physical rituals and routines that the members of a religion, particularly a highly conservative one, constantly create, perform, and reinforce the culture of the religion. Because of the many observances and daily rituals required by their faith, Hasidic defectors are an exemplary case study for exploring the centrality of the body in shaping, maintaining, and shedding religions. This book provides both a moving narrative of the struggles of Hasidic defectors and a compelling call for greater collective understanding of the complex significance of the body in society.

Book Information

Hardcover: 272 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; 1 edition (December 1, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0199380503

ISBN-13: 978-0199380503

Product Dimensions: 9.3 x 0.9 x 6.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 15.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.9 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (25 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #82,321 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #6 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > Judaism > Movements > Orthodox](#) #19 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Religious Studies > Judaism](#) #114 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies > Sociology](#)

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Q&A with the Author Aside from being the topic of your book, you also became un-Orthodox, and

in fact were disowned from your family. How did your own experience becoming un-Orthodox inform your writing? My own experiences of leaving Orthodoxy informed this book every step along the way. I had been reading and learning about self-reflexivity before I began this project, and I tried to be self-reflexive in every stage of the research, beginning with conceiving this study (which came out of my gut, reflecting my desire to learn about people's similar although also different experiences in leaving). I analyzed my stance in relation to this book and wrote about it within the book. I felt strongly that readers needed to know where I was coming from to help them better assess the quality of my analysis. I also described some of my experiences throughout the book, I think a bit in each chapter; because I think it is a much more honest approach and because I think readers are interested in learning about the author and her life. How did your own experience leaving Orthodox Judaism compare to those you write about? My own experiences leaving Orthodox Judaism were in many ways easier (despite being disowned). Modern Orthodox Jews engage with the secular world; their philosophy is following Torah and being a person in the world. So, as a Modern Orthodox, I grew up knowing about the secular world of movies, TV, plays, etc. I went to a University, which helped me leave, and when I left I knew I could manage well in the secular world. In contrast, the Hasidic defectors did not know much about the secular world. They grew up speaking Yiddish, and newspapers, TVs and other forms of secular media were banned from their homes. They grew up in a community in which they were encapsulated physically, socially, and ideologically. They were taught that non-Jews are threatening and that many of them were like animals. So they were terrified of leaving: they did not have the education needed to find jobs to support themselves in the secular world; they had no idea how to find an apartment, or how to finance it; the men spoke Yiddish and poor English. So they had a lot more cultural learning to do in order to leave than I had. Also they had to disinscribe the Haredi markers from their bodies, learn to dress differently (putting on pants was a big deal for the women) and comport themselves in a more open way. Did any interviews surprise you? If so, what was it that surprised you? One aspect of my interviews that surprised me is that none of the people I spoke to were fully cut off from their families as I had been. I expected I would find other defectors (than me) had been cut off from their families. Some remained quite distant or not in contact with their families for a few years, but usually became reconnected after the passage of time... or when a grandchild was born. Some, though, have very poor and painful relationships with their families, speaking of emotional distance and pain. What do you hope readers will take away from the book? For one, I want them to take away an understanding of the body as central to all social interaction and institutions. I would like them to see

how embodiment is not one aspect of a person but the fundamental ground of everyone's being. I have a fantasy they will come away understanding we need to reverse Descartes: I think therefore I am and instead have it as I am therefore I think. I hope readers will understand both the uniqueness of Haredi life, and the similarities between defectors and others who change their identities through the medium of the body such as LGBTQ people. I want to complicate the common sense assumption that all Orthodox Jews are alike.

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