

Attrition and Connection in American Orthodox Judaism

Journeys Within and Out of Orthodox Judaism

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive summary

OVERVIEW

Understanding the issue of attrition from and movement within Orthodox Judaism is an urgent issue for every segment of the Orthodox Jewish population, as continuity is a key factor in building a thriving Orthodox Jewish community. The purpose of the study is to collect and analyze empirical data to help guide and inform communal efforts to increase retention and reduce attrition rates.

Findings are based on twenty-nine semi-structured interviews with religious “switchers” who were raised in, and subsequently left, an Orthodox Jewish community. We used a modified snowball sample to recruit participants with a wide range of “leaving” experiences. We interviewed individuals from different Orthodox communities, locations, and current religious practices and beliefs. The qualitative data elicited a rich description of switchers’ lives and helps shape our understanding of the contours, stages, and motivators of the “leaving” experience.

METHODOLOGICAL WARNING

It is important to note that though this report often discusses the frequency with which we saw different phenomena in our interviews, by its nature qualitative research is not all that concerned with the exactness of the numbers. We are much more concerned with the *qualities* of people’s experiences, rather than answering questions such as, “how many...?”, “what’s the average...?”, or “what percentage are...?”

Although this report often says things such as “half our respondents experienced x” or “all of our respondents said y”, as a reader, you should not get too caught up in the exact numbers. These numbers are in fact important, because they tell us that a particular phenomenon is prevalent in our sample and may therefore be quite significant and important in the story of attrition from Orthodoxy. But though we may now know that this experience is an important factor in people’s life trajectories, we cannot say with certainty that the exact percentages found in our sample will also be found in the world. What we can say is that this is one of the mechanisms that affects those who leave.

Research Questions

1. **Why** do those raised Orthodox leave, move, or stay?
2. **How** and when do moving and leaving happen?
3. **How** do Orthodox Jews’ social networks and connections influence the process of attrition from Orthodoxy?
4. **How many** U.S. Jews who were raised Orthodox...
 - a. ... move to another stream of Orthodoxy?
 - b. ... leave Orthodoxy altogether?

Research question four will be answered in phase two of the study, a survey drawing on a representative sample of graduates of 8th grades from yeshiva day schools across the US Orthodox population. The qualitative data presented below is not representative and cannot answer questions related to prevalence of attrition in our communities.

KEY FINDINGS

The seeds of leaving are planted early, the pace of departures varies.

Most participants (23) reported starting to question aspects of Orthodoxy before completing high school, with only six reporting beginning to question during college or later. A third of participants led a double life (outwardly presenting to others as Orthodox while not practicing Orthodoxy in private), about half left gradually, and a few experienced a quick break in their belief and observance. Some participants from the Modern Orthodox community did not experience any radical change because their families' observances lay so close to the borders of Orthodoxy that their current non-Orthodox life choices cannot really be considered a real departure.

Participants are still deeply connected to the Jewish and Orthodox community.

Participants maintained numerous forms of connections to Judaism generally, and to Orthodoxy specifically, with many retaining aspects of those identities even after leaving. Some participants maintained Orthodox values and beliefs that are reflected in their worldview. Many participants maintained connections to Jewish traditions and practices, to Jewish texts, to shul and davening, to Shabbos, and to their Jewish identity. Many of them were deeply connected to Orthodox communities or to Orthodox people, with some choosing to send their own children to Orthodox schools.

Participants believe that Orthodoxy is too insular and rigid.

Participants' primary current negative association with Orthodoxy is its perceived extreme rigidity and intolerance. Other major complaints included the treatment of feminist issues, which was a much bigger factor in causing people to leave Orthodoxy for those raised Modern, Chabad, and Centrist Orthodox than for those raised Yeshivish and Chasidic. Other complaints included attitudes of superiority towards others and the treatment of the LGBTQ community within Orthodoxy. Three of the four participants who identified as part of the LGBTQ community reported that LGBTQ issues were a primary or contributing factor in their decision to leave Orthodoxy.

Participants experienced a variety of fissures and disconnects in their lives. Religious misalignment emerged as the most important form of disconnection across our interviews.

The most significant element of disconnection to emerge from our interviews was the varying forms of religious misalignment between different elements of participants' lives. Fully 100% of the interviewees described serious misalignment of this kind while growing up. Examples included parents who had different levels of religiosity, parents who experienced a quick change in religious observance, and families that were either more or less religious than their schools or communities. Participants described having to shift their religious identity depending on the context, or else stand out as radically different.

Close to 90% felt that they did not belong in some way. They either felt socially different than their peers, not Orthodox enough, or not wealthy enough. Many participants switched schools or communities, which either caused this feeling of isolation or exacerbated it. Participants also reported having many questions and doubts about Orthodox norms and truth-claims which were often not taken seriously or outright rejected. Fissures between Orthodoxy as they understood it and their own conceptions of the world resulted in numerous concerns about perceived conflicts between halacha and morals and ethics, the proper religious roles for men and women, the truth of the Torah, and even God's existence.

Many participants experienced forms of trauma and instability, before, during, and after leaving.

Some participants experienced instability in their emotional lives, such as in their relationship with their parents. This instability was exacerbated during the leaving process, particularly in the stricter religious communities. Participants also experienced instability directly and personally. Examples include using alcohol or controlled substances, physical abuse (mostly in a school setting), and sexual abuse. A quarter of participants experienced the death of a close relative or friend; a third suffered from depression.

More than half of our participants' parents were either converts, baalei teshuva, or drastically changed their level of religious observance. In these families the level of religiosity within which the children were raised may not have been as deeply rooted as in other families. By having moved religiously themselves parents may have inadvertently modeled religious movement for their children; in addition, many of these families have non-religious relatives, creating a religiously unstable environment.

It's hard to overstate the importance of Rabbis (and other religious authority figures).

One of the most significant elements in participants' personal narratives was their experiences with Orthodox rabbis/religious figures. Positive interactions were described as supportive and caring at a point when they were struggling, some during a time when they may have been alienated even from their parents and siblings.

Participants also described negative experiences with rabbis who bullied and belittled them, mocked them for their deviance, and excluded them from the community. Others reported experiences with rabbinic figures who acted in ways they perceived to be unethical or inappropriate. Such behavior often exacerbated negative perceptions of Orthodoxy they were already beginning to develop. Additionally, rabbis had a negative impact when they were unwilling to answer religious questions. Rabbis who were dismissive of what participants felt were sincere questions left them upset and bewildered.

RECOMMENDATIONS: HOW SHOULD FINDINGS INFORM ACTIONS?

Communal Leaders:

People who left Orthodoxy are still connected to Orthodoxy. Understanding that religious switchers maintain deep connections to the Orthodox community and cultivating an inclusive mindset on the part of Orthodox organizations may go a long way towards improving the discourse around attrition and making those who leave continue to feel welcome in Orthodox spaces.

Transitions can be fraught. Communal leaders should be aware of the needs of people undergoing transitions in their lives, such as switching communities and schools. Ba'alei teshuva and converts and their children may need continued support long after they join the Orthodox community to prevent religious fissures from forming.

Discourage quick religious change. Communal leaders and educators should be cautious when faced with individuals undergoing rapid religious change; it may be prudent to try to slow them down, both for their benefit and the benefit of their families.

Navigate any misalignment. Encourage people to wisely acknowledge and navigate any misalignment that may exist with their schools and communities, as such misalignment can undermine the child's sense of belonging. Education and supportive structures can be provided to help families navigate the misalignments they experience.

Rabbis and Educators:

It's not all or nothing. Some participants had an all or nothing attitude, feeling that Judaism is an either/or. Rabbis and educators can convey the importance of adherence to halacha while nevertheless acknowledging that all Jews are in constant state of refining and strengthening their commitment to God and His mitzvot.

Human first, Rabbi second: Rabbinic figures succeeded in connecting with individuals struggling with religion when they took the time to listen and express human interest in the participants' well-being. Negative rabbinic interactions had a huge impact. Rabbis and communal leaders need to be aware of this and sensitized to act in ways that have an enduring positive impact.

Look for signs of religious struggle early. Religious questioning appears to begin early in life, usually in high school, but at times even in middle school. If rabbis and educators can identify these students when they first begin to question, there may be ways to address their concerns before they lead to complete departure from Orthodoxy.

Validate questioners. Individuals who are questioning religion may need space to explore their religious doubts and find answers that are meaningful for them and would benefit greatly from rabbis and educators who validate their experiences, struggles, and questions. Rabbis and educators must also be aware that it is their listening that is key to support and validation.

Help individuals develop a healthy sense of agency and resiliency. Many—though certainly not all—of our participants seem to describe a feeling that their journey just happened to them, rather than seeing themselves as autonomous individuals with control over their lives. When things went awry, they were not able to maintain a social and emotional equilibrium. Rabbis, educators, and parents can work in conjunction with psychological professionals to help individuals develop a robust and healthy sense of self-efficacy.

Communities:

Tolerance of difference is really important. Communal institutions should work hard—wherever religiously possible—to tolerate differences. Even when it is necessary to reject ideas and behaviors, it can be done with kindness and without being cruel or denigrating. Without radically changing their norms and values, communities can strive to broaden the range of differences which can be accommodated.

Schools and communities should think carefully about how they communicate social and religious norms and expectations. A complete absence of these expectations may lead people to leave, but extremely rigid expectations, or intolerance of the violation of social norms, may also lead people to leave.

Parents:

Traditions and rituals are important. Given that Jewish rituals and traditions are a major source of Jewish connection for those who have left the Orthodox community, parents should reflect on how their children experience these rituals and work to ensure positive associations with these spaces and times. The fact that these features of Orthodoxy remain salient even to those who have left the community suggests that parents can create connections in these areas that fortify religious bonds.

Love, support, and stability are crucial for children's wellbeing. Some of the worst experiences described by our participants were parents who displayed a lack of love or support for their children. Parents should be encouraged to express love and support for their children, and to provide them with a sense of stability regardless of their life-choices. Parents do not have to approve of children's choices to still express love.

Help children develop a healthy sense of agency and resiliency. As noted above, for rabbis and educators, resilience and a healthy sense of personal agency help individuals respond successfully to the inevitable challenges that arise in life. Parents should seek resources, support, and if needed, professional guidance, to be able to help children develop a robust and healthy sense of self-efficacy and resilience.