Attrition and Connection in American Orthodox Judaism

Journeys Within and Out of Orthodox Judaism

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First and foremost, we thank our participants for generously and openly discussing their life experiences and perspectives with us. Their willingness to share their stories has given us a window onto the religious journeys and lives of those who travel in and out of Orthodoxy. We tried to honor their stories by capturing and sharing them with fidelity and respect.

The Orthodox Union Leadership championed this research study from start to finish. Rabbi Hauer's singular focus on helping *Klal Yisrael* inspired us throughout the project. His collaboration and guidance strengthened and elevated our work.

Dr. Michelle Shain and Dr. Moshe Krakowski designed the study. Abby Nadritch, Daniel Presman, Joshua Schoenberg, Akiva Schuck, and Rabbi Moshe Shields helped analyze the anonymized and transcribed words of our survey respondents. Their material contributions to this analysis are reflected in the following pages.

Key informants from educational, psychological, and rabbinical fields reviewed this report and offered detailed feedback, which contributed significantly to our understanding of this complex phenomenon.

Their insights pushed us to gaze deeper into our data, to question more, and to consider alternative possibilities.

Our gratitude notwithstanding, the authors of this report take full responsibility for its contents.

Foreword by Rabbi Moshe Hauer
Executive Vice President of the Orthodox Union

Looking in the Mirror

וְהַעֲרֶב נָא ד' אֱלֹקֵינוּ אֶת־דִּבְרֵי תוֹרָתְךָ בְּפִינוּ וּבְפִיּוֹת עַמְּךָ בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל. וְנִהְיֶה אֲנַחְנוּ וְצֶאֱצָאֵינוּ וְצֶאֱצָאֵי עַמְּךָ בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל כֻּלָּנוּ יוֹדְעֵי שְׁמֶךָ וְלוֹמְדֵי תוֹרָתֶךָ לִשְׁמָהּ

Hashem, our God, please make the words of Your Torah pleasant in our mouths and in the mouths of Your people Israel. And may we and our descendants and the descendants of Your people the House of Israel, all know Your Name and be students of Your Torah for its own sake.

This prayer recited each morning cuts to the core of what we seek as individuals, families, and as a community, specifically - that we experience Judaism positively and thereby succeed to transmit it effectively to our children and students. We realize that future continuity depends on the quality of our current experience.

We are obsessed with continuity, which is why we devote such considerable resources to our children, including sending them to Jewish schools. While we value Jewish literacy and consider Torah knowledge paramount, v'talmud Torah k'negged kulam, the real driver of investment is the quest to assure Jewish identity, engagement, and continuity. Yet, the phenomenon of attrition from the ranks of Orthodoxy raises many questions about the extent to which our families, schools, and communities are succeeding in meeting those goals. These questions are essential to the work of every one of the OU's programmatic departments, all of which focus on enhancing the current religious experience of Jews and supporting the education and engagement of the next generation. They are also the questions that preoccupy parents, educators, and communal leaders seeking to understand our successes and failures.

This current report is a first step towards answering those questions via serious research, allowing us to move from anecdotal evidence and speculative prescriptions to a data-driven analysis of the facts on the ground and the paths forward. Through comprehensive interviews, our team has produced a thorough, qualitative analysis of the experiences of many who have shifted away from the Orthodoxy they were taught at home and in school, identifying where we succeed and fail to meet the goal of making the words and ways of Torah pleasant and enduring.

Educational outcomes are not the result of classroom methodologies alone, nor are they solely—or perhaps even primarily—the school's responsibility. Decades of research have shown that the greatest predictors of success in education and religious engagement are the family's behaviors, values, and priorities[1]. Communal values also play a significant role in educational outcomes. That leaves us with many possible directions to study—our communities and the values they prioritize; our schools and their educational philosophies and methodologies; and our families and their level of function and focus. This report should shed light on all these areas.

The one question that we will have to answer after reading this study is—what are we prepared to do differently? If we truly want to make meaningful positive change regarding American Orthodox Jewish attrition, our community will need to pursue the data that will inform that change and commit to act based on what we find. All of us will do well to read this report, study it, and take a long and honest look in the mirror.

It is with gratitude and humility that we publish this report. Many exceptionally talented professionals working with the outstanding team at the OU's Center for Communal Research invested countless hours in this effort to better understand attrition and connection in Orthodoxy. We are especially indebted to the many men and women who gave of themselves by participating in the comprehensive interviews that form the basis of this first stage of the study. We hope they feel rewarded by the insights that will surface for the national Orthodox community herein, and that those insights will heighten communal awareness and spark the change needed to enable us all to make the Torah pleasant in our mouths and in the mouths of our descendants and students, ensuring the continued endurance and vibrancy of Judaism in the lives of all Jews.

Rabbi Moshe Hauer

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.

Purpose of the Study: Why We Did It

Is there significant attrition from Orthodox Judaism? Are our families, communities, and schools succeeding in inspiring our children to continue maintaining our religious beliefs, sense of communal belonging, and behaviors? Understanding the issue of attrition from and movement within Orthodox Judaism is an urgent issue for *Klal Yisrael*. This phenomenon is relevant to nearly every communal organization focused on the Orthodox Jewish segment and to nearly every Orthodox Union program and initiative, and yet, very little empirical data is available to help guide communal efforts to reduce attrition.

Religious switching—changing one's religious preferences and observance—is generally on the rise in the United States, as are the number of poll respondents who state they have no religious affiliation[2]. From 2007 to 2021, the proportion of religious "nones," those who have no religious affiliation, rose from 16% to 29% and the proportion of Americans who identified as Protestant dropped from 52% to 40%[3]. In those same years, the percentage of US adults who say that religion is very important in their lives dropped from 56% to 41%[4].

Is the same phenomenon occurring in our Orthodox Jewish communities?

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2. **How** and when do moving and leaving happen?
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Research Design: What We Did

To answer our questions about religious movement and attrition from Orthodox Judaism, we designed a mixed-method approach that uses qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative data lets us understand the "how and why" of attrition and movement. The quantitative data allows us to gauge how many Orthodox Jews move or leave and how often, while also highlighting the life experiences that may be relevant to attrition.

QUALITATIVE DATA

We conducted twenty-nine semi-structured interviews with religious "switchers" who were raised in an Orthodox Jewish community and subsequently left that community. The qualitative data elicited a rich description of switchers' lives and their experiences of leaving the Orthodox community. These interviews shape our understanding of the contours, stages, and motivators of the "leaving" experience.

The data these interviews provide will also inform the creation of a survey instrument and will likely help us interpret the survey results.

QUANTITATIVE DATA

The quantitative data from that survey is expected to be collected in the spring and summer of 2025. We will survey a representative sample of alumni of private Jewish day schools, aged 18 to 34, who graduated eighth grade between 2003 and 2020. The survey will sample all graduates, not only those who have left Orthodoxy, to determine rates of attrition. This will help us understand the prevalence of attrition in different Orthodox communities and allow us to create robust models of religious switching both *from* and *within* Orthodox Judaism. This data will be extremely helpful in informing policy and communal responses to a wide range of social and religious phenomena.

This report focuses on the qualitative data we collected during our interviews with religious "switchers" who have left the Orthodox community in which they were raised. A second report will be issued at the conclusion of the survey collection and analysis.

Literature Review: What We Know So Far

Much of what we know about attrition from and movement within religion comes from studying "religious switching" in religious contexts outside of Judaism. There is far less research on attrition from American Orthodox Judaism, and even less on movement within the different strands of Orthodox Judaism.

RELIGIOUS SWITCHING IN AMERICA

A review of the academic literature on American youth and religion finds adolescent religiosity to be positively associated with educational success, self-esteem, positive attitudes, constructive social behaviors, exercise, eating well, and negatively associated with drug use, depression, suicide, and teen sex[5]. There are clear benefits, even beyond the religious mission of the Orthodox Union, to better understanding how and why Orthodox individuals change their religious observance.

In general, males report lower levels of religiosity than females, while older adolescents report lower levels of religiosity than younger adolescents[6]. The average age for an American to leave the religion he or she was raised with is 22.2. There are important differences between those who grew up with no religion at all and those who left religion. Those who leave, or "leavers", are consistently more religious, even after leaving, than those raised with no religion, as they maintain some religious connections from their childhood[7].

The National Study of Youth and Religion, a longitudinal study of religion and spirituality in the lives of American youth from adolescence into young adulthood, found that "parents and parent figures are by far the most influential people in the religious lives of American adolescents.[8]" Respondents in that survey who grew up with both parents in the home were more religiously engaged than those who did not. Those who experienced parental divorce or frequent moves to new communities were less religious. Respondents whose parents were not very religiously committed or had parents who were committed to different religious traditions than each other were less likely to adapt their parents' religious identity[9].

Another factor identified in the National Study of Youth and Religion was the impact of parents' religious instruction on children's religious development. Parents who were reluctant to give strong religious guidance, and instead encouraged their children to express their own views, grapple with religious issues independently, and come to their own conclusions, tended to have children who became less religious over time. Similarly, parents who did not engage their children in conversation around religious issues at all, made it more challenging for their children to identify or connect with religious traditions[10].

RELIGIOUS SWITCHING IN ORTHODOX JUDAISM

There is scant research on attrition from Orthodox Judaism. Published materials on the subject—including some research, anecdotes, and popular press opinion—have pointed to a wide range of different motivations for leaving and have employed a variety of different methods and theoretical frameworks. Some researchers have attempted to use different psychological assessment scales to understand the psychological predictors and impact of leaving Orthodoxy. They measured items such as personality dimensions, emotional wellness, stress, and loneliness[11]. Others explored attachment orientations, mental health, and satisfaction with life. At least some of this research suggests differences in rates of attrition may be related to differences in secure or insecure attachments amongst participants[12].

Some social scientists have applied a Push/Pull lens, taken from research on immigration, to understand the factors that either **push** individuals out of Orthodoxy (such as intolerance or abuse) or **pull** them towards the "outside" world (such as the attraction of secular society)[13]. For example, this literature has suggested that exposure to the secular world may be a pull factor from Orthodoxy. This exposure includes connections to religiously unaffiliated relatives, secular books, and social media[14]. Some of the **push** factors examined include high levels of conformity and rigidity in Orthodoxy[15] and negative experiences with Orthodox Rabbis and other communal leaders (particularly the perception of leaders' hypocrisy)[16]. Social conditions have also been identified as factors in leaving; particularly conditions that lead to isolation and loneliness. This research suggests that those most likely to leave are less embedded in the community to begin with and feel out of place within it[17].

Some mental health professionals who specialize in treating individuals who choose to leave Orthodoxy have asserted that bad parenting, abuse, or mental health issues are central to the motivation to leave. It is important to note that these accounts are not based on a systematic sample and have a profound selection bias; all the accounts come from people who have sought out counseling. While they may describe this population quite well, it is difficult to know how generalizable these impressions are[18].

Familial factors have also been suggested as relevant to leaving. These include growing up in a family that deviated in some way from Orthodox norms, religious differences between mother and father, conflict in the home, divorce or the death of a parent, and having an older sibling leave Orthodoxy[19]. Although there is no evidence that abuse is the sole or central reason people leave Orthodoxy, the research literature has identified verbal, physical, and sexual abuse as factors that potentially play a role in leaving Orthodoxy[20].

Researchers have also distinguished between emotional factors and intellectual factors in leavers' motivations. Some leavers describe feeling unsafe or lonely in the Orthodox community (emotional), while others describe doubts about the truth claims that underpin Orthodoxy (intellectual)[21].

Finally, there are differences in the literature concerning gender-specific factors that may influence men and women to leave[22]. In one study of formerly ultra-Orthodox Jews, more men than women identified the insularity of the Orthodox community as a relevant factor. Women were more likely to feel excluded from central Orthodox institutions and religious norms, and to feel constrained by inequity in shul practices, education, and available life choices[23]. Participants who had religious struggles related to sexual orientation and identity described feelings of exclusion, rejection, and a lack of belonging in the Orthodox community[24].

Given the broad range of factors that have been suggested as relevant to individuals leaving Orthodoxy, it is not surprising that the literature has suggested that the process of leaving is varied as well. Some literature has asserted that the process of leaving is not linear; individuals may leave and then return, negotiating space within their families and communities[25]. Some individuals hide signs of leaving, appearing outwardly observant in their community while shedding those signs when they are outside of the community[26]. Others leave abruptly, without leading such a double life. Some literature has described the transition to non-Orthodoxy as difficult; participants struggled to acclimate to the secular world and felt "scriptless,"in contrast to the security that Orthodoxy's clear life "script" may afford[27].

These findings are rich with detail, cataloguing a wide range of experiences and beliefs. In some sense this breadth is valuable, but its sheer variety makes it difficult to draw any firm conclusions. If everything and anything might play a role in why people leave Orthodoxy, we are left with little knowledge to direct policy and practice in Orthodox communities. Some of this variety is a function of methodology. Many studies recruit and sample from organizations or online forums that are designed to support leavers[28]. Participants in these environments may be quite different than the sorts of people described in Orthodox therapists' accounts of leavers, and both groups may likewise be quite different from those who maintain no connection whatsoever to the Orthodox community.

It is important to try to tackle the phenomenon of attrition from Orthodoxy without privileging the voices of those leavers who are easiest to access.

PREVALENCE

There are currently no reliable estimates of the prevalence of attrition and movement within American Orthodox Judaism. In 2021, the Pew Research Center found that one third of American adults who were raised Orthodox no longer identify as Orthodox today.[29, 30] But this estimate is misleading, as it masks a decrease in attrition among people raised Orthodox in the past three decades. Those raised Orthodox in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s left at extremely high rates, and this trend only turned around in the late '70s[31]. Some sociologists estimate American Orthodox attrition rates to be around 6.5%[32] and a 1999 study of youth in Brooklyn, NY estimated between 5-10% of Orthodox youth to be "at-risk" – defined by pervasive patterns of violation of family, school, community and social norms[33]. However, these are mainly hypotheses and none are based on a representative survey sample.

THE OTD PROTOTYPE

In recent years the term Off the Derech, or OTD, has gained popularity as a descriptor for individuals who leave Orthodox Judaism. This popularity has been fueled by narratives portrayed in popular memoirs, reality television, and the news media, which generally portray the Orthodox community as stifling and cult-like[34]. These narratives capture a sense of loss, displacement, and trauma, and their protagonists champion their own resistance to conformity, societal norms, and expectations, factors that tend to garner wide public interest[35]. But these stories are hardy typical and tend to amplify the salacious and the scandalous at the expense of representativeness[36]. They often seem as if they were designed to appeal to feelings of superiority held by outsiders rather than promoting nuanced understanding.

This is not meant to challenge the truth of these accounts. Far from it. We are not calling into question the lived experiences of those whose lives have been so vividly captured in these accounts. But they represent only one small slice of reality; the range of experiences of those who leave Orthodox Judaism is much, much, larger than what is captured in the media and pop culture. Because these accounts attract a great deal of attention, many people recognize the OTD prototype reflected in these accounts but may be missing out on the varied and disparate voices and experiences that exist along the broad spectrum of leaving Orthodoxy.

Our goal is to try to capture voices and experiences from all segments of Orthodox society who have left Orthodoxy. Our aim is to develop a more robust and wide-ranging understanding of the different ways and reasons people leave Orthodoxy, the reasons or factors that lead people to stay Orthodox, and the factors that influence a change in religious levels.

Methodology: How We Did It

The purpose of these qualitative interviews was to catch as wide a range of "leaving" experiences as possible. We did not aim for representativeness, but for comprehensiveness. We sought out people from different Orthodox communities, living in different parts of the country, with a wide range of current religious practices and beliefs. A few participants are currently Orthodox, after having spent many years away from Orthodoxy; most, however, remain outside of the Orthodox community.

RECRUITMENT

Participants were recruited through a modified snowball sample. Each "seed" of a snowball was only used to generate one or two more contacts before moving on to another seed. This allowed us to cast our net widely. This approach is an important factor in our understanding of this population because previous research has typically recruited participants through self-contained pools of people who are connected to organizations and online communities specific to leavers[37]. These studies provide us with valuable information about the population connected to these groups but tell us very little about the broader pool of leavers. This can sometimes distort our perceptions of the phenomenon of leaving, substituting the experiences of a small, and in some ways, quite unusual, population, for those of the entire group.

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Our focus throughout the design of the study was to avoid privileging one or another community or theory of leaving. This extended to the construction of the interview protocol. Rather than directly asking participants for explanations about why they had left or probing into a few specific areas of interest, the protocol was designed with an understanding that we could not simply ask people why they left Orthodox Judaism and straightforwardly interpret the answers. Instead, we built the protocol around topics that the research literature identified as important, structured it broadly, and allowed people to talk about their lives in totality. We did not presume to know which elements of their lives would be particularly important to them, or to us.

The first section of the interview focused on participants' life trajectories. This section, which took the longest to conduct, involved participants' own account of their lives from the beginning, with the participants choosing which elements to recount and which to skip. The second section asked them about the values, norms, and knowledge they were raised with. The third asked about their emotional and physical well-being, along with the nature of their interpersonal relationships before, during, and after leaving Orthodoxy. The last two sections asked them to reflect explicitly on their religious beliefs and behaviors, and their perception of the Orthodox community from their current, more distanced vantage point.

CODING AND ANALYSIS

The coding process was both elaborate and deeply complex; a more in-depth description can be found in Appendix A. Transcripts of the interviews went through multiple rounds of coding and analysis, which resulted in narrative summaries of the key themes identified in the interviews and a database of quotes from participants for each of the themes. These summaries and quotes are used extensively in this report.

Sample:
Who We Spoke With

The principal researcher conducted twenty-nine interviews during the winter of 2023 with religious switchers—those raised in Orthodox Jewish communities who subsequently left Orthodox Judaism. We spoke with fifteen female and fourteen male participants who ranged in age from eighteen to forty-three. Participants were raised in many different Jewish communities.

# of Participants	Community Raised
2	Chabad
3	First Modern Orthodox, then family became more Yeshivish
4	Centrist
4	Chasidic
6	Yeshivish
10	Modern Orthodox

Their current locations include New England, New York, New Jersey, the Mid-Atlantic region, the Midwest, the West Coast, Europe, and Israel. The average interview length was 1 hour and 12 minutes, with the shortest interview lasting 35 minutes and the longest lasting 1 hour and 52 minutes.

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Findings:

What We Learned

The Seeds of Leaving are Planted Early; Actual Departure Varies.

Most participants reported questioning aspects of Orthodoxy before completing high school, with six participants reporting starting to question as early as middle school and more than half (17) during or immediately after high school. Only six out of the twenty-nine participants said they started questioning aspects of Judaism and Orthodoxy during college or later.

Although most participants reported questioning in middle and high school, actual behavioral changes were extremely variable. About half our participants gradually left over a period of several years, while some experienced a quick break in their belief and observance once they decided to leave. Others remained in a liminal state, participating in some aspects of Orthodoxy without "believing in" Orthodoxy, believing in Orthodoxy but not participating, or moving fluidly between different levels of connection to Orthodoxy. Some left completely only to return to Orthodoxy many years later.

SUDDEN SHIFT

Eight out of twenty-nine participants described their leaving observance as sudden. One participant explained, "It was kind of pretty like extreme, one day to the other kind of thing where I decided that I don't—I don't—believe so why am I doing it? And I just stopped doing anything."

Most of the "sudden" leavers were not quite this quick to leave, however. Though they did describe a sudden moment of realization that they ought to make a clean break, this realization was often the product of a long period of questioning and reduced observance. For example, a female participant explained that for some time she would listen to Jewish music on Shabbos while still keeping other aspects of Orthodoxy. At some point, however, she had a sudden realization that she was going to leave Orthodoxy, "it was like the weirdest thing, like something just like clicked—I don't know—or unclicked or whatever. And I just in [college] like just stopped being religious."

GRADUAL FADE

Nineteen respondents described the leaving process as gradual. They thought about leaving for a long time and the decision wavered throughout the years as they gradually abandoned more and more facets of observance. Eventually they reached a point at which they were no longer Orthodox at all, without ever having definitively made a decision to leave:

> *I was slowly eroding my faith in various ways. For example, I remember the first thing that happened was, I used to wait six hours between meat and milk, right? Six hours turned into three, three turned into one. One turned into fifteen minutes, fifteen minutes—I just rinsed out my water, you know, my mouth.*

Another participant described her process this way:

> *... [it was a] gradual distancing that I wasn't even aware of. I was like going through all the motions all the time, and—and—you know, doing well in all of my classes and making frum friends. But I think that it was, I was less... I don't know, it's just like less feeling, less connected with it.*

Another participant explained, "there was never like an epiphany moment, or like a something happened, and then that was like it." Yet another described the final moment as having been a long time coming:

> *[I] just started becoming kind of less and less—like I'm like, what difference does it make if I turn the light on—like, I don't think Hashem's gonna mind, you know, like that kind of thing. And so, I started, so then...ah, we stayed at a hotel that had [bed bugs], and it was in driving distance to our house, and it was Friday night, and I was like I don't care I'm driving home.*

DOUBLE LIFE

One phenomenon that is extensively discussed in the literature[38] is that of leading a double life—outwardly presenting to others as Orthodox while not practicing Orthodoxy in private. This body of literature has generally focused on those who lead a double life long-term; they never officially leave Orthodoxy. In our sample, which focuses on leavers, a third (mostly from Charedi backgrounds) led a double life for some time before completely leaving Orthodoxy.

They ultimately left, at least in part, because the double life existence didn't feel sustainable. They felt that the mix between the two worlds was too hard to maintain; eventually they felt forced to make an either-or choice. As one male participant noted:

> *I tried to live what they call a double life... basically doing the "do" without believing the belief. I did that for some time. But it turns out it's incredibly difficult to do. You know it's one thing if you actually believe that Hashem cares about x, y, and, z, and therefore, dealing with any hardships related to it is a non-starter right... you know this is what it is, right. But once the belief goes away, it's incredibly difficult to do all these things. So, after a while I couldn't. I couldn't do that anymore.*

Another participant remarked that it took several years for her to finally live a fully non-Orthodox life. "I realized that I'm living as an impostor, as a double. I just couldn't, I couldn't for myself, I couldn't live that lie."

Living a double life wasn't simply a function of behaving one way in public and another way in private. Participants living a double life mixed Orthodox practice with non-Orthodox activities in many domains, sometimes testing the limits of acceptability in semi-public ways. For example, one participant rode in an Uber on Shabbos that somebody else had called. Another participant chose not to wear pantyhose while doing (Chabad) shlichus. The same participant described this experience:

> *The first night where it was Friday night, and the sun went down, and I was like, I didn't light Shabbos candles. I'm obsessed with lighting Shabbos candles, obsessed. I can count on one hand how many times I've missed it. So, I took the cigarette or the joint that was in my hands, and I was like, okay, like this is lehadlik ner shel shabbos.*

Rather than a clear public/private distinction, the most important element expressed by the double lifers in our sample was secrecy. Participants felt that they needed to hide their departure from religion from their friends and families, going to great lengths to maintain their identities as Orthodox individuals.

> *I'd come back for breaks and holidays, and definitely like a lot of sneaking out until you know it's on Shabbos, they can't find you. They can't call around, or whatever, so you could, you know. There, you could do all kinds of stuff. You could go anywhere, and I'd have like double outfits, and I'd take off whatever you know, and hide it, and I'd go out to wherever teenagers were hanging out, like hang out with people I probably wasn't supposed to be hanging out with.*

In many cases our participants felt that this secrecy wasn't to protect themselves, but to protect their families and friends. "I was very afraid of, like, my grandfather is like the rabbi of the community, and my parents, like their reputation being on the line. I was very worried about that."

Sometimes it was both: "For a long time I kept the full beard, Chabad beard, because for two reasons (a) I didn't want to hurt my parents and (b) I wanted to avoid a confrontation. I didn't want to be hurt. I didn't want the fallout."

Our double life participants were often concerned that they would be judged by the rest of the Orthodox community, but they wanted to maintain their family, friends, and community without being Orthodox.

THE MODERN ORTHODOX / EGALITARIAN TRANSITION

In contrast to the double lifers, a subset of our sample cannot easily be characterized as having left Orthodoxy, because their childhood Orthodoxy already lay at the boundary between Orthodoxy and non-Orthodoxy. It may not be fair to suggest that these respondents experienced any serious change, as their families—while part of the Orthodox community—did not maintain strictly Orthodox practices to begin with.

Two examples illustrate this phenomenon:

1. **Leora [pseudonym].** Leora is a forty-three-year-old woman who identifies as Egalitarian. Although her parents were Orthodox, they sent her to a pluralistic elementary school (and then an Orthodox high school). They were generally observant, but "we would like, eat vegetarian in a variety of restaurants, but nothing beyond that."

   Her family adopted some Egalitarian principles. For example, "one year on Tisha B'av there was a women's Eichah reading that I went to in someone's living room. So it was very, just casual and warm, and someone was hosting it, and I, I was a teenager. I was maybe like sixteen, and my mom asked me if I wanted to go". She went on to explain that "my mom, in more recent years, who grew up, you know, like a big Conservative synagogue, and became Orthodox when she and my father started dating... she said that if she had seen what the Egalitarian community looks like now, at that time that might have been a really prosperous Jewish environment for her."

Leora was raised in an environment in which Egalitarian principles were valued. It is hard to say that her choice of Egalitarianism represents a radical departure from her upbringing.

2. **Meirav [pseudonym].** Meirav is a young woman from an out-of-town community who is studying at an Egalitarian rabbinic institution. Her parents sent her to Orthodox schools but deliberately sent her to a local school that had the most "nuance."

While at that Orthodox high school, she began thinking about problems within Orthodoxy and considering pursuing Egalitarian smicha. "My high school was actually like, I had a teacher there who, inadvertently, kind of gave me the idea to pursue semicha.

> *I remember one time I had a teacher in high school tell me like Modern Orthodoxy is sometimes just like hitting your head against the wall [regarding feminist issues]. Sometimes that's just how it feels, and I was like, I don't want that, that sounds painful. Like I don't really want to be doing that. I think it's a big part of why I just like, I really try not to daven in spaces with a mechitza.*

Aside from her school's messages, her parents also communicated an alternative to Orthodoxy. Her mother, for example, attended a non-Orthodox shul.

> *So she started going there, and my dad continued to go to his Orthodox shul, and slowly he would like start to, this was like early high school or late middle school for me, and he was like, I'm just going to go for kiddush, Oh, you know, I'm just going to go for Musaf because, and he just started slowly going there more and more such that by now, like most of his like best friends are from there.*

These examples highlight the fuzziness of borders between denominations. Fluid borderlines can accommodate a range of beliefs and practices. Someone raised on the border who moves slightly beyond it has likely had a very different life experience from someone who grew up deep in a Charedi enclave and made a radical break away from Orthodoxy. It is important to recognize the differences in these phenomena.

ORTHODOX UNION
CENTER FOR COMMUNAL RESEARCH

Part 1

Participants Now

This section of the report describes participants' views and feelings about the Orthodox community now. Today, participants are both very connected to and critical of the Orthodox communities they left. These current views help us understand how those who leave feel about the Orthodox community as outsiders looking in. Later in the report, we examine how they felt in the past, as insiders prior to leaving.

Participants are Still Deeply Connected to the Jewish and Orthodox community.

In work on religious switching in a non-Jewish context, Bieder (p. 84) has written that "disaffiliates are consistently more religious than lifelong "nones" due to religious residue from childhood, with greater residue found among those who were more religiously committed as children[39]." Those who are raised in religious environments tend to hold on to their religiosity in various ways even after leaving.

In our study, participants maintained connections to Judaism generally, and to Orthodoxy specifically, in numerous ways. They continued to see the world in ways influenced by Orthodox values and beliefs; aspects of their identities remained Orthodox; and they expressed positivity about many aspects of Orthodox life. Nearly all (25 of 29) had at least some positive things to say about the "frum" community, mostly centered around the benefits of its strong communal structure. Only four participants expressed outright animosity towards Orthodoxy.

In this section we review the myriad ways participants felt close to, and still connected with, Orthodox communities, beliefs, and practices.

COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY

Participants described the Orthodox community as warm, caring, and tight-knit (a positive feature that also had a negative side). Many participants stated that because of this caring structure, Orthodoxy instills a strong sense of identity, providing members with a deep sense of belonging along with practical, emotional, and spiritual support. One participant explained that the Orthodox community is so strong that all her closest friends today are still Orthodox, even though she is no longer Orthodox herself. Another interviewee asserted that Orthodoxy is the best form of Judaism; although she wasn't religious, she couldn't see herself within a Conservative or Reform community.

Although our sample included only people who left Orthodoxy, some made strikingly heartfelt positive comments about Orthodoxy. One remarked on the beautiful way in which the community provides "comfort and solace during difficult things and wonderful things." Another participant lamented that she does not currently enjoy the same type of communal belonging as when she was growing up. Another participant stated, "we [the Orthodox] do community better than anything. So, I have humility around that." In describing his connection, another participant stated, "we have thick family and community commitments, and I'm big believer in communitarian values. And that's what binds me to Judaism - is communitarian values."

Many participants understood their own Jewish identities to be deeply connected to the strengths of the Orthodox communities they grew up in. Several participants described the Orthodox Jewish community in terms of peoplehood or nationhood, describing Orthodoxy as connecting them to their history and ancestry. Two participants explained that when they meet people, they share their background or "origin" because it is so integral to who they are as people. One participant noted:

> *It's like a way of understanding a little bit about how I think in the world. About—like—sort of some of the things that I'm rooted in. So, it's a sense in that way, it's like a real sense of like connection and of pride and affinity.*

Participants felt a sense of loyalty and solidarity with their Orthodox upbringing. One explicitly mentioned loyalty, another emphasized a commitment to Jewish identity, and another participant (who still maintains some Orthodox practices) explicitly described this sense as a form of loyalty to identity:

> *I chose to remain frum the way I am – keep Shabbos keep Kosher as part of my identification of solidarity and loyalty to Am Yisrael or Klal Yisrael, whatever you want to call it. It is a very deep loyalty to the Jewish people, to the God of my ancestors, if you will.*

CONCERNS ABOUT SECULAR SOCIETY WERE FRAMED IN TERMS OF ORTHODOX VALUES

In contrast, participants' views of secular American society were overwhelmingly negative. Of the twenty-nine participants, twenty-one viewed American and secular society negatively while only seven participants viewed American and secular society positively (one did not address this point). Even among these seven participants, five also mentioned some aspects of secular society that they view negatively.

Participants were critical of secular values, particularly materialism. "We have too much at . . . our fingertips. We have too much available to us. There is just non-stop, and almost an infinite amount of *gashmius* [materialism]." Many participants expressed their dislike of the way that social media permeates secular society. One participant said:

> *Social media has really, really, really, taken a toll on people's . . . emotions and ways of life, and . . . it's weird that there's a tool that is made by people to control your life and tell you what to do.*

Other participants felt that people in secular society are more self-centered than in religious communities or described "rampant individualism" within secular society.

Some participants described secular society as lacking any values at all, or as characterized by a lack of meaning. For example, participants stated that "there's not really much, like, values there" and that "secular society is empty." Another participant described Western society as having a "meaning crisis." In contrast to the Orthodox community, many participants asserted that there is no sense of community in secular society and that secular society does not provide a framework for community support. As one participant put it: "I think in terms of the lack of support, for, let's say poor people or people with mental illness across pretty much across the board..., I am definitely not a fan [of secular society]."

These views contrasted sharply with participants' views of Orthodoxy and Judaism more broadly. "And one thing that I'll say for the wider American land that I think Judaism can teach people is . . . like real rootedness around a place where community happens." "I think, even like the frum world does a lot better with—I don't know—*tzedakah* and *bikur cholim* and all these organizations, I think that's really nice."

When participants did have positive things to say about the secular world, these revolved around the issue of freedom. Five of the seven participants who took a positive view of secular society stated that they appreciate the freedom it gives people to make their own life choices. "I think there's a lot more freedom [in secular society] to just choose the things you want to do and find meaning." Another participant stated:

> *I think autonomy is the most important thing for me, to be able to be free to freely determine my own path, and I feel the frum community doesn't give enough room for people, even people who are observant, to be able to be there to find their own voice.*

TRADITIONAL JEWISH PRACTICES

Many of our interviewees adhered to some Orthodox traditions and practices. More than three quarters of participants described feeling a connection to Orthodox traditions and practices, often because they had fond memories of these practices (such as hosting a Pesach seder) or because these practices remained important to them and their families (such as brit milah).

For example, one participant maintained a connection to kashrut because she has friends who keep kosher:

> *I don't keep Shabbat, but I will host Friday night dinner. I eat out at a non-kosher restaurant, but if I'm hosting my friends who I know keep kosher, I have kosher pots and pans, and I order kosher meat, and I can make a kosher dinner.*

Another participant was dating a non-Jew who intended to convert to Judaism and whom he intended to marry. He said that out of respect for his parents, it was important to him that her conversion be halachically acceptable to them. He began by stating that "it does not bother me personally that they [his future children] halachically wouldn't be Jewish" but then pivoted and said:

> *Although somebody brought this up to me, and I kind of like I, that part I guess, does bother me I must admit. The fact that it's entirely conceivable that I'll have a child or children that will want to be frum. I don't—that's not fair—I don't see, I don't think that's a crazy thing to imagine... You know I see myself as really warm to it. It's a neshama, I don't want it for me, but I but I'm very friendly towards the idea. And because of that I can imagine my child wanting to live that life, especially that they might see my family. It's, they might see my family and say it would be much better if we were frum. Look at my cousins, look at my uncles. You know? How I would be denying them that because they're not Jewish, you know.*

Some participants held on to tradition simply because it brought them joy. One participant spoke about taking his children, who were being raised Orthodox, to a *Megillah* reading on *Purim*. He brought along "a real *megillah* on a *klaf*. I have it. My brother-in-law wrote it for me years ago." He continued, "there are things that I enjoy about Judaism, and those are the things that I celebrate." Another participant explained, "I'm doing the parts of Judaism that bring me joy." She spoke about selecting some traditions and rejecting others, observing traditions that "make me feel connected to God, connected to the universe, connected to the traditions my ancestors have been doing since the beginning of time, and I'm leaving out the rules that feel very constrictive."

The sense of Jewish and Orthodox identity described above also played a role in motivating participants to observe Jewish practices. One participant, who maintained very few traditions, stated:

> *I don't eat like pork or shellfish, and that for me is this like sort of culturally affiliated way of like defining myself as Jewish... But it's like a very arbitrary rule, and it was while I was working consulting after college, and that was sort of this like way of like maintaining a bit of like a Jewish identity.*

Similarly, a participant who described himself as atheist noted that he identifies with the culture of Judaism:

> *I like the cultural side of it. I don't have any problems with it like, I feel like most people who like stop being religious, usually, it's coming from a place of like either being hurt or angry, and I don't have any of that, or like any guilt or anything. It's just, I don't believe it's true. So, it didn't make sense for me to continue.*

Cultural connections to Orthodoxy were present in several different interviews. Some participants spoke about the foods they associate with Orthodoxy, foods they enjoy on Shabbos and Yomim Tovim, and non-kosher foods that they still do not eat even though they do not affiliate with the Orthodox community. Others spoke about joining their families for Shabbos and holiday meals and enjoying the rituals and traditions of the day through a cultural, not religious, lens. One participant stressed his commitment to Jewish continuity:

> *I think Orthodox Judaism is the strongest, the most potent means to ensure Jewish continuity, and in that sense I'm still part of the Jewish community and the Orthodox community in that belief that there has to be some form of a pattern of observance that Heschel calls, that retains Jewish continuity. So, I do feel that the Orthodox Judaism is the most loyal, the most committed, the most saturated form of Judaism that there is today, and I am part of that thick Jewish culture.*

SHUL

Participants described finding meaning in prayer and shul rituals. Almost half of the participants spoke about their connection to aspects of shul, including parts of the liturgy (e.g., songs or Kabbalat Shabbat services), and described feeling connected to God in shul. One participant described attending a Reform service at his daughter's school and finding it deeply uncomfortable because he grew up attending an Orthodox shul. Another explained how through "Carlebach singing" (spiritual Jewish singing composed and popularized by Shlomo Carlebach) he connects to God and engages in "his hisbodedus" (spiritual meditation).

Several female participants who moved to Egalitarian or Conservative shuls extended their sense of connection to shul from Orthodoxy to their new, non-Orthodox lives. A participant who attends Egalitarian services and learned to lein and lead her shul in davening stated that these activities increase her connection to, and investment in, shul attendance. She stated:

> *I started learning how to read Torah. I started learning how to lead Shabbat Musaf... So those kinds of skills have given me a really deep investment in the way shul runs, and what it takes to make the shul experience really polished.*

SHABBOS

More than one-third of participants spoke about their feelings of connection to Shabbos. Some emphasized the social component of Shabbos, especially being together with family, while others talked about the Shabbos foods and songs that they love. A few participants talked about the simple enjoyment they get out of participating in a Shabbos meal and the meaning they find in the day. One participant spoke at length about the value of Shabbos and the gratitude she feels that "my screens can go away. It's just so mentally healthy." She continued:

> *Having a meal with your family and with your friends like you invite people over, or you go to someone, and the meal ends, and no one goes anywhere. That's something I have on Shabbat that I never have any other day of the week.*

A few participants described feeling connected to God on Shabbos. One participant described Shabbos as an opportunity to "commune with God." Another participant stated:

> *When I keep Shabbos, I feel I'm connecting with a sense of transcendence.... even if I don't, it doesn't necessarily correlate with objective beliefs as articulated by any catechism, or creed, or dogmatic scheme. But I do feel an innate sense of religiosity.*

JEWISH TEXTS

Some participants connected to Orthodoxy through Jewish texts. Two participants spoke about the Torah as being a framework for life and a "magnificent document that's reverberated through the generations." One explained:

> *I see the Torah as our national founding. You know our Constitution in a certain sense, where we get valuable information about how our ancestors thought about themselves and their history and their place in the world, and my connection with Judaism in general is through that lens.*

For two participants who moved to Egalitarian spaces in Judaism, texts such as the Torah and the Rambam remained meaningful. One participant discussed teaching Torah and giving classes and sermons as a leader in her Conservative synagogue. Another spoke about her connection to the Rambam; she felt that she could relate to his engagement with the knowledge and culture of his time.

Two other participants described their connection to Jewish texts as important in their professional lives. One male participant, a scholar of Jewish studies, told us that he maintains a connection to Judaism through his work with Jewish texts. Another participant, a psychologist, described finding principles in her work that echo Jewish texts she learned growing up:

> *I've found so many kinds of principles replaying from Rashis, I don't know, like various things I've like learnt in my religious upbringing. I'm like oh, that's not a new thing that Marsha Linehan came up with. There is a Rashi about that from whenever, however many hundreds of years ago.*

CONNECTIONS TO GOD AND MAN

Connection to God

Despite leaving Orthodoxy, many participants stated they believe in God and experience connections to God, even while believing that God may not approve of their life choices. When asked whether she believed in God, one respondent stated:

> *I think I tried not to, but it just didn't make sense to me. I mean I've been talking to Him, or having conversations, or whatever it, knowing, thinking, whatever that He was there. He's here all the time listening to this conversation, and I can't really shake that. And then also, you know, wondering what He, wondering if I'm [expletive] it up.*

On the other hand, many participants stated that they are certain that God loves them and is happy with the choices they have made. For example, one participant noted that as his religious observance decreased, his connection to God increased. Another participant described maintaining a connection with God "in his heart" that he feels confident about, despite his lack of observance.

Connection to Man

More tangibly, close to one-third of participants highlighted connections to Orthodox individuals as playing a central role in their lives. One participant described her connection to Orthodoxy in terms of her relationships with her siblings:

> *I think that what's been holding me here in this murky space is my siblings, just like that strong connection with them. I don't think I'd be, I don't know, I don't think I'd be wanting anything to do with religion if I didn't have such a strong sibling unit.*

One participant said that she chose to give her son a brit milah in order to maintain her connection to her family. Another participant stated that his friendships with people in the frum community kept him connected to Orthodoxy. Two participants described their relationship with a community Rabbi as strengthening their connection to Orthodoxy.

CONNECTIONS MANIFEST IN CURRENT LIFE CHOICES

Because many participants had difficult experiences in Orthodox schools, it was surprising to see that more than a few sent their own children to Jewish schools or expressed appreciation for Jewish schools—even right-wing schools such as Bais Yaakov. Of the eleven participants who had school-age children, eight have children enrolled in Jewish schools. Of those eight, all but one stated that they themselves had very bad experiences in Jewish schools as children. The schools their children attend include Bais Yaakov, Yeshivish, Modern Orthodox, and non-Orthodox schools.

Participants also remain connected to Judaism through their occupations. Thirteen participants (45%) work either in a Jewish setting or on behalf of the Jewish community. Participants hold jobs in service of the Conservative, Non-Affiliated, Pluralistic, Chassidic, Modern Orthodox, and Lubavitch communities.

> *I'm a researcher, researcher of Jewish thought, Chassidic thought, Yiddish Literature, Bible studies, many other areas of Jewish thought. I lecture, I write articles, I teach. I work on different research projects, helping rabbis writes books, looking for sources—Torah or academic Jewish sources—or I translate from Hebrew to Yiddish and to English. I do a variety of different jobs in the broader field of Jewish studies.*

CENTRALITY AND CONNECTION TO GOD AND RELIGION

We asked participants how central they felt religion was in their lives now compared to how they felt before they left Orthodoxy. Some participants who now participate in *more* Egalitarian forms of Judaism stated that religion is now more important to them than previously. Likewise, some participants described experiencing a renewed relationship with God as they got older, e.g., "my relationship with God is the most important relationship that I have. Like hands down. It's the center of my life. I need it to be for me to survive." One participant who was still searching for religious clarity and hoped to strengthen her connection to Orthodoxy noted, "I think that I want it to be really important to me. Like my *siddur's* on my nightstand. I'll take it with me. I don't use it ever."

Participants who maintained few Orthodox practices described religion as less central or important to their lives. Nonetheless, some such participants stated that vestiges of religiosity remain embedded in their lives. One described religious experience as an "extra-curricular activity" in her life now, in contrast to the central position it held when she was younger. Another participant stated that even though religion is not central to her everyday life, she felt, "it's just absolutely in there... it's still very much there to me, it's very, it's still very present maybe in a different way than it was before."

AMBIVALENCE

Some participants described their rejection of Orthodoxy with considerable ambivalence. These participants describe feeling guilty or conflicted about their abandonment of Orthodoxy. One participant described violating Shabbos this way:

> *It's still in my head feels like something I shouldn't be doing. And like it's still in there, you know. Like sometimes I'll be very aware where if I'm driving somewhere on Shabbos," and I'm like for a second, I'm like, "Oh, no!" And I'm like you've been doing this for years. What are you freaking out about right now? Or like I'm holding, you know, holding money... And I don't know if I feel bad, but I think I feel, I wonder if I should feel that.*

Another described having felt similar ambivalence in the past:

> *I think when I was younger, I did feel like there were things that if I didn't do them, it would be like some kind of devastation like I don't know. I mean like you know, eating chametz on Pesach, or something like this sort of like, "Oh, my God! What, you can't, you can't." But—and now I probably don't think it is the same kind of devastation.*

A female participant described this feeling in terms of both fear and love:

> *There's like a seriousness about Judaism that I can't release from myself, and like that seriousness—like—partially comes out of the idea of—like—Hashem punishing us for all sorts of things, but it's also tied into like a love, like a love of God and a love of Torah, and a love of other Jews, that on some level I think I did get from Orthodoxy, even if I didn't feel like the people in my life were living out those ideals as much.*

ABSENCE OF CONNECTION

Less than a quarter of our sample described feeling no connection or very little connection to Orthodoxy. Interestingly, most of these respondents attributed this to alienation caused by the Orthodox community's responses to them.

For example, three of the four participants from Chasidic backgrounds described having no connection to the Orthodox community, in part because of the community's insularity and negative response to their leaving. Participants from Chasidic communities described leaving suddenly, "cold turkey", or being cut off from family and friends. One participant spoke about getting back in touch with his parents, but his relationship with siblings was, and continues to be, severed. In contrast, those who left the Lubavitch community maintained connections to and within their communities, perhaps because of the way Lubavitch interact with and position themselves in relation to secular Jews. Another did not want to contribute to the Orthodox community, saying that he had "no interest in building the Jewish community" in any way. One participant spoke about the price of leaving the Chasidic community in terms of lost relationships:

> *The price of freedom, freedom is very expensive. When I say freedom, it's very difficult and very expensive to leave frumkeit, right? I am not going to mention the C word - cult... I lost my marriage. I lost my family. When I say my family, my you know, my biological, my siblings and my parents. I lost all of my friends from there. So, people lose their jobs right. People lose their homes. People lose lots, even more than I did. It's very, very expensive to leave frumkeit.*

Other participants, from Yeshivish and Modern Orthodox backgrounds, also described having been pushed away from the Orthodox community. For example, one participant's family was shunned by their community for sending their children to public school for academic reasons, which contributed to their decision to leave the community.

Finally, some participants have no connection to Orthodoxy by choice. One participant described slowly drifting away from the frum community, only maintaining friendships with others who had also been raised Orthodox and left. Another participant described feeling a lack of connection to her ancestors because her parents had converted to Judaism. She explained:

> *I think it, not having, not feeling that past where your parents and your grandparents, and your great-grandparents, like the town in Poland, the village in Poland, and then imagining that all the way back to Har Sinai, or whatever. Yeah, I didn't have that, and I think it made me have less of a feeling of a connection.*

Despite High Levels of Connection, Participants Have Significant Criticisms of the Orthodox Community.

In this section, we describe participants' criticisms of the Orthodox community as they understand it **now**. Such criticisms naturally incorporate many reflections on their past experiences and may appear to be indistinguishable from their recollections about the process of leaving. There is a key difference, however, in that such criticisms also include many views that respondents developed in retrospect and that they did not necessarily hold when they made the decision to leave. It is important to understand both how leavers understand Orthodoxy from their position outside of it, *and* how they experienced Orthodoxy while leaving (a topic that will be discussed later in the report).

NEGATIVE ATTITUDES

Twenty-two of twenty-nine participants described having some negative feelings towards the Orthodox community, even though many of these participants also hold positive views. Some complaints are mirror images of the positive views that these same participants expressed.

RIGIDITY AND INTOLERANCE

The dominant negative emotions expressed by interviewees relate to the intolerance and rigidity they experienced within Orthodoxy. Intolerance was a common theme in nearly all these interviews; participants asserted that the Orthodox community does not accept those who are different in any way, whether socially, religiously, or behaviorally.

One participant stated that the community he was raised in was averse to other streams of Orthodox Judaism. He was, therefore, turned away from exploring such streams further:

> *Not everybody is going to relate to Modern Orthodoxy, maybe they want to be completely Orthodox, maybe they want to be Chassidish, but you're stuck here, that's all you can do ... this is all I know this is, so it must be that this is all there is. And if it's all there is, then there's nothing here for me.*

More than half of all participants used the term "rigidity" to capture this perspective. A few participants described rigidity within their families. Others focused on their communities' "very rigid way to be Orthodox," noting that Orthodoxy requires community members to follow an exact template, with little room for deviation. Orthodox rigidity alienated participants who differed from most members of their communities in varying ways. For example, one participant stated that community members did not accept her family because her parents were converts. One participant described "lack of flexibility" as a major factor in her journey away from Orthodoxy. Another described Orthodox rigidity as a function of Orthodoxy's assumption that it is the only natural and logical way to be in the world: "If you think logically and healthfully about it, you're going to believe in our Charedi belief. So, if you came to a different conclusion, it must be something went wrong."

Several interviewees emphasized the rigidity of Orthodox schools. One female participant stated that beginning early in elementary school, and continuing through high school, students were required to be a "certain type of girl;" those who couldn't meet this expectation were perceived as "basically a lost cause… a second-class citizen." These expectations exacerbated her sense of distance: "I'm going to be more myself then, because I feel like I am special, and I am good. But—like—if you're not going to recognize it, then screw you." Another female participant described disappointment with her high school's response to her not fitting the "mold perfectly." She felt the school "could have handled that in a much different way, and I'm disappointed that they couldn't, they were so rigid and couldn't work within that and be more compassionate."

Rigid Religious Norms

Close to two thirds of participants criticized Orthodox communities' rigid religious norms, particularly around *halacha*. One participant described her school's extreme emphasis on *tzniyus*; the school never explained, however, what value *tzniyus* had, they simply presented rigid rules around showing one's collarbone or the length of one's skirt. Another female participant contrasted the rigidity she experienced at her school with the experiences of her sister, who went to a "school where Orthodox Judaism could look like so many things." A few participants spoke about the control halacha attempts to exert over Orthodoxy, and the "impulsivity to add *chumrah* on top of *chumrah* on top of *chumrah*." "Orthodoxy is getting tighter and tighter. Things that are not necessarily *assur* are just being made *assur* just because." A younger participant remembered cleaning lettuce for Pesach and working to inspect it for bugs, which would render it non-kosher. Her brother-in-law felt she did not do a good enough job and cleaned the lettuce again, prioritizing a machmir interpretation of halacha over her feelings.

One female participant who attended a Bais Yaakov in which *hashkafic* values (religious values rather than religious law) were treated as *yeihareig v'al ya'avor* (a principle whose violation is worse than death) shared:

> *The Bais Yaakov from sixth to twelfth grade, I'd come home, and I'd like—I don't know what to do—I served avodah zarah, and I'm really nervous. And my mom's like, oh when did you serve avodah zarah? And I said, oh, my teacher said that if you read Harry Potter, then it's—it's like you served avodah zarah, and I was like super OCD, so like I went to my room for a few hours and said viduy.*

Participants also described Orthodox religion as dogmatic. For example, one participant described wanting to learn *Kabbalah* and *Chasidus* and could not find any classes in his community to explore these interests because the community's attitude was, "that's not what we do over here." His community defined Orthodoxy within very narrow parameters. This dogmatism extended to religious expectations: "[I was raised] to spend every second thinking about learning and then feel guilty about every deviating thought and desire." He expressed frustration at not having known that it was "normal to feel the desires I was feeling."

A few participants noted that Orthodoxy, by definition, subscribes to a single view of Judaism in which there is only one way to be Jewish in this world. As a male participant put it, "they have fused the layers of Judaism and Orthodoxy and pushed out anyone else [referring to other Jewish denominations]."

Another stated:

> *The problem is, I was born in the wrong denomination and because of my family commitment—so it's fraught with tension. I have to walk on eggshells to be able to find my own voice without being alienated or alienating others.*

Rigid Social Norms

Close to half the participants described their communities and families as maintaining rigid social norms that permitted little deviation. One participant compared Orthodox communities to *The Stepford Wives*. Community members are expected to "go with the flow, make sure you do what the institution tells you to do, don't think, be robotic." Another described the Orthodox community as a "very conformist space" where he felt "hemmed in." A participant who sent her children to public school for various educational needs stated that this move was outside of the social norms of the community, and subsequently, no one would let their child play with her children. Within Orthodox families, participants related rigid social norms about talking with the opposite sex in high school and adhering to the established social expectations to "belong to the [Orthodox] club."

Religious Intolerance

As opposed to mere rigidity, intolerance involved concrete consequences for social and religious deviations. For example, in describing his experiences in school, a male participant stated, "if you deviated, you were kind of ostracized... okay, you don't fit the mold, get out of here. So, yeah, totally, totally ostracized." One participant described the "my way or the highway" approach to religion in his family and believed that that is how "people get turned off." An older participant, who maintained some level of religious observance after leaving Orthodoxy, described his journey as an "endeavor of moving away from a fundamentalist religious point of view to a non-fundamentalist, but still an engaging form of Yiddishkeit." He viewed the fundamentalist, "draconian" approach to religion as completely intolerant; this "mummified" version of Judaism did not allow any room for deviation.

Intolerance was felt when small deviations were treated as unacceptable. A female participant felt she had a different sense of humor than others, and it was both not appreciated and considered inappropriate. Another described the response to his misbehavior in school, "they just saw something that didn't fit any of their parameters, they wanted to squish it into the square, right, instead of providing the circle that I needed." Many participants experienced intolerance towards modes of dress, "if you said something or wore your clothes a certain way or did something that seemed just slightly off, you know there was not a tolerance for that, like you were told to be a different way." One participant explained that he would have liked to wear all white on Shabbos, as he did in Israel when he studied there. He felt that if he did that in his Northeast community he would "be ostracized, like why's he wearing all white, he's just a weirdo, just for practicing what I thought is true."

This was most striking in one participant's conversation with his mother:

> *I will never forget the conversation I had with my mother where we were talking about modes of dress, you know, white shirt, black pants, etc. Even beards and things like that right? And I came to the point where I said to her, you know I don't think you have to have a beard and wear a white shirt to be a good person. And then I asked her, I said, if I would come to your house wearing jeans, would you still love me? And she said no.*

Personal Rigidity

Interestingly, some participants felt that they themselves had been overly rigid in their attitudes towards Orthodox practice. They described this rigidity as having caused them to abandon Orthodox practices entirely, because they could not maintain the stringent practices they associated with Orthodoxy. A female participant described herself as "a fundamentalist at heart" who understood Orthodox practices to be "all or none," leading her to choose "none." Likewise, a male participant described himself as having thought that if he was not keeping Shabbos, he should not maintain any religious practices at all.

While these were not the dominant themes expressed in most interviews, participants also criticized wealth and status differentials in the Orthodox community, problems with education, and the powerful pressure to remain within the community.

FEMINISM AND THE PLACE OF LGBTQ INDIVIDUALS WITHIN ORTHODOXY

With the distance of time, and from an outsider's position, the majority of participants described concerns pertaining to feminism and the treatment of LGBTQ individuals as major problems within Orthodox Judaism today (though very few participants who identify as heterosexual spoke about LGBT-related issues as the reason they left.)

Treatment of LGBTQ People

Both members and non-members of the LGBTQ community described Orthodox communities as intolerant of LGBTQ people. Although only four participants identified as part of the LGBTQ community, many interviewees understood this stance as part of a larger pattern of Orthodox intolerance. For example, one participant framed intolerance of LGBTQ people as intolerance of "the other." Another included LGBTQ community members in a broader category of people who have some halachic impediment to their full participation in the Orthodox community, such as *mamzerim* and *agunot*. Others blamed Orthodoxy for not finding compelling answers to contemporary social questions:

> *The inability of Orthodoxy to give a real solution to pressing contemporary issues like feminism, people in the gay community, or how to deal with Biblical criticism, that has caused me a kind of distance and alienation from it. I no longer feel that I can be completely, that I can buy into the system, as it were.*

Many participants felt that it ought to be possible to identify as LGTBQ and Orthodox. One participant stated that he personally believes that someone can be gay and observant as a serious Jew, but the Orthodox community is simply not open to it. Another respondent suggested that how an LGBTQ individual feels within the Orthodox community depends on how their family and community perceive and treat them. Because the majority of Orthodox community members won't accept them, LGBTQ members have difficult social and religious experiences in Orthodox communities.

Treatment of Women in Religious Life

Over half (nine female, four male) of the participants described the treatment of women as a major problem within Orthodoxy. Close to one-third of participants criticized the halachic restrictions that Orthodoxy imposes on women. Almost a quarter percent of participants believed that women are not allowed active communal roles, and twenty percent viewed the public roles permitted to women within Orthodoxy as overly rigid. (These categories overlapped—many respondents had more than one of these concerns.)

Female participants described feeling unequal to men within Orthodoxy. Female participants also asserted that Orthodoxy leaves no room for women to accomplish their personal goals. One participant described being a woman in Orthodoxy as akin to being a "second class citizen." She explained that her mother was career-focused and had a lot of ambition, but that the community didn't accept or value this. Another participant described a scene she witnessed when driving through an Orthodox community on Friday night:

> *I thought to myself, all the women are home right now with all the children after they've worked all week too, and they're cooking and cleaning and preparing Shabbos, and the men are out hanging out with their friends. They came home from work, they took a shower, and they went out, and then they're gonna come home to sit down to this beautiful dinner that somebody else prepared, you know, and it was like, I just got like enraged.*

Another participant described her frustration at being uninvolved in shul; she compared her own inability to contribute to shul for her Bat Mitzvah to the contributions that boys make at their Bar Mitzvahs. Many participants highlighted women's religious passivity within Orthodoxy. One participant compared participating in shul as a female to sitting in the passenger's seat of a car. Another participant, who had been in charge of organizing a *minyan* for Rosh Chodesh, described becoming aggravated when not enough men were present to form a *minyan*, even though plenty of women were present.

A female participant complained that it is unfair that only Orthodox men can become rabbinical figures:

> *I don't get how in every other aspect of your life you see yourself as equal to a man, and like you work and you vote, and you participate in society. But you think that like men, should make all the religious decisions for not only your body, but for your soul also.*

This was a common concern from others as well, as two other respondents explained:

> *A woman can be a federal judge, and a woman can be in the State Department, and you all go to a school where your moms have jobs like that. But no, a woman is not gonna be a Rabbi. And a woman is not going to lead davening or lein Torah. Like those are different things, like the standards of sort of like the spiritual world and the halachic world are not of like, are not the same.*
>
> *Some shuls don't even have an ezras nashim, right. They are not part of anything, right. The only things that women can do are sort of outside. You can run a Sisterhood right, but you cannot be, you cannot have any functioning role right, even though that's not what Shulchan Aruch says. Shulchan Aruch doesn't say that a woman can't be a gabbai or collect tzedakah.*

Other gendered critiques that women raised included the laws pertaining to agunot, mechitzot in shul, and the discrepancy between men's and women's Torah learning.

OTHER COMPLAINTS

Superiority Complex

Participants experienced Orthodox communities as maintaining an attitude of superiority to others. It is important to note that most members of the Orthodox community would strongly disagree with this characterization of Orthodoxy. It is nonetheless important to accurately record participants' perceptions of their own experiences, regardless of whether we agree that these experiences are broadly representative.

Slightly over one quarter of participants stated that Orthodox community members' negative views of non-Orthodox people made them uncomfortable. The participants described what they perceived as both Orthodox racism and a negative view of non-Jews. One participant stated, "the message that we got that everyone is created for us and everyone they only exist for our benefit." Another participant criticized Orthodoxy's "dismissive attitudes" towards non-Jews and described this attitude as "ignorant and very arrogant." He continued, shockingly, "*goyim* were almost seen as subhuman—it was—it was almost like this racial hierarchy. And we mistreated our cleaners at home, we greatly mistreated them. Every goy we came in contact, we treated like pieces of [expletive]."

Stifling Closeness

Interviewees highlighted the drawbacks of tight-knit Orthodox communities (even as many participants, including some of these same people, described communal cohesion as a positive feature of Orthodoxy). One participant categorized the closeness of Orthodox communities as "unhealthy" and "inauthentic." Another participant stated that there is both "good and bad" in a tight knit community; the closeness allows for support, but also allows members to know "what's up in your business." The small size of the Orthodox community also led to criticism of members' lack of involvement with others. For example, one participant described her anger towards rabbis in her community who knew that her parent was abusive but did not intervene.

Shul

Although most participants identified shul as a major strength of Orthodoxy, two participants expressed very negative associations with shul attendance. A Black participant talked about his mixed emotions about feeling accepted in shul. He currently attends an Orthodox shul where he feels welcomed but described alienation and rejection in his past shul experiences. Another participant felt that shul could be oppressive, "shul was like, shul like, in my family everybody knows like don't mention a shul to me like, from a very young age it was a sore, it's a sore, sore topic."

Orthodox Practices

Participants expressed negativity about certain Orthodox practices. One participant explained that although she has reclaimed some religious practices as an adult, she engages in them "very differently than in the way I grew up", as she "can easily get very triggered [by these rituals] in a frum context." When she hosted a holiday meal for individuals who left the Orthodox community, she described:

> *We sang Niggunim, and they were like so happy that, they wanted to do yuntif, but they didn't want to deal with all the baggage that came with yuntif with the family, yuntif back in the home place, and I was able to give them that.*

Identity

A few participants hold negative associations with the implications of their Jewish identity. One such participant explained:

> *I'm obviously Jewish, many people would define me as such. There are various repercussions of that identity, that some I accept and some I'm not happy about but there's not a lot I can do. I'm in Jewish studies, so that kind of maintains this kind of connection. I have a lot of ambivalence about that connection. I, in my mind I would not particularly like to be connected to such an identity on various levels.*

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Part 2

Growing Up and Leaving

This section of the report describes participants' life experiences, before, during, and after they left Orthodoxy.

QUESTIONING

It may be self-evident that those who leave Orthodoxy have engaged in religious questioning, but it is important to understand the specifics. Participants described questioning morality, faith, religious and empirical truths, and societal norms. More than half of the participants reported that they began questioning in high school or right after; one-fifth said they began questioning in middle school; the rest of the participants reported starting to question Orthodoxy in college or in their early twenties.

Over a third of participants described receiving negative responses to their questions from Orthodox authority figures and family and community members.

MORALITY

Two-thirds of the participants described themselves as questioning the morality of Orthodoxy. This was the most frequently cited category of question. One participant explained:

> *It's more important to be perfect than to think about somebody's feelings. I felt like I ran into that a lot, and that's what started making me go, how could this be right? That can't be what a God would want?*

Other participants struggled with dictates in the Torah that they perceived as immoral. "I started having questions about the humanity of halacha and that led me to question: is this really coming from God? Is this really, is God telling me to kill Amalek?" Some viewed Orthodoxy's approach to members of other races and religions as immoral. One participant stated that he felt "ashamed" of how his community talked about and treated non-Jews. Still others struggled with questions about the morality of women's role in Judaism. One participant stated, "Why does it make sense to continue excluding people from religious spaces because of gender? It doesn't, it had stopped making sense to me."

Intellectual Questioning: Is all of Judaism reasonable? Is all of it true? Does God really exist?

Just over half of all participants struggled with questions that were more intellectual than moral. These questions centered on the truth of, and meaning inherent in, Orthodox Judaism. The most common example of such questions involved Jewish practices, the halachas and mitzvos that make up Orthodox life. Participants questioned why they had to keep "all these stupid things." They struggled to understand halachic practices as important. One participant said:

> *... when I started learning, I was learning like Hilchos Shabbos and Hilchos Kashrus in depth, ... I was like, wait some of this is [expletive], like why, I get why some people don't do this! You know, or don't subscribe to this... I'm just having a little bit more nuance of like, is this the only way to do it? This is the only thing that we're gonna, this is the only correct way to do it? ... So, I think it was again, like starting to interact with people and recognize that there's a lot of different expressions [of Judaism].*

Another explained:

> *...how am I observing Shabbat? Am I cutting my toilet paper before Shabbat? Am I covering my elbows, right? It was very much on, I think so much of the like, what I took as Jewish values, was about the details of observance. Right, that was what I put the primary focus on. I think as I've gotten older and especially now, I think I put more, for me it's like I focus on the values that I think are more prominent in non-Orthodox communities.*

Several participants described questioning the truth of "Torah Mi-Sinai". Participants described feeling "skeptical" that the Torah was given to Moshe from Hashem, questioning whether that belief was "all just a farce." One participant noted, "I've always been like thinking and curious and questioning, and I was just trying to find the truth." Many participants understood scientific and academic knowledge to undermine Orthodox truth-claims about the Torah. A participant who studied biblical criticism remarked, "I thought about religion, reading about other religions, a lot of reading about science and how at some point it just, you know the weight of it all just tips and nothing really holds together."

Many participants also struggled with the question of theodicy – God's goodness and omnipotence in light of the evil that exists in the world. One participant described the 2007 terrorist attack at *Merkaz Harav* in Jerusalem as a pivotal moment in his life. He stated:

> *You had a terrorist open fire in the yeshiva in Israel, killed I think 7 or 8 kids, and that was like the seed, because I didn't understand how God could do that to you, and you know you're learning Torah, you're doing what you're supposed to be doing and there's a lot of mefarshim that's say if you learn Torah, you're going to be protected from all things, and it just didn't make sense to me.*

A third of all participants questioned their faith and belief in God. For example, one participant spoke in depth about her struggle to believe in God:

> *His [Hashem] hand was always just a little too far for me to reach. And then, when I went to shul, I was like, now I know, I couldn't ever reach your hand because it was never there, you're actually not here.*

Another shared an agnostic view of belief in God:

> *In terms of belief, I don't really believe in any organized religious creeds or anything like that. I think existence is a mystery. I don't know the answers. I haven't met anyone who does. That's as far as I can get.*

Another remembered how adamantly he denied the existence of God:

> *I was a kofer and I wanted the world to know it, and I was very strong in my, I was almost religious about my atheism. No, I'm not frum, I'm not gonna, you know, cause it's not true and you told me lies, that kind of thing.*

Questioning Societal Norms

One in five participants questioned whether the Orthodox community's societal norms and expectations were compatible with their own sense of self. One participant felt that the "frum lifestyle" was "very jarring to like my personal sense of spirituality." Another wondered whether she would "do better" if she was not "trying to force myself to believe and subscribe in a lifestyle that I didn't necessarily actually feel." A gay participant questioned his ability to fit into the community. He remembered asking himself, "is the place that I come from really, do I really feel a sense of at homeness in this community, Orthodox community?"

A few participants described feeling unable to express their authentic selves from within Orthodoxy. A female participant described her feelings of inauthenticity:

> *I felt disconnected from Hashem. And in my mind, it took the form of, I wasn't my authentic self... I would look at people who were totally not frum, nothing, but they were authentic. And I felt like Hashem loves them more than He loves me right now, because I'm so not connected to who I really am.*

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONING

Although there is a common presumption that Orthodox communities are intolerant of, and respond poorly to, challenging questions, two thirds of our participants reported no negative response from Orthodox community members to their questioning.

The remaining third, however, did describe negative responses, which took several forms. The most common type of question that produced a negative response was intellectual, followed by questions related to morality.

No Room to Question

Some participants stated that there was no room within Orthodoxy for questioning. One interviewee stated, "had I been given the space to question and the space to figure it out, probably I would've, I wouldn't have felt the need to rebel in such a public way." Another stated that a pervasive inability to question motivates many to leave, noting, "If there was room for thought, there'd be so many kids that had a seat at their Shabbos table."

Others felt that their questions were not taken seriously by teachers and rabbis. One participant stated, "My questions weren't taken seriously because I'm a good kid, right? I wasn't the kid they were worried about. So, I don't think it wasn't tolerated as much as it wasn't taken seriously... not even humored."

A few felt that their questions were taken as a personal attack on the individuals to whom they were posed. For example, one participant described being thrown out of a high school class for questioning a point the teacher was making in a Gemara lesson; the teacher had taken it as a personal affront. Another participant described an interaction with his father that left him feeling "betrayed."

> *And especially, when he took it personally, my questioning, and he would shout at me for questioning and wouldn't give me the space for questioning. I was very, very, I felt very betrayed. I felt, you always raised me to be, sincere to care about the truth, not just to go along with emotions. And here I am, genuinely wanting to understand, genuinely wanting to discover, and you're just upset with me for wanting to do that.*

Weak Answers

Some participants reported having received answers to their questions that they found unsatisfying. For example, one participant asked why bad things happen to good people and could not bring himself to accept the answers he was given: "then they try to explain that to you and you're like, 'Okay, I don't know.' There was a point where I just did not believe any of like, come on man."

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Participants spoke at length about their family relationships, with emphasis on their parents. When examining these relationships over time—before, during, and after leaving—we saw three distinct patterns.

It should be noted that participants did not always discuss their relationships at all stages of leaving. We have data on all three stages for twenty of the twenty-nine participants, with fifteen clearly falling into one of the three patterns. The other five were more difficult to categorize.

The first pattern was marked by a happy, close relationship in childhood, followed by a difficult or strained period while the participant was leaving Orthodoxy, ending in a repaired or respectful relationship now. This pattern was described by seven participants. Another participant described a variation in this pattern, in which he had not yet reconciled with his family but was moving towards reconciliation.

The second pattern was defined by a difficult or stressful childhood upbringing that continued through the period of leaving Orthodoxy, only to resolve into a repaired or respectful relationship after leaving. Four participants described their relationship with their parents in this way.

The third type of relationship, described by three participants, involved close and warm relationships at all stages of leaving. Two out of these three participants also described leaving Orthodoxy as a natural outgrowth of their upbringing, not a stark departure from the way they were raised. This may account for the stable nature of their family relationships, as these participants did not see themselves as having rejected their parents' values.

Parental Relationships Before Leaving

Of the twenty-two participants who spoke about their relationship with parents before leaving Orthodoxy, ten described coming from a happy, close-knit family in which they maintained positive relationships with their parents. Many respondents described struggling with one parent more than the other; six participants had difficulties mainly with their father and four participants had difficulties mainly with their mother. A small percentage of participants who struggled with their relationship with their parents described a difficult early family life in which they felt neglected and unsupported.

Parental Relationships While Leaving

Fifteen participants experienced relational difficulties with their parents while they were leaving Orthodoxy. They described having "a rocky relationship" or a "rough couple of years" during this stage of their lives. Some described the pain and disappointment their parents felt as they were leaving. Others described intense fighting with their parents. One participant described being put in cherem by her father for writing about queer women in Orthodoxy; two others were cut off from family when they made the decision to leave Orthodoxy.

All four participants who were raised Chasidic struggled in their relationship with their parents while they were leaving Orthodoxy. In contrast, only two of the 10 participants who were raised Modern Orthodox described struggling during this stage. Only three participants described their parents as being supportive during this time in their lives. One participant described her parents as very flexible; they felt that they could be happy for her if she moved to a denomination where she found more Jewish meaning. Another noted that her parents were also moving away from Orthodoxy, although to a lesser degree. The last participant described his parents as persistently working to stay close with him and keep him in the "fold"; he stated that they never had the attitude, "Hey, if you're not frum, go away."

Parental Relationships Now

More than half (13) of those who spoke about their current relationship with parents described strong, loving relationships. Many spoke about healing relationships that ruptured during their departure from Orthodoxy. They felt their parents ultimately just wanted them to be happy and came to accept their decision to leave, prioritizing their relationship over any feelings of anger or disappointment they may have felt.

A few participants described a relationship of mutual understanding that was also marked by a "don't ask, don't tell" policy. Each side understood the other's position and chose not to engage in conversation about things that might harm the relationship.

Only three participants described permanently damaged relationships with their parents. These participants were either cut off from, or themselves chose to have little to do with their families. Of the three, one participant was hopeful that he would soon reconcile with his parents.

Siblings

One-third of all participants had at least one sibling that is also non-Orthodox. Some participants reported having multiple non-Orthodox siblings. It was sometimes apparent that these siblings impacted the respondent in significant ways. One participant stated, "By the time I was in high school, it was clear my brother wasn't religious, and that was like a, you know he was the person I knew best who was not religious." Another commented, "I have one brother who is not frum. An older brother that definitely had an impact on me in a big way. He—he—was a very, very big influence on me when I was younger."

In contrast, other participants expressed disapproval of their non-Orthodox siblings, despite having left Orthodoxy themselves:

> *So, one of my brothers is, has 2 babies with a black woman. Not Jewish. They're living like in an off-grid cabin, and they don't have running water and electricity. They like, you know they're complete, "of the earth", whatever. He's rejected, it's very cool but kind of annoying. They're pretentious about it. But like you know, he has rejected being Jewish... As his kids get older, he is becoming more and more interested in sharing his Jewish self with his wife, or whatever she is [since they are not legally married].*

Participants often mentioned their sibling's spouse or partner in relation to their siblings' religiosity.

> *So, he's like not Shabbat observant now, but I think like, if he does get married and does have kids, he will raise them in an Orthodox community. Like almost kind of like a very like Sefardi kind of mentality there.*

> *I'd say that myself and my brother are probably, I know that my little brother is involved in a Reform synagogue because his partner is considering conversion, [inaudible] but my step sister and step brother, neither of them are affiliated Jewishly.*

> *Then I have 2 sisters who married guys who are not religious. Really good guys they're just not religious.*

The large number of sibling leavers raises several questions that require careful attention in future work. On the one hand, siblings who leave may influence each other to leave. Participants in our study may have followed in the footsteps of other siblings and may also have influenced other siblings to follow them. It is also possible, however, that siblings leave because of underlying family dynamics that impact all the children in the family. If a family is unstable, abusive, or religiously complicated, children may be more susceptible to leaving without direct influence between siblings. Teasing apart the possibilities will require significant future work.

Spouse or Partner

Nearly two-thirds of the participants mentioned a current or past spouse or romantic partner. These partners influenced participants in different ways. Ten participants stated that their partner had a positive impact on their observance; four participants stated that their partner negatively impacted their observance; and four participants stated that their partner did not have an impact on their religious observance.

Of the participants who described a partner as having positively influenced their religious commitments, two stated that their partner explicitly encouraged them to be more religious. One said, "I'll be the one who would want to drive to shul, she'll be the one to push us to walk, so she's like the good angel on my shoulder." Another, whose partner is in the process of converting to Judaism, said that his partner "wants to have a connection with Judaism. She's learning a lot, and we do Judaism together. We encourage each other."

More often, however, participants described such encouragement as implicit rather than explicit. For example, one participant stated that his partner was "always . . . on the up [religiously]. So, a lot of my Judaism was like floored wherever she was." Another participant stated that her partner's religious life provided her with a sense of religious possibility:

> *I was like, oh . . . I like the way you are in the Orthodox community. Like . . . actually I could see myself there . . . I started wearing skirts. I took out my nose ring . . . And he didn't even care, like he didn't ask me to.*

In some cases, participants became more observant in response to having a non-Jewish partner. One participant noted, "I started introducing some Jewish [observance] . . . because [my partner] does like to celebrate Christmas." Another participant stated:

> *Being with him makes me more frum . . . cause . . . there was one time I was talking to somebody, and I was like I feel like I have to prove to you that . . . I'm still very . . . observant in many ways.*

Yet another participant stated that her non-Jewish partner's questions about Judaism encourage her to observe more Jewish practices.

Of those whose partners negatively influenced their religious commitments, two described having been negatively influenced by a spouse's stronger religious commitment, while two described having been negatively influenced by a spouse's weaker religious commitment. One participant noted that when she was deciding not to be observant:

> *I said, oh, okay, I'm okay with marrying somebody not Jewish, you know, like it was, there was a like a lot of soul searching that happens and . . . I'm sure there was a part of it that was like, influenced [by him].*

Conversely, another participant stated that many of the halachic restrictions that his wife brought into the marriage, such as not being able to give their child a bath on Shabbat, pushed him in the opposite direction. He stated, "I think it was some other argument where I just got so turned off by her thing, I'm like basically just screw it, I'm going to turn on my phone."

LGBTQ AND FEMINISM

Although many participants voiced serious criticisms of the Orthodox community's approach to LGBTQ individuals, this subject did not emerge as a major factor in most respondents' decision to leave Orthodoxy. However, it was a factor in leaving for three out of the four participants who identify as part of the LGBTQ community. In contrast, feminism emerged as a significant factor in leaving for those who grew up Modern Orthodox, but not for those raised within other denominations.

LGBTQ

Four of the twenty-nine participants identified as LGBTQ. Out of the four, three described the role of LGBTQ individuals in Orthodoxy as a factor in their decision to leave. The first of these participants stated, "I primarily left Orthodoxy because I'm bisexual, and I could not see a place for me within Orthodoxy as a queer woman." The second participant stated that he left Orthodoxy because he perceived the Orthodox community as unable to provide solutions to contemporary issues such as dealing with LGBTQ individuals.

Though he didn't describe his sexual orientation as the primary factor in his decision to leave Orthodoxy, the third participant did express a great deal of pain surrounding this subject: "There's pain here, because there's a sense of, I'm not, I don't have a sense of belonging in an Orthodox community." He went on to state that even were he to attempt to rejoin the Orthodox community and follow halacha, he "would feel a sense of dissonance with myself, because I don't really feel a sense that, halachically, spiritually, religiously, or socially, that I can fit into that box anymore."

Feminism

Feminist critiques of Orthodoxy played a much bigger role for those raised Modern, Chabad, and Centrist Orthodox than for those raised Yeshivish and Chasidic, for whom this subject appeared almost non-existent as a factor in the decision to leave. However, respondents raised in all Orthodox communities expressed such criticism after having left.

Seven of ten respondents who were raised Modern Orthodox described the role of women in Orthodoxy as a factor in their leaving. This was also true of three out of four respondents who were raised Centrist Orthodox and of both participants raised in Chabad. Only one of nine participants who were raised Yeshivish mentioned women's roles in Orthodoxy as a factor in their leaving, and none of the Chasidic participants did.

A female participant stated that she had found it difficult to remain Orthodox because women were not valued in shul or with respect to Torah learning. Some participants described residual trauma from similar experiences. A female participant who is studying to become a Rabbi stated:

> *I also still have to do a lot of work with like my inner child trauma around like when I try to hold the Torah to return it [to the Aron Kodesh], and they're like [worried gasp], and I'm like - are you saying that because I'm a woman? And then I realize that they're saying it because they think that I can't hold it because it's heavy.*

Another participant described wanting to connect to God in shul but stated, "if I start butting up against that constricting feeling that I had growing up of women can't do this, you can't eat here, you can't do this, I walk away, and that's for my own mental sanity."

Disconnects, Fissures, And Religious Misalignment.

Participants described having felt disconnected from the Orthodox community and religiously misaligned in a wide range of ways as they were growing up.

DISCONNECTS AND LACK OF BELONGING

Fully 86% of participants described feeling that they did not belong in some way. They either felt socially different than their peers, not Orthodox enough, or not wealthy enough. Participants described themselves as "not fitting in the box" or "feeling out of place on some level." Many participants switched schools or communities at some point during their childhoods or adolescence. Such moves often precipitated or exacerbated feelings of not belonging. Participants also described themselves as having wanted to do things that their community did not allow, or that went against the basic tenets of Orthodoxy. They reported feeling inclined both to violate social norms within their communities, e.g. by dressing differently than other members of the community, as well as to violate Jewish law, halacha, for example, by eating non-kosher food.

Social Norms and Socioeconomic Status

One participant reported having struggled socially in peer-to-peer interactions. Another participant stated that he had experienced prejudice because he was Black and felt that racial prejudice hindered his social acceptance. Yet another participant described not fitting in socially with the students in his yeshiva during a gap year in Israel. One participant, who moved away from Orthodoxy later in life, described her struggle to fit in socially after she switched her children to public school which violated societal norms in her community:

> *So, we ended up putting our kids in public school, and that completely changed how the community responded to us, connected with us... So, we had a very hard time in the community the minute that we did this, because people wouldn't let their children play with ours. People were not inclusive, I mean they really, and I would go to shul every Shabbos, the people stopped saying good shabbos to us, they didn't want to socialize with us.*

Other participants described their social isolation as a product of class and status differences. One participant reported feeling "dwarfed by other people's wealth." Another participant noted that she had been very aware of being surrounded by wealthy people and had felt that she "was not in that group." A third participant described the dynamics between wealthier and lower-class members of her community:

> *In [city in the Midwest], it was like, people, there was a requirement to be friendly to people who were poorer than you or had less yichus than you. But you felt that you were a second-class citizen, and children are really smart and intuitive, and they can feel that. And my response to that was... I just had so much pride I was like, I don't want to have anything to do with this.*

Ba'al Teshuva and Convert Families

Nine participants were children of *ba'alei teshuvah* and three were children of converts. These participants stated that their parents' non-Orthodox background impacted their family's social belonging and ability to fit into the community. One participant stated:

> *It's just our family was different, because my mother converted, my father is, a strange person ... When we moved to [a city in the Midwest] I all of a sudden realized that people thought we were weird. And so I think mostly we ended up befriending other families that the community saw as weird.*

Two participants described this type of alienation in cultural terms. For example, one participant stated that the "frum from birth" world was different from her own:

> *The culture there [frum from birth] was something that was actually unfamiliar to all of us, and that we either had to fight to belong in, or just opt out of. And I'm the only one who opted out of it.*

Changing Schools and Communities

Just over a quarter of participants described having experienced difficult or frequent moves to new communities where they struggled to fit in. For example, one participant struggled after moving to a socially homogeneous community; she wondered if she would have fit in more in a diverse community but then stated, "Or maybe I just feel like an outsider wherever, anywhere I went." Another participant spoke about "the huge culture shock" of moving to a new city and the feeling of being lost in the conversations her peers were having. Yet another participant felt that as a member of the new family in town, she "felt on display all the time." A participant that moved from a small, close-knit community to a larger community stated that over time it "increasingly got less appealing to me to be a part of it."

More than a third of all participants said they had switched schools over the course of their education. Several participants who switched schools explained that they were asked to leave their current school by the administration or the rabbinical leaders of the school. One noted that he understood why he had been asked to leave but felt he could have adapted to the school's requirements and succeeded had the school given him more of a chance. He noted, "you're a yeshivah, you don't want to have a [name]. But you guys could have a [name]! … I was like, just give me some time, you know." Many of the participants who had been asked to leave a school and attended schools "for kids who are a little bit different, who aren't necessarily towing the line, fitting in the box." Few participants who attended alternative schools of this type described positive movement within or towards Orthodoxy as a result.

Lack of Religious Belonging

Several participants described feeling out of sync with Orthodox religious ideas and culture. One participant stated that she felt herself to be on the fringe of Orthodoxy and that she had a "fluid way of thinking, that there really wasn't space for, at least in the Orthodoxy I was raised." Another participant described discomfort with the Orthodox system of beliefs about reward and punishment and wanted to "join a different denomination and kind of live in a way that felt sure to myself, without always feeling like an outsider in the Orthodox community." Another participant felt, "the Orthodox Jews around me didn't really feel like a community I fit into. And so, I became friends with more Conservative people, more Reform people."

Such religious differences created tensions for participants within the Orthodox community. Participants described being looked down on, yelled at, or ostracized for not being "religious enough" or for struggling with their level of observance. One participant stated that the rigid religious expectations made him feel "out of place" and caused "discomfort, feeling that I wasn't completely at home." Another participant attributed some of his lack of religious belonging to the term *off the derech*. He explained, "I never liked the word *off the derech* and stuff like that. I just feel like that way of thinking, it automatically separates people."

Fissures

Over half the participants experienced a sense of disjointed expectations—gaps between parental, educational, or communal expectations of them and what they wanted for themselves. In contrast to the feeling of a lack of belonging that was often foisted on them from the outside, these feelings were often driven by participants' need to move away from Orthodox practices and standards. Several participants expressed the need to dress differently, to violate *halacha*, and to experience the secular world. These initial desires to explore the non-Orthodox world or to push the boundaries of Orthodoxy ultimately led a number of participants to reject Orthodox traditions altogether.

Clothes

For a quarter of the participants, clothing standards played a role in such feelings of fissure. One participant described community members who chastised him for wearing shorts on Shabbos, saying "you should be dressed nicer, cleaner, fresher."

Another participant stated that she had felt tied down by the community standards of modesty, saying:

> *I used to wear these skirts that were like black Lycra that like are just, just, like technically they're skirts, but really there's, you can see everything, and I did it because I needed that identity like I'm an Orthodox woman, I only wear skirts, and I just was like, what am I holding on to this for, like I can buy a pair of jeans, and then I'll be much more tznius actually.*

Halacha

A quarter of the participants described having wanted to purposefully violate Orthodox halakhic norms. One participant explained this desire this way:

> *We were frum kids, we grew up in healthy, happy households, and all of a sudden, we get sent to yeshiva and we're just rejecting everything. We're like, you know, screw you, we're angry, we're whatever right? We were not getting the answers to our questions, which at the time is why we used it as an excuse.*

Another participant said, "I had a long bucket list of things that I'm not allowed to do, that I'm gonna do. And the only reason why they were on the bucket list is because they're not allowed."

The Outside World

About 17% of participants described feeling drawn to the secular world. One participant noted that he was "just more intrigued by the idea of just the convenience… I would go to the mall with my friends, and they would go to Sbarro's, and I would not." Another participant explained that after she acquired her first laptop after high school, she felt as if she had been "starved for so long." She explained, "I need to just catch up on movies and like I did for a couple of years, like, I just watched shows and movies and just caught up." Experiencing a taste of the secular world often led participants to feel that they had been deprived of important experiences.

Different Forms of Judaism

10% of the participants explored different forms of Judaism than they were raised with. A participant who identified as bisexual described wanting to leave Orthodox Judaism when she realized that other movements in Judaism fully accommodated women and queer individuals. A Modern Orthodox participant commented that he took time after his gap year in Israel to explore his spiritual connection to Judaism within Chabad and *Chasidus*, which weren't forms of Judaism he had previously been exposed to.

MISALIGNMENT

The most significant fissure that emerged from our interviews was misalignment between different elements of participants' lives. Fully, 100% of our interviewees described some form of serious misalignment of this type while growing up, whether religious, social, or political. Many of these misalignments were centered around family and were especially salient when families experienced religious shifts and when the family's religious observance and beliefs differed from communal and school norms.

Misalignment between different aspects of life required our participants to reconcile inconsistent ideas, expectations, or experiences. One participant noted that it was "difficult in terms of having consistent views of Judaism," because the messages she received from family members about Judaism conflicted with those she received in school.

Misalignment Within the Family

More than half of the participants experienced misalignment within their families. This sometimes manifested as a lack of alignment between parents' forms of religiosity, as in one case where one parent was adopting Charedi practices while the other didn't even keep Shabbos. At times, family misalignment manifested in the context of rapid or radical changes in the family's form of observance. Sometimes both features were present, as with one participant whose mother became significantly more religious after visiting a Chabad Rabbi:

> *She's wearing, you know, like a snood, she's covering her hair. She makes my dad stop off in Queens to pick up Chalav Yisrael milk. And she basically came home a different person after a week. So, I think we were all like, kind of what the hell is going on here. This is crazy.*

This change caused an irreversible strain between his parents, and they eventually divorced.

Tension from religious shifts was most acute when the religious changes happened rapidly. A female participant described experiencing confusion during her father's rapid religious journey, "My father dressed like in a *bekeshe* and whatever, and then had stumbled over *kiddush*, you know. So, it was like, there was like some of that element of like disjointedness."

Drastic religious change had an impact even when the change occurred before the participant was born. An unusually large percentage of our participants had family members who significantly changed their religious practices.

School Misalignment

Twenty-two of the twenty-nine participants described a misalignment between themselves or their families and their schools. Schools are central to the religious socialization that takes place in Orthodox communities. Participants whose schools maintained different religious norms from their families, for example in dress, entertainment, Torah learning, and adherence to *halacha*, described feeling a great deal of tension and confusion, as if they belonged to a different world. One participant stated, "I never really was quite in the same world as any of the schools I was in." Discussing his parents' reaction to his school forbidding him to play guitar, another stated:

> *I was told not to be playing guitar in school, because it wasn't a frum thing to do and like they [parents] were very upset and pushed back on that. So, I definitely think that my parents kind of stood their ground, regardless of what communities we were in.*

Participants described attending schools that were both more right-wing *hashkafically* and more left-wing *hashkafically* than their families. For example, one participant described her school as:

> *...extremely yeshivish. It was more yeshivish than my parents. They were very strict. They were very like, you know, do the utmost. They were always about like doing, even more than my parents... like with all the little things, like closing your top button, like where it was like way above your collarbone anyways, or things like that.*

In contrast, one participant who attended a non-Chasidic school even though his family was Chasidic:

> *My home was Chasidish. So we were one of the only families in town who spoke Yiddish. I was one of the only kids in school that had long peyos. Because my school was Litvish. We weren't allowed to do some things that the other kids did.*

Some participants stated that they themselves had been hashkafically different from the schools they attended and that they would have benefitted from a school that was more suited to their own religious interests and abilities. One participant described his school's yeshivish environment as overly intense:

> *I was in yeshivah, I was in ninth grade. We were up from 7 o'clock and we were back in the dorms at 9:30, lights out at 10:15. That's a brutal day for a 14-year-old. Right? That's a brutal, that's like 7 hours, 8 hours of yeshivah plus, you know, 2 hours of English, because you know the English right. And what was I witnessing? I was witnessing my yeshivish friends who had the expectation of always continuing along that life and just going straight through kollel. And they were gonna be successful at that, and a lot of them were, but in ninth grade for me there was no way in hell I wanted to do that. I don't want to learn.*

One participant stated that her school didn't value career preparation, which was important to her. Ruth described the path that her school expected from students this way: "if they had it the way they wanted it, we would all go to Seminary and then get married immediately afterwards, you know, follow a certain course of things." But this wasn't a *hashkafa* she felt comfortable with.

Struggling in School

Academic misalignment was also an issue for six participants who described struggling to meet the academic demands of their schoolwork. Several of these participants spoke about being diagnosed, or diagnosing themselves later in life, with ADD or ADHD. One talked about how his academic struggles and inability to succeed in school contributed to his mental wellbeing, "I had a lot of depression, anxiety, a lot of stuff like that growing up and ADD for sure played a big role in that." Another described the frustration he felt about the way traditional testing was misaligned with his way of demonstrating academic proficiency in school:

> *They didn't recognize the non, what is it, neuro-divergent, non-neuro, whatever that term is. They did not recognize that I was not processing information the same way, you know. I held all the information, but if you wanted it for me right there and then, I probably was not going to give it to you. Right, let me do my thing, and I will get you all the information you need.*

Communal Misalignment

Many participants described having grown up in families that differed significantly from the broader communities they belonged to. One participant noted that her family was stricter than other families who were more modern. Another participant noted that her mother was a career-driven woman in a community that did not value women's careers. A male participant said that the discrepancy between his family and the community made him feel like he was "caught between two worlds." A female participant described feeling alienated from the *hashkafically* right-wing Jews in her community; "the Orthodox Jews around me didn't really feel like a community I fit into." Another described feeling out of place for privileging a career over marriage, saying "I also felt like everyone's getting married, there's not really a place for me in the community."

Participants whose families were either more religious or less religious than their schools or communities, or who themselves felt misaligned with their schools or communities, described feeling that they had to constantly negotiate their religious identities. Depending on the context, they might have to adopt behaviors that they didn't really believe in, or else stand out as radically different. Religious mixed messages of this kind were a source of significant trauma and confusion for many of the participants, both as a primary source of religious confusion and because of their secondary effects – bullying, cruelty from peers and/or teachers, and social isolation.

Many Participants Experienced Forms of Trauma and Instability Before, During, and After Leaving.

ABUSE

More than a quarter of participants experienced sexual abuse. Not everyone provided information on the nature of the abuse, but some examples include:

- Adam* [40] was sexually abused by a counselor in camp.
- Naama* was sexually abused by her ex-husband while they were married.
- Shayna* was sexually abused by her boss at work and experienced sexual harassment at several companies where she worked.
- When he was 12, Yonason* was sexually abused by a 16–17-year-old camp counselor (not while in camp). His abuser is now a Rebbe.
- Berel* was frequently molested when he was 10 years old by a rabbi in the community, who was also a close family friend.
- Raizel* was abused by a rabbinical figure as a young child, and again when she was older.

A quarter of participants experienced physical abuse. Some examples include:

- In his cheder, Yossi* was physically abused by teachers; he described the abuse as "hitting, kicking, punching, frisking".
- Yonason's* second grade Rebbe slapped him across the face.
- The Rabbi who sexually abused Berel* also physically abused him.
- Jonah's* teacher threw him across the room in yeshiva. The teacher was fired immediately after this incident.
- Raizel* was also physically abused by those who sexually abused her.
- Yedidya* experienced severe bullying, including physical assault, and having his payos forcibly cut off.

Many participants described a variety of forms of emotional abuse at home and at school. Unlike physical and sexual abuse, the line that separates ordinary emotional turbulence and an abusive interaction is difficult to draw, especially in hindsight after many years. Sometimes it is simply too hard to tell, as in the case of Michal*, who described an extremely emotionally unstable home but then said, "I wouldn't call it like emotional abuse, but it was just like not emotionally healthy."

- Yossi's* father reacted in an emotionally abusive way when he began asking questions about his Judaism.
- Naama* felt emotionally abused by her ex-husband (who also sexually abused her), specifically with respect to finances and sexual relations. In addition, she experienced emotional abuse from her mother, who she described as unstable and addicted to drugs.
- Devorah* father had anger issues and was verbally violent.
- Rina* described her father as emotionally abusive, specifically in relation to questions of religion.
- Batya's* principal would watch her over the security cameras, and dictate what she could or couldn't do, and who she should be friends with.
- Meira* stated that certain teachers who expressed concern about her religiosity were actually being emotionally manipulative (and condescending).
- The teachers and administrators of the *cheder Yossi** attended were also emotionally abusive (in addition to the physical abuse described above).
- Yonasan* was humiliated by his teacher in front of the whole class. For example, he was denounced as a *kofer* (heretic).

ILLEGAL SUBSTANCE USE

Eighteen of twenty-nine participants used illegal substances either recreationally or habitually. The ages and environments in which substance abuse began varied from high school, to yeshiva, to college and participants' late twenties. A number of participants described their substance use as an addiction (31% had addictions to drugs and alcohol); a small number of participants also described addictions to pornography, sex, vaping, cigarettes, and medication.

Recreational Use of Drugs and Alcohol

Some participants described using drugs and alcohol to have a good time with friends at religious functions, music festivals, or on a Shabbos afternoon. This was often fueled by social pressure. For example, one participant stated, "I never really liked alcohol, but I just do it because, you know, people were doing it at a tisch or a dinner or something, and I just join in." Another participant noted, "I smoked some pot, and I tried acid a couple of times. I didn't like the feeling, but I also wanted to connect, you know."

Other participants used drugs or alcohol to help them deal with challenging experiences. One participant linked her substance use to her father's death. Others reporting used substances to cope with the challenges associated with their exit from Orthodoxy. Some described substance use as part of the process of trying new and different things: "being a rebel also means experimenting, well it means experimenting with like marijuana and stuff. But besides that, it means experimenting with not being religious."

Abuse of Drugs and Alcohol

Many participants reported recognizing that they had a serious problem with substance abuse after reaching a low point in their lives. One participant described herself as realizing that she had no boundaries with men and no sense of self-worth; this realization was the catalyst for major life changes, which included stopping her use and abuse of substances. Another participant described his substance abuse as caused by insecurities surrounding dating; he started seeing a therapist to address the issue.

Other participants received outside assistance that helped them to identify and address their substance abuse. One participant stated:

> *The people who referred me to them straight up told me to my face you're a drug addict, and you need help. And to me I thought, no, I'm not a drug addict, I'm a kid who needs help. I'm a kid who needs a lot of help, it's not only drugs.*

Another interviewee reported believing that he experienced Divine intervention with respect to his drug use, an experience that shifted his perspective on God:

> *I was doing a lot of drugs at one point, and I was going to die. And I couldn't stop even though I knew I was going to die. I don't know how much you know about addiction, but like I really just, I just couldn't, I just couldn't stop. I just couldn't, couldn't, stop. And one night I fell on my knees and I just begged, but I was like there's no God, but like whatever I don't care, like I need it, please help. And I said the Hashem, Hashem, Kel Rachum Vechanun [God, God, compassionate and gracious] right, like a whole bunch of times like over and over and over again. Hashem, Hashem, Kel Rachum. And I just like begged for help, right. And the next day I woke up, and I went to sleep. I [inaudible] everything I had, and I went to sleep. And this is after months of using, like I couldn't stop. And the next morning I woke up and I said, I'm not doing it anymore, I swore off, which was pretty commonplace for me. And a couple hours later I changed my mind, which is also commonplace for me, and I went to go move money around my bank account. And that day someone had gotten ahold of my bank account and hacked it, and emptied it so I couldn't get high. Now that might be coincidence.*

> *You could chalk it up, you could chalk it up to coincidence if you wanted to. But to me it was just very clear. The timing was too suspect. Combined with other experiences that I've had that that like that's there's God. He's looking out. You just have to ask. Karov Hashem l'chol korov l'chol asher yikra'uhu b'emes [God is close to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him sincerely]. I live by that.*

DEPRESSION

Nine participants reported experiencing depression during their lifetime. Three of them attributed this depression to their religious experiences. For example, one participant who experienced a bout of depression and anxiety, said, "it felt like it had something to do with in being in the community and not feeling like I fit in correctly." Another participant stated that her depression and obsessive behaviors caused her to question Judaism in an obsessive way, which then led to a breakdown of her religious beliefs. A participant who is bisexual attributed her life-long depression to fear of not being accepted in the Orthodox community due to her sexual orientation.

The other six participants did not understand their depression as related to Judaism. One participant, for example, described her grandfather's death and her weight loss surgery as the causes of her depression. Another participant grappled with depression while she was in seminary; that school year began with the 9/11 attacks, and she reported having felt scared of violence and terrorism during this period.

DEATH AND DIVORCE

Five of the participants' parents divorced while they were growing up. Five participants were themselves divorced (before or while they were leaving). A quarter of the participants experienced the death of a close relative or friend. Four out of these seven individuals lost a parent, while the other three either lost another family member, a close friend, or a significant role model. Additionally, four of these seven individuals noted losing two or more significant people before leaving Orthodoxy.

A female participant's mother died during her senior year of high school, though she didn't think this played a role in her leaving Orthodoxy. For another participant, Judaism played a positive role in helping her cope with loss. This participant lost her childhood best friend at five years old due to a Jewish genetic disease but felt that Judaism helped her overcome that trauma.

Sometimes death impacted participants even when experienced at a remove. For example, one noted that the death of the Lubavitcher Rebbe—who many in Chabad had assumed to be Moshiach—was very important in his religious journey. The centrality of the Rebbe to the entire Chabad religious worldview made the Rebbe's death as personal and as devastating as the death of a close relative.

It's Hard to Overstate the Importance of Rabbis

One of the most significant elements in participants' personal narratives was their past and present relationship to Orthodox rabbis. More than half of the participants had positive experiences with rabbinic figures, but more than half also had seriously negative experiences (some people had both positive and negative experiences).

These experiences emerged from our interviews as especially important to the participants' sense of themselves and their religious histories. Although we did not ask direct questions about the role of rabbinical figures in their life stories, many participants independently singled out their experience with a rabbi as the most important factor in either alienating them or reconciling them in some way to Orthodoxy.

POSITIVE EXPERIENCES WITH RABBIS

Participants who reported positive experiences with rabbis described rabbinic figures who had been supportive and caring when they were struggling. These rabbis were there for them during the hard times in their lives when they may not have had any other source of support and may have been alienated, even from their parents and siblings. More than a few participants described staying close to these rabbis for decades, well after leaving the Orthodox community.

Many participants had one particular rabbinical figure that they trusted even at times when they felt alienated from everyone else in their lives. One participant remarked, "he actually wanted to get to know me, and what I was struggling with, and like no one in my entire life had ever given me the time of day, you know." Another stated:

> *Honestly, he's like God's gift to our communities. He's like a phenomenal, forget "rabbi", he is a phenomenal human being. Like as good a human being as there is, and I actually enjoy going now just to hear him speak. You know, I connect with a lot of what he says, and I'll go, if I'm not there, I'll go read his stuff online. So, like I'll enjoy going just to, even though I don't really care for so many of the people in the shul, I'll go just to hear him.*

Participants described even small positive interactions with rabbinic figures as important in their lives. One participant stated:

> *I had this wonderful Rebbe for 11 days, and I remember in that time my viewpoint, again I was a turbulent, horny, you know, teen, I had nothing else I wanted. I remember at that time thinking like you know what, this ain't so bad. This ain't so bad, this, this like frum thing.*

While some individuals only interacted with a rabbinical figure in passing, some built relationships that lasted for years. One participant stated:

> *Yeah, I had no interest in sitting and learning all day, but I did actually become very close with my Rebbe, who did Night Seder, and again I'm there in 1999 I think, and I'm actually still close with him 24 years later.*

A theme that emerged in the interviews was that rabbis were successful in connecting with individuals struggling with religion when they *listened* and *expressed interest* in the participants' well-being, regardless of their own religious beliefs. This allowed rabbis to connect with participants as human being, rather than religious authority figures. Sometimes rabbis used this connection to encourage participants towards Orthodox observance. One participant took a greater interest in Judaism after reading passages from *Tehillim* that a rabbi had given her. Another participant attended an Orthodox camp that his rabbi had promoted and had a positive experience there.

Participants described rabbinic figures with whom they had positive interactions poignantly:

> *He was a good dude. He understood. He didn't grow up frum. He could have done whatever he wanted, and he fell into it. He drank the punch when he was like 18, so he understood our distractions better than most people.*
>
> *The rabbis actually care, like I felt like I was a person there. And I think that allowed me to trust them and allowed me to connect more. It allowed me to be myself, and I thought that exploded everything.*
>
> *There is a very big Rav in our community, who for whatever reason, was always very attached to me. He's close to my family and he always really saw something in me, I guess, and he came and visited me in rehab when I was 18. He drove like 2 and a half hours out just to come visit me. And that was impactful. That was impactful. I always [inaudible] there was always a connection. No matter how far away from Judaism I went there was always a connection.*
>
> *He was my rabbi, and he's my age. We're chavrusas. And he can sit [inaudible] this rabbi, which I think every good Rabbi should do. But he was my Rabbi, my friend, my father, my brother, my therapist, my home, my everything.*

NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES WITH RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

In contrast to these positive experiences, participants also described negative experiences with rabbinic figures that had profoundly negative and long-lasting effects, remaining a source of anger and pain for decades.

Bullying and Belittling

Participants described rabbis who bullied and belittled them, mocked them for their deviance, and excluded them from their communities. These participants also described feeling tremendous pressure to conform to rabbis' expectations to avoid being targeted as a problem.

> *Something about the way I carried myself definitely didn't sit right with some rabbis in hanhala, whether that was at [the yeshiva I was at in ninth grade] or [my other high school] and I remember, especially as I got more involved in NCSY thinking like, man these guys are so warm and welcoming, and why can't the rabbis at [my high school] be more like that?*

Another participant noted that "anytime I tried to actively make an effort to do something religious, he'd have some snide comment to make." Another participant described a female religious authority figure tormenting her:

> *She would single me out like all the time, she would like, you know, call me in her office and yell at me, tell me I'm doing a bad job, she would just like, she was completely awful to me.*

Another participant wasn't personally targeted by her rabbi but felt that her values were constantly undermined by his speeches:

> *The rabbi of the synagogue that I grew up in has given sermons about how tzniyut means women don't rise to certain positions. And that is just a thing that I grew up with, and a thing that I knew that it would not be valued.*

UNETHICAL BEHAVIOR

A few participants expressed anger at rabbinical figures who behaved in ways they perceived as unethical. One participant stated:

> *They'd bring us up to the Rocky Mountains for Shabbatons and the principal like, I never, I was not comfortable dancing, so I didn't. They used to dance a lot. And he always used to be like, come on, get in there, dance, and like he used to just sit there and watch everyone dance, and like, it just didn't make sense in my head, it was like what the hell? I don't, I don't understand.*

Other participants described rabbinic figures who had behaved in ways that clearly violated appropriate boundaries, including by attempting to manipulate their life choices.

One participant described a rabbi who took an unhealthy interest in her religious trajectory and told her that God was talking to her through him.

Another participant stated:

> *April time of the year that I'm supposed to graduate. My menahel at the time pulls me aside, and he's like, I know a way for you to graduate... He's like well right now, you're not graduating our yeshiva. I'm like, what do you mean I'm not graduating yeshiva, what do you mean? I'm like, I get all my grades. What are you saying? He's, like well, you've actually failed bekius, and bekius is an actual English course according to our report cards, and which is, I mean, I did fail... He's like, the plan is, [name] has to go to yeshiva in Israel and complete one year. And once he does that, I will give him his diploma. We were going back and forth, my dad, who's like the one who usually pushes me to be religious, he told the principal, like, why he doesn't even want to go to yeshiva. Why, it's like a waste of time, waste of money. I hated it. I didn't care about it. It was firm though, a grade is a grade. So, this was very much manipulation.*

Another stated:

> *I was involved with the girl in [the Southeast] that I was engaged to that was, that was pretty bad. That was pretty bad. The rabbi, the community, like they were, they all did a bunch of stuff that was really messed up [in order to control his behavior]. They—it was my grandmother's ring, they held it for ransom... the whole thing was crazy. And the rabbi backed everything they did. Because very, very clearly, because this guy, her father, was like the main donor for the Shul [so the Rabbi manipulated the participant at the father's request].*

Another stated:

> *My Chabad rabbi, like making comments like after months and months of knowing him, that he thought that I should like marry a guy. Like it's not any of his business. I wasn't like, he didn't know anything about my life, except that I enjoyed studying Torah.*

HARMFUL RESPONSES

Finally, participants described rabbis who had been unwilling to answer religious questions or who had responded poorly to them as having had profoundly negative impacts on them. One participant stated,

> *We were learning in class about, in response to people with disabilities as it's described in the Talmud and trying to ask these questions. And then what would happen, and it would be like the response was generally like, "Go, go, leave the class because you're being annoying.*

Another noted:

> *The reason you have these questions is because you're not on the madregah to understand the level of the discourse of the rabbis. So, therefore, like, what you need to do is sort of like humble yourself, because obviously the rabbis know more than you.*

Another participant stated:

> *My ninth grade rebbe called me a kofer [heretic] in front of the whole class. I don't know if that's abuse, or more just the inability to answer questions. I, we, were learning a certain Gemara, and I raised my hand, and I said, I think d'rabbanans [laws ordained by the rabbinical sages] are optional. D'oraysas [laws that is based directly on the Torah] you have to do. But D'rabanans you know. He flew off his rail. That was an interesting situation.*

ORTHODOX UNION
CENTER FOR COMMUNAL RESEARCH

Part 3

Insights, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Topics That Did Not Appear to Factor in Participants' Lives

A number of factors that we had hypothesized before conducting these interviews might be potentially relevant to the experience of people leaving the Orthodox community emerged as relatively unimportant in our interviewees' narratives. *This doesn't mean that a larger, broader, survey will not identify these factors as important, but it does suggest that they may be less salient than we initially thought.*

YEAR IN ISRAEL

For those who had spent a year in Israel after high school, the experience did not seem to play a major role in their religious trajectory. Several participants described becoming a bit more religious during this period, but the year in Israel did not emerge as a major theme in any of our interviews.

COLLEGE

Likewise, college did not play a particularly important role in participants' narratives, neither as a major inflection point nor as a site for leaving Orthodoxy. A number of participants spoke about college and reported a variety of experiences there, but the common narrative that Orthodox Jews often leave Orthodoxy as a result of going to college was not substantiated by our interviews. Most of the participants who attended college were already questioning Judaism and thinking about leaving Orthodoxy well before they arrived there.

OTD

Very few participants consider themselves members of the "OTD" community. Only 14% identified as OTD, and another 17% said they had some affiliation with the OTD community. As noted earlier, this is significant as the OTD community is probably the most recognizable and well-known community of leavers, and facts about that community tend to shape the public's perception of people who leave Orthodoxy. They may not represent a very large proportion of those who leave, however.

FAMILY ALIENATION

Very few participants were alienated from their families, despite often having had strained relationships while leaving. This is consistent with Newfield's work with Satmar and Lubavitch leavers.[41] Like the "alienated OTD" narrative mentioned above, family alienation may be less common than is often presumed.

SHIDDUCHIM

Difficulties in *shidduchim* did not emerge as a major cause of participants' leaving and did not come up often in interviews. Most participants began their journey away from Orthodoxy well before they became old enough to begin the *shidduch* process. Those participants who mentioned *shidduchim* at all noted that the *shidduch* process confirmed for them that they were not willing or interested in leading an Orthodox life, rather than causing them to leave.

THERAPY

When asked about experiences with therapy, participants neither described positive experiences that helped them remain in the Orthodox community nor negative experiences that exacerbated their struggles within the community. Participants' statements about therapy were mainly neutral and unrelated to their decision to leave. Some literature and a good deal of anecdotal "common wisdom" has suggested that bad experiences with poorly-trained Orthodox therapists contributes to some people's decision to leave Orthodoxy. Conversely, there are those who suggest that good therapists can keep people from leaving. Our interviews did not substantiate either hypothesis.

SECULAR EXPOSURE

Although it is likely that overall levels of exposure to secular American culture play a role in individual's different trajectories in leaving different Orthodox communities (Modern, Yeshivish, and Chasidic), at the individual level, such exposure did not play a major role in participants' decisions to leave. Thus, the overall fact that Modern Orthodox communities are much more connected to the "outside" world may allow them to see the world through a secular lens, raising questions and concerns that wouldn't emerge in other contexts. This might result in more Modern Orthodox people leaving (or may not—we do not yet know), but at an individual level, participants did not describe being pulled away from Orthodoxy by experiences with secular culture.

Conclusions: What We Now Understand

It is almost always inaccurate and reductive to attribute any complex human decision to a single simple cause. To highlight any one phenomenon as the reason people leave Orthodox Judaism would be both condescending and incorrect. People make autonomous choices about their lives for all sorts of reasons, and often for reasons they themselves cannot articulate. Nevertheless, with a mission to serve the Orthodox community, to promote Jewish religious life, and to support Jews themselves, the Orthodox Union has a natural interest in better understanding the phenomenon of attrition from Orthodoxy and religious movement within Orthodoxy. This study identifies several key factors that *may play a role* in Orthodox attrition. This study also sheds light on some of the features of the experiences of leavers, such as when in life people leave and how leavers relate to Orthodoxy (and to Judaism more broadly).

This rich data also gives us a deep understanding of the many different ways people leave, and the very different meanings leaving holds for our participants. Some leavers hold on dearly to Orthodox practices, without any belief in the truth of Orthodoxy; others believe in Orthodoxy and value it, despite not remaining Orthodox; yet others don't think about issues of practice and belief at all—completely different factors drive their religious behavior. The heartfelt and poignant descriptions of participants' struggles, traumas, successes, and accomplishments, reflect deeply on what it means to be a Jew in the modern world, and how Orthodoxy holds meaning for people who are raised in it—even long after they leave.

The narratives in this report give voice to the experiences of people who have often upended their lives in dramatic ways. These experiences could not have been easy to share. In doing so, our participants have performed a great service to the Orthodox Union and to the Jewish people.

Some of the things we have learned as a result of our participants' brave honesty include the following points:

The seeds of leaving are planted early. Most participants report having started questioning aspects of Orthodoxy before completing high school, with six participants reporting questioning as early as middle school. More than half (17) of all participants said they began to question during or immediately after high school and only six out of the twenty-nine participants reported starting to question aspects of Judaism and Orthodoxy during college or later.

A third went through a period of leading a double life before completely leaving, about half gradually left over a period of several years, while a few (5) experienced a quick break in their belief and observance. However, not everyone completely leaves—some remain in a liminal state, and some leave and subsequently return.

For some Modern Orthodox participants, it may not be fair to suggest that they experienced any radical change. 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. Some of the ways participants described the world reflect Orthodox values and beliefs. For example, participants described secular life as lacking in values, in community, and in charity and care, all values they felt were present in Orthodox communities. Others expressed positivity towards the sense of identity that Orthodoxy instills in its adherents, and many retained aspects of those identities even after leaving.

Participants maintained connections to Jewish traditions and practices, to Jewish texts, to shul and davening, and to Shabbos. Some expressed the desire for their children to be able to choose Orthodoxy if they were so inclined. 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 was its perceived extreme rigidity and intolerance. Concerns around feminist issues were a contributing factor in leaving for close to half of participants, and while many are currently unhappy with Orthodoxy's treatment of LGBTQ issues, this may not have played a major role in their process of leaving, although it was a factor for most (3 of 4) participants from the LGBTQ community and one non-LGBT individual.

Communal treatment of feminist issues 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, where this factor was almost non-existent. After leaving, participants raised in all communities shared this criticism.

Participants experienced a variety of fissures and disconnects in their lives. This is not surprising. But notably, religious misalignment emerged as the most important form of disconnection across our interviews. Close to 90% felt that they did not belong in some way. They either felt socially different than their peers, not academically successful, not Orthodox enough, or not wealthy enough. Many participants switched schools or communities, which either caused this feeling of isolation or exacerbated it.

The most significant element of disconnection to emerge from our interviews overall was varying forms of religious misalignment between different elements of participants' lives. Serious misalignment of this kind while growing up was described by **100%** of the interviewees. Examples included:

- Parents weren't on the same page as each other religiously; one parent might be adopting Charedi practices while the other didn't even keep Shabbos.
- Parents changed their religious orientation quickly, leaving other members of the family scrambling to keep up. For example, a family might barely keep kosher one day and be keeping Chalav Yisroel the next.
- Participants and their families were either more religiously "right-wing" or more religiously "left-wing" than their school or community. Participants described having to shift their religious identity depending on the context, or else stand out as radically different. Aside from the religious mixed messages this setup created—as misalignment was a source of significant trauma and confusion for many of the participants—the misalignment also caused secondary trauma as well, in the form of bullying, rejection and cruelty from teachers, or social isolation.

The question of misalignment requires serious additional study. In particular, we have to ask whether misalignment can also be a positive factor in religious development. Parents may send children to schools that are more religious with the express purpose of exposing those children to a more religious environment. Could there be an equal number of people, not found in our study of leavers, who were inspired to stay religious because of misalignment? Only the larger survey of leavers and non-leavers can answer this question.

Growing up, participants frequently expressed the desire to do things that their communities did not endorse, or that went against the basic tenets of Orthodoxy. Some examples included norm violations (e.g., dressing differently from everyone else in their communities) as well as violations of Orthodox Jewish law (*halacha*), such as eating non-kosher food.

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. Participants experienced instability in their emotional lives. Among participants who were asked about their relationship with their parents, less than half reported having happy relationships with their parents before starting to leave. While they were in the process of leaving, it seems that the stricter the religious community, the worse their relationship with their parents was. But this tended to resolve with time. Only three have broken relationships with their parents now. An indication of the fissures present in participants' families can be seen in the fact that close to a third of participants had a sibling who also left Orthodoxy. Five participants experienced parental discord and divorce, and five participants were themselves divorced.

Religious instability, such as parents' rapid religious change described in the misalignment section above, impacted participants even when the instability occurred *before* participants were born. More than half of our participants' parents were either converts, *ba'alei 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.

Participants also experienced instability directly and personally (not just as a side-effect of larger familial instability); 62% had experiences using alcohol or controlled substances, and 31% suffered from substance abuse. A quarter of participants experienced some form of physical abuse, mostly in a school setting, and just over a quarter were survivors of sexual abuse. A quarter of participants experienced the death of a close relative or friend; a third suffered from depression.

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 past and present relationship to Orthodox rabbinic and other religious figures. More than half of the participants experienced positive experiences with rabbinic figures, but more than half also had seriously negative experiences (some people had both positive and negative experiences).

These experiences were extremely important to the participants' sense of themselves and their life stories. Many participants explicitly named identified their experience with a rabbi as the single most important factor in their relationship to Orthodoxy, even though the interviewer never asked them directly about religious authority figures as a factor.

Participants who had positive experiences with rabbis described people who were supportive and caring when they were struggling. These rabbis were there for them during the hard times in their lives when they may not have had any other source of support and may have been alienated even from their parents and siblings. Conversely, participants also described rabbis who bullied and belittled them, mocked them for their deviance, and excluded them from the community. Others described 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.

Finally, rabbis played a major negative role in these participants' lives when they were unwilling to answer religious questions. Rabbis who were dismissive of what participants felt were sincere questions left them upset and bewildered.

QUESTIONS RAISED

These findings naturally raise a number of further questions, many of which we intend to pursue in the second phase of the study.

SITES OF DISSONANCE

The first major set of questions relate to the different sites in which leavers first experience dissonance. Within families, we would like to know more about how sibling, spouse, and parent relationships play a role in staying or leaving. For example, the National Study of Youth and Religion[42] has found that parents who articulate clear religious instruction to their children have children who are more religious, while those who let their children come to their own conclusions tend to have children with weaker religious commitment. Is this true in Orthodoxy?

What about schools? Orthodox Jewish day schools are a prime site for religious socialization; how do these schools help or hinder students' religious development? Some of our participants described serious traumas associated with schooling. Were these a cause or a product of students' leaving Orthodoxy?

Hashkafa and Sub-denominations

How does communal *hashkafa* impact participant religiosity? The qualitative nature of this phase of our study makes it impossible to draw broader conclusions about the role of communal religious outlook in attrition from Orthodoxy. Nonetheless, there were some suggestive findings. For example, feminist criticisms with Orthodoxy were a factor mostly for our Modern Orthodox participants, but not for those raised in more right-wing communities. Chasidic participants experienced a sharper break from Orthodoxy than participants from more liberal sectors of Orthodoxy. Will these differences persist in a larger survey? If so, what factors within the different communal structures and religious outlooks in different sectors of Orthodoxy impact these aspects of leaving?

Answering Questions

Are there better or worse ways for parents, friends, and religious figures to answer questions and problems people have about Judaism? It is possible that answers that work for some will alienate others, and it is possible that no answer would be good enough for some participants. However, we might be able to determine certain sorts of answers—or even certain ways of answering—that are more or less helpful to those posing the questions.

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Feedback from Key Informants

BACKGROUND

We shared a draft of this report with a variety of stakeholders in the Orthodox Jewish community. These individuals have experience in different domains in which the subject of attrition and religious movement might arise. They included psychologists, rabbis, college campus professionals, Jewish communal professionals, and youth mentors, among others.

Their feedback was captured through a series of panel discussions where we asked them to reflect on what surprised them in the report, what rang true, and what they felt we may have missed. Some of their reflections are presented here.

MODERN ORTHODOX VS. CHAREDI ATTRITION

Panelists working with Modern Orthodox community members responded very differently to the report than those working in more Charedi communities, with each group finding different elements of the report compelling. Those who work in Modern Orthodox communities did not relate to the stories of deviant behavior, abuse or trauma; they saw the phenomenon of attrition as one of apathy and lack of commitment. As one panelist put it:

> *What I am familiar with is mostly in Modern Orthodoxy, where the kid and his parent or her parent is not entrenched in a life of growth and aspirational Jewish life, they are the JFK's, the 'just for kiddish' community and they are just committed to a social experience versus a Torah growth orientation... I have only seen "it's not relevant". The parts that are relevant are not fun, therefore I'm checking out, and I've watched my parents basically not buy into the total story.*

Another panelist stated:

> *... a lot of people grew up with family members who just went through motions.*

And:

> *And the impression I've gained is that getting to Harvard or Yale and making a very great income is a greater priority than knowing Shulchan Aruch in the Modern Orthodox world. It's not that it's [knowing Shulchan Aruch] is not a priority, it [college, income] is just more of a priority. The kids feel it. If the kids are going to feel that and they're going to have any attachment or other struggles on the way, if –that's the if. That's for many of them. The underlying feeling that my parents' primary priority is that I get to an Ivy League college, and I make a ton of money. And their excitement about me knowing Shulchan Aruch is very secondary. If that's secondary, then I think they're in trouble.*

And:

> *So, in the sample of the Modern Orthodox subgroup, it was really that there were so, such a little difference between observance and non-observance that the initial level of affiliation and sense of connectivity to it was what didn't leave a lot of room to have to deviate, because the boundaries were so porous.*

Those who worked in more Charedi environments, however, responded strongly to the parts of this report that discussed trauma. One panelist pointed to sexual trauma and learning trauma (difficulty with school) as the two biggest factors in his experience, adding parental attachment problems as a secondary concern. Another panelist from this community agreed, stating:

> *Those who are leaving the fold are leaving because there are significant emotional or psychological issues. They are then able to point to the community as being a source thereof and are not people that are well grounded, socially integrated part of society and the fact that they're leaving whatever subgroup that they initially belonged to has less to do with the subgroup and more to do with their individual pathology.*

He continued:

> *If we look at, go through all of the sample that was represented within this study, those all came back with some level of emotional issue, trauma, possible multigenerational trauma and are all not well socially integrated within whatever subgroup they belonged to, which I think is enormously telling in terms of the phenomenon of that.*

Another panelist stated:

> *In the Chasidic community, I've seen the exact opposite, that almost always it's some type of personal fracture, and then afterwards there's some type of questioning to, as a justification...*
>
> *In my own personal experience with the Chasidic community, sexual abuse is probably one of the, you know, the primary experiences that will lead someone to go down this particular pathway. Very, very few people I have met who are struggling in this manner, do not have that as a part of their history. A significant part of their history, especially amongst the men and most yeah, unfortunately amongst the women as well.*

The very consistent pattern of responses from our panelists—with Charedi panelists relating to trauma and Modern Orthodox panelists relating to apathy—may reflect two disparate streams within our data. It is certainly possible that in talking about attrition we are not actually talking about a single phenomenon, but a range of different processes by which people move away from Orthodox Judaism. These processes may be predominantly community dependent.

THINGS THAT RESONATED

Our panelists all seemed to relate to the importance of rabbis and other religious authority figures in people's religious trajectories.

> *[If] they have healthy role models, they have people who love them and respect them and connect with them—and in the appropriate way—they are the people who have no reason to turn to anything outside of sort of the normative.*

Speaking about religious mentors, another panelist explained:

> *Something that I think of all of the time and something that I think is part of the success of NCSY, specifically over the course of the last 30 plus years and that's the interaction between smaller groups of students and teens and mentors.*

Many panelists also recognized the problem of misalignment between school and home as particularly important.

> *... and certainly, with the schools where the misalignment piece you have in your document was so on target because misalignment is a such a tragedy. So many of the kids, because they'll never connect with the place they're in, they'll always feel, 'We are not wanted, we are tolerated at best, but we're not celebrated in this school system.' They actually walk around feeling like they're on probation all the time knowing, having a second sense of somehow, you know, we're really not wanted here, and they know it. The kids know it. That destroys the attachment to the system.*

This issue related to another issue our panelists frequently mentioned, lack of **belonging**:

> *... no adolescent feels a sense of belonging. That's kind of the nature of adolescence, right? Is that you don't belong anywhere. I don't belong in my family really, because I'm trying to individuate, and find my identity and I don't know where yet I belong in the world. But I think the question of belonging was even louder for this group, and I think it was like somewhere where over 80% hadn't felt this idea of belonging.*

Finally, our panelists agreed that our population's tendency to engage in black and white thinking was also present in the communities that they worked with.

> *I will add that one of the things that I noticed was that students there were often times a domino effect, even if a student hadn't made the decision to go off the derech per se, oftentimes, it felt like all or nothing.*

And:

> *[There is a] tendency of certain people to present things that if you're missing, if you're not doing everything that we say, it's better that you did nothing. I lost count of the number of people that I would tell them... "Why don't you put on your tefillin and just say shema and you know and say them in English for 60 seconds and go to your work?" And they say, well, my rabbi said that if you're mafsek in the middle of davening, a snake is going to bite you or if you daven without a hat and jacket, it is worse than if you do not daven at all. You know? So, like some people just, like, brush it off.*

THINGS WE MISSED OR SHOULD HAVE EMPHASIZED MORE

Our panelists came from a variety of backgrounds and have a range of different experiences with people who leave Orthodox Judaism. Each of them may experience a different piece of a much larger puzzle, and, therefore, see specific phenomena as particularly significant due to those unique experiences. Although we cannot know how generalizable those experiences are, it is important to recognize that the depth of their involvement likely leads to important insights—even if we are unable to assess how prevalent these insights are.

One common concern of our panelists was that this report did not capture many of the individual personality features that may lead people to leave. They pointed to an absence of **sense-of-agency** that they believe many of our participants implicitly expressed, as well as a possible lack of **resilience**.

> *Are individual personality factors [important], different personalities? Different people will react differently.*
>
> *And maybe, again, for some people with low resilience, that's a warning factor. Is that something that somebody has a self-awareness to volunteer in an interview setting?"*

And:

> *What came up for me is this question about how much intentionality is there in this? Do I know what I want? And then maybe even more importantly, can I have impact on what I want? And I think to some degree this could be plugged into a question of self-efficacy, right? Or the idea of... I have, I have goals. I know what they are, and I have impact on them, and I could do hard things, and I can do things that are uncomfortable, and I know how to get places that feel difficult.*

And:

> *And the human experience, by definition, is traumatic in nature. It comes down to what is our resilience levels to it that allows us to continue to function despite the adversity that all humans face as a result of being human.*

Another major absence felt by our panelists was the possible impact of **educational struggle** or **learning disability** in people's movement away from Orthodoxy. Although not a major factor in our twenty-nine interviewees' narratives, panelists felt it probably plays a bigger role than is presented here.

> *And obviously, when a person feels that they're struggling in terms of finding a place, whether that's starting from the younger grades in terms of just acquiring the basic skills of learning again, I always use a very simple parable. One who is not good at catching a baseball is not going to be particularly interested in playing baseball, so someone who's not good at reading a siddur or opening a religious text is not going to find a lot of enjoyment when they're asked to analyze a passage of Chumash.*

And:

> *Education and schools are by definition social structures, if they're not making it in either of those, there's nothing holding on to them at all.*

Finally, a number of factors that we expected to see in our data, but which didn't seem to play a major role in subjects' lives, were also mentioned by panelists. They, too, were surprised that these factors were not present, as they had seen evidence of their relevance in their own work. They particularly mentioned the **year in Israel**, college, and remaining **single later in life**. One shared:

> *Individuals who finished the yeshiva years or the college years and did not marry earlier on, felt that finding a place within community was hard. And then the question of, you know, what keeps a person motivated, right. Well, what are we? What are we offering in terms of reward for good spiritual behavior? You know, promises of Olam Haba seems very aloof and very distant.*

Another panelist explained:

> *[College students] are able to kind of sample from more Egalitarian communities and practices, and then when they leave the campus experience and find themselves in what they call the adult communities, they find that a little bit more binary.*

She continued:

> *And so on campus, you're able to not think too hard about, am I Orthodox, am I not Orthodox, they just kind of float between different experiences, and they're never really forced to define themselves, and then they leave the campus experience, and they're forced into those corners and to ask those questions of themselves, and I think, unfortunately, more often than not, when they're forced to make those choices, they land on the side that maybe you or I wouldn't be as comfortable.*

And another shared:

> *...and then once they're in college, what role the finance is playing, the development of these students, the amount of time that they have to be invested in their career aspirations certainly impacts their sharpness, certainly impact their time to learn to, to do mitzvot.*

DISCUSSION GENERATED BY THE DATA

The data presented in this report generated a great deal of further discussion amongst our panelists. These conversations did not always take the form of critique or approval but related to interesting questions or the need for further research raised by our interviews.

Two important conversations worth highlighting here are:

The importance of risk factors and protective factors: Many of the features we identified as potential risk factors for leaving are also true for people who do not leave. Everyone has doubts about Judaism at one point or another, for example, what makes one person with doubts leave while another stays?

> *My problem with that is that almost everybody has doubts at some level. And it just, laying it out that way, sort of saying this is the cause. Everything else sort of feeds into it or affects it in some way, but this is a cause, I don't know if this is a cause. There are many people, almost everybody, any thinking human being has questions and doubts at some point. Some come to terms with it. Some find a way of living with it. Some find answers, but not everybody who has doubts in high school or beyond is going to go to attrition.*

What are the protective factors that allow people to handle trauma, doubt, or other types of struggles without feeling the need to abandon Orthodoxy?

> *The researchers suggested we need to look at what are the protective factors? So single parent homes, it's been found, for example, if there is a family member and uncle and grandfather or somebody who steps in and helps the child, well that's a protective factor.*
>
> *We need what's called, what they call an ecological approach. Looking at the whole picture. An ecological approach looks at what is negative for this kid in this situation, what is positive that might offset that? And then when we have too many negatives and not enough positives, then we might end up with somebody saying this is not for me. I'm leaving. I'm no longer religious.*

These questions are important ones, but a study that only looks at people who leave is not designed to answer them. The second stage of the study, which will look at the full population of Orthodox day school graduates, should be able to address these concerns.

Rigidity vs. Flexibility: A second major topic of discussion prompted by our study related to the difference in communal norms in the Modern and Charedi populations.

> *I think it will be important in terms of community response that there seems to be an importance in both flexibility and how we respond to children in education, or when it comes to spiritual topics, but at the same time [the] importance of clear messaging. So, there is this paradox of needing to both have flexibility and also clear messaging. And I think that's part of the misalignment. The paradox is that there needs to be the question of what does this child need, but at the same time, that to have some clarity as to what's the messages that we want to send them.*

On the one hand, our panelists see the Modern Orthodox world as sliding too far in the direction of openness and feel that the lack of clear communal norms and boundaries leads many people to drift away. A panelist stated:

> *It's almost like the path is too wide... that there isn't really a clear directive of what it's supposed to be. What is a successful Modern Orthodox teen? It's very confusing.*

Another explained:

> *I think from what I've seen within the Modern Orthodox community, I have seen people who have attended schools who have a greater reputation for openness and allowing students to you know, do their own searching, I actually have seen more religious questioning from people from those schools anecdotally.*

On the other hand, they noted that the interviewees from the Yeshiva world and the Chasidic world often felt extremely constrained by the rigid norms of their community, and that more flexibility may have been beneficial.

> *And I think that that's the other side of it is that in the yeshiva world, everything has become so confined, like you have a quote in here, a kid was chastised for wearing shorts on shabbos. So, anybody who's a mechanech knows just don't pick the fight. So, he's wearing shorts. OK, yes. There's a piece of conformity there. But in that world, there's so much fear of kids leaving the box that they're supposed to be in that the minute they deviate at all, they're off the derech.*

Recommendations: How Should Findings Inform Actions?

The findings in this study can be used to educate communities and institutions to strengthen Orthodoxy and better support those who may find themselves leaving. Given the nature of the findings thus far, these recommendations must be seen as tentative; nonetheless, we believe that there is sufficient evidence from our work to explore these recommendations seriously.

Communal Leaders:

1. **People who left Orthodoxy are still connected to Orthodoxy.** This matters to all Orthodox synagogues and organizations working to support and engage the Orthodox Jewish community. This population is still largely connected to the Orthodox community and may, therefore, still fall within their mandate as part of the broader Orthodox tent. An inclusive mindset on the part of Orthodox organizations may go a long way towards making those who leave continue to feel welcome in Orthodox spaces.
2. **Transitions can be fraught.** Communal leaders should be aware of the needs of people undergoing transitions in their lives. People who switch communities or schools may be particularly vulnerable to attrition. *Ba'alei teshuva* and converts and their children may need continued support long after they join the Orthodox community. That support may prevent religious fissures from forming.
3. **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.
4. **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. This is true of families and individuals belonging to both less and more religiously-committed communities or schools. Education and supportive structures can be provided to help families navigate the misalignments they experience.

Rabbis and Educators:

5. **It's not all or nothing.** Some participants had an all or nothing attitude, feeling that Judaism is an either/or. For these participants, difficulties with one part of Orthodoxy can lead them to abandon all of Orthodoxy. 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*.
6. **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.
7. **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. Many of the other features of leaving described in this report (e.g. misalignment, trauma, rapid religious movement) may be present at this time as well; addressing those issues early may go a long way towards addressing religious questioning.
8. **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, and that answers that are meaningful and persuasive to them may not be compelling to questioners, who should never be made to feel inferior for not accepting these answers. Rabbis and educators do not have to agree or affirm the doubts themselves in order to validate the person having the doubts.
9. **Help individuals develop a healthy sense of agency and resiliency.** Individuals who do not develop a sense of themselves as active agents in the world—people who are capable of taking responsibility for their lives and making change—may feel like the world is happening to them. Many—though certainly not all—of our participants seem to describe a feeling that their journey just happened, rather than seeing themselves as autonomous. When things went awry, they did not have the strengths or skills necessary to maintain 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:

10. **Tolerance of difference is really important.** Communal institutions should work hard—*wherever religiously possible*—to tolerate differences. Where possible and *halachically* appropriate, they should find ways to make people feel that their differences are not reasons to exclude them from their school, shul, or community. 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.
11. **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:

12. **Traditions and rituals are important.** Given that Jewish rituals and traditions, particularly those relating to shul and Shabbos, are major sources of Jewish connection even 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.
13. **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.
14. **Help children develop a healthy sense of agency and resiliency.** As noted above for rabbis and educators, individuals who can respond successfully to inevitable challenges in life develop resilience and a health sense of agency. Letting children experience normal childhood obstacles, instead of shielding them, and giving them the tools needed to overcome challenges can help build a sense of resilience and self-efficacy. 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.

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Appendix A

Detailed Explanation of Coding Process

Work of this kind requires researchers to take special care that they do not allow their own perceptions and biases to influence the interpretation of data. Detailed and systematic coding helps to ensure that our understanding of the material is based on organized and replicable procedures. The coding process reduces bias and safeguards the integrity of the research process. The following is a detailed description of the process used in this research.

After all interviews were conducted, the research team transcribed and coded them. The first coding effort looked simply for what we term "high level" codes – codes that provide us with a broad description of the population interviewed. For example, we catalogued how many participants came from Yeshivish, Modern, and Chasidic communities, the sex of each participants, when in their lives people began to leave and when they completely left, whether their parents ever went through a religious change, or whether they experienced abuse or other trauma. This level of coding reflects broad descriptions of the interviewee that allow us to stake out some big picture claims about our data.

Once these broad descriptors were in place, multiple researchers began a process of more detailed coding by reviewing the transcripts in depth and developing a standard codebook of common responses. We began with codes that related to themes found in the research literature and to codes we identified in the high-level coding. In addition, researchers identified additional codes that were relevant to participants' experiences and to the question of leaving Orthodoxy. These were assembled into a master codebook that contained roughly 700 codes, many of which overlap to address different dimensions of each respondent's experiences. This codebook was reduced, through multiple iterative sessions of discussion, comparison, and consolidation into a usable set of codes that captured the major domains expressed by our participants.

Using the reduced codebook, multiple researchers coded the same few interviews to determine whether the codebook could be implemented reliably. These were reviewed by the entire research team and differences were discussed and reconciled. Once we had agreement on these few interviews, the entire set of interviews was coded again—each interview by two coders and then checked for reliability between the codes they assigned. Generally speaking, the codes at this point were largely in agreement with one another, and only minor differences emerged, e.g. the two coders applied a code to slightly different portions of the same part of the interview or applied slightly different sub-codes to the same text.

Key themes emerged from the coded interviews across a wide range of topics. We had anticipated some of these, but many were substantially new. For each theme, we identified quotes from the participants' interviews that illustrated the theme and assembled these quotes into a file. Summaries of each topic were then compiled both across all interviews (horizontally) and within each interview (vertically). This produced a summary of the key themes every participant expressed and how they related to one another. We also created a summary of each theme showing how it expressed itself across multiple interviews. These theme summaries form the backbone of this report.

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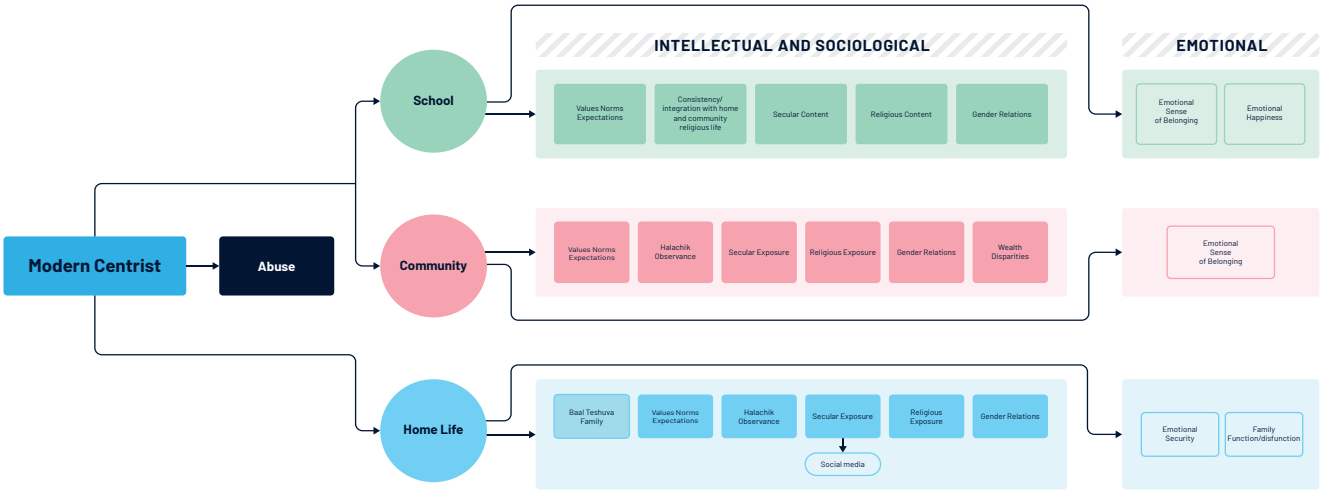
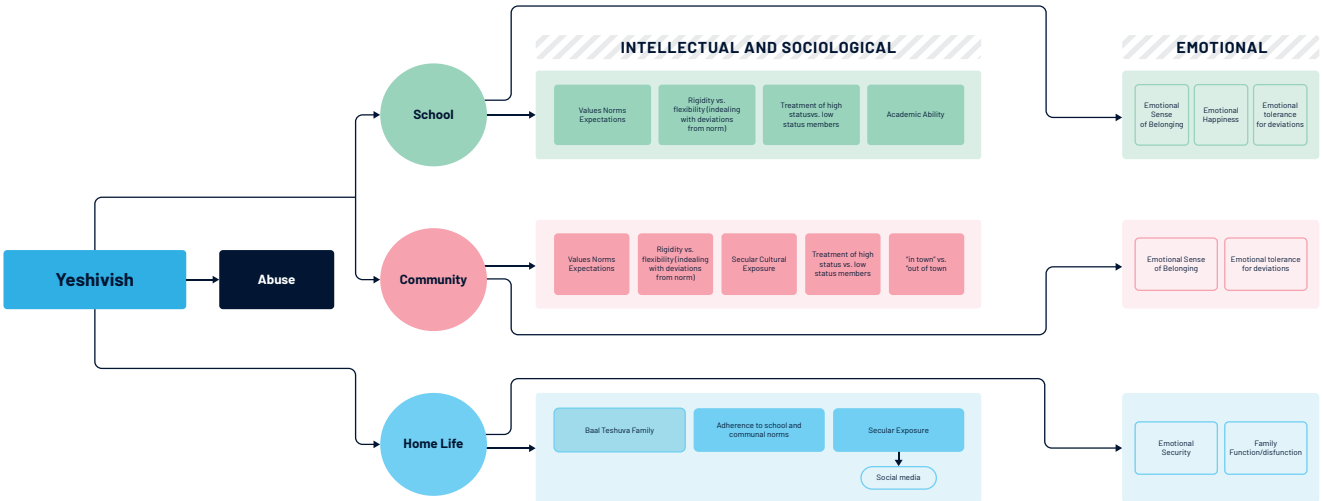
Appendix B

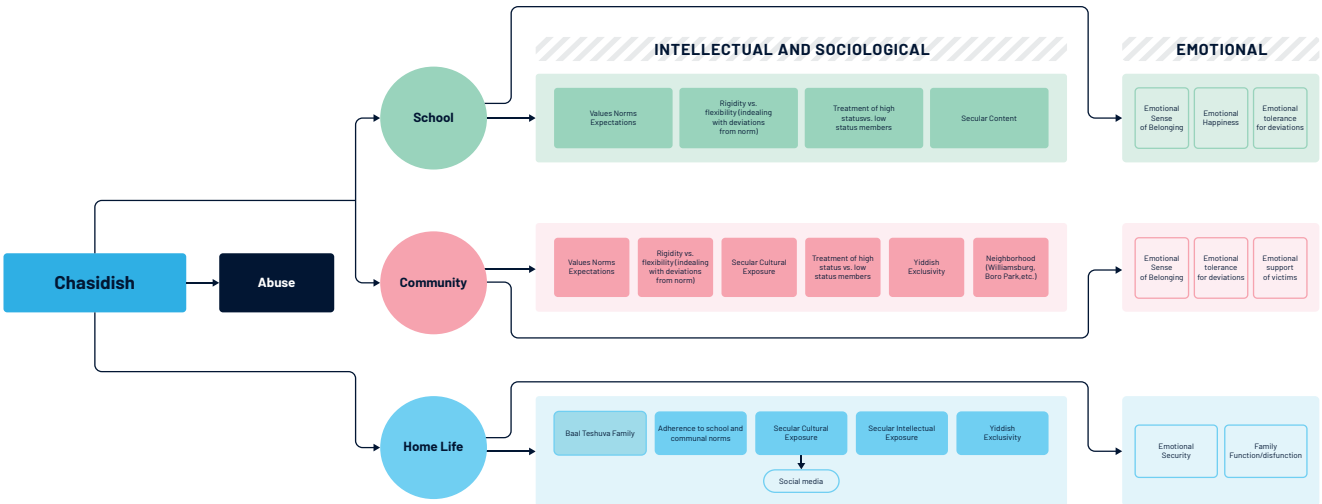
Models of Attrition

We entered this study with a comprehensive model of attrition based on research literature and personal experience.

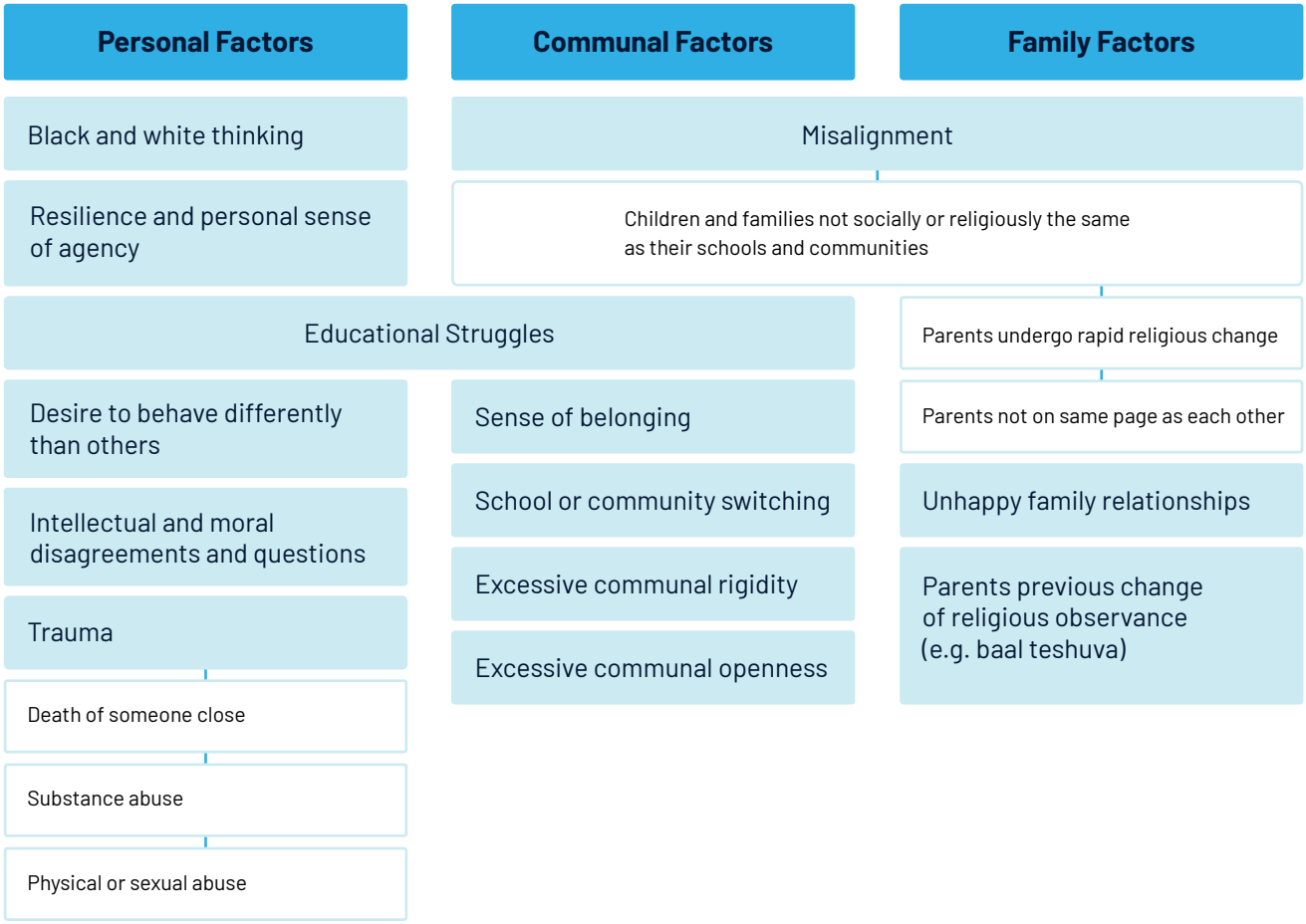
This model (Figure A) has been substantially updated on the basis of this study.

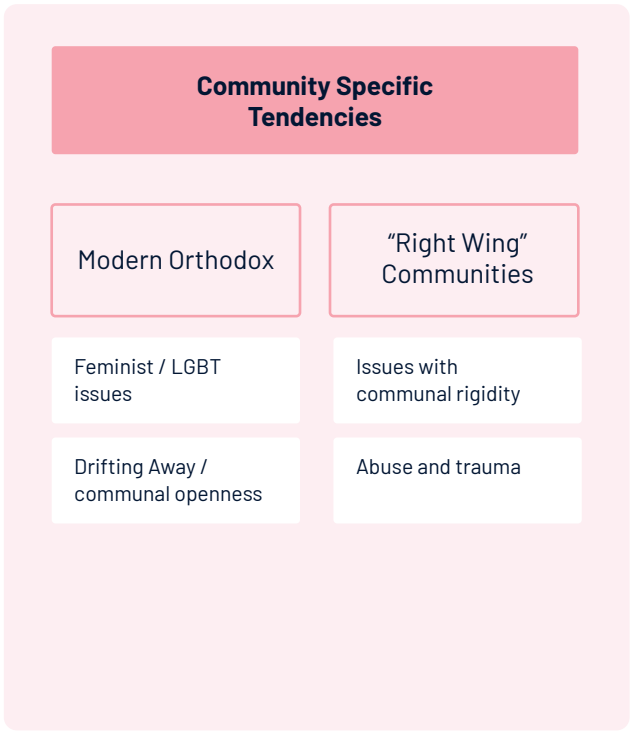


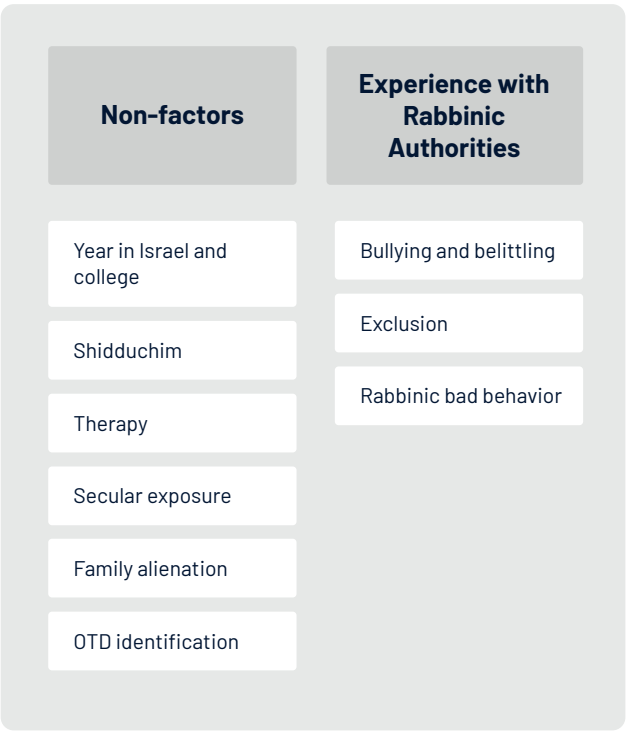




Our new model (Figure B) will undoubtably undergo revision as we complete phase two of this study.







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Appendix C

Glossary

Agunah (sing.)/Agunot (pl.) – A Jewish woman whose husband will not grant her a Jewish divorce

Am Yisrael – All Jews, the nation of Israel

Amalek – Ancient enemy nation of Israel

Assur – Prohibited according to Jewish law

Avodah Zarah – Idolatry

Ba'al Teshuva (sing.), Ba'alei Teshuva (pl.) – A Jew who becomes Orthodox or returns to Orthodoxy

Bais Yaakov – Charedi Jewish elementary and secondary schools for girls worldwide

Bat Mitzvah – When a young woman reaches the age of twelve, she accepts the responsibility of fulfilling the Torah. This is a much-celebrated event by family and friends, as it is her inauguration into Jewish adulthood.

Bekeshe – A type of coat, worn by male Chasidic Jews

Bekius – Broad, rather than deep, knowledge of Talmud

Bikur Cholim – Visiting the sick

Brit Milah – Circumcision

Centrist Orthodox – An Orthodox Jewish movement that lies between Modern Orthodoxy and Yeshivish

Chabad – a Chasidic group known for its religious outreach to non-Orthodox Jews and its emphasis on the coming of the Messiah

Chalav Yisrael - Milk that was produced under constant supervision by an observant Jew.

Chametz – Food that contains wheat, barley, spelt, rye, and oats that have leavened, which Jews are prohibited to eat or own on Passover

Chasidic – Belonging to the Chasidic movement, a popular pietist movement that emerged in the 18th century

Chasidus – Religious teachings that emerged from the Chasidic movement

Charedi – Orthodox Jewish groups characterized by strict adherence to the traditional form of Jewish law and rejection of modern secular culture

Chumrah – A prohibition or obligation in Jewish practice that exceeds the bare requirements of the Jewish law

Conservative – A denomination of Judaism that is more traditional than Reform but less traditional than Orthodoxy

Daven – To pray

Egalitarian – A religious movement in which men and women participate equally in religious practices

Eichah – Book of Lamentations, read on Tisha B'Av

Ezras Nashim – Area in an Orthodox synagogue designated for women

Frum – Religious, devout, pious

Frumkeit – Jewish religiosity, frum-ness

Gabbai – The person who assists in running the congregation services

Goy (sing.), Goyim (pl.) – (a) A non-Jewish person (b) A nation

Halacha – (a) The body of Torah law; (b) a particular law.

Halachically Acceptable – Acceptable according to Jewish law

Hanhala – Head staff in a Jewish organization

Har Sinai – Mount Sinai

Hashem – lit. 'The name'. Commonly used to refer to God, to avoid casual use of His name in conversation.

Hashkafa – Religious worldview and guiding philosophy

Hashkafic – Of or relating to religious worldview and guiding philosophy

Hilchos Kashrus – The laws about eating food permitted to be eaten by Torah observant Jews

Hilchos Shabbos – The Torah laws of observing the Sabbath

Kabbalah – The body of classical Jewish mystical teachings, the central text of which is the book of Zohar

Kabbalat Shabbat – A prayer sung during services on Friday night of the Sabbath

Kashrut – State of being Kosher

Kiddush – (a) Blessing over wine and bread on Saturday and Jewish holidays (b) a celebratory buffet held after morning services on Saturday or Jewish holidays

Klaf – Parchment the Torah is written on

Klal Yisrael – All the people of Israel

Kollel – An institute for full-time, advanced study of the Talmud and rabbinic literature

Kosher – Food permitted to be eaten by Torah observant Jews

Lehadlik Ner Shel Shabbos – Blessing made on the Sabbath candles

Lein – To chant Torah, Haftarah or Megillah

Litvish – Associated with the rational or intellectual culture of Lithuanian Jewry

Lubavitcher Rebbe – The most recent Rabbi of the Lubavitch Chasidic dynasty

Machmir – Strict

Madregah – Religious level

Mamzer – A Jewish child born out of a forbidden relationship, e.g., incest or adultery

Mechanech – A teacher

Mechitza (sing.), Mechitzot (pl.) – A physical barrier. Wall, curtain, that separates men and women in the Synagogue.

Mefarshim – Commentators on the Torah

Megillah – One of the five scrolls that compose a portion of the "Writings" section of the Bible

Menahel – A principal of a Jewish school, especially a yeshiva

Merkaz Harav – A national-religious yeshiva in Jerusalem, founded in 1924 by Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook

Minyan (sing.), Minyanim (pl.) – A quorum of ten men required for Jewish public worship, or a gathering for public worship

Modern Orthodox – A mode of Orthodox culture and ideology, relating to the synthesis of secular knowledge and Jewish religious knowledge

Moshiach—the Messiah

Musaf – The additional prayer of Shabbos and other Jewish holidays

Niggunim – Ashkenazi religious songs or tunes sung by groups of Jews

Night Seder – An organized Jewish learning program held in the evening

Nishama – A Jewish soul

Observant – A classification for a Jew who observe the Torah laws

Off The Derech – An expression used to describe the state of a Jew who has left an Orthodox way of life or community

Olam Haba – The world to come, i.e. the afterlife

Out-Of-Town Community – A Jewish community located outside of the densely populated Jewish communities in the New York – New Jersey area

Pesach – Passover, an eight-day festival celebrating God's deliverance of the Jews when they were slaves in Egypt.

Pesach Sedar – A ritual feast at the beginning of the Jewish holiday of Passover

Peyos – Sidelocks

Purim – A Jewish holiday commemorating the Jews' deliverance from an attempted massacre in ancient Persia

Rambam – Maimonides

Rashi – The preeminent sage and commentator on the Torah and Talmud

Rebbe – (a) Chasidic spiritual leader (b) male religious instructor in a school

Reform – A Jewish denomination that emphasizes the adaptability of Judaism to the modern world

Sefardi – The population of Jews whose ancestry and tradition are from the Iberian Peninsula; often used in reference to all Middle Eastern and Central Asian Jews and their traditions

Shabbos – The Jewish Sabbath, celebrated weekly from Friday at sundown till Saturday at nightfall

Shabbos Candles – The traditional candles lit at the start of the Sabbath

Shidduch – A match between a man and women for marriage

Shlichus – Hebrew for "mission," "agency," or "task"; refers to Chabad Jews dispatched to a certain locale to foster Jewish life and serve the Jewish population in any way possible

Shul – A Jewish synagogue

Shulchan Aruch – A book written by Rav Joseph Karo in the 16th century that codifies Jewish law

Smicha – Rabbinic ordination

Tisch – A public feast, held with a large crowd, where the rabbi and/or his Hasidim sing songs or read various texts related to the event

Tisha B'av – An annual fast day in Judaism commemorating the destruction of both the first and second temples in Jerusalem

Torah – The books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, also known as the Five Books of Moses or the Pentateuch.

Torah Mi-Sinai – The Jewish belief that the Torah was given to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai

Tzedakah – Charity or righteousness

Tzniyus – Modesty

Viduy – Confession to God, repentance

Yeshivish – A mode of Orthodox culture and ideology originating in the great Lithuanian yeshivot of the 19th century

Yichus – Lineage or pedigree

Yiddish – A language used by Jewish people in central and eastern Europe before the Holocaust and by most Chasidim today

Yiddishkeit – Judaism or Jewishness (i.e. "a Jewish way of life"). Refers broadly to forms of Orthodox Judaism when used particularly by Ashkenazi Jews

Yom Tov/Yuntif – The term used to refer to a Jewish holiday that has most of the same prohibitions at the Sabbath

Endnotes

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3 Smith, "About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated."

4 Smith, "About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are No w Religiously Unaffiliated."

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6 Pearce and Denton, "A Faith of Their Own: Stability and Change in the Religiosity of America's Adolescents."

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8 Pearce and Denton, "A Faith of Their Own: Stability and Change in the Religiosity of America's Adolescents," p. 146.

9 Beider, "Religious Residue: The Impact of Childhood Religious Socialization on The Religiosity of Nones in France, Germany, Great Britain, And Sweden."

10 Pearce and Denton, "A Faith of Their Own: Stability and Change in the Religiosity of America's Adolescents," p. 146.

11 Engelman et al., "Leaving a Covenantal Religion."

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14 Davidman, Becoming Un-Orthodox; Davidman and Greil, "Characters in Search of a Script: The Exit Narratives of Formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews."

15 Behr, "Coming and Going: Movements In-And-Out of Orthodox Judaism."; Steinberg, "Lived Experiences of Young Adult Orthodox Jews Who Have Chosen Attrition from Orthodoxy."

16 Steinberg, "Lived Experiences of Young Adult Orthodox Jews Who Have Chosen Attrition from Orthodoxy."

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19 Davidman, "Becoming Un-Orthodox."; Davidman and Greil, "Characters in Search of a Script: The Exit Narratives of Formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews."; Margolese, "Off the Derech."; Steinberg, "Lived Experiences of Young Adult Orthodox Jews Who Have Chosen Attrition from Orthodoxy."

20 Behr, "Coming and Going: Movements In-And-Out Of Orthodox Judaism."; Berger, "Leaving an Insular Community: The Case of Ultra Orthodox Jews."; Davidman, "Becoming Un-Orthodox."; Margolese, "Off the Derech."; Newfield, "Degrees of Separation."; Trencher, "Leaving The Fold: Dissent from Communal Authority in the Orthodox World?"

21 Behr, "Coming and Going: Movements In-And-Out of Orthodox Judaism."; Newfield, "Degrees of Separation."

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24 Berger, "Leaving an Insular Community: The Case of Ultra Orthodox Jews."; Newfield, Degrees of Separation.

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42 https://youthandreligion.nd.edu/