Authority and Dissent in Jewish Life
Greenspoon, Leonard J.

Published by Purdue University Press

Greenspoon, Leonard J.
Authority and Dissent in Jewish Life.
Purdue University Press, 2020.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/77425.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/77425

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2700646
INTRODUCTION

Quantitative research has been lacking among those who have left the American Orthodox community. While there have been many memoirs written by some who have left Orthodoxy, the anecdotes have not adequately shed light on the many varying themes and reasons why people are leaving.

The central question explored in this essay is the extent to which leaving the community has been a way for Orthodox individuals to express dissent from the community’s authority, as imposed largely by its authority figures and normative behaviors.

While the departure of Jews from Orthodoxy has often been cited as a “crisis,” there has been a dearth of solid, quantitative data to answer the question of why people leave. Some research has been done but it has been limited in scope (i.e., the breadth of community segments studied), and the Orthodox community has been relying largely on memoirs, anecdotes, and punditry for an understanding of the reasons for departure.

Communal rabbis and other observers have pointed to all sorts of reasons—often simplistic in citing a few purportedly explanatory reasons. But there has been frustration with the relative lack of deep understanding, both within the broader Orthodox community as well as among those who have left.

Further hampering deeper self-reflection, departure has often been blamed on character flaws among those who leave. They are often portrayed as troubled, promiscuous, lacking religious seriousness, and weak in moral character, and so their departure is often viewed as their fault and not due to anything that is occurring within the community.
OUTLINE OF THIS ESSAY

In an effort to better understand the Orthodox community, the nature of its authority, issues that might generate dissent from authority, and whether dissent-driven departure is taking place, we will cover the following:

A profile of the U.S. Orthodox community—The Orthodox and Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) world are not widely understood, and this background will help the reader to understand the particularities of this group as they relate to our hypotheses regarding departure as a form of dissent.

The nature of authority—Authority in the Orthodox community is very different from what is found in secular society and the non-Orthodox Jewish world. Further, it varies substantially among the subsegments of Orthodoxy (Modern Orthodox and Haredi and their subgroups).

Possible causes of dissent—We draw upon quantitative (and some anecdotal) data to develop hypotheses relating to factors that might be causing people to dissent and leave their community.

Testing the hypotheses—Finally, we will draw upon primary quantitative data.

QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH CONDUCTED

To answer the question of the extent to which departure from Orthodoxy is a form of dissent against authority, we will draw largely on primary quantitative data, specifically an original field survey: The 2016 Nishma Research survey “Starting a Conversation: A Pioneering Survey of Those Who Have Left the Orthodox Community.”

This was the first broad quantitative study undertaken among those who have left Orthodoxy, and it covered a broader spectrum of the Orthodox community that had not been adequately covered in prior research or memoirs.

The survey posed the following question: “Please think back to when you started moving away in belief or practice from the Orthodox community in which you were raised. What were the key things that caused your beliefs and practices to change?”

Respondents were not presented with a checklist of potentially triggering events or situations that might have caused them to leave. We were looking to not limit the responses in this manner, but to allow respondents to share their thoughts in some detail. The responses may thus be viewed as “top-of-mind awareness”—those things that were most often remembered, sometimes many years after the events. Thus, when we say that X percent left Orthodoxy because of Factor Y, what we are really saying
is that Factor Y was important enough that X percent of respondents recalled it as a factor that had been important in their decision to leave Orthodoxy (perhaps many years later) and cited it.

This survey explored why respondents left Orthodoxy, focusing on (1) the extent to which they have been pulled or lured out by the outside world and, if so, by what aspect of the outside world; and (2) the extent to which their departure was precipitated by intolerable or objectionable communal authority figures or behaviors—that is, they were “pushed out.” It is the latter reasons that will lend themselves to consideration as drivers of dissent.

Overall, the factors most often mentioned are shown in fig. 1. We shall draw upon these data and explore some differences among the Orthodox subgroups as we test our hypotheses.

PROFILE OF THE JEWISH AND ORTHODOX COMMUNITIES

It is widely believed and inarguably true that the U.S. Orthodox population is disproportionately influential in American society, despite its small size. In fact, while the Jewish population represents about 2 percent of the total U.S. population, the Orthodox community is a very small subset of Judaism, comprising about 12 percent of the total U.S. Jewish population and thus about a quarter of a percent of the U.S. population (see fig. 2).

ORTHODOX SUBGROUPS AND THE VARYING NATURE OF AUTHORITY

The differences between the Orthodox subgroups as shown in fig. 3 (Modern Orthodox and Haredi, which in turn comprises various Chasidic sects and the Yeshivish group) are important, as their differing worldviews (in the area of insularity vs. engagement with secular society) and practices affect the reasons people might leave those groups.

Orthodox Judaism across all of its subgroups believes in adherence to and guidance by Jewish law (halachah). However, while a cornerstone of Modern Orthodoxy is its attempt to synthesize Jewish values and the observance of Jewish law with the secular, modern world, Haredi Judaism is characterized by insularity and a rejection of modern secular culture.
Modern Orthodoxy is itself quite heterogeneous. It covers a wide range of approaches, from very liberal to near-Haredi. Except for those on the extreme right of Modern Orthodoxy, adherence to halachah is less stringent than it is among the Haredi. The authorities in the Modern Orthodox community are of course halachah (albeit with lower levels of normative adherence than among the Haredi): the local synagogue rabbis (as synagogue membership is virtually universal among the Modern Orthodox), the national Jewish organizations (e.g., Orthodox Union,
Fig. 2 Size of the Jewish community.

Yeshiva University), and the rabbinic leaders who guide those organizations, as well as prominent synagogue rabbis.

The Haredi world comprises the Chasidic and the Yeshivish. The Chasidic are known for their extreme insularity and their distinctive garb (e.g., long black coats, fur hats, and sidelocks among the men and very modest garb with head coverings for the women) and are ruled by an authoritarian charismatic leader (the “rebbe”).

Probably the most widely known (although not the largest) of the Chasidic groups is the Chabad-Lubavitch, with authority emanating from the teaching of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe and Chabad customs. The Chabad have a mission of outreach to less religious (often secular) Jews and are therefore less insular than other Chasidic sects. In our research we looked at the Chabad and the other Chasidic groups separately, given their substantial differences—notably in their engagement with the outside world (secular as well as other Jewish groups).

The Yeshivish (also known as Litvish/Lithuanian, Agudah, and Misnagdim) focus on advanced religious study and their authorities are halachah and the deans [Roshei Yeshiva] of advanced Torah schools. The Yeshivish tend to have a leery attitude toward secular society but are not as insular as the Chasidic groups. The youth have significantly
The nature of authority in the Orthodox community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Modern Orthodox</th>
<th>Chasidic</th>
<th>Chabad/Lubavitch</th>
<th>Yeshivish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Summary, Insularity, Authority</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covers a wide range of approaches, from very liberal to near-Charedi. Adherence to halachah is less stringent than among Charedi. Synagogue and school rabbis are authoritative.</td>
<td>Ruled by authoritarian charismatic leader (“rebbe”). Very insular, with minimal exposure to secular society. Stringent religious practice; education generally limited to religious study.</td>
<td>Authority is the teaching of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe and Chabad customs. Less insular due to its mission of outreach to less religious (often secular) Jews.</td>
<td>Deans (“Roshei Yeshiva”) of advanced Torah schools are communal authorities. Focus on Torah study and stringent adherence to halachah. Limited—but some—exposure to secular society.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The community exerts great influence across all groups. “Being Orthodox involves not only a system of belief and religious observance but also a set of cultural practices. . . . Religious and cultural practice may take precedence over full acceptance of the underlying system of belief. . . . The centrality of the community persists in contemporary Judaism.” (Sarah Bunin Benor, Becoming Frum [New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 2012], 2–3.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In summary, the authorities in the Orthodox community are halachah (Jewish law), rabbis (synagogue rabbis, Chasidic leaders, and yeshiva deans), cornerstone organizations, and communal normative behaviors.

In contrast, the Orthodox community views these as less authoritative: the non-Orthodox Jewish world, popular culture and societal norms, the secular government,
and academia, especially when it conflicts with Orthodox beliefs or is viewed as irrelevant to one’s living an Orthodox lifestyle.

POSSIBLE CAUSES OF DISSENT

In our quantitative research study of people who left Orthodoxy, respondents cited many reasons for their departure. As noted earlier, to explore the extent to which reasons may have been spurred by dissent, we divided the fifty-plus reasons cited into two broad categories: (1) factors whereby people were pulled or lured out by the external world; and (2) factors whereby departure was precipitated by intolerable or objectionable communal authority figures or behaviors (i.e., they were “pushed out”).

The research showed that communal elements that pushed people out—that is, spurred dissent and gave them reason to leave—were cited far more often than outside world elements that lured people (see fig. 4). This supports the theory that there are reasons for dissent. But how much dissent is actually occurring? How many people are leaving Orthodoxy? A 2017 Nishma Research survey of the Modern Orthodox community found that about 10 percent of adults do not agree that their Orthodoxy is important to them, and the study offered an opinion that this group is “at risk” of departure. In addition, an informal social media survey conducted in 2018 estimated that 25 to 30 percent of Modern Orthodox Jewish high school graduates were no longer observant an average of ten years after graduation. So, while in fact the extent of communal departure is still largely a matter of speculation, it is a growing concern.

Admittedly, however, there are no solid data on the extent to which people are leaving Orthodoxy. Thus, the following analysis is conducted in a relative sense—that is, considering which drivers of dissent/departure are more prevalent than others, without solid quantified data as to their prevalence. In other words, we may know that a particular driver of dissent is more impactful than other drivers but are unsure of its exact impact in terms of the percentage of the community affected.

TESTING THE HYPOTHESES

After reviewing the many reasons people gave for leaving their Orthodox community, both overall and among various community subgroups (i.e., Modern Orthodox and Haredi as well as differences by gender), we hypothesize four possible manifestations of dissent that might be taking the form of communal departure: community
insularity, poor secular education (in the Haredi community), the role and status of women, and communal inadequate addressing of abuse.

**Community Insularity**

The Haredi community is characterized by extreme restrictions on exposure to the outside world (e.g., Internet/technology, secular education, social interactions). Insularity is more severe in some of the Chasidic groups (i.e., Satmar, Skver) and less severe in others, particularly Chabad. Simply put, society is seen as increasingly base and dangerous to Orthodox Jews’ spiritual health and continuity, and insularity preserves Jewish values.

Insularity is a minor factor, at best, in the Modern Orthodox community. It was found to be a far less significant driver of departure in that group than among the Haredi, where it is the most frequently cited factor in causing people to leave the community. Following are some recent newspaper headlines:

Rabbis Tell 60,000 in NY: Get Rid of the Internet if You Know What’s Good for You\(^20\)

Hasidic Leaders Sharply Limit Members’ Web, Smartphone Use: “It’s Like We’re in North Korea”\(^21\)
Ultra-Orthodox Rabbis Ban Women from Going to University in Case They Get “Dangerous” Secular Knowledge

Insularity was found to be the top driver of dissension, more for men than for women, although few respondents specifically cite the Internet (which the Haredi community greatly fears) as having spurred their departure. Dissent is driven by gradual awareness of the external culture and its beliefs, and an inability to reconcile those with the religious beliefs, all of which are a result of the insularity. See fig. 5 for the percentages of respondents citing various aspects of insularity and its effects.

Following are typical comments offered by those who left the community in explaining why they did so:


The secular world seemed more free and breathable so I naturally gravitated towards that world.

I just was questioning things. I was told I was bad for thinking and being me. I sometimes think, if I had someone who understood me or had a conversation with me, I might have stayed.

Poor Secular Education (in the Haredi Community)

In the Haredi community, the focus of children’s education is very much on their religious studies. Among boys, secular education virtually disappears after the eighth grade, at which point it is common for students to have only religious studies. The Haredi value Torah study as a core purpose of Jewish life, while secular studies have at most pragmatic value for employment.
As Shulem Deen (an advocate of sorts among Chasidic Jews who have left Orthodoxy) wrote:

When I was in my 20s, already a father of three, I had no marketable skills, despite 18 years of schooling. I could rely only on an ill-paid position as a teacher of religious studies at the local boys’ yeshiva, which required no special training or certification. . . . I remember feeling . . . anger at those responsible for educating me who had failed me so colossally. . . . Ten years ago, at age 33, I left the Hasidic community and sought to make my way in the secular world. At 35, I got my G.E.D., but I never made it to college, relying instead on self-study to fill in my educational gaps. I still live with my educational handicaps.16

However, in the survey of those who left Orthodoxy, fewer than 2 percent of respondents mentioned poor secular education as a reason why they left. While it has been mentioned by some (often those who have left for other reasons), secular education is unknown and generally not “missed.”

The Role and Status of Women

Orthodoxy defines and limits gender roles, and there has been growing activism aimed at women achieving more involvement (in synagogue, organizations, etc.), almost solely among the Modern Orthodox.

While it is true that some Haredi women bridle at their destined role as largely stay-at-home mothers of large families27 (although some have jobs to make money, allowing their husbands to pursue Torah studies), not many mentioned this. The role and status of women were mentioned far more often in the Modern Orthodox community. It is relatively unusual for Haredi women to speak out on this issue.28 On the other hand, Modern Orthodox women do speak out about their role and status, and they are not fearful of expressing dissatisfaction.29

Statistically, the role and status of women were found to be a notable driver of people leaving Orthodoxy, especially among Modern Orthodox women. Overall, 11 percent of respondents cited this as a factor in their leaving their community, but it was even higher among the Modern Orthodox—22 percent, compared to 6 percent of the Haredi. It was higher yet among Modern Orthodox women, at 37 percent.30 Many respondents commented on this in the survey of those who have left Orthodoxy:31

As I grew up it became very clear to me that despite teachings, men and women were certainly not considered or treated equally. Once I began questioning that, I questioned everything else I had been told.
It started (with) my interaction with women’s issues. . . . As a child the gender roles bothered me but only marginally. As I grew older these issues became much more intense. I started realizing that I was working so hard for a system that was rejecting me at every turn. I can not accept sexism as divine.

It seems clear from the data that the role and status of women are a strong driver of dissention among Modern Orthodox women—statistically the number one driver—and a lesser driver in the Haredi groups. Still, there are many women in Orthodoxy who are quite happy with their role and status.32

Communal Inadequate Addressing of Abuse

Recent years have seen an increase in reports on sexual and other forms of abuse in the Orthodox community. In studying whether this is a driver of dissent, we focus not so much on the incidence of abuse (it is unknown whether the levels in the Orthodox community are different from those in society at large) but on the view that it has been very far from adequately recognized and addressed.33

While the Modern Orthodox community has been increasingly active in addressing the problem,34 there continues to be a view, especially in the Haredi community, that incidents of sexual abuse are too often kept hidden, with alleged perpetrators shielded and the victims and their families silenced:

Sexual abuse within the community is often not reported to police. Many feel that to report a Jew to non-Jewish authorities constitutes [a] religious crime. . . . Samuel Heilman, a professor of Jewish studies at Queens College, writes that one reason why cases or patterns of sexual abuse are rarely reported to law enforcement is because “they think that anyone who turns over anyone to the outside authorities is committing a transgression to the community at large.”35

The survey of those who have left Orthodoxy found the community’s inadequate addressing of this problem to be a moderately important driver of dissension. While 6 percent explicitly cited sexual abuse, physical abuse, or domestic violence as their reason for leaving the community, 10 percent cited “community hypocrisy,” often relating this hypocrisy to the treatment of perpetrators by communal leaders. As two survey respondents commented:36

Seeing the rabbis constantly ignore abuse in the community. Plus the complete lack of checks and balances plus transparency amongst the hierarchy of the entire system. And so once I peeled away at the hierarchy, my entire belief system collapsed.
Even when people do leave and have been abused, it’s not the abuse that causes dislike of the community. It’s usually that the abuse causes them to question the community, and question what we have been told, to the point that we eventually cannot reconcile the answers.

Confirming this finding, a recent study by two Orthodox researchers found a wide-spread history of sexual abuse among the formerly Orthodox, noting:

This report supports the anecdotal evidence I’ve seen that indicates a close link between abuse in a religious context and the subsequent rejection of that community, its practices, values, and often everything it stands for.17

**SUMMARY**

The research suggests the following:

- Community insularity is relatively the strongest driver of dissent/departure among the Haredi population but is a minor factor (at best) in the Modern Orthodox community.
- Poor secular education in the Haredi community is not a significant driver of dissent among that population.
- The role and status of women are by far the strongest drivers of dissent/departure among Modern Orthodox women (albeit less of a driver among Modern Orthodox men and the Haredi).
- The Orthodox community’s inadequate addressing of abuse is a moderate driver of dissent.

**NOTES**


6. The survey reported detailed findings obtained from 885 people who had left Orthodoxy: Chasidic excluding Chabad (216 respondents), Chabad (97 respondents), Yeshivish (221 respondents), and Modern Orthodox (230 respondents). Most of the previous research that had been conducted on this topic had focused on the Chasidic segment, and nearly all of the memoirs emanated from the Chasidic and Yeshivish groups. For a discussion of why Chabad was analyzed separately from the other Chasidic groups, see Mark Trencher, *Starting a Conversation*, 16.


10. For a detailed description of key differences between Orthodox subgroups, see Mark Trencher, *Starting a Conversation*, 16.


16. Mark Trencher, *The Nishma Research Profile of American Modern Orthodox Jews*, 24. Respondents were asked to rate on a scale from 0 to 10 the importance of their Orthodox observance. This scale is often used in research (and widely used in creating a metric called Net Promoter Score), with those providing a rating of 6 or less being labeled as “detractors,” — that is, those with a weak connection to the entity being assessed. A similar methodology was used in the Nishma survey.

17. Mark Trencher, observed results of Facebook postings among approximately thirty participants, September 2017; an anecdotal and nonscientific finding, but one that we see as directionally noteworthy given the lack of harder statistics.


27. See, for example, a widely read memoir that is being made into a film: Deborah Feldman, *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012).


31. Ibid., sample verbatim comments by respondents.


