



Dialogical Deconversion

Understanding Undercover Infidelity

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Abstract

This article examines the process of departure or “deconversion” from Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Judaism of young men in Israel. Deconversion describes the progression of abandoning a faith community and the difficulties involved. It is dialogical because it describes an interaction between the individual, his position, and the Haredi structure that seeks to speak in one authoritarian voice. Dialogical theory leans on the work by early 20th century Russian literature scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, which was later adopted by social psychologists, literature scholars, and social and cultural anthropologists and sociologists. I introduce the reader to the figured world of Haredi Judaism, its intensity, religiosity, and the way young men interviewed struggle with living a life they do not believe in and subsequently negotiate their way out.

Keywords: deconversion, dialogical self, ideological becoming, Haredi Judaism, yeshiva, ex-Haredim

Introduction

This article reflects my current and past research on young Israeli men who leave Ultra-Orthodox (known in Hebrew as Haredi) Judaism¹ after finding it impossible to continue

¹ Hakak (2009) notes that in Israel the term Haredi is used to describe Ultra-Orthodox Judaism and that it applies broadly to European (Ashkenazi) Jews and to Jews from Arab countries (Sephardim). The Haredi community is further divided through ideological lines. Most of my interviewees were from the Lithuanian

leading a religious life. The interviews were conducted with young men, largely in their twenties, all of whom were members of Hillel, the Hebrew acronym for the Association for Former Haredim, where I also volunteer. I call the departure process dialogical-deconversion because, in the course of the deconversion, the individual maintains an ongoing interchange between what becomes his own internally persuasive voice and the authoritative voice of the religious Haredi world. It is a transformative experience in which the constraints of Haredi Judaism are critiqued and the young man explores the possibility of living outside of Haredi Judaism. The young men speak about the lack of open dialogue in a community that does not accept questions that may undermine its fundamental beliefs. In large part, Haredi Judaism depends on its ability to discount the multiplicity of voices and ideas and questions expressed by some members of Haredi society. This dearth of dialogue is a significant force that leads young men to leave. Coming to the decision to leave demands that the individual challenges the perceived monologue of Haredi Judaism, involves dialogue with new voices that originate from within, and the realization that he does not have enough space to grow in the Haredi yeshiva.

I come to deconversion because of my interest in how people struggle, make meaning, and face social and ideological obstacles as they reject the cultural worlds in which they live. Deconversion, as I describe it, is about learning how people manage to leave a religious world. A recent interviewee (Yair)² told me, as we sat in my kitchen drinking coffee, that he has no particular attachment to ex-Haredim, and that he sees adopting Haredi Judaism like other journeys made by people who are not satisfied with their situation. His statement summarizes the journeys described by interviewees. They describe material needs, but their stories are no less about an intellectual process of learning to fill those needs.

It is, of course, important to point out, that despite the critical tone in this discussion of Haredi Judaism, my view is not contemptuous. For some people, namely people who abandon it, it is a negative place. Yet for thousands of its adherents Haredi life is fulfilling and is no less meaningful than any other form of communal life.

Young men who leave the Haredi world describe, in similar ways, the process of developing an alternative way of living and thinking that sustains them before they actually negotiate and learn the way out of their communities. I will introduce the reader to the deeply religious world of the Haredi and the dialogical way that these young men move away from religion, at least from religion as they were expected to live it. Exactly where one ends up, on a permanent basis, is another story.

The Experience of Leaving and Coming to Leave

The yeshiva is an exclusively male system and has been described as a “total institution” (Hakak 2012: 45). The Haredi experience starts in preschool and shadows Haredi boys well into adulthood:

branch of the Haredi world, which differentiates itself from Hasidic and Sephardic streams of Judaism (see Stadler 2007: 175). The educational goals of all streams of Haredi Judaism are the same, and life in the Haredi world is characterized by constant religious study.

² All names and personal details are changed to protect the participants' anonymity.

Haredi society is made up of yeshivas, which include all males and their households. There are no Haredi members that are not attached to a yeshiva, and there is almost no Haredi existence outside these institutions. The yeshiva is a total institution in many senses of the word. It covers the life span of a Haredi, from the *heder* [preschool] for toddlers to the *kolel* [full time adult religious learning] for men with families of their own . . . The yeshiva also covers the entire breadth of the life-cycle of the individual, as a place of prayer and study, as a framework for socializing and leisure, and as a kind of community center which provides material aid, housing, medicine and even psychic support (Aran, Stadler, and Ben-Ari: 33, internal citations omitted).

Haredi education/socialization is structured to flow, with no pause, from childhood through adulthood. It begins in the primary school where their lessons are “far more than a literary foray into a text or a recitation of a narrative. They are pretexts for passing along values, tools for deflecting heresies, and, perhaps most importantly, means for helping to give substance to what it meant to be a Jew in the world they inhabited.” That is, they are taught that they are all “part of a community” and to “watch out not to ask an outsider’s question” (Heilman: 225). Michael Rosenak, a philosopher of Jewish education, writes that “education is an obligation imposed on parents and the community to enable the young person to become an adult capable of studying Torah and carrying out its commandments.” That is, “traditional Jewish education begins in the home and is bound up with the norms of the family . . . the child learns immediately who has status and authority and why” (377). The education of the Jew is bound up in everyday practices and life in the Haredi world. The synagogue is also an educational establishment. Here the child learns who is in and who is out and why. The child learns and is embedded in “the language of community life and is considered to be ‘substantially educated.’ He learns customs as ‘iron clad’ laws which are precious and indispensable aspects of one’s innermost being” (Rosenak: 386).

This means that the education and schooling of children in orthodox religious environments amount to an effort to embed them in a very particular “figured world” (Holland et al.: 41-42). A figured world “then provides a means to conceptualize *historical* subjectivities, consciousnesses and agency, persons (and collective agents) forming in practice” (42). In other words, figured worlds are historical places into which people enter or are recruited and “develop through the work of their participants . . . processes or traditions of apprehension which gather us up and give us form as our lives intersect them.” They are places in which our position in them is important and where things happen and they are places, which may, at times be exclusive to certain participants. Figured worlds depend on “interaction and intersubjectivity for perpetuation.” Their “significance” and “indeed the existence” depend on its members “re-creating them by work with others.” Also, and very important, “figured worlds distribute” their members by placing them in particular “landscapes of action . . . but also by giving the landscape human voice and tone.” Holland et al. point out that figured worlds are “characteristic of human societies” (41). Following this, the Haredi community seems to be a figured world with an educational philosophy “centered on holy community and transcendence, the hallmark of educational practice is unbending traditionalism . . . Any new idea is seen as a danger to everything Judaism stands for, a blatant attempt to introduce reform, atheism, or Christianity, surreptitiously. The only

way to educate is the way it was (presumably) always done” (Rosenak: 385). Heilman says that despite the obvious concerns and fears a child has when he first goes to school, he is taking his first steps into a society of scholars where things need to stay the same more than they need to change (184). This place should not be seen as distinct from the rest of their lives. What is new is not new but already known. There is no room to challenge, just to proceed and to learn in order to reach the Yeshiva. This is the “embodiment of the Haredi ideal for life, a microcosm of the real world in which the divine presence dwells” (Rosenak: 386).

We learn, both from other writers and from former Haredim themselves, that “the Haredi curriculum must reflect the constant struggle against the outside world” (Rosenak: 388; see also Heilman: 174-76). In a sense, what is sought is the maintenance and purity of a constructed reality that seeks to keep (or protect) its most precious possession, the Talmud, from the outside world (see Rosenak: 389). It similarly resists introduction of seemingly harmless institutional or educational innovation or methodologies. “Even if some weak souls leave the fold, that is a price [that the Haredi establishment sees as] worth paying for the yeshiva ideal” (Rosenak: 389). That is, the world of the Haredi/fundamentalist Jew acts as a filter separating the holy from the profane.

The young man who eventually leaves begins to grasp the distance between what he thinks and what he is supposed to think, leading him to question and negotiate the truths taught to him in the course of his yeshiva career: avoidance of compulsory military service, denial of secular learning, an absence of critical Jewish dialogue, very distinct gender roles and separation, sexual denial and an obsession with control and discipline of the body (see Hakak 2009; 2011; 2012 for a critical examination of the life of young men in the Haredi yeshiva world; see also Nurit Stadler 2007; 2008). It is through this process that he is effectively “yoked” together with believers. The young man spends time trying to figure out a way to remain in Haredi society until it is safe for him to leave. He needs to be creative, to improvise, and to be flexible, clever, and resilient. He needs to play by the rules, or at least to appear to do so until he is able to leave, and he learns to function within the Haredi world while feeling that it is not his world and through this he learns how to leave, essentially passing (Renfrow) as a Haredi Jewish Male while actually living a nonreligious life.³ For many in the yeshiva there is an almost constant state of being monitored and of being denied autonomy. For this reason the yeshiva is effectively an insecure environment for someone with the kinds of questions that have the potential to undermine Haredi ideals. Young men said that rather than giving answers, their teachers avoided their questions or offered prescribed answers. “As I see it,” according to Yoram, “to leave (*yetziah l’sbealah*) is to abandon a place where they don’t ask questions except to quibble [while studying Torah]. They do not ask fundamental questions. To leave means to leave with the question to a question and to ask the question all your life. I do not believe that I will ever find an answer and that, as I see it, is to live with the question” (Frankenthaler).

³ “Nonreligion” is, according to Lee, “anything which is *primarily* defined by a relationship of difference to religion” (131).

While the young man feels unsafe in the yeshiva, the public library is a place where many go to get away from the restrictions they experience in the yeshiva. Many of the young men that I interviewed were boarding students and were under the constant watch of their rabbis and teachers. That is, all of them speak of accessing outside knowledge as the equivalent of committing a sin and as unacceptable to their communities. One young man, Eran, a well-respected and very promising yeshiva student, revealed that he had ideas and opinions that were considered, in his words, rather “heretical.” At first his criticism was confined to what he called social issues. “Even then [age 14-15] I was interested [in other issues], I would read books . . . on the Haredi sector, on the army, and why they [Haredi Jews] do not serve. I had serious doubts that were very serious to those who heard them.” He went on to say, “now the rule [at the yeshiva] was very strict, you were forbidden to leave the yeshiva.” But he stated that he would do what he wanted to do. He would attend his lessons and participate in other yeshiva activities. “But, then it started to be more prominent. I joined the municipal library which is the sin not to deny God . . . thanks to this I left the yeshiva.” He continued, “there was also the daily newspaper . . . I would bring the books back with me and I was not ashamed. Everyone would see me with the books, at least in my room. Perhaps outside of my room I would be careful that they would not see them. But in my room they knew. I guess you can say that was the first sign that began to stand out. I mostly read books on psychology or politics which were very interesting to me.” These books were “repugnant to Haredi Jews” (Frankenthaler).

Eran goes on and discusses how he thought about leaving but was not willing to take this upon himself, so he “would start to make it [his actions] more prominent,” including his relationship with the library. He illustrated the Haredi attitude in this way: “You need to understand that to bring a newspaper, any newspaper to the yeshiva is defilement . . . but I would bring newspapers to my room.” At the same time he spoke about a decline in his academic excellence at the yeshiva. He attributed this to his need to “read more . . . and I visited the *beit midrash* (study hall) less . . . I was in the library a lot.” It is clear, as Hakak discusses in his work (2011), that these young people are engaged in a process of undermining an institution, which they see as oppressive. It is a system that is characterized by an ideology of preserving itself as an enclave and in order to do so it must preserve a very particular ideology that serves to keep members contained within and to attract new members. The yeshiva system works quite intensely to maintain its status and to preserve its membership. Young people who leave are essentially an example of how this effort has failed. Hakak writes:

Therefore, in order to preserve its hold over its members, the enclave makes intensive use of a moral discourse that distinguishes the outside – presented as threatening, dark, and negative – from the enlightened, pure, and positive inside. This effort is supported by physical or geographical separation and by barriers between the “inside” and the “outside,” between the pure yeshiva and Haredi home and the defiled street. Thus the ‘inside’ of the enclave is not only presented as more honest and respectful, but also as better, by various comparisons with the “outside,” which are intended to raise the self-esteem of those who remain “inside” (2011: 295-96).

Yoram, who studied at one of the *Lubavitch* movement's (*Lubavitch* – or *Habad* – is a *Hasidic* sect well known for its efforts to reach out to and draw in other Jews) top yeshivas, discussed questioning and intellectual exploration. He said that he “was one of the best students and when I started to seriously think about the real essence of life I said wait, why am I doing this? Because of how I was born or because this is what they want me to do? And what about what I want to do? So, I would say, an internal process of excitement or agitation began. I had nobody to ask, because to dare to ask questions like this is unacceptable, or better to say, it is forbidden . . .” For him the yeshiva was extremely strict and lacked even a modicum of privacy. Together with what he saw as a failure to relate to intellectual inquiry in a serious manner on the part of the rabbis and teachers, he turned to outside sources. “. . . I would read books from outside. My yeshiva was a boarding school where we have no privacy, even in your most personal things. They would search all the time. So I just made a hole in my mattress and hid my stuff there.” When asked what he would hide he said: “Books, I had a library membership. The yeshiva where I learned was considered the best in Habad and I had a library card at the local library so I would take out books. I had no trouble concealing the books because I had that big suit, and you just put it in your suit. The librarian knew what was going on and knew us, and I had other friends from the yeshiva who also would go to the library. She [the librarian] collaborated with us. She knew it was forbidden, but she would ignore that. We always worried that the *Mashgiach* [yeshiva official who supervised the students] would come; he lived in the town, which was small. It was enough for him to be driving and see you outside of the yeshiva for him to start asking, “Hey why aren’t you in the yeshiva?” You are supposed to be there 30 days and to leave one Shabbat a month and then come back. So we followed the rules and they never caught on” (Frankenthaler).

In order to seek out safe space for questions the young man needs to go outside the walls of the yeshiva itself. Some individuals actually find alternative learning spaces. Others retreat to sanctuaries like the library, as Yoram does, while others find other spaces, books that they smuggle into the Yeshiva or newspapers, radios, etc. Hakak further notes, “Haredi yeshivas are the ideological heart of the community; this is where the fundamentals of belief are transferred and constantly emphasized. Its members are considered to fulfill, in the best way possible, one of the most important commandments: the study of the Torah. Also, they are more likely to have internalized all the other commandments and therefore able to follow them as closely as possible. While yeshiva students are encouraged to minimize or limit competition with their fellow students, they are encouraged to consider themselves superior to those who are not part of the yeshiva world” (2011: 295). Leaving this system is a challenge that requires negotiating implicit and even explicit coercion as well as the complacency of having all of one’s needs taken care of, as long as one does not need answers or non-Haredi intellectual stimulation.

I met Eitan one cool day during the autumn. We met in a mall in Tel Aviv, Israel’s largest city, which is the notoriously secular antithesis to the Orthodoxy of Haredi urban centers like Jerusalem or Bnei Brak. As I searched for a quiet and comfortable space in the mall I came across the virtually unused mall synagogue. Eitan was amused and a bit puzzled by my choice but I explained that this was the quietest space I can find and that if he wished,

we could sit elsewhere. As the synagogue no longer impressed him as sacred space, he was comfortable with it, so we sat down and he proceeded with his story at the beginning.

I was born into a Haredi family, I am the eldest, and I have two brothers and two sisters. In school I was the class nerd, let's say. I always enjoyed learning, not so much in class but rather auto-didactically, independently and I always asked question. I would check and investigate. I was a good boy; I would not make noise or disturb the others but I always asked questions and researched all sorts of subjects. I would read encyclopedias and all sorts of books. I had a library card and I would go to the municipal library, right from school and sit and read books, from the phone book to books on physics. I always knew that it was most important to go with what I believed. Up to about three years ago, let's say, I believed completely, not just blind faith, but as if all the proof that they (the rabbis) give I convinced myself that it was true. I am not one of those guys who just does not feel like it. I do things that I believe in and I believed. But, slowly, slowly I asked questions. It started while I was in 8th grade and it was during the disengagement [when Israel unilaterally left the Gaza Strip] and like all Haredi kids I was against it, but I slowly started to think about it and came to some left wing conclusions, even very left wing . . . in my junior Yeshiva, which was like high school I would argue with everyone . . . about my political opinions . . . and I continued to investigate and do research . . . I started to come to the conclusion that the main problem is that man does not understand the person whom he is facing. He thinks only from his own direction [or perspective]. Need to think from the other perspective and slowly I got into this frame of mind . . . I started to think from inside the head of another person . . . I read a lot of books about faith . . . I was still convincing myself but I read a lot of books . . . Haredi books as well as secular books and I concluded not that God does not exist, after all who we to make such a determination . . . I just concluded that religion is not correct, even if God exists, he [sic] is not interested . . .

In an interview with Yosef during the winter of 2003, in his student flat, not far from university, he pointed out that, "Part of the problem is that in the Haredi world you do not decide anything." The yeshiva for him was almost a prison. For example, he spoke about a very particular prohibition: "There are very strict rules there [at the yeshiva] . . . For example there are people there whose job it is to write down what you do all the time. There is a rule that prohibits conversations between three people or more outside of study time. Let's say at break time, if you are three together it is a sign that you are not studying. So they watch over you and everything is written down . . . you can get kicked out. They threaten you all the time." This type of threatening is common, he reported. So he devised a way out while remaining in. He spoke about four important outlets: studying the literature of Hassidic masters; studying Jewish thought; creating an *imaginary* world; and attending lectures at what he called a "white yeshiva." Regarding Jewish thought he said: "I began to get excited by this and I started to ask questions and then I became a bit more rebellious . . . I started to express things, to ask questions . . . one day the yeshiva head's son came to me and told me that next

year he was going to be my rabbi and he asked me if I was religious, Haredi, traditional, or just secular” (Frankenthaler).

Yosef spent significant amounts of time ensconced in the process of working on not being a Haredi Jew in the Haredi Yeshiva. In other words he was passing, as most of the participants in my study did, as a Haredi Jew prior to actually leaving. They essentially managed life in a system that, to them, was oppressive. Traditional treatments of passing, as Renfrow makes clear, examined how the person who is “passing,” as the holder of a different identity, does not particularly challenge the power structure that is oppressing him or her. Rather passing “may provide an alternative means for navigating” the oppression they experience (502). In my interviews, ex-Haredim discussed their methods, tactics, and improvisations that enabled them to negotiate their way in the Haredi world from which they were alienated while formulating how to safely get out.

I spoke with Hanan in my office, at the NGO where I worked in Jerusalem. It was an interview space that I used on several occasions. In the early evening it was generally quiet and the office is situated in a flat, with a kitchen where we made coffee and prepared snacks. After making sure that we were both comfortable we began to speak. Hanan was 27 when we spoke and had been “out” of the Haredi world for a number of years. He grew up in one of Israel’s large Haredi population centers in what is known as the Lithuanian community. For most of his life, he told me, he believed in God, in religious life, but he was not satisfied with his Haredi education. He spoke of his parents as being new to Haredi Judaism and of placing him in “hard core” schools, from elementary school through high school. For example, if he wanted to be physically active he had to “engage in sport secretly.” Although now tall and thin, he reported having a weight problem as a child and going out to jog in the evening, under cover of darkness. At this point he still did not question religious faith or God, just his environment. “From an ideological standpoint I was still very, very religious. I just felt that to study religious texts all day was not fulfilling; also lately I did not study much. I felt that I was wasting time and then I decided to look in other directions.” Around this time his rabbis (teachers and supervisors) began to notice that he was not completely committed to his religious learning and suggested that he attend another institution where he could “strengthen” his faith. But, at age 19, this was not what he wanted. He needed a place to learn and was accepted into the preparatory program at a technical institute geared towards Orthodox Jews. Haredi education, especially for boys, almost exclusively and effectively denies its students access to a full core secular curriculum (Hakak and Rapoport: 255). To a large extent, Haredi education places the collective “enclave” needs over the general educational needs of the children. For instance, it protects its students from having to participate in the institutions and obligations otherwise incumbent on other citizens of Israel. That also means that it insulates them from accessing the secular-Zionist, higher education, workforce or joining the army.

Hanan told me that when he started to learn mathematics it was like understanding Chinese, but eventually he managed to learn and to appreciate mathematics. “I would stay up until four in the morning every night and do all the exercises. And apparently, I discovered as well, later, my head deals well with mathematics and real things; I picked up on that quickly.” Shortly thereafter he was offered a place in the college’s prestigious training program for Haredi Jews, which prepares individuals for technical jobs in the military while

they earn an academic degree in engineering. Hanan accepted the offer and began his academic career and his way out of Haredi Judaism. He discussed how learning at the technology institute actually shook his faith and paved the way for him to make a break with religion. His rich description of learning the way out of Haredi Judaism along with other stories shows how the process of leaving is, in and of itself, a form of scholarship, in which, as discussed below, the young yeshiva student raises questions and creates space to change and to develop the wherewithal to actually break away from his world.

Hanan, while still a Haredi Jew, yet one who challenged the ideal of exclusive religious learning in order to not “waste” his life, talks about his education in the technology program:

In the beginning of the degree you study physics, and that’s the reason that so many Haredim are afraid that you will go out and get an education. Physics in combination with the specific Haredi methodology, especially the Lithuanian, is very problematic. It really does not fit much of what you learn. In order to really accept physics, and if you are a smart guy, that is, you understand, know to connect things then you raise many questions and that is what happened to me. That is how the process started in the first year of the degree. I said ok, there is something problematic here.

I asked Hanan to elaborate on this and he did, in detail, speaking about the Lithuanian yeshiva system, extremism and the clash between science and belief and how believers rationalize the study of science.

The Lithuanians, because they are very extreme, the Torah and all that we learn, you learn that as absolute truth, absolute truth. All that is written in the Torah comes from God so there cannot be something different and there is no room for interpretation from this perspective. That means science that is developing now – it was all in the Torah already. All is written in the Torah. If there are things that contradict the Torah those are mistaken because the Torah is absolute, it is not something primitive, old, or something that developed. Rather God wrote it. That is, if all of a sudden we discover aliens from outer space, it is not logical because they are not in the Torah and the Torah knows all, for example. Now, aliens, that is a big thing that clearly is not written about, but there are little things that you understand that apparently were not known because if they were known they would have recorded them and then questions start to arise for you . . . Physics is how our world works and Torah, too, at least strives to be a guide book for life that explains the world. So when you start, when you accept physics, and that was a process that took some time for me, because at first I was quite skeptical, all the physics, you cannot succeed in physics if you do not accept it, and when you see that really there is no space to ask questions about science you have to accept science because if not you will not get it. You say here, things work. People fly to outer space, people, physics works and when you accept physics totally you have a type of clash [he used English] how do you say, an encounter, you have a problem with your previous perspective and what you now accept.

Hanan's accounting of coming to disbelief, that is, to questioning and doubting accepted truths, clearly involved a process of understanding what is wrong with the world in which one lives. It is a process that I will now discuss and theorize.

Dialogical Deconversion

Many young Haredi men live a mapped existence. They are supposed to be married by a relatively young age, continue learning, perhaps work in an acceptable profession, remain entrenched in the relative certainty of Haredi life, and, by process of elimination, avoid the demands of the normative secular Zionist world. Departure means that one forsakes the certainty which Haredi society, as an enclave society that seeks to separate itself from mainstream society in order to perpetuate itself, works very hard to establish and maintain (Hakak and Rapoport). When we understand this and its implications, it is easier to understand the manner in which the struggle to leave is a process of learning to challenge the enclave and to undermine its grip. Hakak and Rapoport cite Mary Douglas and her work on enclaves to "show that underscoring equality among community members is a major practice employed by the *Haredi* society to prevent defection" (257). They point out that in order to prevent departure by members the community creates an understanding or perception that community members enjoy equality and are individually valued and that this is the correct way for the community to exist even though the community may actually seem to be managed unequally. Haredi leaders create a counter-narrative and point out that the alternative to the equality and communalism of the Haredi enclave is oppression and insecurity characteristic of the outside world.

I use the term "deconversion" in order to conceptualize and explain the process of leaving Haredi Judaism. My task now and in my current research is to demonstrate the link between deconversion and the literature on learning, agency, and the "dialogical self/ideological becoming" (Tappan 1999, 2000, 2005). Deconversion is an expression of how the individual produces meaning and learns to progressively evaluate and change his life as an agent through recognizing that the dissonance he experiences is irreconcilable with leading a viable and fulfilling life as a Haredi Jew. In the case of former Haredi Jewish men, this process often leads to disengagement from active Haredi life and movement toward, though not necessarily as a part of, the wider non-Haredi society in Israel.

Deconversion involves an exchange of ideas between the individual and his social setting. He dialogues with an authoritative voice, which represents the certainties of Haredi life, and his own voice, which is constructed in his dissonance (Holland et al.: 185; Tappan 2005: 54). This represents the move to uncertainty and ambiguity where dialogue is ongoing, challenging, and critical. In other words, there is an official Haredi discourse that the young man in his growing contempt of the Haredi world must challenge. Meeting this challenge in his daily life necessitates a combination of agentic development and learning that is embedded in a process of dialogue. This is a process of ideological becoming in which the Haredi discourse is authoritative, but the one who leaves the Haredi life essentially retells and reworks the Haredi story using his own words. It becomes fundamentally different and still linked to the Haredi world, but now it is his own story and thus it is "internally persuasive" (Tappan 1999, 2005).

In his 1994 study of loss-of-faith autobiographies by adult Christians, John Barbour argues that “deconversion involves doubt or denial of the truth of a system of beliefs. Second, deconversion is characterized by moral criticism of not only particular actions or practices but an entire way of life. Third, the loss of faith brings emotional upheaval, especially feelings of grief, guilt, loneliness and despair. Finally a person’s deconversion is usually marked by the rejection of the community to which he or she belonged. Deconversion encompasses, then, intellectual doubt, moral criticism, emotional suffering and disaffiliation from a community” (2). In contrast to conversion, deconversion indicates the loss of a specific element of belief, religious belief, without a necessary move into secularization where religion no longer matters. In some deconversions the religious or communal connection remains at certain levels yet, theologically, religion becomes less relevant and even irrelevant. The deconversion stories in my research have illuminated situations in which religion no longer controls a person’s life, but not all ex-Haredim completely reject their religious past (see Davidman and Greil for another perspective on deconversion).

Streib and colleagues (Streib et al.; Streib and Keller) followed Barbour (a literature and religion scholar) with a more traditional social science study of individuals who left very demanding religious communities in the United States and Germany. Thus, a typology of deconversion emerges, which combines Barbour’s four original elements with Streib’s fifth element: “loss of specific religious experiences . . . [such as] the experience of God” (Streib and Keller). Barbour’s work helps us to understand deconversion as part of a process that a person may undertake when dissonance is joined to personal ethics: “Among the reasons for which people reject a faith,” writes Barbour, “I see ethical considerations as primary, determining not only when religious beliefs or practices are deemed to be harmful or hypocritical but when cognitive uncertainties or doubts become compelling grounds for deconversion” (4). That is, deconversion is about a person’s learning to interpret, reflect, and act on his doubts and to recognize the need for transformation. Deconversion experiences are not particular to any one religion or religious expression and, perhaps, the term can even be used to describe exits from nonreligious insular communities or groups. It is important to understand deconversion as an expression of an individual living in a controlling (ideological and/or religious) community who, after feeling ill at ease or out of place, begins to question that system and to eventually make a clear and conscious effort to leave.

Deconversion, to describe it within the conceptual framework I am outlining, is an expression of an individual social actor in a dissonant relationship with the figured world (see Holland et al.: 41-42) in which he lives. The person involved in the deconversion process is in a learning exercise that includes identifying and challenging the reason for the dissonance and, if finding it irreconcilable, employing his agency to eventually leave. The ideological underpinnings of the Haredi world lose their force and the individual must then enter, or strengthen, a dialogical process in which “what strikes us as the normal order of things is suddenly revealed through ideology critique as a constructed reality that protects the

interests of the powerful” (Brookfield 2001: 16).⁴ For Tappan, however, the place of ideology is not so black and white. “It also entails, theoretically, combining Bakhtin’s ideas about ideological becoming, in which ideologies are any system of ideas, with Freire’s ideas about liberation from false consciousness, in which ideologies” are political (2005: 70). Tappan (1999) writes, “ideological becoming–identity development, for Bakhtin, entails gradually coming to authorize and claim authority for one’s own voice while remaining in constant dialogue with other voices” (1999: 122). According to Bakhtin:

Consciousness awakens to independent ideological life precisely in a world of alien discourses surrounding it, and from which it cannot initially separate itself; the process of distinguishing between one’s own and another’s discourse, between one’s own and another’s thought, is activated rather late in development. When thought begins to work in an independent, experimenting and discriminating way, what first occurs is a separation between internally persuasive discourse and authoritarian enforced discourse, along with a rejection of those congeries of discourses that do not matter to us, that do not touch us (quoted in Tappan 1999: 122).

This research also seeks to further develop and understand how leaving the Haredi world appears to challenge its discursive regime. Former Haredi Jews have pointed out that there is a dearth of open channels for dialogue in the Haredi world. Deciding to leave requires that the individual challenges the authoritative voice in Haredi society and introduces new voices developed in the course of realizing there is no room to grow in the Haredi yeshiva. An exit is not a process entered into lightly; it is an identity struggle and invokes the Bakhtinian process of authoring (Holland et al.: 173), which is the way that people answer their worlds. “One can never inhabit a world without at least the figural presence of others, of a social history in person. The space of authoring, of self-fashioning, remains a social and cultural space, no matter how intimately held it may become. And, it remains, more often than not, a contested space, a space of struggle” (Holland et al.: 282).

Moshe, an active ex-Haredi, is currently working on completing a college degree and works on behalf of others like him. When we spoke he described spending much of his life in the Haredi world as an “undercover infidel.” Like other interviewees, he hid alternative reading material under his official texts and spent significant time in public libraries exploring unaccepted literature. For Moshe the dialogical moment(s) occurred when he took a step beyond the mind into action. Tappan (1999, 2005) explains that the social actor is engaged in an intensive process of discourse that takes place in a social setting. It is not exclusively in the mind, where he must negotiate his coming to realize that the authoritative voice of the rabbis, for example, is less persuasive. The dialogue includes his own voice, influenced by his dispute with the authoritative voice. Subsequently, the alternative voices he has been able to accumulate and listen to in the process of his own “authoring” become his chief guide in the process of his ideological becoming (Holland et al.). The understanding of deconversion that will emerge from this study should provide another approach to the claim

⁴ Brookfield’s treatment of ideology critique is based in adult learning theory. Although most young men begin the process in their mid to late teens, the adult learning model remains applicable to young people going through adult like situations, such as deconversion.

that there is a natural Haredi male identity. “Subjectivities and their more objectified components, identities, are formed in practice through the often collective work of evoking, improvising, appropriating, and refusing participation in practices that position self and other” (Holland and Lave: 29).

We learn, therefore, from words expressed in departure narrative texts, ways in which young Haredi men who leave Haredi society are actually engaged in dialogical practice. They are “*in a state of active existence*” (Holland and Lave: 10, my emphasis) that involves a constant conversational process of being addressed and responding. Through this process the individual produces meaning and learns to engage his life progressively as an agent. Following Holquist, the Haredi male who leaves Haredi life challenges the official Haredi discourse which, “in its most radical form resists communication: everyone is compelled to speak the same language” (Holquist: 51; see also Tappan 1999, 2000, 2005; Holland and Lave) in the material and in the intellectual and spiritual realms of life (see Hakak 2011). This type of discourse could be interpreted as “totalitarian and [does] not recognize otherness: they abhor difference and aim for a single collective self” (Holquist: 51). Even an official discourse that is not totalitarian serves as “masks for ideologies,” all of which “privilege oneness” and harkens back to a time when language was unnecessary and in which the difference between a person and his or her society did not exist. In other words, official discourse is part of what the young man who is discontented with the Haredi world must challenge. Meeting this challenge in his daily life is the essential root of the learning and deconversion process that the young man undergoes.

Drawing on Bakhtin, the deconversion process is one of “ideological becoming” (see Tappan 1999, 2005). At this point dominant male-based ideological constraints of Haredi Judaism are critiqued and the young man explores different ways to exist or to become in the world. This is problematic if not threatening from the perspective of the Haredi Jewish establishment, which seeks to avoid questions, especially when the questions seem to subvert rabbinic authority rather than to help the individual correct his ways and stay on the Haredi path. The rabbis fear that incessant critical rumblings of deconversion may indeed upset the Haredi political system(s) held in place by ideologies of certainty (see Brookfield 2005; Frankenthaler). Tappan writes: “As such, identity development as ideological becoming, for Bakhtin, entails gradually coming to authorize and claim authority for one’s own voice, while remaining in constant dialogue with other voices” (2005: 55). This learned process of ideological change is integrated into the daily life of the young man. It is reflected less in major systematic change than it is in the daily improvisations and negotiations of daily living in which the young men endure and through which they learn how to leave (on improvisation, see Holland et al.).

Concluding Thoughts

Agency entails the ability of social actors to negotiate, navigate, and improvise their way in and through socially problematic or complex situations and to utilize these experiences to facilitate change at a personal level and at a systematic level (Holland et al.). The ability to challenge an imposed identity or belief structure, such as a very orthodox and religious one, which demands much from the person in terms of belief and behavior, is an expression of agency. Young men who leave Haredi Judaism develop critical imaginative capacities to

intervene “in the diverse contexts within which they act” (Emirbayer and Mische: 970). This is visible in their everyday lives, the conscious acts and improvisations that contribute to their ability to negotiate their struggle, to endure the hardships and to learn the way out. Moreover, in these deconversion narratives, we can identify the way in which agency is manifested dialogically (see Lieblich et al.) in how they learn, while in the yeshiva, to leave, as well as how their search is a process of personal discussion with the self (Tappan 1999, 2005). The social practice of deconversion remains very private and secretive, even when they reach out for help or direct questions in various directions. Their questions to authority figures are often rejected or ignored, particularly, as Moshe put it, when the rabbis know that this person is of “weak faith.” The transformative experience usually begins with an impetus for change rooted in struggle that arises within the person. Like in Yoram’s self-described process of “excitement or agitation” or the desire to ask a question, it does not stem from specific knowledge but from a feeling that something is not right or missing and a need to figure out what is missing. This is a dialogical event in which the individual challenges the hegemonic authoritative discourse in the Haredi world and challenges it with a more “internally persuasive” discourse. This conversation is ongoing and does not stop at a particular and discernible point. As long as the person is alive he will continue to relate to these conversational voices (Tappan 1999). Deconversion narratives make it possible to gain insight into these questions and to uncover much of what lies behind the very difficult task of leaving and learning to deal with the voices encountered both within Haredi Judaism and on the outside. At the same time, the journey out has no real end; the young man is engaged almost perpetually in his ideological becoming.

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