

Introduction

- Orthodox Judaism is a religion rooted in specific laws, restrictions, and customs that pertain to all aspects of daily life.
- Though a majority of individuals who grow up practicing continue to do so throughout their lives, a small number disaffiliate from the religion and stop practicing. These individuals are commonly referred to as *Off the Derech* or *OTD*.
- Causes for disaffiliating from Orthodox Judaism have been a source of conjecture among community members and discussed in community newspapers.
- Currently, there is limited existing literature on the topic of religious disaffiliation from Orthodox Judaism and even more limited quantitative studies examining the factors associated with disaffiliation in this population.
- This dearth of scientific data thus creates an environment for myths to exist regarding causes for disaffiliation and leads to blame, stigma, and marginalization of this population.

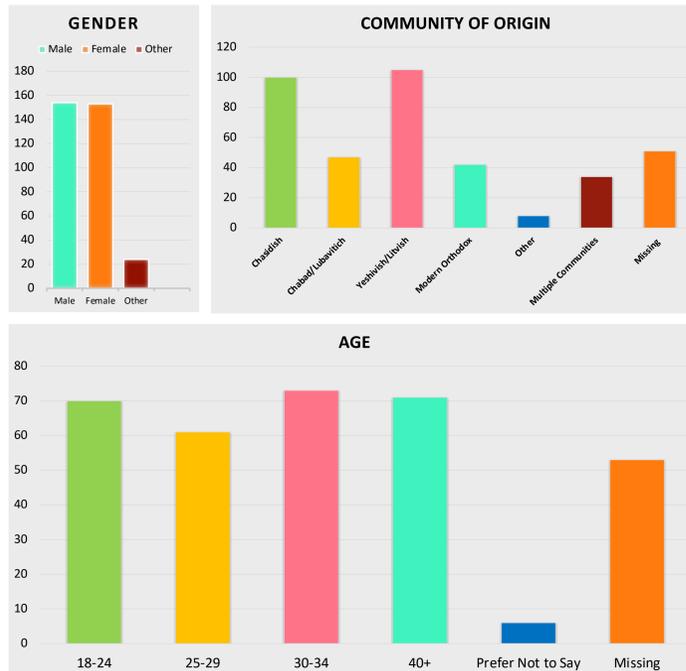
Rationale & Hypothesis

- Our recent study entitled *Religious Disaffiliation from Orthodox Judaism: Social, Psychological, and Intellectual Factors Related to Exiting* (Miles, et al. under review) investigated the factors reported by individuals as having contributed to their religious disaffiliation from Orthodox Judaism.
- The current analysis aims to compare findings from the above study to speculations about the causes for disaffiliation made in popular Orthodox Jewish newspapers.
- This comparison can make way for a more accurate conversation about disaffiliation from Orthodox Judaism, leading to a greater understanding, more inclusion, and less stigma of the *OTD* population.
- We hypothesized that qualitative differences would emerge between the original study and findings in community newspapers.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 387 individuals who identified as having grown up practicing Orthodox Judaism but who stopped practicing, and who were at least 18 years of age.



Procedure

Empirical Study

Participants were recruited* via:

- emails sent by *Footsteps*, a non-profit organization serving individuals who have religiously disaffiliated.
- postings on social media forums related to religious disaffiliation.
- in-person invitation at relevant professional gatherings.

* The recruitment letter and survey link were disseminated and conducted according to an IRB-approved protocol.

Community Perspectives

- Comparison data were obtained online from popular Orthodox Jewish community newspapers, including *Mishpacha*, *Orthodox Union*, and *The Jewish Press*.
- Once on these websites, a search was conducted using the phrase *Off the Derech* or *OTD*.
- Articles were specifically reviewed for references related to causes for going *off the derech*.

Measure

The religious disaffiliation survey used in this study consisted of three sections: A) 25 yes/no questions regarding personal life experiences; B) 25 Likert-scale questions for participants to rate the extent to which items in Part A affected their decision to disaffiliate; and C) demographics: gender, age, sexual orientation, community of origin, education level, and age at disaffiliation.

Results

Findings from the Empirical Study

Reported by > 90% of respondents:

- Moral and social conflicts with Orthodox Judaism
- Intellectual conflicts related to Orthodox Judaism
- Feelings that Orthodoxy is restrictive

Reported by 60-90% of respondents:

- Discrimination from members of the community
- Belief that one is an independent thinker
- Emotional abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Questioning gender and/or sexuality
- Being expelled from school
- Exposure to forbidden reading material

Findings from Community Sources

- Lack of attention and warmth from parents¹
- Poor parental discipline¹
- Being in pain for a variety of reasons²
- Desire to follow what feels good³
- Insufficient focus on the "heart of Judaism"⁴
- Judgement and negativity from the community⁵
- Poor parental role models⁶
- Sexual abuse⁷
- Academic difficulties⁷
- Feelings of loneliness⁸
- Issues in the parent-child relationship⁹
- Parental strictness¹⁰

References

- Aisenstark, S. (2017, January 18). Not a Hefker Velt. *Mishpacha Magazine, Guestlines*.
- Cohen, D. (2021, July 6). Sibling off the Derech. *Mishpacha Magazine: Family First, Issue 750*.
- Fink, R. E. (2014, September 4). Why do people leave Orthodox Judaism? Why do people stay?: Everyday Jewish living. *OU Life, blog post*.
- Leuchter, R. (2021, January 27). Building a Heart in Avodah. *Mishpacha Magazine, Issue 846*.
- Novick, A. (2008, April 16). Off the Derech and the Community. *The Jewish Press, Archive*.
- Pruzansky, R. S. (2017, February 16). Why are our teens going off the Derech? *OU Life, blog post*.
- Russell, S. (2017, February 1). Hefker Velt Revisited. *Mishpacha Magazine, Issue 646*.
- Singer, Y. J. (2018, June 29). Widen the Derech. *The Jewish Press, Book Reviews*.
- Sorotzkin, B. (2005). The role of parents in the current crisis of "off the derech" adolescents: Dare we discuss it? Can we afford not to? *Unpublished manuscript*.
- Strauss, R. (2020, July 22). Other-Derech Children. *Mishpacha Magazine: Family First, Issue 702*.

Conclusion

Although some similarities exist between the factors reported in our survey responses and the perspectives provided in popular Orthodox Jewish newspapers, the majority of the findings highlight many qualitative differences between the empirical study and community sources.

The most-commonly documented variables reported in the empirical study tended to focus on intellectual issues with the religion and feelings that the religion was restrictive, while the variables discussed in the community sources often pointed to situational factors such as strict parenting, deficits in the parent-child relationship, feelings of loneliness, sexual abuse, academic difficulties, and judgement from community members.

Discussion

Placing the results from the empirical study alongside responses from community sources presents a more accurate view of what individuals who are *OTD* actually experience.

Such comparisons help highlight inaccuracies regarding variables contributing to religious disaffiliation from Orthodox Judaism and create less harmful judgment, more inclusion, understanding, and positive dialogue surrounding the *OTD* population.

An important future direction would be to involve community members and leaders in conversations with *OTD* individuals regarding their lived experience of disaffiliation from Orthodox Judaism.

Contact Information

Dr. Rona Miles
Department of Psychology
Brooklyn College/CUNY
Email: rmiles@brooklyn.cuny.edu
IRB Number: 2019-0397

