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Why Do They Leave?

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One of the subjects that I have discussed a lot here is the phenomenon of leaving Orthodoxy (...commonly referred to as going OTD – off the Derech. Although I don’t really like the term – OTD will be used in this post for simplicity’s sake). What has not been discussed as much is the wide variety of issues that drive those people away... and the widely divergent reasons that drive people from one segment versus another.

Nisma Research has released a [summary](#) of the results of a study that reveals interesting facts about why and how Orthodox Jews leave. And the reasons do vary. A good review of those results is available in the [Forward](#).

What was somewhat surprising to me is just how many Jews leave Orthodox observance and belief while remaining a part of their community. Fully one third of them do.

I have always known that there are people like this. They keep up appearances in order to remain accepted by their community thereby enabling themselves and their families to continue the lifestyle they are used to. In many cases they have established roots which would make it impossibly hard to break away from that and start life over again in a world to which they have never belonged. breaking away from the community can also easily lead to divorce if a spouse is not on the same OTD page. So they ‘fake it’ by keeping up appearances at least on the outside.

The problem with this lifestyle is that you are living a lie, which is difficult to do if you have any self-esteem. This is why 2/3 of that community drop out not only of observance but from their

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community. Difficult as that may be.

Another fascinating factor is that the largest portion of them – 19% do it based on finding contradictions to what they have been taught... or the lack of proof thereof. Another 31 % say they do it for other intellectual reasons (eg. unanswered questions, reliance on rational thought, or general doubts).

That means that half of all respondents to that survey did not do so for emotional reasons. Which is one of the claims of those that deal with young people that go OTD. Most – they say – do it for emotional reasons.

What I didn't see in the summary is whether more Modern Orthodox (MO) go OTD than Charedim. And if MO does have a bigger percentage (as many people assume), by how much.

The reasons MO go OTD are different than the reasons Charedim go OTD. My guess is that a person's environment as he grows up plays a significant role in this. Those families that are what I call MO Lite, surely have a greater number of OTD. If one comes from a home where the M is more important than the O, it should not be a surprise that so many MO youth go OTD.

Charedi OTDs are at the other end of the spectrum. Their religious education is so narrow and their secular education so limited, that the slightest exposure to the outside world can easily create doubts about what they were taught as immutable fact.

It is also interesting to note that when a Charedi drops out, the fall is much greater than when a MO drops out. From the **Forward**:

Mark Trencher, the director of Nishma Research, noted that there was an inverse relationship between level of observance while still a part of Orthodox Judaism and level of observance after leaving. "It seems that those who started out most stringently to the right — Chasidic Jews, Yidishists — after leaving the community, they retained less of their beliefs and practices than other groups," he said.

One can speculate about the reasons for this. MO is generally much more accepting of those who leave than Charedim are. (Although I believe that is changing for Charedim.)

The lifestyle of a Modern Orthodox Jew is not all that dissimilar from that of his non-observant neighbor. Except for Shabbos and Kashrus, their lifestyles are more or less the same – both participating in the general culture. Both more or less look and dress the same. So when a child goes OTD, his lifestyle may not change all that much. Even as it causes tremendous internal pain for a religious parent to see a child go OTD – it is nonetheless easier to accept someone whose changes are not so apparent. At least externally. There is far less communal embarrassment when the

community just doesn't know what is going on with your child. Acceptance gives a child a more positive feeling and that can mean retaining at least some of their observant behavior.

Charedim on the other hand have in the past reacted negatively to a child that goes OTD. In some cases parents have refused to have anything to do with them. That closes doors and pushes them away even further. When a lifestyle rejects the general culture – then dropping observance means dropping everything. Which quickly become apparent to the rest of the community. And that makes it extremely embarrassing for the parents.

As I said this is changing. Charedi experts in the field say that while it is important to express disapproval of going OTD, it is equally important to give their children unequivocal love and personal acceptance. But even so, the greater embarrassment and thus disappointment of a Charedi parent surely pushes a child further away from observance.

All of this begs the question: How do we deal with this? And what do we do to reverse this trend?

There are organizations that help people. One of which, Project Makom. They actually try to convince Charedi dropouts that there are other ways to be observant besides the Charedi way. Obviously Project Makom by definition does work for MO.

But the larger question is How do we prevent it? This is where our community focus should be. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

Harry Maryles

About the Author: *Harry Maryles runs the blog "Emes Ve-Emunah" which focuses on current events and issues that effect the Jewish world in general and Orthodoxy in particular. It discusses Hashkafa and news events of the day - from a Centrist perspective and a philosophy of Torah U'Mada. He can be reached at hmaryles@yahoo.com.*

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