

Ayala Fader, *Hidden Heretics: Jewish Doubt in the Digital Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), pp. 288.

by *Florence Heymann*

This book deals with those ultra-Orthodox Jews who lead a “double life,” men and women who do not leave their communities and continue to practice their ultra-Orthodox way of life, but secretly violate most of the rules and commandments, because they no longer believe in them. They are born and raised in this ultra-Orthodox society and get married there. They have children, but they no longer feel they belong to this world.

As they commit these violations in complete solitude, it is almost impossible for double lifers to develop a subculture. They cannot communicate, especially with those closest to them. If they revealed themselves, they would risk losing everything: spouse, parents, children, often also work.

Jewish orthodoxies are today in crisis. The broader political and social context of generational rebellion is important to understand the contemporary crisis of authority (p. 17). Economic problems are also an important factor. However, the main culprit, the catalyst for these phenomena is clearly the internet, although it can be said to be a broader crisis of authority in the twenty-first century. Blogs and social media have allowed many to anonymously criticize “the system,” the structures of rabbinical authority and affiliated institutions, schools, synagogues, charities, kosher businesses, and summer camps. In addition to what authorities see as a moral decay of each successive generation due to the morals of the time, new communication technologies have widened the breach in the edifice of rabbinical authority. The authorities’ fight has therefore fizzled out. Their prohibitions, linked to the increasingly numerous revelations of rabbinical scandals and sexual abuse, have shaken the foundations of the said authorities.

The book is divided into two parts. The first follows the trajectory of the crisis of authority as it unfolded during the struggles around the Internet. The second part

analyzes “life-changing doubt” and its implications for families, friends, religious authorities and institutions.

Chapter two deals with the Jewish blogosphere. The “Jblogosphere” and the “Jblogs” constitute a “heretical counter-public.” They allow the assertion by a marginalized group of an alternative discourse in conflict with the dominant public space.

Hassidic bloggers run multilingual blogs. Fluency in Standard English has become a sign of doubt or at least of enlightened inclinations (p. 45). Along with the use of English, sarcasm has become another characteristic of the “religious doubtful.”

Chapter three chronicles the struggle of the ultra-Orthodox rabbis against the Internet, as well as the ban on smartphones, which should be replaced by kosher phones. Indeed, smartphones are for the rabbinical authorities immodest or inappropriate objects. They evoke disgust, impurity, and are considered harmful to the environment.

In the mid-2000s, before social media became mainstream, ultra-Orthodox leaders had mostly fought against online pornography. This deviance led to the sin of masturbation, which was presented above all as an addiction. In 2006, the Yeshivist rabbis formed the first anti-Internet organization: Ichud HaKehillos Le Tohar Ha Machane. In 2011, two other groups followed: Guard Your Eyes and Technology Awareness Group, whose large rally, which took place in 2012, had the goal to ban the Internet in all ultra-Orthodox homes.

However, double lifers, especially men, say their doubts stem from real intellectual questions, and not just from new technology. They challenge the rabbinical authorities and claim the right to make their own ethical judgments, because they do not accept that the authorities present themselves as divine mediators of truth.

Chapter four analyzes the morality of a double married life. Secrets create boundaries between people. The ultra-Orthodox way of life makes it even more difficult for women than for men to keep secrets. If a woman were to agree to keep

the secrets of a husband leading a double life, this might be one of the few ways for her to maintain intimacy with her spouse, as well as the respectability of the family unit, while protecting her children and securing their own reward in the world to come.

Women who lead a double life, unlike men, do not have the opportunity to become intellectuals, even when they are heretics. Their deviations from the norm are still considered to be of a sexual nature. They break the framework of modesty (*tsniut*). The husband who remains religious in the couple creates a gender shift in authority, whether in private or public space. Gender shapes the opportunities and limitations for the religious spouse. Wives who are still religious have less authority to make demands of their doubting husbands, and rabbis rarely advise them to divorce. Men are allowed to divorce more often than their wives when they become too overtly rebellious (p. 119).

Chapter five analyzes the methods by which doubt has been and is dealt with today. For rabbinical authorities, doubt is either the influence of Satan or mental illness. A therapeutic framework is a recent phenomenon in ultra-Orthodoxy (p. 122), but the results are rarely encouraging and the process often implies misdiagnosis, over-medication and above all, numerous violations of patient-therapist confidentiality (p. 123).

Those who intervene—rabbis, activists and Orthodox life guides—generally use two distinct strategies: 1) respond using argumentation from historical and theological texts. 2) suggest that doubts are symptomatic of an emotional problem. Religious therapists, on the other hand, encouraged by the rabbis, use treatments such as cognitive behavioral therapy or prescription drugs for depression or anxiety (p. 132). There are some dissenting voices among religious therapists. Being both a therapist and a religious Jew is particularly complicated when dealing with doubt. Not all religious therapists are willing to participate in the triangulation of care, and certainly the majority of trained therapists do not invest in sustaining those living a double life at all costs (p. 141).

Chapter six attempts to describe the world in which double lifers live. They think of themselves as pursuing new values of autonomy, self-expression and personal fulfillment (p. 152). For them changes in the body is the primary embodiment of deviance. For example, they can learn to ride a bike or ski. They may spend weekends away from their home and community so that they can build up a larger space of freedom. They may also start going to bars and even experimenting with sexuality (p. 166). Other changes could affect the body, hair, headgear, beard or clothing (p. 164).

Beyond the body, changes also affect their language. In the same way that these people live a double social and religious life, they also lead a double linguistic life and create a “medialect.”

Chapter seven, which deals with family secrets, takes us to the very heart of the family. How does the doubt that changed a parent’s life, even if it was kept secret, affect the rest of the family, when things seem to be more or less the same on the outside? The biggest challenge of “mixed marriages” is vis-à-vis the children. They disrupt, in an almost obligatory manner, the coherence in which ultra-Orthodox children grow up, where home and school support each other. Raising children to participate in a dominant ideology, while simultaneously and secretly undermining that ideology, seems ethically extremely complicated. How do you make a child feel that morality, and even truth, could be relative, and that this would pose a potentially dangerous threat to the authority of ultra-Orthodoxy (p. 190)? By secretly introducing a different authority structure into the privacy of the home, parents who lead a double life try to quietly encourage values antithetical to ultra-Orthodoxy without straying too far from the lines, for fear of attracting unwanted attention from school authorities, rabbinical authorities, and the extended family (p. 183).

Those who experience a double life are not making a radical conversion from belief to disbelief, a process that would turn their everyday life into a “before” and an “after.” Instead, it is a long and messy process, continually adding to emotional commitments, moral dispositions, and changes of all kinds.

“Double lifers” speak of cognitive dissonance, an uncomfortable state in which they constantly and simultaneously experience conflicting attitudes, beliefs and behavior (p. 217).

What the ultra-Orthodox rabbinic leaders came to realize is that the real threat to their authority is not just a new technology or a loss of individual faith, but rather the fact that the internet makes it possible for these heretics and their peers to remain hidden, secretly support each other, and share their ideas as they seek new ways of being in the world (p. 220).

What happens when a loved one, a spouse or a child, adopts a radically different way of understanding themselves and humanity? Can you support someone who you think is morally wrong? Can love be sustained beyond a drastic shift to a different moral worldview? These are questions that “double lifers,” ultra-Orthodox rabbis, and religious therapists grapple with, but these questions do, in fact, have universal resonance.

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