

“Off the Derekh”: Losing and Leaving Religion

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers’ Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/module/off-the-derekh>.

Introduction

Hasidic communities typically value privacy, discourage interaction with the non-Hasidic world, and communicate internally in Yiddish. Consequently, information about the personal lives and close relationships of Hasidim is not readily available, and the information we do have comes primarily from atypical members of the community such as those who leave.

Recently, a small body of testimonial literature written by former Hasidim who have gone “off the *derekh*” (off the path) has developed. These narratives are valuable because they provide a glimpse into a Jewish community that many people know little about. They are universally compelling inasmuch as they highlight coming-of-age struggles, social and familial turmoil, and the shifting nature of individual identity. Those who remain in the Hasidic community might justifiably point out that these “off the *derekh*” narratives represent exceptions to the rule, since the vast majority of community members do not leave. Critics also note that these memoirs, written for outsiders looking into the Hasidic world, tend to emphasize the aspects of Hasidic life that readers may find most surprising, foreign, and exotic, turning the Hasidic community into an object of entertainment and celebrating leaving Hasidic life as a story of triumph. Read judiciously however, these narratives offer insights into Hasidic cultural and social structures. They are also personal accounts of transformation that might be relevant for anyone struggling to navigate between tradition and modernity, familial loyalty and individual identity, or religious and secular commitments.

Tales of young individuals leaving their religious communities and traditions for a modern, secular society and worldview are not only part of the 21st century landscape of Jewish literature; they are at the heart of modern Jewish literature in general. This kit makes the connection between contemporary works by ex-Hasidim and narratives, both fictional and autobiographical, by Jewish writers from earlier times, who experienced the confrontation between a religious upbringing and an increasingly secular world.

Thank you to the Forward Association for generously sharing the cover image to this resource kit.

Subjects

Hasidism, Marriage, Memoir, Religion

Reading and Background:

Here is some background reading about each of the three contemporary, ex-Hasidic authors excerpted in this kit:

- Shalom Auslander’s [website](#) includes clips of radio interviews and readings, excerpts of recent writings, and quotes from book reviews. These *New York Times* book reviews of Auslander’s book *Foreskin’s Lament* by [Charles McGrath](#) and [Benjamin Anastas](#) offer additional insight into Auslander’s work and its popular reception.
- Shulem Deen’s [website](#) includes interviews, videos, and quotations from reviews, as well as articles and opinion pieces by the author. [This review](#) in *Tablet Magazine* of Deen’s *All Who Go Do Not Return* contextualizes Deen’s work within the “micro-trend” of recently published “off the *derekh*” narratives.

In addition:

- This [website](#) accompanying the PBS documentary *A Life Apart: Hasidism in America* includes extensive general information about the religious movement of Hasidism and its various manifestations in contemporary America, especially in the greater New York City area.
- This [recent article](#) in the *Forward* discusses the trend of “Off the *Derekh*” narratives, their major themes, and also criticisms that have been leveled against them.

Resources



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1: Excerpt from Shalom Auslander's "Foreskin's Lament: A Memoir," 2008.

This satirical memoir of the author's upbringing in the Hasidic community of Monsey, New York, focuses on the development of his neuroses, which he attributes to the authoritarian thought structures and social patterns in which he was raised.

Suggested Activity: Read the excerpt aloud with your students. Have your students discuss the notion that some religious people find the idea of God's control over life's events – even unfortunate events – comforting. Ask your students to speculate about why the rabbi in Shalom Auslander's story might find comfort in ascribing his misfortunes to God. Shalom Auslander finds the notion of God's control immensely distressing. Ask your students why they think Auslander and the rabbi have such different perspectives on the idea of God's involvement in life events.

Source: Shalom Auslander, *Foreskin's Lament: A Memoir*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), pp. 70-72.

2: Animated trailer for Shalom Auslander's, "Foreskin's Lament: A Memoir," 2008.

This short animated video presents an introduction to the book's content and tone. It features the author's voice reading the first few pages of the book.

Suggested Activity: Have your students discuss the following questions: What makes Auslander's first few pages funny? Perhaps the humor comes from the reader's / listener's discomfort with what is said. The reader perceives the author's statements as transgressive – not only of the norms of Ultra-Orthodox culture, but also of the assumptions of wider Jewish and American cultural patterns. Have your students make a list of the cultural assumptions Auslander challenges or transgresses. Ask your students: Why do you think we as readers might identify with those specific assumptions? What was your reaction to these assumptions – were you uncomfortable? Did you laugh? Why or why not?

Source: Video Preview of Shalom Auslander, *Foreskin's Lament: A Memoir*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), for Jewish Book Week 2008. Available via Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Yt-jdwkIH8>

3: An antecedent from a previous generation: Excerpt from Yekhezkel Kotik's, "Journey to a Nineteenth-Century Shtetl," (1913), trans. David Assaf.

Yekhezkel Kotik (1847-1921) was born and raised in a well-off family in present-day Belarus. He received a traditional education, but eventually rebelled against his father's legacy, especially his father's commitment to Hasidism. His memoirs were hailed by the Yiddish literary establishment as valuable for their historical and literary merit. In them, he describes nineteenth century Jewish life in Eastern Europe with an eye to historical detail and without a critical or nostalgic tone. In this excerpt, Kotik describes his critical attitude toward his teacher's understanding of the idea of God.

Suggested Activity: Have your students compare and contrast the rabbi's notions of God with Kotik's notions of God and attitude about God. Invite your students to also compare and contrast Kotik's notions of God and attitude towards God with Auslander's. Ask your students to evaluate Kotik's and Auslander's approaches to religion. Do they see them as confused? Confrontational? Rebellious? Curious?

Source: Yekhezkel Kotik, *Journey to a Nineteenth-Century Shtetl*. Translated and edited by David Assaf. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press: 2002), p. 223.

4: Excerpt from Shulem Deen, "All Who Go Do Not Return: A Memoir," 2015, and excerpt from PBS documentary, 1997.

Without sarcasm or affected humor, the tone of Shulem Deen's memoir is very different from that of Shalom Auslander. Deen chronicles his life within the Skverer Hasidic community. This includes his struggles with adjusting – socially and sexually – to being married to a stranger.

Included in this resource is an excerpt from the PBS documentary *A Life Apart: Hasidism in America* in which Professor Samuel Heilman, an expert on Orthodox Jewish movements in contemporary America, discusses how a young Hasidic man learns about the sexual obligations of marriage.

Suggested Activity: Have your students discuss the following questions: What must it be like to enter married life with a partner who was selected for you and with whom you are not familiar (and not in love)? What disadvantages does such a system have

over the courtship process that is common in secular life (dating and romance)? What advantages might the brokered-marriage system afford?

Sources: Shulem Deen, *All Who Go Do Not Return: A Memoir*, (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015), p. 47-49.

A Life Apart: Hasidim in America. (Produced and directed by Menachem Daum and Oren Rudavsky; written by Daum and Robert Seidman. First Run Features, PBS, 1997).

5: An antecedent from a previous generation: Excerpts from “Solomon Maimon: An Autobiography,” trans. J. Clark Murray.

Solomon Maimon (1753-1800), was born Shlomo ben Joshua in the town of Zhukov Borok in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (present-day Belarus). A child Talmud prodigy, as a young man he became increasingly disillusioned and disenchanted with the leadership of the Jewish community and with the religious beliefs and commitments of Jewish tradition. He left his home, abandoning his wife and children, and traveled to Berlin to participate in the intellectual environment of the Enlightenment, eventually becoming the author of a major critique of Kantian philosophy. In his memoirs, which combine philosophical ideas with personal experiences, Maimon chronicles his intellectual path away from Jewish tradition and toward the Enlightenment. His memoirs, modeled on Rousseau’s *Confessions*, set a pattern followed by many *maskilim* (followers of the Jewish Enlightenment) who described their development toward rationalism and away from religious tradition. Such memoirs played a central role in the development of modern Jewish literature. In the first excerpt, Maimon describes his lack of preparedness for marriage. In the second excerpt, he describes his decision to leave his community.

Suggested Activities: Have your students discuss the challenges of learning about a culture through informants who have left, discussing the following questions: Both Shulem Deen and Solomon Maimon describe their communities for a readership that is outside of the religious milieu. Do you feel that the authors are respectful of the community and culture they describe? Do you feel that they emphasize certain aspects that their readers might find exotic, funny, or scandalous? In what ways do they represent marital practices similarly, and where do their presentations differ? In reading a negative or unsatisfied review of a culture in a narrative, we should bring at least as much critical awareness to our reading as we would bring to a negative or unsatisfied review of a product on Amazon. How do you think a “satisfied customer” would respond to the portrayals of Deen and Maimon?

Source: Solomon Maimon, *Solomon Maimon: An Autobiography*, trans. J. Clark Murray. (University of Illinois Press, 2001), p. 79, 187.

6: Another antecedent: Excerpt from I. L. Peretz’s, “My Memoirs,” 1913-15, trans. Seymour Levitan.

I. L. Peretz (1852-1915) is considered one of the founding and most important writers of modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature. As a child in Poland, he was raised in an Orthodox home and received a private education in Talmud and commentaries. As a young man, he turned toward the Jewish Enlightenment, educating himself in on secular topics and Enlightenment literature. In this excerpt from his memoir he describes the moment when he expanded his reading beyond Jewish sources into what he describes as “their” *besmedresh*, the study house of the gentiles. As he describes it, a book dealer learned of his exceptional scholarship and offered young Peretz the keys to his library. In the excerpt, Peretz describes his feelings on entering the library for the first time.

Suggested Activities: Have your students discuss the following questions: What are the stages that Peretz goes through as he develops intellectually beyond traditional Jewish thought and knowledge? Why does he describe the physical space where he studied non-Jewish texts in such detail – what is the relationship between non-Jewish spaces and non-Jewish knowledge for him? Why do you think he quotes “Those who enter will never return” (Proverbs 2:19)? This is the same passage that Shulem Deen chose for the title of his memoir. Why do you think each author chose this passage, and does it mean the same thing to each of them? What is the boundary line in each author’s imagination which, once crossed, can never be retraced?

Source: I. L. Peretz, “My Memoirs,” trans. Seymour Levitan in *The I. L. Peretz Reader*, edited by Ruth R. Wisse. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 343.

7: Antecedent from a previous generation: Excerpt, Puah Rakovsky’s “My Life as a Radical

Jewish Woman: Memoirs of a Zionist Feminist in Poland,” trans. Barbra Harshav with Paula Hyman.

This memoir was written between 1940 and 1942, and first published in Hebrew translation in 1952 and then in the original Yiddish in 1954 in Buenos Aires. It describes Rakovsky’s journey from an Orthodox home in Bialystok to a secular Jewish life as a Zionist Feminist activist. In this excerpt, Rakovsky, who has abandoned her first, arranged marriage and obtained a divorce against her family’s determined opposition, moves to Warsaw to begin her career, and must consider what this means for her children.

Suggested Activities: Have your students discuss the following questions: Why does Rakovsky choose not to leave her son with her father? What are the considerations in this decision? . How is Rakovsky’s experience of leaving Orthodoxy for a secular lifestyle inflected by the obligations and social roles she has as a woman? To what extent is this passage about the emotional challenges of leaving Hasidism for a secular environment, and to what extent is it about practical challenges?

Obviously the presence of children complicates a social transition. Invite your students to make an imaginative diary entry, or perhaps a childlike drawing or painting, portraying the perspective of Rakovsky’s son or daughter as they adjust to moving from one part of Europe to another, one household to another, one lifestyle to another, all because of Rakovsky’s intellectual and spiritual journey which perhaps they cannot fully understand. How would the child make sense of what is happening to their world? What attachments, anticipations and excitements, or disappointments would be present for the child?

Source: Rakovsky, Puah. *My Life as a Radical Jewish Woman: Memoirs of a Zionist Feminist in Poland*. [Zikhroynes fun a yiddisher revolutsyonerin] ed. and introduced by Paula E. Hyman, Trans. Barbara Harshav with Paula Hyman. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2002.