Introduction

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The term "Off the Derech" has a complex meaning and history. *Derech*, Hebrew for "path" or "way," bears a religious connotation: those on the path, those who follow the *derech*, ascribe to a rabbinic authority, both ancient and modern, which determines a way of communal and private life that leaves the individual with relatively little autonomy. The Hebrew word *halacha*, which means Jewish law, is derived from root *halach*, "to go." Taken together, committing to the legal and moral system put forward by Jewish *halacha*, Jewish law, as interpreted by certain scholars and rabbis, means that one lives by a specific code, one follows the ways (*derech*) and customs that are not only deemed necessary for belonging within certain communities but also understood as carrying with them the ultimate authority of what it means to lead a good and morally upstanding life.

The term off-the-derech originated from within ultra-Orthodox communities as a way of describing members of these communities who determined to leave it. It is a word, then, with subversive origins that carries with it a sense of stigma and difference. But, as is the case with a number of pejorative words and phrases, in an act of transgression that in some ways mirrors their original departures, many of those who self-identify as OTD, or off-the-derech, effectively re-claim it as a term that is less derisive and marginalizing and more descriptive, offering—as it does—a specific orientation. Then again, there are those who reject the label, viewing it as unnecessarily critical and derogatory. A number of the contributors to this volume address and

explore the meaning of the term off-the-derech. We have chosen to use it as the title of this volume because, for better and for worse, it has become the most commonly used term to describe the act of departure from the practices and ways of living within a native religious Jewish community. It is used by those who remain within their religious communities to describe a decision that is as much a physical one—individuals who move away from family and friends—as a religious, ethical, and cultural one. It describes an abandonment of the principles held most closely by those who continue to live within their religious communities, who maintain a belief system that the "right" and "best" practices of Jewish life involve adhering to a strictly codified set of rules. For these believers, going "off-the-derech," and this is often the phrase used, describes a set of detrimental decisions that can lead that individual irrecoverably astray. It can be characterized as crazy, scandalous, weak, a betrayal, wrong, catastrophic, morally compromising, selfish, and destructive. Going off-the-derech places those individuals beyond the reach of their community and, by inference, beyond the reach of God. Often those who leave their religious communities are cut off, partly or fully, from their families—siblings, parents, spouses, and children refuse to speak or interact with their family members because doing so in many ways further contaminates them. It leaves them vulnerable to the influence of that person; it allows that person even a minimal platform within the family and, therefore, within the community; it deepens and enlarges the stain of embarrassment and difference that hold very real implications for marriage prospects for all those associated with the family. For many within religious communities, the term "off-the-derech" marks a sinner, one who is unrepentant and one who has little interest in changing course. It is a term of condemnation and exclusion, the scarlet letter of assignations. While not all of those who declare themselves to be off-the-derech are shunned by those who continue to live in their native religious communities, invariably a deep—even unscalable—sense of difference exists between those who choose to stay and those who choose to leave.

And then there are those who openly declare themselves to be off-the-derech, who embrace the term, identify with it, and determinedly re-claim it. This volume centers on them, their stories, their voices, and their presence within the larger Jewish community. Some identify with

the term "off-the-derech" precisely because of its subversive meaning—they wish to re-define a term of stigimatization, turning it on its head, emptying it of its pejorative meaning, and adopting it with defiance and pride. Of course, a wide array of responses to the "off-the-derech" label exist among the many people who have left their religious communities. Some reject the term "off-the-derech" because of its history, its negative valence, and its meaning in religious communities. Some reject it as a term that gives credence to the myth of religious superiority, lending those who are "on" the path a semblance of authority that doesn't exist for those who are "off" of it. Some prefer the term "ex-O," short for ex-Orthodox. "Ex-Jew" is often a term used in blogs that refers to those who are no longer religious. "Ex-Hasidic," or "ex-Haredi," is regularly invoked and offers a more specific indication of one's native community. A term used by both members of religious communities and those who have left is "Apikoros." Derived from the Greek philosopher Epicurus, its meaning has been extended and modified since being first invoked in rabbinic literature in the Mishnah and "is popularly used loosely for anyone who expresses a view which is regarded not only as heretical but even as heterodox."[1] Over the past decade, however, the term "off-the-derech" has become increasingly familiar, in common parlance, blogging, journalism, and scholarship as identifying a brand of secularism born from a lived experience within a rigidly Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox home and community.

In fact, the gesture initiated in recent years by this movement of leave-taking and reinvention echoes earlier movements in Jewish and Jewish-American literature. The Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment in Europe that began in the eighteenth century and effectively ran parallel to the European Enlightenment, happening at the same time, was a determined move toward secularization that challenged rabbinic authority. *Maskilim*, proponents of the Haskalah and often contributors to Haskalah literature, embraced knowledge of the scientific, political, economic, and intellectual world that fell outside of Jewish culture. Maskilim celebrated secular education and culture and weakened the role of religion and the influence of clergy in public life. In terms of literary contributions, the Haskalah initiated the idea of a Hebrew literature largely independent of religious influences and gave rise to the production of secular Yiddish literature. Off-the-derech literature, among the newest directions within the larger cannon of Jewish world literature, can trace its roots back to

the broader embrace of secularization and pushes against religious restrictions as set forth by the Haskalah.

Indeed, the single-most unifying theme across all of Jewish literature since the eighteenth century is the act of departure from the practices and cultures of native communities. More circumscribed but equally impactful reiterations of leave-taking and assimilation are seen in American literature. Early-twentieth-century Jewish immigrant stories consistently document departures within departures, with immigrants such as Mary Antin, Rose Cohen, Anzia Yezierska, Henry Roth, Abraham Cahan and others documenting first a departure from a native community usually located in Eastern Europe or Russia and, second, a departure from the religious and cultural practices that defined and dictated the very rhythm of days, weeks, and years. Because Jewish writers tend to reflect a national frame of reference in their move away from their former communities, the creation of a modern Jewish Israeli literature in many ways evolves differently as its creation of a national identity was in process at the same time as its creation of a literary identity. And yet here, too, in its very newness, in its search for definition, Israeli Jewish writers such as S. Y. Agnon, Hayim Bialik, Uri Zvi Greenberg, Yonatan Ratosh, and Natan Alterman, followed a generation later by A. B. Yehoshua, Amos Oz, Aharon Appelfeld, Mordecai Tabib, David Shahar and others, supported the creation of a new Jewish imaginary, a gesture that is explored from a range of perspectives in *Off the Derech: Leaving Orthodox Judaism*.

This volume centers on those who decide to leave their religious communities. We consider this act of departure in its broadest possible form. Some contributors have chosen modern Orthodoxy over ultra-Orthodoxy; some have chosen atheism over modern Orthodoxy. Leave-taking, and specifically choosing to adopt religious practices that distinguish the writer from his or her native community, is what binds together this group of contributors. Accordingly, we have invoked a broad conception of off-the-derech (OTD) narrative and scholarship. Because, as one might suspect, the term "off-the-derech" has political implications not only within religious communities, but also among those who identify as OTDers. While we recognize that hierarchies exist in determinations of "most religious" or "most traditional" or "most strictly observant" and that, indeed, some religious communities are more insular than others, and so less likely to have been impacted by modern secular society, our goal here is to bring

together a diverse array of voices to address the growing and under-studied phenomenon of off-the-derech. We wish to present a forum by and about men and women who have either chosen to leave or were forced out of religious Jewish communities because they refused to conform to the many rules and regulations that inform daily life and so have been identified, or identify, as off the path.

Our commitment to examining this particular brand of (ir)religious non-conformity extends to the volume itself. We include here a diverse set of essays written by academics, writers, journalists, social activists, and more. The writing here is in some instances personal and in others analytical; it includes interviews, stories, personal histories and scholarly essays. Our primary goal for this volume is to bring together and to recognize the diverse makeup of the OTD community and to present, collectively, an array of scholarship and perspectives that have been essential to defining this developing movement. The wide range of contributors included here document, narrate, examine, and analyze an increasingly public trend of departure from ultra-Orthodoxy and the movement toward secular culture. While movement away from traditional religious practices and communities, and toward a lifestyle that embraces secularity has a rich tradition in Jewish and Jewish American literature, OTD literature distinguishes itself as a movement that originates in the postmodern world and moves toward, if anything, one that is post-postmodern.

The volume is divided into two sections: literature and critical analysis. The literature section includes memoirs, interviews, and personal essays by authors who identify as OTD. The critical analysis section includes the work of scholars who write about departures from ultra-Orthodoxy from literary, religious, sociological, anthropological, linguistic, gendered, and filmic perspectives.

The OTD movement is a burgeoning one. Over the past few years, the number of publications that describe lives leading up to and following these deeply personal and religious breaks has grown dramatically. Dozens of published novels, memoirs, blog entries and autobiographical accounts detail, from an insider's perspective, and with intimate knowledge of communities about which very little is known in the outside world, the many urgent reasons individuals feel the need to leave their ultra-Orthodox communities while at the same time they are often emotionally torn by an overpowering longing

to stay connected to home—to the only way of life they have ever known. OTD stories tap into public interest and curiosity, not only because of what they reveal about ultra-Orthodox communities that are easily identifiable and yet mysterious to all who are not a part of them, but also because of their pathos—they encompass a profound sense of loss, displacement, and trauma. In communities predicated upon a sacred sense of conformity that is firmly established by rabbinic authority, deviation is often deemed heretical. The absence of conformity is what marks OTD authors and their stories, which collectively are stories of survival and, also, stories of adventure, stories that document a grand but deeply intimate reckoning that brings them to terms with a set of values and a lifestyle drastically—violently, even—different from those of their families and communities.

Once separated from their communities, these writers tend to describe a position of profound abandonment. Often educated in Yiddish and almost exclusively in religious Jewish texts, OTD authors document not only their search for new lives, but also the challenges of having to navigate entirely new worlds of higher public education; custodial battles over their children and other interactions with state and federal law; sexual identity; professional identity; and financial needs, in addition to struggling with the emotional aftermath of, in many cases, some form of abuse or trauma. OTD narratives in many ways mimic the last few centuries of Jewish history: displacement, rejection, and the earnest attempt to create new meaning in the absence of traditional values and practices. The history of ultra-Orthodoxy is centuries old; OTD authors are writing it a new ending. OTD literature, and this volume concentrates this impulse, breaks new ground by surveying both literature that is itself OTD and by analyzing and taking into account sociological, literary and historical trends that provide a window onto a world that has few means of egress and access, allowing readers to better understand, in more than one dimension, what it means to live off-the-derech.

The essays included in this volume reflect the sense of individuation and non-conformity that is in fact entailed by the move away from religious authority toward a more independently lived life. In the volume's opening essay, Naomi Seidman writes about the post-Holocaust home her immigrant parents built for her and her three siblings in Boro Park, Brooklyn. Her parents' strict adherence to

religious practices did not preclude a sense of difference from other families in the community, one that is primarily born out of her father's appreciation and recognition of the richness that could be found in the secular, and even non-Jewish, world. Seidman, the only one of her siblings who left the religious community of her upbringing, complicates the story of leave-taking with her abiding affection and deep sense of warmth toward her father's interior and past life, the hidden pieces of him which, to this day, remain a mystery.

Joshua Halberstam and Shulem Deen address their readers directly, and focus on the challenges of self-determination for those who have left their ultra-Orthodox communities. Writing with a distinct voice, each essay effectively forms not so much a response *against* a set of practices or a doctrine, but a move *toward* an understanding of a self that is, in the immediate aftermath of leave-taking, independent to the point of being adrift, so vast is one's initial reckoning with the larger world. Speaking with the voice of experience, having left his community decades earlier, Halberstam breaks down his advice into a series of topical questions that cover the philosophical, religious, and practical. Deen speaks angrily not only of indignities he has suffered, of his challenges in claiming an authentic literary voice, but also with a sense of despair upon learning that an OTD woman and personal friend has committed suicide.

Writing about his childhood on New York's lower east side, Morris Dickstein pointedly identifies as an agnostic skeptic and writes with unvarnished criticism about his yeshiva education. And yet, like Seidman, Dickstein's criticism is blunted by a sense of nostalgia for both the community and ritual of his past. In the wake of his father's death, Morris rediscovers the songs and prayers of his youth, unexpectedly discovering an element of Orthodox Judaism that engages him, which he wishes to recapture. While recognizing that the poetry of Wordsworth, Shelley, Whitman and Dickinson is more likely to offer a sublime touch, Morris acknowledges the existence—and the possibility—of an occasional moment of rapture coming from the Tanach.

Frieda Vizel, Leah Vincent, and Frimet Goldberger document an increasing sense of alienation and difference from their native communities that inspires their respective departures. Vizel documents her transformation through ten graphic panels that trace her growing interest in the secular world from the time she was in elementary

school, eager to read and understand the words censored in her school books, through her marriage, her discovery of the Internet, her subsequent divorce, and ultimately her move to free herself from the constraints of a community where she did not belong. Similarly, Vincent traces her path as her father's favored child, a position lost to her once she hit puberty and declared her interest in attending college. Married for the second time, to a non-Jewish man, Vincent claims both her origins and her future with a biblical insistence of the rights of a first born. Having left her community with her husband and children, Goldberger addresses her post-partum depression after the birth of her second child, her reluctance to shave her head and to conform to the strict and unvarying clothing requirements for women in the community.

Offering still another perspective on gender, Leah Lax's responses to questions and comments about her published memoir, *Uncovered: How I Left Hasidic Life and Finally Came Home*, an excerpt of which follows the interview, considers the homoeroticism of the Hasidic world—a point of view which both helped Lax determine a role for herself as a young woman but became stifling as she gradually became aware of her own lesbian identity.

Unlike Lax, Vincent, and Morris, who document both their ties to their native communities as well as deeply felt moments of disconnectedness, Mark Zelcer states plainly and at the outset that at no point in his history, nor to the present day, did he share a sense of religious belief or social belonging within his community. Defining five topics to measure his departure intellectually, socially, epistemologically, religiously, and practically, Zelcer's analysis is an acknowledgment of the challenges in identifying the precise meaning behind the cognitive dissonance of not believing but living a religious life.

The volume's second half includes ten essays by a range of scholars and professionals whose focus on the OTD community, and on OTD literature, yields a richer understanding than has heretofore been available. The two opening essays are studies in contrast. Literary scholar Jessica Lang investigates acts and descriptions of intimacy in OTD memoirs authored by women. She distinguishes between the failure of more conventional understandings of physical intimacy, and the success of its imagined counterpart—intimacy through the read-

ing of forbidden texts. From a different disciplinary vantage point, sociologist Lynn Davidman positions Jews at the center of research examining the process of leaving strictly religious groups, and contrasts Jewish exit narratives to those narratives coming out of Evangelical or Fundamentalist Christian communities.

Moshe Shenfeld and Miriam Moster examine the educational histories, prospects, and governmental policies affecting members of ultra-Orthodox communities who have left their communities. Shenfeld, raised in an Israeli Haredi family and co-founder of an Israeli advocacy organization, "Out for Change," analyzes the challenges facing ultra-Orthodox and post-ultra-Orthodox education in Israel, a state that approves and financially supports the limitations of Haredi educational institutions. Miriam Moster, looking at the American ex-Orthodox community, considers the educational attainments of individuals once they have left their ultra-Orthodox communities.

In an essay that straddles auto-ethnography and scholarly intervention, Shira Schwartz explores the ontological orientation and origins of OTD identity. Her essay provides an interesting counterpoint to the essay written by Rachel Berger, Tsivia Finman, and Lani Santo, the leadership team at Footsteps. Their essay reviews the mission and outcomes of the organization, which is headquartered in New York City, and which provides space and an array of support initiatives for individuals who are considering, or are somewhere in the process of, leaving their Jewish community.

In offering three more different disciplinary perspectives, anthropologist Jessica Roda reflects broadly on the role and impact of media on the OTD community, while sociolinguist Gabi Amramac investigates a particular community of OTDers, the Shababniks. Roda considers both the creation of the OTD community itself and its institutionalization through mediatization. Abramac's work on the Shababniks, a group of Israeli OTD-ers, some of whom have moved to Brooklyn, illustrates the diversity within the OTD community. In terms that are sociological and also journalistic, Naftuli Moster considers the transition of those leaving their religious communities from the closely scripted narratives that are intrinsic to ultra-Orthodox communal life, to the dramatically unscripted post-Orthodox world that exit-ers suddenly find themselves inhabiting. The concluding essay

of the volume is by literary scholar and creative writer Ezra Cappell. At once personal and interrogative, Cappell moves between personal history, ancient Jewish text, and contemporary OTD narratives, all of which form a background to both breaking with tradition while still honoring its memory.