

**The Unchosen:  
The Hidden Lives of Hasidic Rebels**

By Hella Winston

Beacon Press  
Boston, 2005

185 pages

Reviewed by Mayer Schiller



The tragedy of a Jewish soul condemned by circumstances to live outside the world of Torah is very great. It must remain a mystery, the purpose of which is beyond human understanding. Yet, its horror is substantially lessened by the mitigating forces of environment. A far greater tragedy, though, is that of those Jews born and raised within the Torah camp who opt, in whole or in part, to leave it.

*Unchosen: The Hidden Lives of Hasidic Rebels* describes a handful of such tragedies from within the Chassidic community. The author, Hella Winston, is a self-described “secular Jew” who “wanted and needed to see the world from ... [the] perspective [of Chassidim].” As she began to explore the community, focusing on the most right-wing Chassidic groups, she became aware that certain members of

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the community were none too happy about their surroundings. Some had left them altogether. Others had jettisoned assorted standards and demands. A particularly strange group maintained communal norms on the outside while violating them in private or simply ceasing to believe in them.

The author dealt with “close to sixty people in all” and admits that “it is impossible to get an accurate sense of the number of Hasidic people who are transgressing against or struggling to leave their communities.” She is confident, though, that her “experience ... indicates that this phenomenon might well be quite widespread.” As a basis for this “indication,” she offers that Footsteps, a “group devoted to providing former ultra-Orthodox Jews” with the means to enter secular society,

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receives “an average of five new inquiries a week.”

However, *Unchosen* is not concerned with intuitively achieved sociological conclusions. It is a very human book and its strength lies in its moving depiction of the pain and difficulties encountered by those uncomfortable in and seeking to abandon the Chassidic world. It was a gripping read for this reviewer, and despite the author’s obviously a priori rejection of Orthodoxy, it is a book both kind and sympathetic to all sides of the personal and family struggles created by those who opt out.

Nonetheless, our author cannot

escape the constricted, doctrinal confines of our age. She bemoans the fact that she “couldn’t help feeling angered by the treatment many had been subjected to, merely for asserting their individual desires or daring to question.” Winston flirts briefly with the universality of norms in all societies, even the secular and the “suggestion that everyone is concerned with—indeed structures his or her life around—other people’s opinions and perceptions.” She tried to “remain open to all points of view” but eventually admits to feeling “angered” by that which she encountered, attributing it to the “paradox of fundamentalism.” It is wearisome at this stage of the debate to have to state yet again that the orthodoxies of modernism are no less intrusive and coercive than those of any traditional society. We are all aware, for example, of the ruthlessness that major universities and the media employ to stifle all those who question the sacred dogmas of secularism and egalitarianism.

Indeed, the hold of these mind-controllers is so powerful that even Winston is aware of the sociological given that all of us, believer and materialist, labor within philosophical limits that are enforced by social stigma. Yet she is powerless to escape them.

The provincialisms of modernists have been well dealt with by others. For us at present there are the more pressing questions of what we, as Orthodox believers, both Chassidic and non-Chassidic, are to make of the stories assembled in *Unchosen*. Are there some lessons to be gleaned from these sad tales for Chassidim in particular and for Orthodox Jews in general?

First, it is important to note that this work ignores the other story—the story of the overwhelming majority of Chassidim who find their lives very fulfilling. It leaves us in the dark about the

movement's spiritual elite, paragons of faith, purity, scholarship, piety and humility. Of course it makes no claim to present a balanced picture, yet, the result is that the book taken in a vacuum is apt to mislead the unsuspecting reader into a mistaken view of the Chassidic community. For the reader with little or no contact with the various Chassidic groups and interested in seeing the tale untold in Winston's work, I recommend nothing more elaborate than a visit to any Chassidic community for a Shabbat or even on a weekday. This trip would doubtless provide a counterbalance to the unintended, but nonetheless severely limited perspective that emerges from *Unchosen*.

Second, what lessons may be derived from this work to assist those within Orthodoxy to prevent the phenomena of "drop outs" from the ranks of Torah Jewry in general and the Chassidic world in particular? We are all aware of the litany of advice in this regard, all accurate, which posits the need for a warm and caring home and communal environment as the primary prevention against alienation from Torah. The weakening of authority and discipline in recent decades has altered society as a whole, and its effects, however we may either bemoan or welcome them, have a powerful impact on the ranks of Orthodox homes and *yeshivot*. Thus, we have been warned, since the author of *Chovat Hatalmidim* penned his introduction in the 1930s, to imbue our youth with a sense of joy and fulfillment in Torah and *mitzvot*. Of course, this must be balanced with the teaching of respect, modesty and objective standards of learning. This balancing act is always difficult, and its means of resolution will either exacerbate or alleviate the alienation that produces "drop outs."

In fact, *Unchosen* seems unaware of both the changes and efforts afoot in the Chassidic community to address these problems. It is a common misconception among those outside of traditional societies that these communities are forever utterly frozen in time, devoid

of change. This is hardly the case. Despite a rhetoric of unalterable norms, the truth is that even these communities are forever changing. Methods of education, hours, content, girls' schooling and family discipline across the board are far different today than they were just a few decades ago. For lack of one general term to describe these changes, they may loosely be grouped under the general categories of "more individual attention" and "softer methods of discipline and subject presentation." This is, of course, not even to mention the many technical pedagogical changes that the computer age has facilitated. In truth, despite their public postures, modernist cultures cannot escape the past and traditional peoples must always

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evolve. One should always be careful to glance behind the absolutist self-descriptions of both worlds.

In addition to the slow reforms that the Chassidic world undergoes, there are many schools, teachers and counseling programs that are available for troubled and weaker students. While they may not yet be sufficient, they do exist, and they are growing; they are a powerful step toward assisting those

who find personal or communal life difficult and alienating.

Having noted all these positive trends, the point must be acknowledged that much still needs to be done. The question is, how far could the Chassidic world change in order to reach alienated numbers of its own community, without damaging its essence? This is a daunting question. The yeshivah day is long and hard anywhere, but is particularly so in Chassidic and *yeshivish* worlds, where there are no (or severely de-emphasized) other studies and no extracurricular outlets. Thus, with the exception of Shabbat and *yom tov*, where these communities tend to provide very engaging, spiritual experiences open to all and the occasional *rebbe's chasunah* (good for a week's worth of events now and then), the Chassidic adolescent spends ten hours a day, no vacations, over a Gemara or a *Shulchan Aruch*. Incidentally, there is a much lower drop out rate among girls, who have a more colorful, somewhat varied and less demanding educational system, than among their male counterparts.

It remains to be seen how much the Chassidic world is willing to introduce other studies, extracurricular and physical activities and vocational training in order to make its environs more hospitable for everyone. In fact, what is taking place today is, on the one hand, an attempt to close the doors even further to the outside (witness the enormous energies invested in the struggle against the Internet) and, on the other hand, a concomitant realization that some things must change—by offering children more play time, physical activities, games, prizes, trips and the like.

Left neglected are the larger questions concerning the problems created by the explosive population growth combined with no secular training, which leave all Chassidim, besides a small minority particularly adept at business, severely behind the eight ball economically and yields enormous crises in areas such as affordable housing and school costs. These difficulties sometimes produce *shalom bayit* problems,

with children who suffer accordingly. Thus, much of the personal turmoil depicted in this work may be traced to the Chassidic community's inability to resolve the predicament just outlined. Thus the root question: How much can this lifestyle be altered without compromising the purity and sincerity of the old-European pieties?

What Chassidim always grasped instinctively, the yeshivah world belatedly and Modern Orthodoxy almost not at all is that a faith is lived in a culture. It is almost impossible to live in consumerist, irreverent America emotionally while attempting to believe in and practice a faith that demands respect, reverence and an opening to the life of the spirit. Chassidic cultural devotion to language, dress, traditional respect, reverence and deep historical memory and continuity all safeguard and transmit the soul of faith and a joyous passion for its preservation. The startling success of this model in creating Torah study and devotion to Judaism must give us pause when considering whether the system may be significantly tampered with it in order to help lost children and potentially lost individuals.

Of course, we need be aware of those who no longer think of themselves as chosen and seek to remind them of their membership in the "legion of the King." Let us also be aware that a work of this kind will be a welcome event in those Jewish journalistic circles that never saw a problem in Orthodoxy that they didn't find newsworthy. Nonetheless, we must not fall prey to their modernist provincialism. To the degree that *Unchosen* helps us better see ourselves and leads us to discover remedies for our maladies, it is to be welcomed. We still await—and the wait may prove a long one—the major publishing house that will issue a study about the faith, piety and scholarship of the Chassidic world. Yet we need not find our verification of this grandeur in books. It is there in the communities themselves. We need only visit and emerge spiritually renewed. **IA**

## Off the Derech: Why Observant Jews Leave Judaism

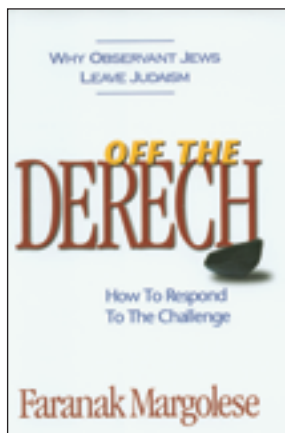
By *Faranak Margolese*

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Reviewed by *Hillel Goldberg*



In the decades after World War II, with the growth of Orthodox Jewish society from the ashes, it was assumed that with an observant family and a proper day school education in place, Orthodox Jewish growth was guaranteed. No wrinkles. No drop outs. No re-run of the nineteenth-century breakdown of traditional Jewish society.

We all know that this is not the case, although, thank God, there is no near-total meltdown of the kind that began in the early-nineteenth century in Western Europe and in the mid-nineteenth century in Eastern Europe. We also have much to be grateful for in the existence of a large number of aware, sensitive and effective rabbis, parents, educators and others who work with children at risk. To that list we may now add Faranak Margolese, who has compiled an extraordinarily wide range of analyses of fault lines within Orthodox society that cause or facilitate Orthodox Jewish youth to "go off the *derech*."

The school, the home, the synagogue, the peer group, the general society, the teacher, the parent, the rabbi, the

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mentor, the Hollywood star—virtually every possible source of disaffection from Orthodox Jewish society finds its analysis in *Off the Derech*. Despite a marked tendency to present sweeping historical generalizations and armchair philosophy as profundities, *Off the Derech* offers a number of concrete causes of disaffection from halachic Judaism and suggestions for altered behavior on the part of parents, teachers and others who could ameliorate the problem.

The question is, is the cure worse than the disease? Is the tail wagging the dog?

To take one critical arena of going off the *derech*: the Jewish day school. If the day school is to stop harboring those attitudes or engaging in those activities that turn certain kids off, what are the unintended consequences? Often, a dumbing down of the curriculum. When the prime focus in a school is to be sensitive to that which turns off

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a child at risk, the result is a major emphasis on making the process of learning sweet and delightful. This often entails a lowering of standards. In other words, it is not enough to know what turns off a child and what can be altered to prevent this. It is also necessary to know how the crucial alteration in (for example) the classroom can be accomplished without distorting the entire curriculum and educational goal. For this, Margolese provides little guidance. She writes as if the special attention or adjustment required for nurturing a child at risk can be implemented in a vacuum. This book is written from a pertinent but narrow focus.

This constricted focus calls into question some of Margolese's evidence. She quotes, for example, unqualifiedly

stupid statements by day school teachers, reported by drop outs, as a cause of their disaffection. No doubt, stupid statements are sometimes made in the classroom; and understandably enough, a person could be turned off by them—by the racism, indifference or ethnocentricity they reflect. However, Margolese makes no attempt to establish the veracity of these statements. To her, it is enough that the drop out understood them to have been just as he or she reported them. Again, from the angle of helping the individual, his or her perception is critical. But from the angle of addressing the larger issue—how Judaism is presented in the day school classroom—one cannot take an individual student’s impression at face value. One needs to know exactly what happened in the classroom. It is this context that the book does not address.

Another critical arena: the family. Say that a family with seven children has one child at risk. Is it possible to put into place a series of adjustments that meet the sensibilities of the child at risk without altering the entire family focus? This is not merely a question of enrolling children in different schools or programs, including one tailored for a child at risk, or a question of relating differently to different children, a point that Margolese elaborates, and rightly so. The question is, what do the implicit goals of the family become?

For example, can a family hold up, as a value, the preeminence of *talmidei chachamim*, including the inculcation of the aspiration to become one, while also openly acknowledging a related but still different value system—a love of Torah in general, without the rigorous, disciplined pursuit of Torah texts? It is one thing to subscribe, in the abstract, to the admirable truism that each child needs to be encouraged Jewishly according to his innate tendencies. It is quite something else to foster a genuine thirst for Torah if one of these children is a rebel. How many different messages can one household contain? Should one put the needs of the child at risk above all else, such that if the stan-

dards for the other children are somehow lowered, so be it? Or vice-versa? It is naive simply to mouth the truism that one size, one household, fits all. This may be possible but not without guidance and thought. It is not enough for a book to tell us how children at risk are created and how one should respond. It is also necessary to know how to do all that in the context of sustaining standards in the Orthodox Jewish family, school and synagogue.

No doubt, this is complex, and the answers are varied, perhaps as varied

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as the individual family, classroom or shul. If one keeps in mind that this larger agenda cannot be dispensed with in dealing with children at risk, the reader will benefit from some of the case histories and approaches that Margolese sets forth.

Some of her approaches, however, leave one wondering. She cites, for example, the lack of ability found among certain day school graduates to articulate their basic beliefs, then writes, “intellectual exploration can strengthen and improve the degree of belief.” That sentence makes sense only in a profoundly anti-intellectual age, when genuine philosophical exploration is rarely undertaken. In fact, intellectual exploration is precisely what steered many Jews, from Baruch Spinoza to Solomon Maimon and a slew of nineteenth-century *maskilim*, away from traditional Judaism. Again, just because some day

school graduates found the intellectual foundations of their faith wanting, one should not change the curriculum without considering this: If a day school inculcates a profoundly personal experience of the holy, will this hold the students better than “intellectual exploration?” These contextual questions are critical, and while they should not excuse a shallow curriculum lacking any attempt at giving students a rationale for belief, they do show that what for one student might be a problem will be, for a very different student, a solution.

A final comment. History does not allow us this easy bifurcation: Children at risk are lured by a decadent society; or, as Margolese believes, the temptations might be there, but essentially children at risk are turned off by negatives within Orthodox Jewish society. And if the negatives weren’t there, the temptations wouldn’t triumph. Margolese’s effort at identifying the negatives is valuable, and her prescriptions or other’s should be evaluated and implemented. But historical forces are more complicated than this. It is not strictly within the mechanics of Orthodox Jewish society that the phenomenon of observant Jews who leave Judaism can be understood.

On the material level, economics, lifestyles, social status and family background introduce countless shades and nuances into any personal decision to leave—or to embrace—observant Judaism. On the spiritual level, the collective Jewish soul is too sensitive for easy readings. How did the Haskalah undermine much of traditional society in the nineteenth century? Centuries earlier, how did false Messianism take root in much of Jewish society? After World War II, why did Orthodox Judaism flourish—and also suffer these current setbacks? These questions are far too large for a simple bifurcation. This should offer some solace to both the at-risk youth and their parents and teachers, without derogating from the importance of addressing the issue concretely. If for that alone, we owe Faranak Margolese a strong word of thanks. 