After Conservationism: Jewish Funding Priorities and the Orthodox

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The Applied Research Collective for American Jewry at NYU convenes scholars and practitioners, in & beyond the Jewish community, to collaboratively develop policy and funding recommendations for Jewish foundations and organizations.

Recognizing the dramatic societal, economic, and political changes of the 21st century, ARC seeks to generate a responsive body of literature and cohort of thinkers to enhance Jewish communal life for the coming decades.

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INTRODUCTION

The hit Netflix miniseries, *Unorthodox*, released at the height of the coronavirus pandemic in NYC, familiarized many with another kind of social distancing. The show introduces mainstream American audiences to one Esty Shapiro, as she struggles to wrest herself free from an overbearing family, rigid rabbinic authorities, and a mismatched spouse. Raised in the ultra-Orthodox Satmar community, with no formal education, she sees no viable alternative to the four cubits of her community; Esty feels trapped. Luckily, a piano teacher she knows from her youth helps her escape to Berlin, where she begins life anew, casting off her wig and pursuing an advanced arts degree. Critics point out that Esty’s “Berlin” is in fact far less sexy and welcoming than the show’s director would have us believe. But American Jewish viewers might also reasonably wonder why she needed to go all the way to Europe to escape Williamsburg. Was there no other resource, outlet or safe respite for her in the United States? Didn’t millions of Jews before Esty go through a similar process of social distancing from Orthodoxy? Where were they—secular and liberal American Jews—when Esty was looking for a way out? While secular and liberal Jews have been keen to denounce the Orthodox for flouting COVID social distance guidelines, they passively look on as those like Esty struggle to make their way out of Orthodoxy and into brave new worlds.
Today, American Jews encounter those like Esty in popular books, films, and television, from Shulem Deen’s best-selling *All Who Go Do Not Return* to the widely popular miniseries, *Shtisel*. They are riveted by the sturm und drang of Shulem overcoming the economic handicaps of his Hasidic upbringing. They root for Akiva Shtisel, a budding Haredi artist, to embrace his love for painting and liberate himself from his father’s hold. But Esty, Shulem, and Akiva’s lives and struggles are not unique or the figment of a producer or an author’s imagination; they are real and part of a much larger story that is now playing out in the American Jewish community.

This paper addresses the rise of a new cohort of Estys, Shulems and Akivas, sometimes referred to as Orthodox “exiters.” The Hasidic and Orthodox community is the fastest growing sector of American Jewry; increasingly its children are seeking out new secular horizons in the American public sphere. Yet this cohort possesses attributes that could also be of great value to American Jewry, namely, large reserves of Jewish spiritual and cultural capital, proven commitments to progressive values, and a desire to play an active role in Jewish life. It is in the best interest of the organized Jewish community to develop a strategy to assist this cohort and welcome their participation in its institutions.

To do so, however, requires a paradigm shift in Jewish communal funding priorities. Since the 1970s, Jewish organizations have worked to instill in secular and liberal Jews a greater appreciation for traditional observances and to strengthen their intra-ethnic ties. Often justified by its proponents in terms of “Jewish survival” or “Jewish continuity,” and criticized by its right-wing detractors for being “too lite,” this funding paradigm works to conserve the Jewish identity of what otherwise might be identified as progressive and secular Americans. The conservationist paradigm promoted programs like Birthright Israel and institutions like Hillel geared toward winning over the hearts and minds of Emilys, Sams, and Adams—children born to Jewish parents and raised in largely upwardly-mobile and acculturated homes.

The conservationist funding paradigm puts the organized Jewish community in a long uphill battle against disinterest and disengagement. In the minority of instances in which it succeeds it often carries the unintended consequence of attracting those already dissatisfied with American public life, thereby nurturing a more observant and ethnocentric tendency in Jewish organizations. Those secular and acculturated American Jews who gravitate toward Jewish communal institutions often do so in the context of distancing themselves from more multicultural and secular settings.

While the Jewish community seeks to transform Emilys, Adams, and Sams, it overlooks the growing population of Estys, Akivas, and Shulems who stand to be even more critical contributors to
the fostering of Jewish practices and communal identification. Instead it passes onto state agencies Esty, Akiva, and Shulem’s requests to obtain the same educational opportunities and freedoms enjoyed by secular and liberal Jews. This orientation is biased, misguided, and squanders valuable human resources.

The organized Jewish community should expand its energies to assisting those like Esty, Akiva, and Shulem, and in turn leverage their untapped political, intellectual, and spiritual resources. In so doing, the organized Jewish community will become more culturally literate, economically diverse, politically balanced and reflective of American Jewry’s general progressive values and commitments.

This paper calls for adopting an alternative to the conservationist funding paradigm: it argues for a hybrid funding model that also assists those from less well-off Orthodox backgrounds gain greater social freedoms and labor opportunities. By focusing on Orthodox exiters, the American Jewish community stands to gain more stakeholders and producers of Jewish knowledge and culture than it currently garners from the conservationist model. While it is doubtful (and perhaps undesirable) that Orthodox exiters would ever feel comfortable in any of the existing denominations, historical precedents and current sociological data suggest that, if supported accordingly, they could develop new forms of Jewish identity. The disillusionment and anger that many exiters have toward their upbringing reflect similar feelings to those expressed by exiters over a century ago. In the same way the latter channeled such critiques into the establishment of new denominations and political movements, so too it is more than likely that today’s exiters will establish new movements better suited to this generation’s spiritual and political sensibilities.

Secular and liberal Jews have forgotten that the very drama at the center of the popular books and movies of young people from Orthodox homes seeking out social freedoms and economic opportunities was lived by millions of their ancestors. Jewish communal icons like Abraham Joshua Heschel, Mordecai Kaplan, and Henrietta Szold were all raised in Orthodox homes. The difference is that whereas a century ago the organized Jewish community invested in those like Joshua, Mordecai, and Henrietta’s education and material well-being, today it largely ignores Esty, Akiva, and Shulem—not only to the detriment of the individuals, but to the impoverishment of the entire Jewish community. Currently, there is no set model or path for those looking to leave Orthodoxy. This is largely the failure of the organized Jewish community to invest in the very projects that defined Jewish philanthropy for over a century.

Though this paper focuses on the well-being and flourishing of many who currently identify as Orthodox or are considering exiting, it primarily addresses a secular and liberal audience concerned about the perpetuation of its own values. It seeks to impress upon the latter that a critical assessment of their funding priorities reveals serious imbalances and lacunae that threaten the long term cultural and political well-being of American Jewish organizations.
The Conservationist Funding Paradigm

For most of the twentieth-century, American Jewry was led by secular and liberal Jews, who used their platforms to promote a social welfare philanthropic agenda. They focused on addressing economic and then social forms of discrimination in American society. From eradicating college quotas that blocked Jews’ entry to universities, to outlawing prayer in public schools, fighting for social welfare and Civil Rights, they removed barriers standing in between Jews and other Americans. Those who led these organizations were often themselves children of Orthodox parents looking for greater social freedoms and economic mobility on this side of the Atlantic (Dollinger, 2000). They promoted causes that brought Jews in closer contact with mainstream American institutions.
By the 1970s, efforts to remove social and economic barriers standing in front of Jews had been so successful that many began worrying if there would be a next generation committed to leading these organizations and taking up their causes. Many began mourning the “vanishing American Jew.” In response the organized Jewish community began developing a new funding paradigm directed at encouraging assimilated Jews to engage in Jewish practices and intra-ethnic activities (Staub, 2002). Institutions and programs were established to promote Jewish identity and encourage Jews to marry other Jews.

In contrast to the social welfare model that paved paths for those raised in observant homes to enter American industries and universities, centralized philanthropic organizations now focused on conserving Jewish identity. They directed their energies toward providing gateways for secular and liberal Jews to reenter the Jewish community. Where Jewish communities once built one-way bridges to a shiny American city, they now began leveraging the capital accrued from this undertaking to build one-way bridges back toward a Jewish community.

Whereas the social welfare model of philanthropy often led observant and insulated Jews toward less confessional and more multicultural encounters, the conservationist paradigm moved Jews in the exact opposite direction. It attempted to draw secular and liberal Jews away from multicultural settings and toward intra-ethnic contexts and encouraged them to perform more Jewishly inflected activities.

The conservationist model is most clearly witnessed in Steven M. Cohen’s influential study, “A Tale of Two Jewries” (2006). There, he outlines what he sees as two largely independent Jewish worlds, one fully integrated into the liberal and secular institutions of American life; the other a largely, but not only Orthodox world, which boasted strong intra-ethnic ties. While Cohen celebrates these developments, he lays down a set of policy proposals directed at moving those residing in more assimilated spaces toward those residing in more Jewishly populated spaces. His policy proposals include increased funding for Jewish education, supporting conversion to Judaism, and creating more opportunities for intra-ethnic activities. These recommendations turn on the capacity of the organized Jewish community to pull Jews away from assimilated and multicultural environments toward a certain kind of Jewish community. Cohen subtitles his essay “The Inconvenient Truth for American Jews,” a clear jab at the social welfare model and its influence over American Jewish funding patterns. His goal was simple: to ensure greater forms of Jewish observance and intra-ethnic identity, Jewish funders should focus on de-assimilating or conserving the Jewish identity of secular and liberal Jews.

More extreme proponents of the conservationist model include Jack Wertheimer, who proposes the model of Orthodox outreach, as well as Sylvia Barak Fishman who encourage Jewish organizations and foundations to embrace a Modern Orthodox model as an ideal for all of American Jewry. They call on assimilated and secular Jews to marry earlier and engage in more observances. “Shabbat traditions,” Barak Fishman writes, “encourage intimate time for couples after a candle-lit dinner with wine—Friday nights is the rabbinic version of date night” (Barak-Fishman, 2018). For Wertheimer, the organized American
Jewish community should model the outreach (“kiruv”) movement touted by the Orthodox. “Outreach,” he claims, offers “a new resource to complement existing religious movements, synagogues, and educational institutions in their collective mission to inspire Jews of all ages to draw closer to their religious tradition” (Wertheimer, 2013).

The conservationist funding program is most starkly witnessed in large-scale identity programs such as Birthright, which sends thousands of young people from Jewish backgrounds on an intensive ten-day educational trip to Israel. The billions of dollars spent on the Birthright program have met with some success in attracting certain secular American Jews toward greater observance, commitment to defending Israel, and connecting to Jews worldwide. Proponents of Birthright tout studies that show greater expressions of Jewish identity on the part of certain unaffiliated and largely liberal Jews. Indeed, the groups of individuals who express the least transformation as a result of the Birthright trip are those that express high levels of Jewish commitment and conservative political leanings prior to the trip itself. In practice, the tour tends to make more acculturated and liberal Jews identify with the beliefs and practices of more committed and conservative Jews. The upshot is that the program’s success is based on its ability to promote a certain kind of Jewish identity rooted in Jewish observance, intra-ethnic activities, and the State of Israel. Whether by design or by happenstance, programs such as Birthright have targeted secular and assimilated Jews in the hopes of them becoming less acculturated, more observant, and more pro-Israel (Saxe, 2018).

These developments follow in the footsteps of Jewish foundations that at one time held meetings on the Sabbath and served non-kosher food and now only meet on weekdays and serve strictly kosher food. Defense organizations that were at the forefront of promoting progressive domestic and political platforms and even boasted non-Zionists in their ranks, now assert that anti-Zionism is equivalent to antisemitism. While American Jewry has continued to appear as the most consistently liberal and secular of any minority in the United States, Jewish identity programs continue to target and speak to those moving from socially diverse and secular environments to those seeking greater forms of Jewish observance and less social diversity. While they ostensibly embrace, and in some cases celebrate, certain degrees of acculturation (some are even prepared to embrace those who marry non-Jews), their goal is to pull assimilated Jews toward the organized Jewish community. The unintended consequence of these developments has been an organized Jewish community that is increasingly detached from the liberal social and political sensibilities of most American Jews.

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For good reason, conservationist funding ignores Orthodox exiters, those seemingly moving in the exact opposite direction from the secular and liberal Jews it seeks to conserve or persuade to re-engage in Jewish life. While Birthright claims to engage Jews from the ages of 18-25, it ignores the fastest growing sector of Jews from that very age group. Moreover, when it was first founded, people exiting Orthodoxy who had visited family or attended yeshivot in Israel would not have even been eligible for the trip. Conservationist funding assumes Orthodoxy as a stable model for Jewish continuity. In fact, assisting those exiting Orthodoxy who seek the same opportunities given to nearly all secular and liberal Jews runs counter to the very goals of the conservationist paradigm. While secular and liberal Jews might be convinced to adopt more observant lifestyles and engage in more intra-ethnic activities, those raised in Orthodox homes are assumed to participate in the organized Jewish community already and will continue to do so moving forward.

Those touting the conservationist model see Orthodox Judaism as an ideal or at the very least a bedrock for Jewish identity. They often point to the median age of Orthodox Jews as being under 40. For every 100 Orthodox Jews aged 60-69, there are 575 children under 10 years old being raised in Orthodox homes. On the other hand, for every 100 Reform and Conservative Jews in their sixties, there are 56 putative grandchildren. (Cohen et al., 2017). As of 2013, “among Americans raised as Orthodox Jews, 83 percent of those ages 18-29 are still Orthodox Jews, compared with just 22 percent of those 65 and older” (Pew Research Center, 2013, and 2015, p. 6). Orthodoxy’s demographics and investment in Jewish life are taken to be signs of success that should be emulated by the rest of American Jewry. While the goal of programs like Birthright are anything but to make liberal and secular Jews more Orthodox, it invertibility works to cultivate stronger intra-ethnic ties and increased Jewish observances. In short, it moves the Jewish community in in the direction of the Orthodox.

Orthodox Exiters, OTD, and Double-Lifers

Instead of holding up the Orthodox as a stable and ideal marker of Jewish identity, recent studies have pointed to the emergence of cracks and fissures within its ranks. New data suggest a recent uptick in attrition rates among the Orthodox, especially among those living in Israel. Most notably, research conducted by Eitan Regev (based on data culled from Israel’s Central Board of Statistics) has revealed “a steady increase in the number of ultra-Orthodox Israelis who were abandoning the Haredi lifestyle (not necessarily to become secular, but to become less fervently observant). The data also shows that younger Haredim in Israel (between the ages of 20 and 24) are much more likely to leave the fold than are older Haredim. Among this younger age bracket, the rate is already 12 percent and growing” (Arlosoroff, 2019). According to a 2018 study released by the Taub Center for Social Policy in Israel, “The share of [Haredi children] leaving the State-religious education stream was about 20 percent of girls and 25 percent of boys. Most of these students transferred to the State education system, and only a few completed the research period in Haredi schools” (Taub Center, 2018). The long-term implication of this development is that the prognostics of Haredi ascendency in Israel have been overstated.
Research conducted only a couple of years ago that predicted that for every 100 non-Haredi Jews in 2059 there will be about 50 Haredim has already been modified to 35 Haredim. While it would be imprudent to project developments in Israel onto Haredi communities in the United States, there are strong enough overlaps and ties between these communities to entertain the likelihood that similar patterns could emerge on this side of the Atlantic.

Increasingly those who are exiting Orthodoxy in the United States have begun to identify as “OTD,” which stands for “off the derech,” or “path.” Many others continue to identify with the community while living “double lives” online or among small groups of like-minded friends. This phenomenon has grown to a scale that it has now become a cause of concern among religious leadership. There has been a sense, writes Ayala Fader about the ultra-Orthodox community, “that more and more were either leaving their communities altogether, going ‘OTD’ (off the derech [path]), or living what community members called ‘double lives’: practicing religiously in public for the sake of families, while secretly exploring secular socialities and subjectivities online and off” (Fader, 2017).

Sociologists continue to debate the precise numbers of “double-lifers” and “exiters” from Orthodoxy. The sociologist Steven M. Cohen suggests that based on the 2013 Pew Survey, only 6.5 percent of the ultra-Orthodox community move beyond its borders (Newfield, 2020); Trencher (2016) estimates that there are 10,000 exiters. But as the higher numbers from Israeli sociologists reveal, the exact calculation largely depends on what data set is being used and who counts as ultra-Orthodox, Orthodox, or Modern Orthodox. What is certain, however, is that the phenomenon of exiting Orthodoxy has once again surfaced, crystalizing in a new identifiable OTD cohort.

Footsteps, the leading privately funded organization assisting exiters navigate life outside of the Orthodox community, points to a steady increase in membership and volunteers since its founding in 2003.

The phenomenon of exiting Orthodoxy has once again surfaced, crystalizing in a new identifiable OTD cohort.
Unlike previous generations of Orthodox exiters who could rely on large scale organizations (HIAS, Educational Alliance,) to assist them, Footsteps does not consider itself a Jewish organization. Based on its clandestine profile in the community it serves, undersized infrastructure, and minuscule budget, it is surprising that its membership is as large as it is.

Irrespective of numbers, there are good reasons why American Jews should be invested in assisting exiters of Orthodoxy and “double lifers.” A 2016 study on exiters from Orthodoxy conducted by Nishma Research, a non-academic market research group, highlights the shared political and ideological characteristics of exiters and liberal American Jews. “OTDers are ‘post denominational,” the authors of the report write. “Very few [Haredi-exiters] labeled themselves as belonging to any of the typical Jewish world denominations” (Trencher, 2016, p. 8). Still 60 percent considered being Jewish very important to them and half remain or wish to once again become active in Jewish life (Trencher, 2016). Nearly 50 percent of exiters identify themselves as either “liberal and very liberal” (Trencher, 2016). While Zalman Newfield’s (2020) research points to exiters’ lingering conservative reflexes on race and gender, only 9 percent of exiters identify as conservative or very conservative. In fact, based on available data, the OTD community reveals strong commitments to the values embraced by much of the non-Orthodox American Jewish community.

On the surface, these numbers highlight the similarities between the values and political orientation of exiters and the general Jewish community. But there are also significant differences and roadblocks separating Orthodox exiters from the general Jewish community.
Most notably, exiters lack the basic requisite educational skills necessary to support themselves. The ultra-Orthodox community for the most part shuns secular studies, working around government regulators to ensure a Torah-only educational curricula for its children and young adults. While women’s curricula provide greater attention to secular studies, most still do not receive state recognized high school diplomas or pass GED exams. Whereas children of the Amish are given full days of secular education from first through eighth grade, “most Hasidic boys,” explains Deena Davis “receive only 90 minutes of secular education a day, from third through eighth grade, and some receive none at all” (Davis, 2017). The typical secular education offered at ultra-Orthodox day schools has been described as follows:

When yeshivas do provide secular instruction, it is in the late afternoon or evening, when the students are already exhausted after a full day of religious studies. Secular classes only take place 4 days per week, because yeshivas end classes early on Fridays to prepare for the Sabbath. The hour or 90 minutes of secular studies encompasses a small amount of English reading, spelling, and basic mathematics, rarely including any other subjects, and often far below the state standards for the grade level at which they are taught. Even English classes may be taught primarily in Yiddish, sometimes by unqualified instructors who may have come up through the same yeshiva system with almost no secular education to speak of (Partlan, 2017, p. 31).
By the time someone is in position to entertain leaving the Orthodox community, years of academic malpractice have compounded to handicap them in secular arenas and cripple their earning power. Female exiters, who tend to leave at later points of development than men, are placed in an even more difficult situation of trying to obtain a high school or college diploma while still supporting multiple children. Those wishing to leave are often deterred by daunting tutoring costs to pass a high school equivalency exam. The possibility of college seems nearly unattainable. Their educational deficit makes it difficult not only for them to gain financial independence but also stunts their capacities to acculturate and encounter members outside of their immediate circle.

The wide educational gulf deters even those seriously considering leaving the Orthodox community. The prospect of being forced, at least for a significant period of time, to move downward economically makes exiting both a costly and risky proposition. While few list economic reasons per se for why they want to leave the community, the economic hurdles standing before them are daunting and have yet to be properly quantified in studies addressing the exiting process.

Researchers have noted the critical role played by education in terms of one’s earning capacity. College education has been the surest predicator of upward social mobility for the last fifty years in Western countries. As the French economist Thomas Piketty notes, “the best way to reduce inequalities with respect to labour as well as to increase the average productivity of the labour force and the overall growth of the economy is to invest in education” (Piketty, 2014, pp. 306-7). This point has become even more acute with qualification levels shifting upwards: “a high school diploma,” Piketty continues, “now represents what a grade school certificate used to mean, a college degree what a high school diploma stood for, and so on” (484). The economic forces that block exiters have become consolidated through accreditation institutions with prohibitive costs of entry. Exiters find themselves either lacking requisite knowledge or financially locked out of American higher education institutions.

Moreover, exiters lack critical networks of support, such as parental guidance and mentorship, that often work in tandem with higher educational attainment. Many would be the very first person in their immediate family to graduate high school. For women from these communities, attending college becomes nearly impossible due to early childbirth.

Exiters are also deemed ineligible for many of the remedial programs offered through government sponsored institutions. Since Orthodox exiters never attended public high schools, they are blocked from publicly funded initiatives, such as those run by New York City’s Young Adult Borough Centers. Even those government programs that are open to ultra-Orthodox Jews are often ill-fitted to assist those who have strong study habits and have not been through the criminal justice system.

For example, in one study conducted by Roni Berger on exiters, “one man in his twenties described how in an effort to earn a GED (General Educational Development—an equivalent of a high school diploma for those who failed to complete high school) he applied for a free educational program and found himself as the ‘strange bird’” (Berger, 2015, p. 682). The individual, Berger explains, was among a group of “school dropouts, who were in trouble with the law around issues of drugs, violent behavior, thefts, and other criminal
activity and many of whom lacked studying habits and basic literacy skills” (p. 682). Such programs offer the benefits of a structured public educational environment, but they also place exiters in compromised positions and make it difficult to motivate and incentivize them to pursue advanced degrees.

A more productive approach has been taken by Footsteps, which reports that over one fourth of their members request education counselors to assist them in passing high school equivalency exams, obtaining a GED, or in some cases applying to college. The organization boasts 350 volunteers ready to help its members in areas pertaining to secular education. Many of these volunteers are Jewish and some come from Orthodox backgrounds and are familiar with the exiters’ strengths and weaknesses.

College education has been a critical step for the majority of those who have left the community. However, it often requires years of remedial assistance. Most exiters must still finish their high school degrees. Male disaffiliates from Chasidism, writes Miriam Moster, “require several years to make up for their inadequate primary and secondary education. With time, however, male exiters from Hasidism seem to outperform their religious counterparts in BA pursuit and attainment” (Moster, forthcoming). Based on data from Nishma Research’s “Survey of Those who Left Orthodoxy” (Trencher, 2016), as well as data from the UJA’s “Jewish Community Study of New York” (Cohen et al., 2011), exiters from Yeshivish Orthodoxy and modern Orthodoxy similarly outperform their religious counterparts in BA and graduate degree attainment.

### Table 1 | Educational Attainments Among OTD and Orthodox Individuals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AFFILIATION</th>
<th>HS OR LESS</th>
<th>SOME COLLEGE</th>
<th>BA</th>
<th>GRADUATE DEGREE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>OTD FOR 10+ YEARS</strong> <em>(Nishma data)</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hasidic</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeshivish</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Orthodox</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OTD FOR &lt;5 YEARS</strong> <em>(Nishma data)</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hasidic</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeshivish</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Orthodox</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ORTHODOX JEWS IN NY</strong> <em>(Data: UJA Jewish Community Study)</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hasidic</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeshivish</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Orthodox</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Exiters express strong commitments to obtaining college degrees. The numbers of ex-ultra-Orthodox Jews who obtain college and graduate degrees is noteworthy and suggests similar values to those espoused by non-Orthodox Jews. Obtaining a secular education might very well be the defining feature of American Jewish identity. As Bethamie Horowitz has shown, short of one’s child converting to Christianity, them not obtaining a college degree ranks as the thing that would most upset Jewish parents (Horowitz, 2000). In the two decades since the publication of Horowitz study, Orthodox and right-wing organizations have attempted to convince Jews that secular colleges work against what they take to be Jewish values (Liebovitz, 2019, Pearl and Weinstein, 2013). Regardless of those efforts, American Jews continue to rank as “the most highly educated of the world’s major religious groups” (Pew, 2016).

### Table 2 | How happy or upset would you be if your child...?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>VERY UPSET</th>
<th>SOMewhat Upset</th>
<th>SOMewhat HAPPY</th>
<th>VERY HAPPY</th>
<th>WOULDN'T MATTER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Converted to Christianity</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never got a college degree</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formed a lasting romantic relationship with a person of the same sex</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married to non-Jew</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Become very religiously observant (ultra-Orthodox)</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Horowitz, 2000, p. 57)
Even with the natural overlaps between these exiters and the rest of non-Orthodox American Jewry, there are almost no Jewish organizations dedicated to assisting them. Some have benefited from more general funds made available through Jewish communal organizations. For example, UJA New York through HFLS provides one million dollars in scholarship funds to offset college tuition fees. Likewise, small grants have been awarded to Footsteps, to help those looking to attend college. In 2019, it distributed $440,000 for 127 applicants for higher education scholarships.

Non-sectaran groups and governmental organizations are the chief sponsors and mentors for those seeking opportunities for higher education. In NYC, where the majority of American ultra-Orthodox Jews reside, volunteer programs run by organizations such as Footsteps, BC Bound: High School Equivalency to Degree Program, and New York State Educational Opportunity programs have been at the forefront of providing assistance to ultra-Orthodox Jews seeking to complete high school degrees and/or enroll in college programs. While streams of capital flow in the direction of assisting secular and assimilated Jews to become more observant and engage in Jewish activities, the organized Jewish community has almost no funding earmarked toward assisting those in the OTD community.

**Historical Precedents for Educational Funding of Exiters**

Considering the historical record, it is surprising that the funding organized Jewish communities direct toward educational advancement is only “a drop in the bucket” in comparison to the funding allocated to identity projects (Berger, 2015, p. 684). From the late eighteenth until the last third of the twentieth century, secular education and labor training initiatives were a central feature in Jewish philanthropy worldwide. From the earliest days of the Jewish enlightenment, Jewish communal leaders made secular education a centerpiece of their philanthropic platforms; they did so with an explicitly progressive agenda to help those from lower classes enter civil society.

Already in 1822, the Germany-based Verein für Kultur und Wissenschaft der Juden (Society for the Culture and Science of the Jews) raised funds for sending children from observant backgrounds to German universities (Richarz & Leschnitzer, 1974). Similar educational projects were soon undertaken by others across Europe. The French based Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) established schools as far away as Morocco and Turkey. These initiatives contributed greatly to the social, economic, and educational advancements of their graduates. By the early twentieth century, those who had benefited from AIU schools were now sending their children to European institutions of higher leaning, while the AIU schools continued to serve the poorer population. AIU schools inculcated European languages and vocational skills, which alleviated widespread poverty, brought about significant social and economic
advancement and, for some, led to a university education and more advanced professional careers. While AIU schools may have promoted a secular orientation, these schools were also critical in instilling a deep appreciation for a Jewish collective and national identity (Laskier, 1983a; Laskier, 1983b; Rodrigue, 1990; Sciarcon, 2017).

Likewise, in Russia secular educational initiatives were the mainstay of Jewish philanthropy. In 1857, Evzel Gintsburg donated 5,000 rubles for an endowment for Jewish students wanting to attend Russian universities. Another fund of 7,500 rubles was established the next year in Kiev by a group of Jewish merchants. Eventually, similar funds were set aside by others in Kharkov and Moscow (Nathans, 2002). Between 1840 and 1886 the Jewish student population increased by a factor of more than 100 with the largest increase occurring between 1876 and 1886.

These efforts were institutionalized through the founding of the Society for the Promotion of Enlightenment among the Jews of Russia in 1863. The organization, referred to by the acronym OPE, typically dedicated most of its funds (two-thirds to three-quarters) to supporting students seeking higher education. The founders of the OPE had as their goal the integration of the Jewish population into Russian society and culture and they viewed education and specifically higher education as the primary path toward achieving this goal. The OPE charter began with the following:

The Society has the goal of promoting enlightenment among the Jews living in Russia, encouraging literature and giving grants to young people engaged in study. In these ways it contributes to the proliferation of knowledge of the Russian language among Jews, publishes and helps others to publish useful compositions, translations and periodical literature in both Russian and Hebrew, which have the goal of promoting enlightenment among Jews, and encourages young people who dedicate themselves to advanced knowledge with scholarships (Horowitz, 2017, p. 32).

Over the next twenty-five years, the OPE disbursed 268,000 rubles to Jewish students with data suggesting that in some years more than half of all Jewish students received financial aid from these funds. The OPE also established student mutual aid funds at a number of institutions of higher education through which financial aid was distributed to Jewish as well as non-Jewish students (the disbursement of which was often tied to the strengthening of Jewish identity rather than need) (Horowitz, 2017).

American Jewish philanthropy built upon its European predecessors’ efforts. One of the first and most important initiatives was the Baron De Hirsch Fund established in 1891 to assist Jews from Eastern Europe and Asia to immigrate to the United States and become self-sufficient. In addition to loans and provisions for travel, the Fund supported a range of educational programs, including handicraft, mechanical, and agricultural training as well as instruction in the English language and in civics (Bogen, 1917; Polland & Soyer, 2012).
The Educational Alliance (originally named the Hebrew Institute), an organization established by wealthy Jews of German Reform background, made education the primary vehicle for Americanization of the Jewish immigrant population. According to its first fundraising brochure of 1895: “The scope of the work of the Educational Alliance shall be of an Americanizing, educational, social, and humanizing character.” It offered both educational and recreational programming to the Lower East Side Eastern European Jewish immigrant community and mixed religious and traditional cultural programming with secular and Americanizing initiatives. It provided English classes for new immigrant children (until 1910, after which such classes began to be offered by the city), as well as Hebrew classes (as a strategy to keep children from attending cheder), and lecture series in English and German on various subjects for both men and women. It also maintained a library (with multiple branches), art schools and technical institutes, summer camps for boys and girls, a legal aid society (with 30,000 callers a year), a bureau concerned with family desertion, a children’s educational theatre and a bureau to address delinquency. The Alliance proved very popular among the immigrant population. During the summer of 1903 it served 10,000 people a day.

The efforts of the Educational Alliance were enhanced by other initiatives such as the Hebrew Educational Society, serving as many as 360,000 people a year.

Increased Funding and Sites of Engagement

Often ignored by those who point to the relatively low numbers of exiters per year (in contrast to previous generations) is that these numbers reflect not simply the strength of the ultra-Orthodox community but the lack of viable paths toward acceptance and success in other social spheres. In fact, it is remarkable that the numbers of Orthodox exiters are as high as they are considering the social barriers in front of them and the organized Jewish community’s reluctance to offer support. If, however, the organized Jewish community once again models programs that provide exiters with a clear path toward social freedom and economic opportunity, there is no reason not to believe that those numbers will change as they did in the past.

The organized Jewish community should once again focus resources incentivizing and supporting exiters from Orthodoxy seeking greater social and economic mobility, all the while taking into consideration a very different set of present-day circumstances. More than just time differentiates today’s exiters and those who left traditional or Orthodox homes in the early part of the twentieth century. Whereas boats, cross-continental travel, and organizations like HIAS and the Hebrew Educational Alliance provided viable routes out of Orthodoxy, no such paths or organizations exists for those raised in American ultra-Orthodox enclaves. Whereas the latter were raised in an era
defined by a melting pot theory of assimilation, the former are born into an America often defined as an eclectic salad bowl of different faith groups and identities. Whereas the former grew up in an Orthodox world defined by large-scale poverty and little in the way of social welfare, the latter have been part of communities that boast millionaires and even billionaires that keep the community economically afloat. Emboldened Orthodox leaders have successfully lobbied for strong governmental support for those less well off. Finally, whereas the latter were first generation Americans hungry for acceptance and social security, the latter are sometimes fifth generation Americans who speak English as a second language.

The stark contrasts between twenty-first and twentieth century exiters make it difficult to simply encourage the latter to take greater advantage of public educational models. Furthermore, the economic argument is not nearly as compelling as it was before Orthodox communities procured governmental subsidiaries for their adherents. What is required is form of outreach that takes into considerations these and other challenges to exiting.

Orthodox Jews today live in highly insulated enclaves, but their virtual lines of communication to other worlds are increasingly porous. The rising ubiquity of internet access, smartphones, and various virtual portholes, in theory, provide more open lines of communication to members of these communities. Both the reality of bounded enclaves and open virtual lines of communication should be addressed independently through different strategies.

1. Jewish Public Scholarship Pay-Back Program

The organized Jewish community should establish an annual multi-million-dollar scholarship pay-back program for exiters looking to attend public universities of higher education. The program would be administered through local Jewish organizations in partnership with public universities across the United States. Eligibility in the program would be based on financial need, with special consideration given to the unique challenges and burdens that are often placed upon women. Those granted scholarships would be required to work for local Jewish communities. The loan would be conditioned on it being partially “paid back” by the awardee through work in Jewish communal organizations (e.g. assisting in meals-on-wheels programs for seniors, working at local synagogue afterschool educational program, volunteering at homeless shelters, translating Hebrew texts for online use). These work opportunities would be tailored to awardees’ interests.

The Jewish Public Scholarship Pay-Back Program addresses perhaps the chief barrier preventing exiters from attending college: their inability to qualify for loans and a general fear of navigating bureaucratic financial systems. As one exiter recently confided, “how on earth would I ever get a loan? I have no guarantors and no idea if I could even make it through my first year in college.” The program would help the applicant manage the financial burden of higher education and assist them in procuring work opportunities.
In addition to the challenge of taking out loans, there are the hurdles involved in paying them back. Given the complexity of their life situations before, during and after college, the lack of even a minimum of parental support, and the fact that many who leave the ultra-Orthodox community take longer than four years to complete a degree, they are often left with crippling student debt. This situation leads many to despair about building a career or keeps them from going on to pursuing advanced degrees. A pay-back program would both minimize the burden of student debt as well as integrate individuals into the existing economic and cultural networks of the Jewish community which would greatly assist in developing their post-college careers.

The program would establish a direct line for exiters to access the resources of the American Jewish community. It would both invite exiters into preexisting Jewish institutions and encourage them to cultivate their own initiatives. To support awardees, it would match them with a local family, ideally an alumnus or someone affiliated with the college, to offer social support and guidance to awardees. Ultimately, the dedication, creativity and cultural literacy that characterize this population would enrich existing Jewish communities in their turn.

**Its general goals would be as follows:**

> Provide scholarship funds for exiters wishing to attend public colleges

> Cultivate a new cohort of Jewish professionals

> Help and support local Jewish communities

> Offer a framework for exiters to create new forms of Jewish identification.

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2. **Community Education Hubs:**

Pilot projects run by Footsteps suggest that there is a pressing need and clearly identifiable audience for a set of discreet but accessible hubs set up across Los Angeles and New York, offering sustained educational counseling to members of the ultra-Orthodox. To cultivate stronger ties to American Jewry, these hubs should be led by those capable of mentoring underprivileged and impoverished young adults (above the age of 18). A full-time staff would be assisted by a large pool of volunteers.

Currently, Footsteps boasts over 350 volunteers for their educational counseling programs. These volunteers assist exiters with completing high school equivalencies, college applications, and finding scholarships. Many of the volunteers are secular Jews, some are exiters from ultra-Orthodox communities, and others have family members who went through similar processes (Footsteps, personal communication, 2020). The challenge the program faces is that most exiters who come to Footsteps live in urban centers. Traffic and time spent on public transportation often makes it difficult to match them with volunteers.

Educational hubs on the outskirts of Borough Park and Williamsburg would remove large logistical roadblocks preventing exiters from working with volunteers and professionals.
Perhaps the most critical aspect of these hubs will be their unique geographic location on the very margins of ultra-Orthodox communities. It is critical that they are discreetly located but remain easily accessible for the population they seek to serve. A positive side effect of these encounters will be the building of intra-ethnic ties between exiters and American Jews.

The Hubs would provide the following services:

- Remedial education in English comprehension and math
- Resources for GEDs and high school equivalency exams
- College guidance
- College application preparation
- Assistance in writing scholarship and school loan applications.

3. Virtual Hubs

The Internet is the widest and most accessible porthole for exiters looking to make contact with those outside of the Orthodox world. For good reason, it has been dubbed by ultra-Orthodox leaders “a breeding ground for an ominous rebellion against the Torah” (Fader, 2020, p. 31). As documented by Ayala Fader, the internet has created a “heretical counterpublic” comprising Orthodox exiters and those living double lives within the community. A vast ultra-Orthodox counterculture has emerged online, replete with websites, chatgroups and Facebook pages catering to the OTD community and those with one foot out the door. The presence of these websites and their strong following points to an important gateway through which to connect exiters and those considering leaving with others who have traveled down similar paths.

Rabbinic authorities have proven impotent at controlling smartphones, especially among younger members of their flock. Smartphones provide the privacy that PCs and laptops lack. Attempts have been made to create filters on smartphones that block access to websites deemed dangerous. But since smartphones were originally permitted for business use, leaders have found it difficult to forbid young people from using them (Fader, 2020). Rabbinic rulings and warnings on iPhone usage are increasingly ignored or only given lip service. Hidden inside one’s pocket is a gateway out of the Orthodox community.

Since the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic in New York City, Footsteps has seen a massive uptick in online activity. Data culled from their files show a 148 percent increase in the number of individuals it has referred to outside experts for educational, psychological, legal, and financial assistance. Likewise, it has also witnessed a 625 percent increase in volunteers interested in assisting exiters in these matters. All of these activities are being carried out online.

iPhone usage promises to become only more ubiquitous in Haredi circles following the disruptions wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic. While it remains to be seen how the Haredi community adapts to a world that is fast becoming more virtual, many more in its ranks will be using smartphones and relying on the internet in the future.
Considering the increased usage of smartphones and the internet, the organized Jewish community should work toward building online resources and smartphone apps. This platform could provide many of the deliverables offered through the hubs as well as the following:

- Virtual meetings with educational consultants and volunteers
- Communication with exiters living outside of NYC
- Roadmaps for exiters trying to navigate secular educational institutions.

**Conclusion**

This paper has argued for increased funding to those exiting Orthodoxy, not in lieu of or as opposed to cultivating stronger intra-ethnic ties and Jewish literacy, but rather as a way of ensuring that such goals are achieved, all while supporting American Jewry’s progressive values. It would be a colossal loss if the Jewish community, starving for greater forms of literacy, would simply allow those possessing such vast stores of textual and cultural knowledge to exit the Jewish community altogether. While those exiting Orthodoxy will largely reject a denominational framework based nineteenth-century religious categories, they are poised to develop alternative forms of Jewish practice and collective identity better suited to current spiritual and new-age sensibilities. If the Jewish community is serious about its commitment to Jewish literacy, it would make far more sense to capitalize on all those years of intense Jewish education than to spend money introducing other young adults to Jewish customs and practices. If it is serious about its commitments to progressive values, the Jewish community should invest in those most committed to progressive values.

The upshot is neither a return to old social welfare philanthropy or a continuation of the conservationist paradigm, but rather a hybrid model that cultivates a range of new Jewish identities.
References


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