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Disaffiliation from Jewish Ultra-Orthodox Communities: Life Trajectories Shaped by the Axes of Rigidity–Fluidity and Alterity–Inclusion

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Abstract

Increasing numbers of young Israelis annually leave the enclave of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community. Relying on 16 in-depth interviews, we examine the effects of this disaffiliation on life trajectories and identity reconstruction of individuals who left their society of origin two decades ago. This unveiled a multistep longitudinal process, characterized by moving in and out of various structural stages, coupled with disaffiliates' agency to highlight specific sociocultural characteristics or the more universal nature of the human condition. The life course of disaffiliates begins with a phase of early struggle with the immediate tolls of disaffiliation, followed by a formative period marked by two steps: military service and acquisition of higher education. Here disaffiliates practice adoption of increasingly inclusive identities, in which the past and present are enmeshed. The formative period is followed by three alternative trajectories: (a) adherence to restrictive Israeli conformity, (b) ongoing search for singularity, and (c) integration of ultra-Orthodox heritage with contemporary Israeli realities. The disaffiliation trajectory from the ultra-Orthodox society is embedded in particular sociocultural, political, and historical contexts. However, narratives of disaffiliates adhere to frameworks of cultural Jewish-Israeli particularism, as much as to those of human universalism, plugging in to certain universal themes of the human condition, namely rigidity, fluidity, alterity, and inclusion.

Keywords Jewish-Orthodox · Disaffiliation · Life-course · Fluidity · Otherness · Belonging · Rigidity

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Introduction

In this study we implement the life course perspective theory to explore the effects of disaffiliation from a demanding religious group. Specifically, we focus on the narratives of individuals who chose to depart from ultra-Orthodox Judaism, and examine how that decision has affected their lives and their interpretation of their social world, their journey, and their identity. On the basis of interviews with 16 individuals who exited the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community two decades ago, we offer a diverse and elaborate taxonomy of the impact this has had throughout their lives.

We contend that the choices in the narratives of disaffiliates leaving the ultra-Orthodox community constitute an act of agency best understood as struggling with sociocultural adaptation and reclamation of identity. Specifically, we argue that the retrospective evaluation of the disaffiliation process is guided by four structural components and two opposing forces.

The four structural forces are rigidity, fluidity, alterity, and inclusion. Two of these, rigidity and fluidity, relate to the degrees of freedom imposed on individuals by social structures and to the various ways through which people make sense of their lives (Laidlaw 2014). The other two are alterity and inclusion, in the sense that "othering" plays a role in the individual's phenomenology, and may be manipulated for construing social exclusion and inclusion (Leistle 2015).

The two opposing forces reflect the well-known debates between cultural particularism, which refers to the specific social, cultural, historical, economic, and political context of a given culture on the one hand (Sahlins 1999), and human universalism, which refers to universally shared traits, on the other hand (Brown 1991).

In certain cases, the interviewees refer to their life story by invoking universal themes, while themes of Jewishness and Israeliness are much less pronounced. In other cases the particular ultra-Orthodox traditions increasingly intermingle with the future of disaffiliates in the Israeli context. In all stages, the structural components of rigidity, fluidity, alterity, and inclusion are present in various combinations. We suggest that all these themes refer generally to powerfully transformative cultural journeys, of which disaffiliates are merely one example.

The Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Communities as Demanding Religious Groups

Ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities, like other "enclave societies" (Turner 2007), adhere to an insular, demanding, "high-cost," religious tradition (Finkelman 2002). They thereby resemble other insular religious groups, such as Latter-day Saints, Amish, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Sikhs. Communities clinging to these traditions exhibit some common social structures (Miller 2016). These include: (a) social barriers to keep community members from interacting with outgroups and integrating into society at large; (b) spiritually based foundational axioms regarding public comportment, gender roles, and family hierarchies; and (c) mechanisms for shunning and ostracizing persons not behaving within the permissible bounds and rules of the community.

Ultra-Orthodox Jews are often defined as *Haredi* (literally "fearful of God"), an umbrella term of several communities characterized by strict adherence to Jewish laws and traditions. Large groups within *Haredi* communities consist of *Litvish*, *Hasidim*, *Chabad*, and Sephardic *Haredi* (Heilman 2000; Deshen 2005). **Haredi** communities can be characterized as highly insular and restrictive, adhering to a notable level of alterity vis-à-vis other groups in the population. The *Haredi* usually live in confined geographical settings, placing strong emphasis on the attire worn by men and women as a way to signal belonging to the community. More importantly, the collective *Haredi* community imposes a defined range of behavior codes, and exercises total control over its members (Belfon 2019; Deutsch 2009). Females could be more affected than males by the inherently restrictive nature of *Haredi* society (Shai 2002), and specifically by the emphasis on modesty and obsession with sexual control (Rockman 1993).

In Israel, two legislative initiatives further enhance the insularity of the *Haredi* communities: (a) Young *Haredi* are exempt from enlisting in the otherwise mandatory military service (Stadler and Ben-Ari 2003); and (b) government allowances are provided to *Yeshiva* students as long as they continue their religious studies. All this decreases incentives to seek professional education and join the national labor force (Malach and, Cahaner 2019), and increases the alienation between the *Haredi* community and other parts of Israel's population.

Disaffiliation from Ultra-Orthodox Judaism

The origins of disaffiliation from traditional Jewish communities can be traced back to eighteenth-century Europe (Feiner 2011), and has been part of Jewish history since then. More recently, this phenomenon is manifested by the ongoing disaffiliation from contemporary Orthodox *Haredi* communities worldwide. Such disaffiliation was described extensively not only in communities in Israel (Barzilai 2004; Doron 2013) and in the USA (Berger 2014; Newfield 2020), but also in Canada (Belfon 2019), the UK (Gordon 2017), and Australia (Davis 2017). In Israel, thousands of young individuals disaffiliate annually from the *Haredi* communities (Regev and Gordon 2020).

This phenomenon, often referred to in North America as going "Off the *Derech*" (Off the Path, OTD).The Hebrew term *Yetzia BeShe'ela*, literally translated as "exiting with questions" is built as a "counter" name to "*Hazara Be'Teshuvah*," used to describe non-Orthodox individuals joining *Haredi* groups. It should be noted that the term "exiting with questions" broadcasts misreading "*Teshuvah*" as "answer" rather the actual meaning—repentance.

Here we shall refer to the process of disaffiliation from the *Haredi* communities in Israel as "exiting," and to disaffiliates as "exiters," thus avoiding designations that might have underlining connotations.

A significant body of studies examining the various reasons for leaving the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community suggests that exiting is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that can be defined in several ways.

Disaffiliation as immigration. Just as geographical distance does not necessarily denote cultural differences, geographical proximity does not denote cultural similarity. The process of leaving the ultra-Orthodox community and transitioning to the wider society can feel much like immigrating to an unfamiliar culture (Engelman et al. 2020).

Disaffiliation as apostasy. Abandonment of a strict religious way of life in favor of nonreligious or less religious alternatives can be interpreted as a form of apostasy (Davidman and Greil 2007; Frankenthaler 2015). Exiters reframe the importance of religion to their self-identity, and this may involve intellectual challenges, spiritual quest, and struggle.

Liberation from coercive groups. Many of the issues associated with liberation from cult-like groups (Rousselet et al. 2017) may apply to leaving enclave religions, and specifically to disaffiliation from the rigid and authoritarian *Haredi* society.

Standing for one's identity. Identity reconstruction has been associated traditionally with LGBT people coming out and proclaiming their identities (Jones 2019). Disaffiliation from Jewish Orthodoxy by young people can also be defined as an act of "coming out" (Anderton et al. 2011). This involves declaring a new identity as a non-observant person (Doron 2013), thus achieving a sense of mastery over one's life.

The incentives and reasons for leaving the Orthodox community are complex and variable, and can be motivated by either "origin factors," pushing a person to leave a community, or "destination factors," pulling a person to join a new community (Lee 1966). Nevertheless, the common denominator for exiting appears to be related to the intensity of the desire to disengage from the insular ultra-Orthodox society (Behr 2018). This desire is best identified by their readiness to pay a high price for leaving (Berger 2015; Velan and Pinchas-Mizrach 2019). Exiters have to cope with estrangement and shunning by families, fending for themselves for the first time without instrumental or social support, while encountering unemployment related to lack of formal education (Hakak and Rapoport 2012).

The Life Course Perspective

Research on the process of leaving Jewish orthodox communities has proliferated in recent decades, yet relatively little attention has been paid to the life trajectories of disaffiliates. Specifically, more information is needed on the life course perspectives of disaffiliation, namely the long term social, cultural, and psychological impacts of this specific transition.

The life course perspective (Thomas and Znaniecki 1958) examines individual life histories in order to understand how prior events, social and economic conditions, and individual characteristics influence decisions and events over time (Marshall and Mueller 2003). The life course perspective addresses life events as trajectories, transitions, and turning points (Hareven and Masaoka 1988). Trajectories are lengthy patterns of moderate changes and stability; transitions are common events that cause changes in an individual's life; and turning points are major transitions causing sharp changes in the trajectory of an individual's life course.

The Current Study

In this study, we apply the life course theory to study the effects of disaffiliation on the life trajectories of exiters as recounted in their own words. We use life stories as described by 16 interviewees to sketch a prototypical life course following disaffiliation, and draw from it on the interpretation of disaffiliation as an identity-forging process. By doing so we provide a new perspective to an apparently highly particular Jewish sociocultural phenomenon.

On the basis of the interviewees' voices, we highlight both the particular and universal trajectory components as they relate to form and content. In parallel, we identify four major forces that shape the lives of exiters. These include (a) alterity defined as "separateness, dissimilarity, and distinction," (b) inclusion defined as "belonging, being included, and being similar," (c) fluidity defined as "readiness and capability to change and adapt," and (c) rigidity defined as "inability or unwillingness to change and adapt."

Methods

Study Sample

The first three interviewees were recruited by the "Out for Change" group, a nonprofit organization assisting exiters. Later on, recruitment continued through "snowballing," where interviewees recruit other people for the study.

The inclusion criteria were: (a) self-identification as ex-Orthodox Jews; (b) affirmation that disaffiliation occurred between the ages of 15–25; (c) being 35–45 years old at the time of interview. We interviewed 16 individuals and ended recruitment once preliminary content analysis revealed that we had reached a point of repetition in data.

The study sample included nine males and seven females. The mean age in the study group was 39.2 ± 3.1 years, and the mean reported age at the point of exiting was 18.1 ± 2.6 years. We marked the age of exiting by the point in time where exiters "came out" by declaring their new identity to others. The average time that elapsed between the time of exiting and the time of interview was 21.2 ± 2.9 years. This framework allowed us to examine the life course of disaffiliation in the perspective of the first 20 years of adulthood, and provides geographical and historical unity.

The sample included participants brought up in families representing all major segments of *Haredi* society. Ten of the participants were married at the time of interview, four were divorced, and two were single. Thirteen participants had children of their own.

Interviews

The interviews were conducted in Hebrew. All interviewees were informed about the aims of the study, the format of the interview, and the identity and affiliations of the researchers. At this stage, full anonymity was assured. Subject to participants' consent, all interviews were recorded. The first two interviews were conducted

in person, and all the others by using the ZOOM application. Interviews lasted 60–90 min.

Interviews were based on one major open question. Interviewees were asked to describe their life course during the years that elapsed since affiliation, and relate the effect of disaffiliation to various stages in their trajectory.

Content Analysis

The major motives in the transcribed interviews were identified by means of content analysis, designed by drawing from an interpretative phenomenological approach (Giorgi 1997).

The transcript of each interview was screened for all coherent statements. The lists of statements were then narrowed down to the ones potentially pertaining to the disaffiliation process, yielding lists of about 40 relevant statements per interview. The selected statements were then typified using two criteria: (a) the stage in life at which the effect was manifested (e.g., early years, later years, marriage, studies, etc.); and (b) the identification of effects related to alterity, inclusion, rigidity, and fluidity, as defined above in the introduction.

The typified motives were gathered to construct the effects described in the Results section. Most relevant quotations were selected and presented in the text. Quotations were translated to English by one of the authors (B.V.). In case of uncertainty, an Israeli exiter whose mother tongue language is English was consulted.

Results

Examination of the life stories as accounted for by 16 interviewees allowed us to sketch a prototypical life course for exiters that is unilinear in terms of its stages, yet allows for diversification. The first 10 years following exiting overlap the years of early adulthood. In the life of disaffiliates, this period includes: (a) the early years of struggle with the tolls of exiting, (b) military service, and (c) the years dedicated to higher education. This period is followed by a later period, occurring during mid-adulthood, which is marked by attempts to forge distinctive pathways. Here we identified three typical and parallel possible trajectories characterized either by: (1) adherence to an idealized Israeli conformity, (2) adoption of a bicultural contemporary identity, and (3) resorting to ongoing and unresolved search for identity as a conscious choice. Each one of these life course constituents is elaborated upon in the following sections. In addition, we discuss the extent to which each of these stages is rigid as opposed to fluid, and involves alterity as opposed to inclusion.

The Struggle of the Early Years

Disaffiliation from the ultra-Orthodox community is characterized by the extremely high toll that exiters have to pay for moving out. This toll relates precisely to the extremely pronounced inclusiveness of the *Haredi* societal structure, as well as to

the rigid all-or-nothing demands from its members. The first 1–3 years after disaffiliation are extremely challenging, as exiters try to escape *Haredi* restrictions and embark on a new route. This stage is marked by both fluidity and alterity, theoretically referencing Turner's concept of liminality (1969) as used by Newfield (2020), since exiters float between structures, belonging to neither.

The perspective of 20 years allowed interviewees to reevaluate the early challenges and divide them into practical difficulties and emotional difficulties. The practical challenges relate mainly to material survival. Unstable, the new disaffiliates find themselves juggling between various temporary jobs and also hunting for housing at the same time. This was described by the interviewees as follows: "I did everything; I was a plasterer, a painter, a builder. I worked in the municipal market, in a winery"; and "I was moving from one place to another, squatting in abandoned houses, living on a farm, camping in the Judean desert."

In order to cope with these difficulties, exiters harnessed resilience, hardiness, agency, and self-reliance: "Exiting was an exceptional journey that taught me to trust myself, that showed me that I can manage"; "I realized that there are things worth fighting for. I was ready to face the battle head on"; and "I decided to be proactive, to take the initiative, I had a lot of chutzpah." Interestingly, the reference to *chutzpah*, an inherent personality trait of the Israeli Sabra, invokes animosity between the docility of the diasporic Jew, metaphorically represented by the *Haredi* community, and the Israeli renaissance to which it was counterpoised. Exiters actually employ the rhetoric of resilience in the face of hardships, as did the early pioneers while constructing the contemporary Israeli identity (Almog 2000). Notably, these first steps in acquiring particular Israeli-like qualities are construed as a relatable tale of human sufferance in the face of human difficulty; an essentially universalist theme.

The mental difficulties of exiters mostly relate to the substantial sociocultural gaps between the newly disaffiliated individual and the general society. "You are an immigrant; you don't know the 'language,' the nuances, the do's and the don'ts;" "I felt like the bat in the famous fable, not belonging to the birds because it has no feathers, and not belonging to the mammals because it can fly." Interestingly, the metaphors are universal, and not inherent to the Jewish–Israeli culture, nor to the inherent alterity of Jewish existence (Charmé 1998).

The major tool for overcoming these difficulties was creating social support systems within the hosting Israeli society. Many of the interviewees developed a proactive talent for identifying "Good Samaritans" and recruiting them as helpers: "Life brings good people onto your path. I was always active in finding and approaching them"; and "Exiters learn to identify good people and differentiate them from the many bad people that they meet." Good Samaritans earn their status by virtue of being morally commendable and helpful. They included teachers at college, bosses at work, and commanders in the military, as well as random acquaintances.

In summary, the early years of struggle are marked by the attempt of exiters to distance themselves from the rigidity and alterity of ultra-Orthodox society. They find themselves experimenting with new ideas and more options, and thereby defy the rigid structure imposed by the *Haredi* lifestyle. Nevertheless, new exiters remain entrapped by their otherness, which becomes intensified by the fact that they no longer belong to their old community and are not yet accepted by a new one.

Military Service

Military service appears to be a significant formative step for new exiters. It serves as the first successful gateway into Israeli society through a well-defined, totally inclusive institution, thereby associating past structures and future aspirations.

Military service is mandatory for Jewish Israeli citizens; yet studying in a *Yeshiva* allows ultra-Orthodox men to postpone recruitment, and eventually circumvent it. Orthodox women are not enlisted at all. Upon disaffiliation, ex-*Haredi* lose their exemption from service, and are expected to enlist. All nine males participating in this study, as well as two out of the seven female participants joined the IDF. While service is basically imposed on male exiters, the attitudes of the interviewees toward enlistment, and the choices made during service, attest to the importance they attribute to this service. In this context, one should note that, in recent years, military service has lost some of its past prestige, as Israelis increasingly find ways to evade enlistment (Adres, Vanhuysse Vashdi 2012).

The original decision of the State of Israel regarding general compulsory military service implicated two major perspectives: The need for a broadly structured force to face the armies of the neighboring hostile countries, and the desire for military service to serve as a framework for shaping national identity, bringing together people of diverse backgrounds (Tiargan-Orr and Eran-Jona 2015).The testimonies of the participants in this study indicate that they willingly adhered to these two aspects of service.

Eight of the male exiters and one female exiter served in perilous combat units, making special efforts to be accepted into the more prestigious ones. Joining these units is, in a way, a declaration of readiness to make sacrifices, since the death toll during military conflicts among soldiers serving in such units is notably higher. Some participants addressed this directly: "It was clear to me that I might lose my life during service. Indeed, at times, I was close to being killed." Interestingly, one participant suggested that such sacrifices are embedded in Jewish beliefs: "I was brought up on heroic stories of Jews sacrificing their lives for *Kiddush Hashem* (dying to defend the faith, literally 'sanctifying God'). This led me to be ready to sacrifice my life in the defense of my country." Soldiers fallen in combat are venerated by Israelis, and for three of the participants, non-*Haredi* relatives who lost their lives in service represented role models: *"I learned that an uncle of mine was killed in battle, I perceive this as an honorable self-sacrifice."* This suggests that adhering to the Israeli ethos of military bravery, as mediated by exiters' agency, is not as disconnected from the exiters' *Haredi* past as implied by the deep animosity between the two realms. Life and death are, of course, deep binary structures shared by all mankind. It is therefore interesting to note that the first successful encounter of exiters with Israeliness merges a universalist theme with a religious theme.

Military service provided very practical advantages. Not only did it grant exiters housing, food, and some kind of income, it also provided a mechanism for accessing the broader Israeli population. Interviewees reported that the military service gave them the opportunity to meet people representing a wide spectrum of Israeli society and acknowledge their worth both as people and as Israelis: "I met secular people and realized that they are decent people"; "I was surrounded by well-educated

guys with high aspirations"; "I was exposed to guys of Sephardic background, and to their taste in music, I actually liked it"; and "I became acquainted with the codes of non-Orthodox individuals and learned to speak the 'language' of the Israelis." In this aspect the military fulfilled, at least in part, its anticipated role as an alleged melting pot.

It should be noted, however, that the high adherence of exiters to the military is not self-evident. As mentioned, the military is highly structured and hierarchical and by nature one of the more restrictive institutions in Israeli society. In a certain way, exiters replaced the restraining environment of the *Haredi* society with that of the military to acquire a sense of belonging.

Higher Education

Acquiring higher education is an important formative step in the movement of exiters to adulthood as non-Orthodox individuals. Moreover, the possibilities of conjuring up the exiters' past, or even enlisting it as a beneficial resource, manifest themselves best here.

Acquisition of tertiary education by exiters can be challenging as it involves surmounting barriers related to significant educational gaps. These gaps stem mainly from the fact that core educational curriculum is often denied to *Haredi* boys attending *Yeshivas* (Shenfeld 2020). Moreover, the *Haredi* education system does not grant students a matriculation certificate, which is a prerequisite for academic studies in Israel. Upon exiting, disaffiliates find themselves with no knowledge of English and very limited mathematical skills. Therefore, as a first step, exiters must dedicate time and effort to prepare for higher studies: "I had to take a preparatory program. I started from zero, learning language, grammar, mathematics, and English." Nevertheless, the participants in this study exhibited high commitment to overcome such barriers. Most of our interviewees (14 out of 16) attended institutions of tertiary education. All those who began their studies graduated successfully; three of them continued on to obtain Master's degrees, and one a PhD degree.

Higher education is considered, worldwide, as an effective means for integrating peripheral groups into the general society. Notably, programs aimed at facilitating access to tertiary education for immigrants are often used to pave the way into the labor market, as well as to decrease social inequities and increase "democratization" (Thiessen 2009) (Kao and Thompson 2003). All this may apply to the integration of exiters into general society as well. Indeed, many of the interviewees recognized the integrative power of education: "Studying is a social endeavor. You acquire social skills, you can watch the behavior of others, and integrate through observation"; and "In the university you find yourself among individuals of various backgrounds who all share the same target. This is a very unifying experience."

The quest for higher education can be interpreted as related to cosmopolitanism by virtue of its diverse quality, namely fluidity, and also as related to Israelization, hence inclusiveness. By studying, exiters adhere to the universal value of education and knowledge, and also relate to a cosmopolitan tradition associated with certain manifestations of Jewish life (Miller and Ury 2010). At the same time, through

higher studies exiters adhere to accepted Israeli norms: "My aim was to fall in line with the other Israelis. They all go to university. I should be doing this as well." Obviously, not all Israels go to university. This statement reflects the identification of this interviewee with an idealized Israeli profile (as will be discussed below in the section dealing with adherence to Israeli norms).

In addition, the quest for higher education can be perceived as an effective mechanism for bicultural integration and for bridging between present and past. Education is a venue where norms and practices acquired when growing up in the ultra-Orthodox community can be harnessed as tools for integration into non-Orthodox society. In a way, the *Haredi* tradition that emphasizes the importance of learning (Gilman 1996) can be translated into respecting secular studies after exiting: "Learning was always appreciated at home. I come from a very educated rabbinical family." The value of religious learning is reinterpreted as academic excellence.

Their background as *Yeshiva* students may give disaffiliates (especially males) distinct advantages. The classroom is familiar terrain for exiters, and the process of learning comes naturally: "I have replaced the Yeshiva with the university." In addition, interviewees mentioned specific skills acquired at the *Yeshiva* as particularly helpful. These included: "the ability to sit and study for long hours," "analytical skills," "verbal dexterity," and "skills in presenting an argument," as well as the "practice of questioning and examining." In a way, academic success can be perceived as the outcome of the cross-cultural identity of exiters. The learning traditions of *Haredi* society provide the appropriate foundations, whereas high ambition, a characteristic of exiters, drives them to achieve their goals.

In summary, higher education, by providing a fluid structure, allows exiters to acquire a sense of belonging without having to submit to new rigid rules, such as those imposed by military service. Moreover, the academic experience provides an opportunity to reevaluate the imprint of the *Haredi* heritage in a more favorable way, perhaps for the first time for most. In this sense it can be considered as doubly inclusive, referring both to the exiters' past and to their futures. At the same time, through education, exiters articulate the universal experience of belonging and gaining knowledge alongside sociocultural specifics, such as the value of learning in Judaism and the ethos of integration in Israeli culture.

Life Course Pathways: Adherence to Israeli Norms

Exiters who leave the *Haredi* community and find themselves immersed in general society are bound to redefine their interrelationship with Israeli identity. The accounts of many participants in this study suggest eagerness to adopt Israeliness and adhere to a form of conformity that is shaped by Israeli norms.

The life story of seven of the interviewees in this study can be characterized as a targeted journey towards assimilation into mainstream Israeliness, or toward immersive inclusiveness. The life courses of these "assimilators" appear to resemble one another. They are all males, all enlisted in the IDF, all pursued tertiary education, and all have respectable careers. They are married and have children, and live in communities identified with the secular upper-middle population group.

This life course appears to reflect the desired objectives of this group: "Right after exiting, I decided to be a 'common' Israeli, to be part of the mainstream"; and "My aim was to become a secular Israeli, I knew the road would be long, but I was sure I would eventually get there." In most cases the quest for Israeliness resulted in a sense of accomplishment: "Today after 20 years I am in an ideal place. I am an average guy. I am not different from others in my age group who belong to the Israeli middle class"; and "I am educated and well off. I have a good job, my wife is a lawyer, we own a house with two SUVs parked outside."

Prototypical Israeliness is manifested at various stages in the life of the "assimilating" disaffiliates. The act of exiting itself can be portrayed as a typical Israeli deed. When relating to their experiences, exiters describe harnessing courage, determination, endurance, and *chutzpah* as tools for overcoming the challenges of exiting. In this sense, interviewees use a diasporic Yiddish term to refer to some of the rather cliché characteristics associated with the Israeli stereotype (Weinberg 2019).

The most notable act of Israelization is manifested when exiters (mainly men) enlist in the Israeli army immediately after disaffiliation. While this act is basically imposed on exiters, their attitudes toward enlistment, as mentioned earlier, and the choices made during service, attest to the major effect of the military in shaping their Israeli identity.

The high commitment to acquiring secondary education can be interpreted in various ways. Nevertheless, one facet of acquiring academic degrees is about compliance with Israeli norms. In general, the Israeli population is considered highly educated. In 2021, 50.1% of Israelis held tertiary education degrees as compared with the 38.6% Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average (Education at a Glance, OECD report 2021). Thus, the strategy of assimilation through higher education appears to be an effective mechanism for exiters to become part of the general Israeli society.

Later in life, career choices of the assimilating exiters could also be interpreted as compliance with Israeli norms. Many of the interviewees managed to develop significant careers in prestigious fields, including criminal law, aeronautical engineering, and finance. Three of them became heads of public or private organizations. The drivers for career development among exiters include commonplace motives, such as search for security and personal gratification: "I chose to stick to a secure job in an established organization"; and "Once I started working, I felt that this was my calling, my anchor." Nevertheless, many career choices indicate an inclination toward entrepreneurship and management: "I have created three companies of my own, rejecting propositions that did not give me full independence to do things my way." Such choices reflect entrepreneurial values that are highly appreciated by the present-day, increasingly neoliberal Israeli society (Senor and Singer, 2011).

One additional element that can be examined in the broader context of assimilation into Israeli society relates to spouse selection among disaffiliates. A desirable feature in a partner was described by one female participant as being an authentic representative of secular Israeli society: "My dream was to marry an archetypical Israeli guy. I eventually married a secular Ashkenazi guy. My husband is 'salt of the earth.' He served in an elite military unit; He comes from a good family. They have a swimming pool in the backyard." The other two married female participants

gave similar, yet less elaborate descriptions of their spouses. The male participants were less specific about choosing their partner, yet notably, six out the seven married male participants chose women born to nonreligious Israeli parents.

It appears that exiters choose "marrying-up" into Israeli society as an expression of the aspiration for acquiring an Israeli identity. Intermarriage with the native-born population is often viewed as the "final step" in the assimilation process of immigrants (Lichter et al. 2015), and was noted as a mechanism for integration among immigrants from the former Soviet Union into the Israeli population (Remennick 2009).

Taken together, all these acculturation steps denote attempts to breakdown intergroup boundaries and promote integration into hegemonic society. It should be noted that Israeliness, as perceived by these exiters, relates to a metaphor of Israeli society as dominated by an elite Ashkenazi secular group, and not to its current far more complex state. In a way, exiters ignore the major social changes occurring in Israel during the last decades (Sasson-Levy 2013).

The pathway chosen by the assimilating exiters allows them to break away from the otherness of their *Haredi* past, but does not free them from restrictions. They still remain bound to the rather strict norms of "Israeliness": "I lead a very conservative life style. I am aware of the dissonance between my quest for freedom upon exiting and the fact that I am married, have kids, work around the clock, and have a very sedate life in a kibbutz. But this was the choice I made."

In conclusion, if the exiters broke free from *Haredi* society, which is stereotypically perceived as backward and archaic, to the seemingly liberating future of secularism, they have done so by ironically adhering to a somewhat archaic interpretation of Israeliness. Their choice is marked by rigidity, as well as by a form of strict inclusion, which paradoxically is a manifestation of alterity. This is especially important, as it reveals that alterity and rigidity may manifest themselves in a journey that is stereotypically envisioned as a path from oppression to liberation.

Life Course Pathway: Forming a Bicultural Identity

The disaffiliation process can be perceived as a form of sociocultural transition; essentially a sort of immigration within one's own country (Engelman, Milstein, Schonfeld, Grubbs 2020). Upon disaffiliation, exiters abandon a rather insular restrictive community, and have to redefine their standing in relation to the norms and values of a dominant hosting society (Berry's model 2005).

Some exiters chose to adhere to Israeli conformity, as described above, while others tried to integrate the *Haredi* culture of origin with that of the host culture, aiming for a bicultural identity. As will be described in this chapter, they merge features imported from the *Haredi* society left behind with those acquired, while trying to be part of general society, a category also referred to as "hybrids" by Newfield (2020).

These bicultural tendencies can be linked to certain features characterizing the life of exiters: *Haredi* upbringing, the act of exiting itself, and the challenges encountered after the exit. These life experiences can enhance relativism and reflexivity as

well as subjectivism and post-modern thinking. This can foster a hybrid identity, as well as a rather realistic evaluation of present-day multicultural Israeli society.

Relativism and critical thinking can be traced back to *Haredi* upbringing and *Yeshiva* learning practices: "People don't appreciate enough the place of skepticism in the Talmudic deliberation. *Haredi* students are encouraged to challenge the scripts, to ask questions." Skeptical criticism appears to be linked also to the process of exiting, since disaffiliation is essentially an act of questioning and deliberation: "I don't know if criticism led me to exit, or if it was an outcome of the exit." All this conducts to a wider perspective on given truths: "I tend to evaluate things more carefully, and don't take anything at face value. This is true regarding wider views as well as everyday life. Nothing is a 'Torah from Sinai' (the gospel truth)."

Several interviewees indicated that their life experiences led them to be more open minded and understanding toward various groups in Israeli society: "I am open to various cultures, I have lived among *Haredi*, among progressive religious Jews, among disaffiliates, and among secular people. I've had to cope with all of them. This gives me an advantage." This attitude is not restricted to the Israeli scene. Exiters who have lived abroad learned to appreciate the wider aspects of cultural diversity: "I have learned to speak some Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, and Spanish. This allows me to interact with a variety of people. I understand now that it's not all about *Haredi* versus secular. The picture is much broader."

Critical thinking together with exposure to other cultures can lead exiters to adopt relaxed perspectives: "I try to avoid 'black and white;' I believe in gray. This is true for politics, for religiosity, for interactions with people." As a consequence of this, exiters often identify with liberal thinking: "I see myself as a liberal person. I tolerate all forms of religion or religiosity, as well as all sexual orientations. This could be related to the fact that I left a community where everything was about saying No, No."

One consequence of the intellectual maturation of some exiters is the reexamination of their attitudes toward their past. At a certain point, exiters start to appreciate anew some of the aspects of *Haredi* life. This may include the sense of solidarity, the camaraderie, and family values: "Things I have seen in my *Haredi* family are affecting my family life today. I have learned mutual respect, soft talking, reverence for elders, and good interactions between parents." As a matter of fact, all our interviewees except for two had, by the time of the interview, reconnected with their *Haredi* families, and enjoy an ongoing and respectful interaction between their present nuclear family and their greater *Haredi* family.

The reflections on the schism within their own families led some participants to reflect on the bigger picture—the notable schism between the *Haredi* and the general populations. They even realize that they might have a unique place in such a situation: "I am capable of seeing both sides of the divide. As a newly-born secular person, I am not bound to the cultural conditioning of the secular community. As a rejecter of the *Haredi* way of life, I am not bound by the Orthodox values. I can be a go-between."

Together with the evolution of the social aspects of a bicultural persona comes an attempt to forge a new religious identity. Contrary to the common belief that disaffiliation is a form of apostasy, all but two participants in this study clearly indicated

that they still see themselves as believers: "I believe in the existence of God, I can always turn to Him in need." Nevertheless, many participants dissociated belief in God from adherence to accepted religious practices: "I believe in God, but I don't believe in religion as such, I don't practice, I don't observe the Shabbat, and I eat pork."

The interaction of disaffiliates with religion appears to be a dynamic process. Five of the interviewees indicated that the "rediscovery" of religion occurred at the later stages of the disaffiliation trajectory: "Ten years ago I was distancing myself from everything related to Judaism. Today, at the age of 40, things have changed. I have reached the understanding that I want to reconnect to Judaism. Age was a critical factor in this change." The interrelationship of disaffiliates with religion appears to be flexible and adaptive. One interviewee described this in a rather interesting way: "A 40-year-old man who comes back to religion can take God to wherever he chooses to, without any strings attached."

All in all, many interviewees expressed a reflexive attitude toward religiosity. One interviewee actually described himself as "moving along the religious spectrum." In this way, such participants resemble the "trans-*Yotzim*," described by Sarit Barzilai (2004) as moving freely between the secular and Orthodox world.

"Spectrum religiosity" is not unique to exiters. It was identified among "Sephardic Traditionalists" (Israelis strongly attached to the Jewish tradition) (Yadgar 2010), and among individuals defining themselves as former "religious nationals" (Heymann 2013). Independent of its origins, the emerging flexible religiosity became, in recent years, one of the markers of the movement of the divided Israeli society toward some form of a multicultural co-existence (Liebman and Yadgar 2009). Currently, the majority of Israeli Jews, not necessarily those belonging to the religious sector, define themselves as adhering to Jewish traditions in one way or another (Hermann 2012).

Disaffiliates who chose to take the bicultural path actually chose not to identify with a specific "tribe," and thus have established a stronger belongingness to Jewry at large and to Israeli multicultural society. Moreover, they do so by exercising a high degree of post-modern fluid thinking. These disaffiliates are actually distancing themselves from both the alterity and the rigidity that mark the *Haredi* community, and thus appear to effectively fulfill the apparent motives behind disaffiliation. In this fluid inclusiveness, the interplay of universalism and particularism is also more complex, even dialectical: The critical mind ascribed to *Haredi* values validates the disaffiliates' penchant for universalistic openness, which in turn generates and legitimizes new forms of hybrid Jewry that would not exist in a culturally binary system.

Life Course Trajectories: Nonconformity and the Ongoing Search

A reoccurring feature in the life course of certain interviewees can be defined as an ongoing experience of searching and wandering, characterized by both fluidity and alterity. The life stories of four interviewees clearly identify them as "searchers." In two other cases, long periods of such searching were eventually replaced by periods of stability. These "searchers" were aware of their choices in life, and appeared to

celebrate searching as the human right to curiosity, creativity, experimentation, and freedom of expression.

Some searchers tried to explain their continuous explorations. They have linked their behavior to an urge to question and doubt: "Nothing is self-evident for me. Everything is questionable"; and "I started asking questions when contemplating disaffiliation; as a consequence my curiosity was aroused and I continued asking more and more." Another explanation was related to an inherent restlessness: "My restlessness led me to exit, and is still driving my life today"; and "I have this urge to keep on moving, to keep on creating new realities for myself."

The life course of the "searchers" is affected in many ways by their individualistic character: "I can't see myself as a member of the flock, I am too individualistic. One can even say that I live in the margins." This is complemented by the tendency toward rebelliousness and nonconformity that guided them in the process of exiting and still remains a part of their lives: "I don't abide by rules. Laws have no meaning for me. I have my own norms and principles."

The exploratory tendencies of the "searchers" are not necessarily manifestations of unresolved identities, nor of failure, but rather a lifelong psychosocial trait. This was manifested in their life course in some concrete ways. Interviewees of the "searcher" group have shifted rather frequently from one job to another or from one area of interest to another. This was most notable in the case of one participant: "I was engaged in various projects … I was a freelance journalist, a photographer… I was in marketing … I am painting and writing and I've edited several on-line journals." In addition, maintaining long-term relationships can be difficult for "searchers": "I was married, but today I understand that I am not built for relationships, nor for having a family"; and "In all my relationships I exuded a sense of non-commitment: I am here today and will be gone tomorrow, don't you fall in love with me."

Another manifestation of the ongoing search is the attempt to live in another country. Five interviewees tried living abroad for several years, and three of them kept moving from one country to another: "Living abroad allowed me to distance myself from my past, and better cope with the challenges of my present life"; "I lived in Thailand for several years, but then I moved to Romania"; and "I feel connected to Hong Kong, I have lived there, worked there, was in a relationship with a local girl. To me it is a free and open place."

A more extreme manifestation of the search for a "different life" can be found in the examination of non-Jewish religiosity: "I was recently exposed to Christianity, and Jesus is my guide now." Another variant of this is the examination of alternative spirituality: "I work in a farm that grows organic vegetables; I am deeply connected to the land. This connection helps me to keep in touch with my inner spiritual center."

The net effect of all this is that certain exiters find themselves, 20 years after exiting, not associated with Israeli society at large or with any given fraction of Israeli society. They remain "others," or as defined by the interviewees themselves, "anchorless," "alien," "birds of a different feather." These disaffiliates have replaced the group-based otherness of the *Haredi* community with a different form of otherness, an individual-based otherness. In terms of "form" and "content," these "searchers" actively remain in the margins, but replace one alterity content with another.

Exiters belonging to the "searcher" group have distanced themselves very effectively from the rigidness of the *Haredi* way of life. They have gained a high level of fluidity and reflexivity manifested in their approach to life and in their decisions and routines. It would perhaps be tempting for some to label such exiters as "directionless," disconnected, or in search of a cultural script yet to be found. These exiters prefer to see themselves in another way, as legitimate explorers of the human condition, a definition that rises above particulate political and cultural categories. Nevertheless, in a way they associate themselves with certain typical mercurial aspects of the Jewish identity (Slezkine 2019).

In sum, we have sketched a prototypical multistaged life course for exiters, and used it to analyze identity formation, highlighting, downplaying, or merging particularism and universalism throughout its stages. It should be clarified that this is essentially a schematic representation, and actual behavior was more flexible. While all participants shared the experiences of the struggle of the early years, not all participants served in the military or acquired tertiary education. More importantly, the three proposed prototypical life course trajectories, as well as choices related to particularism or universalism, were not necessarily predetermined or fixed. Some participants moved from one pathway to another during their life course, and the most frequent shift was from Israeli conformity to a bicultural fluidity.

Discussion

The superimposition of the interviewees' narratives unveils a multistep process of disaffiliation. At each step, interviewees either express the sociocultural context of their disaffiliation or choose to construe it as more universal. In other words, exiters highlight specific plot points when reflecting on 20 years of disaffiliation, and charge each with a certain sociocultural significance. Comparing these plot points reveals notable similarities vis-à-vis one another, despite being situated differently on the exiters' timeline. This suggests that disaffiliation may be unilinear in textual and oral narratives, but not necessarily in its structure: the structural constituents of a certain stage may reoccur in a temporally distant one.

Specifically, we argue that the process of disaffiliation from the ultra-Orthodox community, and its accompanying stages, can be formulated as a series of movements across a grid shaped by two axes: a rigidity–fluidity axis on the one hand, and an alterity–inclusion axis on the other. Any point on this grid can be interpreted as more inclined to particularism or universalism. Despite the natural affinity of universalism for alterity and particularism for inclusion, the exiters' agency paints a more complex picture, as they manipulate shared constituents to portray individual stories. Exiters do not simply move out from rigidity to fluidity, from alienation or alterity to inclusion, or from particularism to universalism, as common sense would perhaps indicate, but rather across a complex grid.

The exiters first belong to *Haredi* society. As a relatively large minority in the state of Israel, the ultra-Orthodox Jewish subculture which the exiters leave is marked by rigid alterity. This is owing to its uncompromising and highly demanding adherence to societal norms and clear sociocultural separation from general

society (Gilman 1996), the latter assuming the role of the former's "repugnant other." This appears to be reciprocal, as the COVID-19 crisis most recently revived the tension between the two (Cohen et al. 2021).

The early stages of disaffiliation are characterized by fluid alterity. Suffering from both the rejection of the culture left behind and faced with an uncertain future, the exiters, ipso facto not belonging, are subjected to a lifestyle that entails both physical and emotional dangers. This stage should not be mistaken as "culture-less": First, because by referring to the bare bones of human experience and telling an inherently human tale, it is cultural by definition. Second, by facing (or enduring) these hardships, the exiters mirror the Zionist call for Hebrew renaissance (Almog 2000), leaving the parent culture and, through hardship, forging and adopting "Sabra"-like features, namely self-reliance and tenacity, a theme that reoccurs later.

The second plot point concerns the formation stage and knowledge of the culture of general society. It has two phases (military service and academic studies) and both are oriented toward inclusion and clearly oriented toward particularism, as they acquaint the exiter with the consensual Israeli militaristic-inclined ethos and provide an entrance to the labor market. However, while military service, as a total institution, resembles the rigidity and obedience of *Haredi* life but less so its content (rigid inclusion), academic life, being more intellectually permissive and fluid, allows for a more explicit cultural mash-up between the highly valued culture of learning in *Haredi* life and the prestige and universalism of academic studies (fluid inclusion). Higher education, and to a lesser extent military service, are subjected to the agency of the exiter, who infuses their present and subsequent future with specific meaning by enlisting their past. Serving in the army embodies the cure Zionism offered to the miserable and frail diasporic Jew's predicament (Almog 2000; Laqueur 1976). Academic studies, the phase that best merges universalism and particularism, propose a certain influential sense of continuity between the past and the future in the exiters' life courses.

The exiters' three prototypical pathways that follow the formation stage abide to these axes as well. The Israeli pathway is interestingly paradoxical. Seeking a lifestyle that would best epitomize the Sabra's Israeliness, such exiters display an outright rejection of the source culture in favor of the most prominent and specific symbols of secular Israeliness, and accentuate the symbolic capital acquired during their formative years even more. This strict conscious cultural choice can be characterized as rigid inclusion, which in a sense is also alterity. This Israeli symbolic capital is not representing the fragmented present-day Israeliness, but rather its mythologized ethno-national ethos that characterized the nation-state's early years. These exiters circumvent the complexities of being Israeli and, by clinging on to symbols that were originally construed as a counter-culture of diasporic Jewry (hence alterity), have revised the content but not the rigidity of their cultural adherence.

The searcher's path is a fluid alterity. Refusing the origin culture and the target culture, the searchers' path is either unresolved or conversely resolved by having chosen a fluidity that does not subscribe to a predetermined cultural script that leads from ultra-Orthodox Jewry to some form of secular Israeliness. These exiters resemble the most what could be termed "world citizens," people who, apparently

free from strict sociocultural constraints, are attracted to the universalist vastness of human experience.

Finally, multicultural exiters who exhibit various degrees of reconciliation with the *Haredi* past form a culturally hybrid identity, which amalgamates the ultra-Orthodox past and the inclusion into Israeli general society. We tried to refrain from evaluating the extent to which various exiters are "successful" in the disaffiliation process, or singling out a preferable path. Nevertheless, we remain under the impression that the multicultural path and its concomitant psychosocial fluidity is one in which exiters achieve an emotionally fulfilling and stable state, since it is rooted in a realistic understanding of contemporary Israeli society.

In sum, the exiters' paths undoubtedly differ from one another. However, tensions and reconciliation between universalism and particularism across the various crucial and consensual plot points are identified by most interviewees in their life course narratives—the act of disaffiliation, formative years, and the pathways exiters choose for themselves. This abstract extrapolation should nevertheless not be mistaken for a gradual evolutionary process from Jewry to Israeliness, from oppression to freedom, from cultural insularity to universalism, or from one cultural realm to a radically different one. The various combinations of particularism, universalism, rigidity, fluidity, alterity, and inclusion can manifest themselves in all stages. Their possible combinations, as manifested in the above-mentioned plot points, do not only provide an insightful look at the exiters' interpretation of two decades in a lifelong journey, they also strongly suggest that these could be of use in the analysis of other cultural journeys of people, who, by being human, may choose to celebrate either simultaneously or alternately both cultural appurtenances and the unifying traits of mankind.

Limitations: The conflict between objective reality and its subjective interpretation characterizes every qualitative study that is based on personal interviews, and our study is no exception. Here we describe the actual life trajectories of exiters as told by them. Nevertheless, we try to substantiate their subjective stories by hard facts regarding their actual choices related to life transitions, such as military service, education, career choices, and marriage.

Our study could suffer from a participation bias. Participation could be more attractive to individuals who perceive their life trajectory as successful and are proud to share their story. It could be also attractive to those adversely affected by disaffiliation who want to draw attention to their misfortune. One cannot deny the possibility that those participants remaining less emotionally invested than others are not represented here.

Conclusions

More and more young individuals each year leave ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel and across the world. Much of the ongoing research relating to their journeys reflects two somewhat opposed tendencies. On the one hand, the contextualization of personal narratives as they relate to greater power relations between various institutions, the state, and different cultures, and on the other, the celebration of the singularity and uniqueness of each journey, which is rooted in the natural sympathy

toward struggling individuals in general. The former is theoretically necessary as much as the latter is morally commendable. However, neither differences, nor similarities, should be downplayed.

The terms we use in this study-- rigidity, fluidity, alterity, and inclusion-- have (micro-) psychological as well as (macro-) sociological implications. All four relate to personal journeys as well as to group behavior, and thereby facilitate and clarify the synthesis between similarities and differences. These are, in essence, "macro" concepts that may appear to refer exclusively to the extrapolation of similarities, but it is precisely their multivocality that enhances the understanding of the exiters' journeys at their "micro" level, both in its empirical content and in the exiters' own interpretation of it. These concepts are instrumental in conjuring convincing similarities between different journeys as well as between different points within each journey, while simultaneously acknowledging differences both in form and in content.

Theoretically, we contribute a valuable pattern that emerges from the superimposition of different life stories of exiters. We argue that structural similarities and differences should be embraced to make sense of other specific phenomenological components that may be either rooted in the particularities of Jewish–Israeli culture or in the bare bones of human experience. Finally, if theory is to be put to practice, we encourage the development and the use of the framework we have presented to promote more empathy and better services for future exiters, especially for those who will eventually follow in their predecessor's footsteps.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have not disclosed any competing interests.

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Baruch Velan   is a 75-year-old career scientist who got his PhD in biochemistry in 1975. For most of his career, he was involved in biomedical research focusing on immunology and vaccination. At the age of 63, he decided to switch to the field of medical humanities, and became engaged in bioethics, end-of-life dilemmas, and health sociology. Recently his interest in the Israeli healthcare scene led him to get acquainted with the community of ex-Orthodox disaffiliates and recognize their unique story.

Yoel Tawil , who holds a PhD in anthropology from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (Israel), is a researcher in the field of creativity studies and anthropology. Dr. Tawil's research focuses on the phenomenology and epistemology of creativity, and the symbolic meanings of creativity in the Jewish–Israeli national context—specifically, the cultural intricacies and subtle influences of Judaism and secular Israeliness on each other. His works and ideas have been published and presented in various professional venues. He has taught extensively in universities and colleges in Israel. Today, he lectures primarily at HIT, the Holon Institute of Technology (Israel), and teaches creativity enhancement, medical anthropology, and sociocultural anthropology. Dr. Tawil believes in a multidisciplinary and holistic approach that merges theory and practice. To this end, he also enlists his skills as a professional improvisational actor to promote both applied anthropology and anthropological advocacy.

Avichay Marciano , aged 30, was raised in an ultra-Orthodox family, studied in a Yeshiva and attended a Kollel before disaffiliation from the *Haredi* community. Upon disaffiliation, Avichai joined the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and then started working as a journalist, reporting from the southern parts of the country. Avichai was involved in several nonprofit organizations, and in recent years has been deeply engaged in the Out for Change organization, which is dedicated to helping young ex-Orthodox individuals in their acculturation into the general Israeli society. Avichai's work is focused on the integration of disaffiliates in the military, the higher education systems, and the labor force. In parallel, Avichai is studying communication at the Open University of Israel.

Tammar Truzman   is a PhD candidate at the University of Haifa, studying the effects of brain plasticity and its implications on language treatment for patients affected by acquired brain damage. Additionally, she practices as a speech and language pathologist (SLP) at Sheba Medical Center in Tel Aviv, where she provides language treatments to patients with language difficulties following acquired brain damage. Tammar come from a large *Haredi* family. At the age of 19, she left the ultra-Orthodox community and started her own way. She experienced numerous difficulties initially, but learned how to be resilient and eventually became integrated into the academic world.