In the Religious Closet: A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Experiences of Jewish Ultra Orthodox Nonbelievers

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A DISSERTATION

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by
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Dissertation Chair: Dr. Orly Calderon, Psy.D.
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Abstract

The visibility of individuals losing faith in Jewish ultra-Orthodox communities is increasing, with previous research explaining the unique challenges faced by nonbelievers in these communities. Existing literature identifies a group of individuals called “double lifers,” or those “in the closet,” who have internally disavowed Jewish Orthodox beliefs yet remain within their communities to avoid the consequences of disclosing nonbelief. Due to limited research on double lifers, this study seeks to explore the lived experiences of Jewish ultra-Orthodox double lifers through a phenomenological research approach. Twelve self-identified double lifers from ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities between the ages of 28-49 were recruited via online social groups and snowballing. The primary researcher conducted interviews with each participant focusing on the experiences of being a double lifer, reasons for staying in the community, and implications of their decision to stay utilizing a semi-structured interview style. Transcriptions of interviews were analyzed by the primary researchers and two coders using Phenomenological Reduction to derive meaning units, themes, and subthemes from the text to create a description of the double life phenomenon. The findings suggest that double lifers' experiences revolve around family considerations, social consequences, mental health issues and coping, contemplating leaving and staying, and negotiating dissonance and inauthenticity. These findings underscore the need for clinician awareness and education around the double lifer phenomenon, both within and outside of ultra-Orthodox communities, to reduce stigma and improve treatment for such individuals. This research can prompt future research as well as development of culturally-informed mental-health interventions for this population.

Keywords: double lifer, in the closet, covenantal community, religious de-identification, phenomenological research
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Literature suggests a growing trend of Orthodox Jews leaving their religious communities due to a loss of faith over the past decade, however, there is a lack of empirical data to substantiate this claim (Belfon, 2021; Davidman, 2014; Feder, 2020; Trencher, 2016). It is plausible that individuals who lose faith and exit their communities are challenging to engage with, as they may experience shame and fear surrounding their leavetaking. Nonetheless, the visibility of this population has increased in recent years, with numerous memoirs, films, and academic works shedding light on their experiences (Belfon, 2021). The existing literature suggests that expressing non-belief and/or leaving an Orthodox Jewish community elicits negative communal reactions and social and emotional consequences. A handful of qualitative and quantitative studies exist that examine the arduous experiences of those who leave Jewish Orthodox communities (Berger, 2015; Davidman, 2014; Engelman et al., 2020; Newfield, 2020; Trencher, 2016; Weiskopf, 2016). While existing research mainly focuses on those who attempt to abandon Jewish Orthodoxy altogether, there is limited understanding regarding individuals who have internally disavowed Jewish Orthodox beliefs yet externally appear Orthodox, these individuals are known as “double lifers” (Feder, 2020; Trencher, 2016).

According to a market survey given to nearly 900 individuals who have deviated from Orthodox Judaism, about a third of the participants indicated that they were living a “double life” by remaining in the Orthodox community (Trencher, 2016). Research by Feder (2020) suggests there are many more individuals who are living double lives, or “in the closet,” than are recorded as it is tough to identify a hidden population. Given the hidden nature of this population, it is
possible that research is limited because it is difficult to find “double lifers” who are willing to share their experiences. The two qualitative studies that do examine the experiences of “double lifers” are within the fields of anthropology and sociology (Feder, 2020; Winston, 2005). These studies illuminate the complicated nature of this experience. Despite findings about personal sacrifices and possible social/emotional distress, no research has been conducted to examine the experiences of “double lifers” in the field of psychology (Feder; 2020; Tongeren & Dewall, 2012; Winston, 2005). The current study bridges this gap by illustrating individual experiences of this phenomenon and helps to identify common themes among “double lifers” in ultra-Orthodox communities, which will hopefully prompt future research and theory development in this area as well as culturally-informed mental health interventions for this population.

Orthodox Judaism

Judaism is a monotheistic religion that forms a culture system comprising a worldview, ethical code, and social community (Neusner, 2006). Various denominations of Judaism include Conservative, Orthodoxy, and Reform, and differ in belief and practice both between and within groups (Neusner, 2006). The Pew Research Center Survey (2021) conducted a national comprehensive survey of the Jewish population and found that of the nearly 7.5 million Jews in America, 9% identified as Orthodox. Orthodox Judaism is an umbrella term describing the Hasidic and Litvak (ultra-Orthodox or Hareidi), and Modern Orthodox sects. However, each sect diverges from one another in attitudes, expectations, and cultural norms (Weiskopf, 2016). The common denominators of these groups are the foundations of Orthodox Judaism: adherence to extensive Jewish law (“halakhah”), firm belief in the existence of God as creator and intervenor, and firm belief that the written Torah is divinely authored, the oral Torah divinely inspired, and
both given exclusively to the Jewish people (Feder, 2020; Ferziger, 2015). Following “halakhah” includes eating only kosher food, observing the Sabbath, performing marital purity rituals, and strictly adhering to rituals and restrictions that permeate every aspect of public and private life (Weiskopf, 2016; Yadan, 2020). According to Ferziger (2015), “Orthodoxy was and remains simply the direct heir to an authentic, historic Judaism that has long been characterized by uniformity in matters of religious behavior and core theological principles” (p. 3).

**Hareidi/Covenantal Communities**

Recent data reveals that there are 2.1 million Hareidi, or ultra-Orthodox, Jews in the world currently, making up around 14% of the Jewish population. According to this data, Hareidi Jews are projected to grow to constitute 25% of the Jewish population by 2040 due to high birth rates and increasing lifespan (Staetsky, 2022). Hareidi Jews often live in covenantal communities that are intentionally set apart from other Jewish and non-Jewish communities. Covenantal communities are those that are “built upon theological foundations regarding social expectations of personal beliefs and public comportment,” and adherence to strict rules of behavior typically away from society at large (Engelman, et al., 2020, p. 153). Examples include Amish, Latter Day Saints (Mormons), Sikhs, and ultra-Orthodox Jews. Denominations of ultra-Orthodox Judaism that would be considered covenantal are Hasidism, Litvak, and Chabad. These communities abide by specific dress codes to distinguish themselves, separate men and women socially, and have rigorous behavioral expectations (Engelman et al., 2020).

Jewish ultra-Orthodox is a subgroup of Orthodox Jews; they abide by the same belief system and law, yet insularity and cohesion are greater in the ultra-Orthodox population while exposure to social society is minimal. In some ultra-Orthodox communities, secular education (science, languages, literature) is strictly prohibited and reading non-religious books, watching
TV and movies, listening to music, interacting with non-Orthodox Jews and gentiles are taboo (Berger, 2015). There is scant research on covenantal communities, specifically on ultra-Orthodox Jews, (Engelman, et al., 2020) possibly because of resistance to thwart outside researchers as an effort towards insularity (Shapiro & Rosenthal, 2022).

**Deviating and Doubt**

Increasing numbers of Orthodox Jewish people are questioning and leaving their faith over the last few decades (Davidman, 2014; Feder, 2020; Phillips, 2010). Some reasons identified in the research include increased internet access, educational opportunities, and overall contact with the outside world that leads to secularization (Davidman, 2014; Feder, 2020; Phillips, 2010). The term “Off the Derech” (OTD), or off the path, originated in Orthodox Judaism and refers to those who leave or stop conforming to the ways of their community, encompassing a wide range of practices (Feder, 2020). Individuals are often considered “at risk” of becoming OTD if they dress immodestly in contrast to community expectation, if they don't adhere to religious rituals, or if they deviate in any way from their community’s norms. This term has been found to be stigmatizing and derogatory within the Jewish Orthodox culture. At the same time, many people who deviate from Jewish Orthodoxy use OTD proudly to identify themselves (Capell & Lang, 2020). A survey completed by 885 Orthodox Jews who self-identified as OTD indicated that the main reasons they decided to deviate from Orthodox Judaism are foundational doubts–assessment of hypocrisy among religious authority figures and in the religious texts, lack of proof of God and the Torah’s divine origins–rather than because of abuse, trauma, or internet access (Trencher, 2016).

Other terms used to identify those who deviate from Jewish Orthodoxy include: “defector," “exiter," and “apikores” (Feder, 2020; Weiskopf, 2016). Though these labels are
similar, there are notable distinctions among them. For example, an individual who is OTD is not necessarily an “apikores.” Someone who is considered rebellious may be called OTD even if they have no qualms about the legitimacy of the Torah and the existence of God. “Apikores,” a Hebrew word, appears to derive from Epicurus, who historically denied divine providence and retribution, and is used to describe those who aim to question, contradict, and reveal untruth in Biblical texts (Topel, 2012). However, the label “apikores” is used colloquially to describe those who deny or question the truth of the Torah publicly. Using this label serves to minimize debate surrounding religion because an “apikores,” is typically viewed by the user of the word as weak, lazy, or emotionally disturbed (Topel, 2012). Labeling one as an “apikores” may result in marginalization and stereotyped generalizations that undermine the legitimacy of criticisms aimed at Orthodox Judaism and serves as a protection for Orthodoxy (Topel, 2012). Because of advances in technology, it is easier for an “apikores” to express heretical views and reach even the most secluded communities through social media. This issue has contributed to a “crisis of faith” and a challenge to authority figures in ultra-Orthodox communities (Feder, 2020).

**Threat of Doubt**

The issue of how to respond to “apikorsim,” the plural form of “apikores,” has been heavily debated by Torah authorities and members of the Orthodox community (Levi, 1967). “Apikorsim” are considered worse than transgressors of Jewish law because nonbelievers threaten the unity of the Jewish people should they convince others of their beliefs (Levi, 1967). Therefore, while it is permissible to be in contact with transgressors, it is commanded that “apikorsim” be excommunicated, or shunned, from their communities (Levi, 1967). In addition to excommunication, The *Shulchan Orech*, the primary halakhah text, suggests that murdering nonbelievers is an appropriate response (Kairo, 1565). While murder is not condoned or
practiced against “apikorsim” in modern times, community leaders and members take the condemnation of “apikorsim” seriously by rejecting and excommunicating them. Those who merely express doubt are commonly referred to “kiruv” Rabbis to “cure” their doubt as if it were pathology (Feder, 2020). Regardless, the apparent threat “apikorsim” poses is evident in the strategies developed by rabbis and rabbinical lawmakers to deal with doubt and nonbelief (Levi, 1967; Topel, 2012).

The response to those who leave or think differently in Jewish Orthodox communities serves as “glue” that solidifies the unification of the social group (Davidman, 2014). When members of the group clash with their communities and families, this unity is disrupted and the bonds necessary for survival of communal and religious life begin to unravel. This disruption creates a “tear in the sacred canopy” that protects its community from outside threats, signifying the impact of heretical ideologies on the Orthodox Jewish community (Davidman, 2014, p.31). From the perspective of some Orthodox Jews, survival of the community in the generations post-holocaust is more crucial and the fear of the disappearing Jewish line of heritage is pervasive (Magid, 2013; Yehudai, 2020).

**Leaving Process**

Despite potential consequences, there are many individuals who choose to leave Jewish Orthodox communities, yet there is insufficient documentation of the leaving process (Berger, 2015; Davidman, 2014; Newfield, 2021; Trencher, 2016; Weiskopf, 2016). There is no agreed upon definition of leaving a Jewish Orthodox community in the literature, as the process of disavowing one’s faith and/or community is a complicated and individual endeavor. Leaving can be characterized by renouncing God, fully or partially transgressing "halakhah," or denying a connection with Jewish people (Trencher, 2016).
Those who consider leaving Orthodox Judaism because of lost faith sometimes fear excommunication from their families and communities that value homogeneity and conformity (Feder, 2020; Winston, 2005). Excommunication varies among individuals and communities, ranging from being kicked out of school to rejection by family and friends. Unfortunately, there is little research of the excommunication process (Weiskopf, 2016). Besides the stigma and potential social consequences of leaving or denouncing Jewish Orthodoxy, there are great personal costs of departing from one’s religion, such as the loss of security and comfort that religion provides as well as feelings of confusion and isolation (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997).

Some psychosocial implications of leaving include increased depression and loneliness (Weiskopf, 2016), as well as academic and financial hurdles while trying to integrate into secular society (Berger, 2015). As mentioned earlier, such communities do not provide secular education and therefore, some of the hurdles are logistical in nature; enrolling in schools, applying for jobs, using social media, and coping with lost financial support from family and community are all identified as unique challenges for those encountering secular society for the first time (Berger, 2015). Additionally, leaving Jewish Orthodoxy is a distinctly difficult and life-changing decision as one abandons a completely structured, monitored, and scripted environment that provides very little autonomy to an unstructured world of endless options (Berger, 2015). Because there is no clear path or narrative to follow, those who leave experience significant issues with identity formation (Belfon, 2019; Davidman & Greill, 2007).

To address the dearth of research in covenantal communities and those who physically leave them, a quantitative study was conducted aimed to explore the psychological variables and stressors of 222 participants who disaffiliated, or left, from covenantal Orthodox Jewish communities. The findings of this study suggested that covenantal disaffiliates have similar
experiences to immigrants as they are “psychological immigrant(s) across cultural frontiers” (Engelman et al., 2020, p.164). Results demonstrated that regardless of reasons for leaving (abuse, limited autonomy, freedom, intellectual), psychological wellbeing and health were compromised among a majority of the participants after leaving their communities.

Double Life

Ultra-Orthodox Jews who lose faith can avoid the consequences of becoming “psychological immigrants” (Engelman et al., 2020), the myriad of challenges that await in the secular world (Berger, 2015), potential excommunication, being thought of as an “apikores” (Levi, 1967) and communal efforts to change them (Feder, 2020) if they stay in their communities and conceal their loss of faith.

The aforementioned survey about people who leave the Orthodox community (Trencher, 2016) also collected data on such individuals who are coined “double lifers” in the research. “Double lifers” are defined as those who are no longer “believers” but stay in their community and hide their disbeliefs. Results showed that “double lifers” (33% of the survey’s respondents) have higher levels of participation in visible rituals compared to those who have left the faith completely, while performance of non-visible customs were relatively the same between these groups (Trencher, 2016). When “double lifers” were asked if they were likely to leave the community eventually, 61% of respondents stated that it was unlikely they would leave (Trencher, 2016), and no information was collected about why they decided to stay.

An online and in-person ethnographic study was conducted to describe Hasidic Jews with “life changing doubt” of the faith and truth they grew up in yet who feel they cannot leave (Feder, 2020). It was found that living a double life was a “drawn-out, messy process, one that continuously tacked among emotional commitments, moral dispositions, and changes of many
kinds” (Feder, 2020, p. 229). These findings describe the myriad of challenges of “double lifers” including guilt, ambivalence, cognitive dissonance, confusion, and compromising morality to protect one’s family. “Double lifers” have historically coped with these challenges by connecting with like-minded Hasidic individuals through anonymous online forums specifically created for “hidden heretics,” and eventually by forming an in-person network (Feder, 2020). The “double lifers” in this study were invested in the research and hoped that others would see them as moral people with legitimate intellectual qualms and that social change would be brought to ultra-Orthodoxy. While the term “double lifer” is used in the literature to describe such individuals, terms like “in the closet” or “ITC” are commonly used to self-identify as one who does not believe in God yet chooses to remain within the Orthodox community.

Correspondingly, in a field study exploring the double lives of Hasidim, hundreds of ultra-Orthodox men and women reported that they felt connected to their religion yet oppressed by rules, social pressure, and ideologies (Winston, 2005). While the subjects did not necessarily have “life changing doubt” (Feder, 2020), the study (Winston, 2005) focused on the experience of “rebellious” Hasidim who hide their opinions and behaviors and the social structures surrounding this experience. The researcher was struck by the extent that fear regulated behavior to maintain conformity. The fear of rejection is what primarily motivated these subjects to conceal heretical doubts and transgressive behaviors (Winston, 2005). The researcher stresses that this fear is justifiable because the ultra-Orthodox community aims to get rid of those “whose nonconformity undermines community stability” (Winston, 2005, p. 197), reminiscent of Davidman’s (2014) “sacred canopy” metaphor. This study also found that ultra-Orthodox identity is determined by geographical location, religious belief and practice, and a shared history and future. This binds the community together in intricate ways making it more difficult to express
opposing individual beliefs (Winston, 2005).

“Double Lifer” Identity

Social Identity

Social identity theory conceptualizes identity as intersubjective, relational, or the intersection between the subjective experience and the world/other people around them (Civitarese & Ferro, 2013; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). According to this theory, social identity is an “individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of the group membership” (Tajfel & Turner, 2004, p. 292). Social groups provide members with a collective identity that “prescribes and evaluates who they are, what they should believe, and how they should behave” (Hogg, 2016, p. 6).

The power of social context on ultra-Orthodox Jews’ personal choices is evident in the literature (Engelman et al., 2021; Feder, 2020; Winston, 2005). Strict rules and expectations in a very insular environment lend to strong identification with their religion that defines their social group (Engelman, 2020; Davidman, 2014; Winston, 2005). While research shows that religion is a significant identity marker for Jewish people in general (Friedman, et al., 2005; Ysseldyk et al., 2010), for ultra-Orthodox people, their religion is distinguished as an entire identity (King et al., 2010).

As discussed previously, having an entire identity based on a social group’s prescriptions of belief and behavior, makes leaving such a group difficult in terms of creating a new identity (Belfon, 2019; Berger, 2015; Davidman & Greill, 2007). Research exists on the negative impact of leaving ultra-Orthodox groups on identity, however, there are no peer-reviewed studies that describe the impact on identity for those who do not internally believe in the fabric of their social group yet remain within it. Literature based on a social view of identity suggests that closing off
any aspect of exploration of the self in one’s social context is detrimental for the identity formation (Sadek, 2017). If one does not have access to an element of subjectivity, perhaps because their family or belief system forbids an aspect of their internal world, they may experience a collapse in their identity (Sadek, 2017). A collapsed identity can be defined as “an identity (individual or collective) in which diversity and depth are denied and flattened,” which restricts identity formation (Sadek, 2017, p. 204). The denial and discouragement of personal doubts may put an ultra-Orthodox Jew, whose identity is largely social, in a compromised position. What would it mean for their identity, collective and individual, that an aspect of their internal experience is prohibited and hidden?

**Religious De-identification**

Recent research about religious de-identification calls attention to the need for research on “double lifers” to capture a clearer picture of the “varieties of the nonreligious experience” (Van Tongeren & Dewall, 2023, p. 23). The religious de-identification process, or “any change in which an individual may shift from identifying as religious to nonreligious,” is complex, nonlinear, and may be any combination of four dimensions of de-identification (Van Tongeren & Dewall, 2023, p. 6). The four dimensions include disbelief, disengagement, discontinuance, and disaffiliation. Disbelief is no longer believing in God(s). Disengagement is ceasing the performance of any ritual aimed at getting closer to the transcendent. Discontinuance is no longer abiding by moral norms associated with religion. Lastly, disaffiliation is leaving a religious community. “Double lifers” can be described as functioning in the disbelief stage without disengagement (Van Tongeren & Dewall, 2023). They describe this specific phase as one where someone does not believe in God, yet remains in their religious community, which is comparable to the definition of “double lifer” in the existing literature (Feder, 2020; Trencher,
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2016).

**Closeted Identity**

“In the closet” is used synonymously with “double life” in the literature (Feder, 2020). Although there is not much to augment Winston’s (2005) and Feder’s (2020) research on the experiences of living a double or closeted life in Jewish Orthodoxy, there is some literature exploring a broader context that speaks about the impact of being “in the closet.” This research has shown that for LGBTQ+ individuals, living “in the closet” induces identity conflict, insufficient support, and severe trauma (Faulkner & Hecht, 2010; Gupta, 2020). According to a phenomenological study exploring the experiences of five closeted individuals, thematic analysis revealed that being in the closet means feeling unable to live according to one’s desires and beliefs and it impinges on basic existential rights such as truth, freedom, love, and power (Gupta, 2020). Like a collapsed identity (Sadek, 2017) or living a double life in ultra-Orthodox communities (Feder, 2020; Winston, 2005), being closeted means closing off aspects of oneself and denying expression of internal experiences in social contexts. Alas, most of the literature that exists about “the closet,” relates to the experiences of leaving “the closet” as opposed to staying in it (Adams, 2009; Gortmaker & Brown, 2006; Hoffarth & Bogaeurth, 2017).

**Concealing Non-Belief in Other Faith Based Communities**

While insularity and faith are defining characteristics of ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities, they are not unique to this religious group. Other religious groups, like Mormons and Muslims, hold theological beliefs and doctrines that are all encompassing and are considered to be under a “sacred canopy” as well (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Bowman, 2012). Muslims’ teachings guide the way Muslims act every moment of the day and Mormons participate in daily activities that affect them socially, temporally, and physically (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Vliek,
Mormonism and Islam, much like Jewish ultra-Orthodoxy, consider denial of faith a sin and brand non-believers as “apostates” (Brooks, 2018; Ernstedt & Larsson, 2013). Anthropological ethnographic research on Mormon “apostates,” or those who have lost their faith, has illuminated the distinct effects of sudden loss of faith in the Mormon church (Brooks, 2018). Participants who underwent a loss in faith, in the Mormon church study, experienced psychosis-like symptoms, depression, anxiety, and dissociation as well as relational difficulties and loss of personal identity (Brooks, 2018). In some cases, these impacts, along with the wish to avoid marginalization, motivate some non-believers to hide non-belief (Brooks, 2018).

While there is no research about Mormons who choose to conceal loss of belief, there is some research about Muslim individuals who do so. Vilek (2020) studied approximately 50 ex-Muslims who did not believe in Allah to understand their experiences moving out of Islam and the meaning ascribed to sharing nonbelief publicly. From the interview data, researchers differentiated between the performance/non-performance of religious ritual and the idea of “speaking out” or disclosing one’s loss of faith in Allah. Respondents agreed that speaking out is a “step beyond” not believing (Vliek, 2020, p.41) and researchers highlighted experiences of those who conceal their nonbelief. The study identified reasons for concealing nonbelief included anticipation of relational and communal disturbances and issues of depression and identity (Vliek, 2020). For some respondents, concealing aspects of themselves was problematic and challenging and for others, there was no motivation to disclose as they did not want to create animosity between themselves and their loved ones (Vliek, 2020).

Cottee (2018) investigated experiences of 35 ex-Muslims through life-history interviews and found that most of his informants were “in the closet” or had not disclosed apostasy to others in their community (p.282). He defines apostasy as “more than just an exit departure: it is an act
of renunciation, whereby the exiter disavows the very epistemological and moral tenets of the group (Cottee, 2018, pp. 282-283). This study uses the terms “out of the closet” and “in the closet,” much like Feder (2020), to indicate informants having disclosed their apostasy or not, respectively. Researchers consider the possibility of renouncing group norms while remaining in the group as an outsider. In other words, one can privately disavow the fundamental beliefs of a religious group and still be completely involved in its affairs. Cottee (2018) found that motivation to remain “in the closet” was to avoid hurting parents and risk of being ostracized from family. Feeling trapped and frustrated while performing religious obligations resentfully, fear of being caught, not being authentic, and hiding entire identities are identified as some of the costs of being closeted (Cottee, 2018). Cottee (2018) encourages future research on how ex-Muslims and secret non-believers from other faiths negotiate this challenge and how being closeted affects one’s emotional well-being.

**Gaps in Literature**

Given the large percentage of “double lifers” who report that they will never leave the Orthodox community on the one hand (Trencher, 2016), and research on the disturbing effects of living a double life (Feder, 2020; Winston, 2005) or “in the closet” (Cottee, 2018; Faulkner & Hecht, 2010; Gupta, 2020) on the other, it is worthwhile to delve into the experience of Orthodox people living a double life. Trencher’s (2016) study on double lifer’s was primarily quantitative and did not address the subjective psychological experience of these individuals (Trencher, 2016). Because of the lack of psychological research surrounding double lives in the Jewish Orthodox community, this study aims to fill a gap.

“Double lifer” studies in other fields (Feder, 2020; Winston, 2005) do not specify if their subjects particularly do not believe, which in the author’s opinion might be crucial to understand
the severity of conflict between internal and external worlds for “double lifers”. To address this, the present research focuses on those who do not believe in the existence of “Hashem”, the name for God for Orthodox Jews, or that the written Torah is divinely given to the Jewish people, two of the main proponents of Jewish Orthodoxy (Feder, 2020; Ferziger, 2015).

This study is intended to explore experiences of those who grew up in any ultra-Orthodox/Covenantal community, namely, one that one could choose to physically leave or remain in. This will add to limited covenantal community research and the body of research relating to hidden non-believers in faith based communities (Cottee, 2018; Vliek, 2020). This study may also augment the Nishma Survey (Trencher, 2016) by providing more insight into “double lifers” subjective and psychological experiences including the advantages and disadvantages of their lifestyle and their identity process. Research also suggests that future studies are required to delineate how and why people leave their faith and the psychological processes and consequences associated with religious de-identification in each stage (Feder, 2020; Trencher, 2016; Van Tongeren & Dewall, 2023), which this study aims to address.

**Purpose of Current Study**

The present research question is: What is the experience of being a double lifer in the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community? The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of those who live a double life in an ultra-Orthodox Jewish community. The goal is to gather personal narratives of the “double life” experience, what led participants to stay in the community, and what they think are the implications of their decisions socially, emotionally, and in terms of one’s own identity. By examining this phenomenon, there will be better understanding of struggles and advantages of living a double life and the pursuit of identity creation within Jewish ultra-Orthodoxy. With this understanding, researchers can better develop
models about leaving religion and religious identity and clinicians can plan treatments to best support and facilitate identity development for this population. This study will help clinicians approach treatment for Orthodox Jewish communities and those who are grappling with conflicting beliefs and actions.

**Method**

**Participants**

Approval was sought from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to initiating this study as the study includes human subjects.

A purposive sampling method was utilized to recruit 12-15 Jewish ultra-Orthodox individuals who self-identify as double lifers. The researcher reached out to leaders of various OTD social media and support groups, asking to circulate flyers (Appendix A) with information about the study to people in their groups. The study was described as a research project exploring the experiences of individuals who feel that they are living double lives as nonbelievers in ultra-Orthodox communities. Study fliers included a secure Anthology link created by Campus Labs at Long Island University containing an informed consent form and an eligibility questionnaire for those interested in participating. As purposive sampling did not yield the desired number of participants, snowball sampling was employed by asking respondents to send the study flier directly to individuals who may be eligible for the study. Payments and rewards were not offered to participants. Rather, the anonymous opportunity to contribute to research and help the researcher was used as incentive. As participants living double lives might have been hesitant to share, anonymity, respect, and the purpose of the study was established by the researcher at each stage of the process. Twelve adults ($M = 10$, $F = 2$) ranging from ages 28-49 ($M_{age} = 38.25$) participated in the present study. The majority of participants were married ($n =$
10) and a minority were divorced (n = 2) at the time of data collection. Most participants (n = 11) reported having between 1-6 (M = 3.42) children and one participant reported having none.

**Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

To be included in this study, participants indicated that they were 21 or older, raised in a Jewish ultra-Orthodox covenantal community (Hasidic, Litvak, Chabad), and do not believe in “Hashem” (Jewish Orthodox God) or the main tenets of Jewish Orthodoxy (divinely given Torah, Jews are the chosen nation). Additionally, they identified that despite changes in their beliefs, they have remained in their community for at least one year. Requiring participants to be 21 or older may remove some of the impact of relying on parents’ support or schooling as barriers to leaving. Physically staying in a covenantal community while not believing in the core foundations of it depicts a more polarized double life compared to someone who lives in a non-covenantal community as a nonbeliever. Because Jewish Orthodox laws revolve around the calendar, and include many time-based holidays and rituals, at least one year of living a double life will capture a breadth of experiences. Exclusion criteria included indication of being raised in non-covenantal communities, belief in “Hashem” or Orthodox Judaism, having no or some affiliation with their community, and psychiatric hospitalization in the last year (see Appendix B).

**Procedure**

Before information was collected, respondents were asked to read and sign an informed consent form (Appendix C) included on the first page of the Anthology Link. The Informed Consent Form explained that they would be participating in research, the purpose of the research without stating the central research question, and the procedures of the research. It included an explanation of the voluntary nature of this study and that one can choose to discontinue
participation at any point and without consequence as well as a description of key components of confidentiality and a signature request for audio recording. It also clarified that interviews would be de-identified and that participants’ identifying information would not be associated with their transcript after it is checked for accuracy, and that all data would be saved in a password-protected USB drive. If respondents indicated that they did not agree to these terms and conditions, the survey was terminated.

After respondents signed the consent form, they were directed to an Eligibility Form (see Appendix B) through the Anthology link. Each question appeared on a different page to allow for disqualifications when respondents met exclusion criteria to make data collection simpler and to strengthen confidentiality. For example, if a respondent indicated that they are not Orthodox on Question 4, the survey immediately terminated and respondents were shown a message that thanked them for their time. If respondents met all eligibility criteria and completed the entire questionnaire, they were asked to include their email addresses on the form so that the researcher could contact them to schedule a 1-hour interview. Once 12 people met the study’s criteria, inputted their email addresses, and scheduled an interview with the researcher, saturation was met and the study was closed. The study was open on Campus Labs from January 18, 2023 to April 19, 2023. The Anthology Link became inactive once the recruitment process ended.

Individual interviews were conducted through Long Island University’s HIPAA-compliant Zoom account and were audio recorded using Zoom’s recording software. After each interview, the interviews were transcribed, files were deleted from the USB drive, and the transcriptions were de-identified with an assigned number. Transcriptions were stored in password-protected files on a password-protected computer.

**Design**
The present study was conducted as a Qualitative, phenomenological study that employed Moustaka’s (1994) research approach called Phenomenological Reduction.

**Measures**

*Eligibility Form*

This measure was administered via Anthology and consisted of an informed consent form and a series of questions to determine eligibility based on inclusion and exclusion criteria that capture living a double life in an ultra-Orthodox Jewish community (see Appendix B).

**Demographic Questions**

Before initiating the interview, the researcher asked participants for some demographic information including their age, gender identity, marital status, and number of children (see Appendix D).

**Interview Questions**

In a semi-structured interview, the researcher explored the participants’ experiences, decisions, and impacts of those decisions in various aspects of their lives as a “double lifer” (see Appendix D). While the same questions were presented to all participants, the semi-structured nature of this procedure allowed for spontaneous follow-up questions depending on material shared by participants. The interview highlighted the general experience of living in an ultra-Orthodox community as a nonbeliever which was built upon the Nishma survey (Trencher, 2016) by inquiring about the subjective experience of being a “double-lifer” as defined by the research.

Additionally, asking about this specific experience addresses a gap in literature on religious identification as the question defines a particular stage of de-identification (disbelief and no disengagement) described by researchers (Van Tongeren & Dewall, 2023). Asking
participants what led them to their decisions augments previous research on the implications of leading a double life (Cottee, 2018; Feder, 2020; Winston, 2005) and existence of the “double lifer” population (Trencher, 2016) by obtaining the reasons why people would choose this lifestyle, allowing for a nuanced view of this choice. Inquiring about subjective implications of leading a double life adds to previous findings of social and emotional distress in this position (Cottee, 2018; Feder, 2020; Winston, 2005). Open-ended language welcomed a variety of answers that do not necessarily reflect negative consequences. Addressing identity bridges the gap in religious exiting (Berger, 2015; Davidamn, 2014), religious identity, and religious identification research (Van Tongeren & Dewall, 2023). The interview focused on exploring the collective and individual identity experience for those in a phase of religious de-identification and points out the implications of not expressing one’s internal views in the context of identity (Sadek, 2017).

**Data Analysis**

Phenomenological Reduction (Creswell, 2003; Moustakas, 1994) was implemented to analyze data. First and second year LIU Post Psyd students were recruited via email to be coders for this study. An email was sent out advertising a need for coders who want research experience and are not part of an Orthodox Jewish community. Coders who are not knowledgeable about the conflicts being assessed in this study were chosen to avoid preconceived notions that may compromise objectivity when analyzing data. Thorough training in Phenomenological Reduction (Creswell, 2003; Moustakas, 1994) was conducted by the researcher. Reading material (Moustakas, 2010) was sent to coders prior to training and the researcher met with the coders to review the reading, teach the coding method, and to code a sample transcript together. The researcher also described and discussed key concepts of the study with the coders to ensure
trustworthiness. A portion of a deidentified transcript was sent via email to coders for practice, and the researcher provided individualized feedback to ensure each coder understood the procedure. The coders and researchers met again to discuss questions and concerns that arose between meetings. The researcher also provided a “Terms and Translations” sheet (see Appendix E) with English translations of all of the Hebrew and Yiddish terms used by participants. This was sent so coders could familiarize themselves with common ultra-Orthodox terminology and have it available while reading and analyzing transcripts.

Three coders, including the researcher, bracketed their experiences then “horizontalized” (Moustakas, 2010, p.79) the data by reading and analyzing transcriptions, identifying meaning units, and eliminating redundancies. Then, they grouped meaning units into themes and subthemes that describe the essence of the statements. To address reliability, coders met and discussed intercoder agreement on significant statements and themes after completing each task, respectively. Intercoder agreement was met on more than 80% of themes and subthemes. The researcher created textural (what the experience is like) and structural (how the experience is experienced) descriptions based on themes ultimately amounting to a composite description of the phenomenon, also known as the “essence” of the participants’ experiences (Creswell, 2003; Moustakas, 1994).

Results

Bracketing

I chose to explore this topic because of my personal experience in the Orthodox Jewish community. While I did not grow up in an ultra-Orthodox community, I attended ultra-Orthodox schools and currently have immediate and extended family in ultra-Orthodox communities. Therefore, I am quite familiar with the culture, social norms, and belief system of these
communities. I am no longer immersed in Orthodox Jewish culture, both geographically and practically, and consider myself on the OTD spectrum. I do not deliberately hide my identity, yet I monitor my speech in select Orthodox social settings especially during discussions of faith, religious practice, and politics. I recognize the potential consequences of being completely honest in such settings and have experienced social consequences after changing the way I dress and behave in the last few years. Being that I was not raised in a covenantal community, I believe that the consequences I have experienced and could experience are not as severe as they may be for nonconformists who were raised in a covenantal community. My unique position of having experienced both ultra-Orthodoxy and being an outsider makes me uniquely qualified to understand and share my participants’ narratives, yet carries the risk of bias interfering with the research process. Because of personal biases, insider access, and emotional connections to multiple Jewish Orthodox communities and members who have left them, I expected emerging themes to relate to the conflict between family, or community, connection and individual identity, compromised identity, fear of consequences of leaving, and existential concerns. I was careful not to ask leading questions to suggest these themes and entered the interviewing and analyzing processes with an open mind. I continuously acknowledged my connection to this topic and set aside my feelings and opinions to allow for unbiased research that aims to better understand double lifers in ultra-Orthodox communities.

**Themes**

Five common themes emerged from the 12 interviews: (1) Navigating Family Issues, (2) Social and Communal Implications and Consequences, (3) Mental and Emotional Ramifications and Coping, (4) Contemplating Leaving and Staying, and (5) Negotiating Inauthenticity and Dissonance. The following section will expand on these themes, highlight common sub-themes,
and provide direct quotations from transcripts to form a description of the double life experience. Tables 1-5 include additional quotes supporting each theme. All three coders agreed on the quotes attached to the meaning units within each theme, making sure there was a clear connection between each quote and its respective theme, to ensure inter-coder reliability. Quotes in the narrative and Tables 1-5 were chosen from all transcripts to allow for a wide array of representation across participants’ experiences (See Appendix F).

**Theme 1: Navigating Family Issues**

Embarking on the journey of a double life, individuals face a range of experiences, with family dynamics ranking as a central theme. The narratives of those who grapple with concealing nonbelief emphasize the profound impact of the double life on familial bonds. Several distinct sub-themes emerged from the data: staying in the closet to maintain family ties, navigating challenges in a marriage as a double lifer, and raising children within a belief system that one does not subscribe to.

The fear of destroying and/or losing family connection was at the center of participants’ narratives and is a primary motivating factor to remain closeted. Participants’ accounts reveal the complexities of navigating family issues with their spouses, children, and parents as double lifers who value both family and authenticity. Maintaining family ties includes remaining married despite differences, preventing loss of custody of children, protecting and respecting parents, and generally avoiding familial loss and rejection by being closeted. Prioritizing family in the choice to live a double life is illustrated by Participant 1’s encounter with a Rabbi who threatened to separate him from his kids. In recalling this incident he said, “the Rabbi told me that if you don’t get back in line…I’m going to make sure you don’t see your kids anymore,” and because he considers himself a “good husband, a good father,” he decided to “stay in.” The threat of losing
access to his children ultimately compelled him to compromise his self-exploration, illustrating the sacrifice made to preserve family. For this full quote, see Table 1.

While most participants did not mention being threatened by community leaders, most worry about losing their family members, should they reveal their identities. Maintaining relationships with children and religious spouses were identified as reasons to stay in the community multiple times throughout participant narratives (see Table 1 for more examples). Some participants remain closeted from ex-spouses to protect themselves from losing children and to avoid retaliation from religious ex-spouses. A few participants grapple with the impact of parent expectations, choosing to remain in the community to avoid disappointing or being rejected by religious parents. They recognize that disclosing nonbelief might “hurt” their parents and they avoid discussions with their parents around non-conforming actions and beliefs. One participant highlights the relationship between a double life and accepting parents. He identifies his own accepting parents, who were “totally fine with it [nonbelief],” as a moderating factor for his mental health challenges as a double lifer. He compares himself to other double lifers who remain closeted to protect their parents from having a “heart attack.”

Some marital experiences illustrated were managing a relationship with a spouse who is aware of but unaccepting of loss of belief, dealing with a spouse who is aware of nonbelief and is willing to compromise, both spouses being OTD and having an easier time with the double life, and hiding lack of belief from a spouse completely. For most participants, being in a “mixed marriage,” or a marriage with one religious spouse and one non-religious spouse, requires constant negotiation. Seven out of twelve participants report being in relationships where their spouses are aware of nonbelief and working together to find compromise in their situation. These compromises require finding common ground in activities meaningful to both partners to
improve the relationship. As Participant 4 articulated, “I’m working on compromising…we’ll go to a show in the city…she’s like…maybe it would be better to do a mitzvah (deed) or say tehilim (psalms)…but she gets this is important for a relationship.”

A minority of participants (2/12), however, share a unique experience where both partners are on the OTD spectrum. These participants detail a somewhat smoother experience navigating a double life despite being closeted from everyone else. Contrastingly, one participant struggles while completely concealing his changed belief from his religious spouse. This leads him to compulsively perform religious rituals inside his home to avoid marital conflict. He shares that he’s “never been open with [his] wife,” and fears that if he does “share” his wife will respond with a sermon by a Rabbi which is “very frustrating” for him. He chooses to live a completely inauthentic existence with his wife to avoid frustration and maintain “Shalom Bayis (peace in the home).” While all participants note the significance of their marriages in choosing and living a double life, participants vary on the degree of openness with their spouses and how they compromise in mixed marriages. For more quotes illustrating these differences, see Table 1.

The demands of raising religious children as a double lifer emerge as a universal concern. The majority of participants have children and detail the unique challenges of raising children in a system one doesn’t believe in or even finds harmful. One participant details the “existential crisis” he faces as a double lifer raising Frum children. He states “we’re perpetuating the misery…the fact that they’re trapped…binding them in the same things we were bound in and we’re not giving them control.” He worries about raising his kids immersed in a Frum community while hiding his entire identity from them. Hiding one's true identity from children, by failure to disclose opinions and actively appearing religious, is a source of conflict for all participants with children. Participant 8 believes there would be “traumatic” effects for his
children whether he keeps secrets or is truthful, illustrating the precarious position of a non-believing parent in a *Frum* world. To address this conflict, he implements a “liberal or choice centered approach” for his kids in which he encourages his children to make choices they are comfortable with. Participant 8 does not “push” his children to perform religiously and does not share his nonbelief with his children, allowing them to think for themselves.

Like Participant 8, this conflict motivates participants to explore subtle ways of exposing children to diverse perspectives and to parent them with less religious fervor and dedication while promoting their children’s feelings and choices. One participant speaks about his ability to respect his child’s feelings as a non-believer and describes how his leniency in Jewish law positively impacts their relationship. Other participants describe being closeted from children and how they cope with feelings around childrens’ religious education. Participant 4 shares the challenges of his children presenting their school material with him. With “a lot of self-discipline,” he attempts to “appreciate the emotions they’re expressing…and keep the connection alive even though some of the content doesn’t feel right to me.” Similarly, Participant 5 “straddles the fence” when answering his childrens’ questions about Orthodoxy. His goal is to avoid disrespecting what his children learn in school while also attempting to impart his own values onto them. Participants' overarching objective is to foster connection with their children despite their own discomfort with the *Frum* education system and hiding aspects of their identities.

As an outlier in this study, one participant is completely open with her children about her nonbelief and lifestyle. Her children are also non-believers and together they completely hide their evolving beliefs from the community and family. She describes her double life experience as “incredible” as she explores the world with her children and raises them with a flexible
outcome that aligns with her values. Despite her relative openness, she experiences a multitude of challenges while remaining closeted from her ex-spouse and community. She fears that her community and ex-husband will reject her children who want to maintain social and communal connections. Another exception in this study, a participant without children, spoke about his anticipatory anxiety around having children as a nonbeliever. He worries about his religious parents’ intervention, feeling obligated to raise his children religiously, and describes uncertainty surrounding how he would want to raise his kids. His sentiments demonstrate the universal concern around being a non-believing parent in an ultra-Orthodox world. Refer to Table 1 for more quotes on the challenges of raising children as a double lifer.

**Theme 2: Social and Communal Implications and Consequences**

In analyzing the narratives of double lifers, another salient theme emerges: the profound impact of concealed nonbelief on social and communal lives. Participants reported social challenges including stunted communication, isolation, difficulty socializing with OTD and non-Jewish people, and moral challenges. Fear of social and communal rejection and the presence of positive social implication are prominent sub themes as well.

The majority of participants openly discussed the effortful and challenging task of navigating social and communal settings while concealing their true selves. Pretending, hiding, and self-censorship are often employed to blend into ultra-Orthodox circles. Pretending manifests in speaking like a believer, dressing like an ultra-Orthodox person, and following intricacies of Jewish laws in communal settings. The degree of difficulty of pretending varies among participants, some, like Participant 6, consider it “a small price to pay” for communal belonging. While others, like Participant 10, find it to be “a huge burden.”

Hiding nonbelief from community members is essential to remaining closeted and
participants explain how they self-monitor to avoid accidental disclosure. This extends beyond religious opinion; it permeates into political and social views. The conservative nature of the Frum world necessitates not only concealing religious doubt but also suppressing divergent political opinions. Exposing one’s divergent or liberal political views may lead to outing oneself as a nonbeliever. Participant 7 articulates the need for caution when discussing health policies surrounding COVID-19 with her sister because they might reveal her heresy. Participants curb emotional reactions, avoid meaningful conversations, and filter themselves in social settings to avoid life changing consequences. Participant 4 addresses this social challenge and shares that he would “get in trouble…if I share my political views” and, therefore, is “very careful who I talk to and what I say…sort of filter myself and…avoid interactions.”

Participants express the unsatisfying, unsafe, triggering and fragmented nature of their social lives as double lifers. They identify guilt associated with inauthenticity in relationships they value. They also have trouble connecting with community members with different hobbies and interests due to restrictions in the Frum world. The feeling of isolation is recurrent, one participant laments the burden of living inauthentically and the struggle to find genuine connections, even within communities of more like-minded people:

“…Living the double life is very isolating. That’s probably the primary emotion that people associate it with. There’s like this burden of isolation that…you’re living an inauthentic life and you feel alone. Now people try to find community, they try to find Facebook groups of people who are going through the same struggle and you would hope that finding people would kind of relieve that sense of isolation, that sense of suffering. In my experience, I’ve found, it doesn’t. If anything, it could highlight it and compound it…”
Isolation extends beyond the community, creating challenges in forming connections both within and outside the *Frum* world. Social dynamics amongst individuals on the OTD spectrum present unique challenges such as coping with collective trauma, difficulties with opening up, and perceived judgment by other OTD people. Furthermore, participants illustrate the barriers in forming connections with non-Orthodox and non-Jews due to cultural differences.

A particular social consequence arises concerning the morality of performing religious actions as a nonbeliever. Participant 3 who speaks about “really” wanting to lead prayers for his congregation on Yom Kippur and the pain he felt when his wife “didn’t let [him].” He grappled with an internal conflict as he considered his wife’s stance on honesty and his genuine desire to participate as a community member. Similarly, Participant 7 speaks about her dilemma of appearing religious while not adhering to religious law. She questions whether she should perform religious acts on behalf of a religious school who is unaware of her heresy. Her internal dialogue when considering doing such things is as follows: “Should I do it? Should I not do it? What's the right path? What's not? What do I feel about that deceiving, if it is deception?”

As a community leader and preacher, Participant 8 describes moral qualms and fears betraying those he’s guided. To minimize his own inner turmoil and offending his community, he carefully navigates his role, ensuring not to outright lie while slowly withdrawing from leadership responsibilities. Participants who hold esteemed community roles maintain a balance between working within the community framework without hurting community members. See Table 2 for more quotes about the social challenges experienced as a double lifer.

Despite a prevalence of social challenges, more than half of participants pointed out the positive social implications of living a double life. For some, creating connections with like-minded individuals on the OTD spectrum provides support, comfort, and relief from the
isolating aspects of their experience. Some participants express feeling more authentic in social circles outside of the Frum community. Participant 7 discusses feeling the sense of “herself” in social circles outside of the community, where she can express her true opinions, despite using a pseudonym in this setting. Participant 11 highlights the positive impact he has on young children in the community. By remaining a respected community figure while not adhering to certain more traditional behaviors, he aims to provide an example of individuality and freedom of choice. See Table 2 for quotes related to the positive social aspects of living a double life.

Fear looms large as participants project negative social and communal consequences of disclosing nonbelief. Loss of friends, rejection by community, and the potential loss of income and financial support motivate double lifers to remain closeted. The fear of losing the community is a powerful force that propels double lifers to perform religious actions publicly, avoid seeking therapy, and forfeit authenticity. Participant 9 exemplifies this pervasive fear, refusing to seek therapy due to apprehension that a Frum therapist might “go to the authorities” and lose community status if he discloses his nonbelief. Some participants have begun suffering social consequences of exposed nonbelief, while others assume social losses because of their prior immersion into the Orthodox mindset.

Most participants fear the potential loss of financial support from the community, which is only exacerbated by a lack of secular education or vocational training often necessary for independent financial security. These participants have community-based jobs that provide a sustainable income for a high cost community with no expertise outside of the community. For them, the double life must be upheld as they risk losing the fabric that provides for their existence. Refer to Table 2 for further quotes on the fear surrounding social and communal loss.

*Theme 3: Mental & Emotional Ramifications and Coping as a Double Lifer*
The mental and emotional ramifications of living a double life vary among participants, with participants experiencing a range of challenges and employing various coping mechanisms. Participants disclosed their current and past mental health concerns, discussed how they employ successful strategies for navigating their complex emotions, and shared insights into their unique mental health journeys.

Five participants reported that mental health issues related to living a double life impact their daily lives. Feelings of guilt and stress from lying or hiding opinions, the weight of performing rituals to Orthodox standards, existential concerns, and the burden of secrecy contribute to a range of mental health disturbances such as depression, anxiety, and loneliness. Participant 2 expressed that he feels a “heavy weight of secrecy,” and highlights the loneliness that comes with concealing one’s true thoughts and actions. He disclosed that his mental health has “definitely suffered” because he feels confined, repressed, and does not spend time with others who share his beliefs.

Participant 3 described the feeling of being in “an insane asylum,” likening living a double life to existing in a mentally disturbing atmosphere where the beliefs and actions of those around him seem incomprehensible. He equates the negative emotions of hiding as a double lifer to the struggles faced by a closeted gay individual. Participant 9 articulated the emotional burden he carries suppressing his true desires while presenting as an Orthodox Jew:

“I’d like to not be paranoid about everything. I’d like to have the ability to go do things and enjoy life and not have to worry. The mental picture I have of myself is being curled up under the covers in bed not wanting to get out…I mean literally every step of Yiddishkeit (Judaism)...a Jew can’t move Daled Amos
In the religious closet (approximately 6 ft), you can't move that distance without being in violation of a Halacha (law). It's so true, you're so neurotic.”

The sense of crippling anxiety and paranoia over potential exposure as a nonbeliever, coupled with the emotional pain of obscuring his true self, is echoed by Participant 11. He laments the pervasive stress of leading a double life, describing it as affecting “every moment of the day” and characterizing his mental health as “fucking ridiculous.” The fear of judgment, business boycotts, and potential losses lead him to be hypervigilant to the extent that it affects his physical health. During medical emergencies, he delays calling for help as he considers that Frum emergency personnel might see non-kosher food in his home and out him. For more quotes on mental health concerns as a double lifer, see Table 3.

Contrastingly, four participants detailed past mental health struggles and described how they have navigated and overcome severe mental health challenges with therapy, supportive spouses and friends, psychiatric medication, and time. Participant 4 reflected on a psychotic break that resulted in hospitalization at the start of his double life journey. He reported having developed paranoid delusions surrounding community members outing and harming him, which he believes stemmed from extreme cognitive dissonance. Presently, after years of receiving therapy and family support, his mental health concerns have reduced to “some stress” and “situational anxiety.” Participant 5 described a shift from depression and suicidal thoughts to a more stable state, aided by relocating to a more open-minded community and implementing daily coping strategies. Participant 8 recounted the devastating and traumatic effects after losing belief years ago, comparing it to losing a parent. He shares “my whole world view…kind of shattered…so then who am I?…it was pretty traumatic, tragic.” He has since engaged in coping strategies, such as 12-step recovery, coaching, and therapy, to better manage his emotional and
mental state and denies experiencing current mental health struggles. See Table 3 for further quotes.

Most participants also find positive mental-emotional aspects or the silver lining in living a double life. Some mentioned relief and mental clarity upon shedding belief and the burden of religious obligation. This improves some participants’ sense of self as they learn to independently navigate their beliefs and wishes. Participant 4, despite an early psychotic break, credits therapy in the secular world with achieving an integrated identity. Participant 7 reported mitigating mental health consequences altogether by creating a new identity for OTD social media groups where she was able to express herself while maintaining a double life. She feels the act of “double lifing” is akin to wearing a costume, minimizing negative consequences on her mental health. Similarly, Participant 10 views living a double life as “code switching”, or acting, which does not disturb his quality of life or sense of identity. Personality, gender, moving to open-minded communities, supportive relationships, and the absence of early childhood trauma are cited as mitigating factors for serious mental health concerns across participants.

Participants detailed therapeutic approaches including psychiatric medication, therapy, trauma work, 12-step recovery, and psychedelic use. Participant 5, for example, credits psychedelics for helping process repressed feelings. Participants cope with general discomfort and mental health issues through various means, such as reading during prayers, watching comedies, sharing jokes with other OTD individuals, participating in enjoyable religious rituals, stepping out of triggering religious settings, using marijuana for relaxation, dissociating, and perceiving a double life as role playing.

While some have learned to manage the challenges of a double life, others lack access to essential resources like therapy or supportive networks, making their mental health journey
overwhelming. The variations in their mental health journeys highlight the nuanced connection between mental-emotional well-being and living a double life. More quotes on participants’ unique mental health journeys and coping mechanisms are provided in Table 3.

**Theme 4: Contemplating Leaving and Staying**

In this study, all participants confirmed their physical residence within an ultra-Orthodox community or that they have chosen to “stay.” The discussion surrounding decisions to “stay” or “leave” often included a nuanced examination of these terms. Participants defined the concepts of “staying” and “leaving,” considered the cost-benefit analysis of their choice to remain within the community, and discussed their attitudes surrounding an ongoing evaluation of their decision to stay.

Participants’ definition of “staying” include hiding non-belief, remaining married, performing religious laws and rituals, and doing the “bare minimum” to receive the benefits of the community or to reduce costs of deviating from the community. When questioned about the decision to “stay,” Participant 3 reflects on the complexity of the term, emphasizing that it’s less of a choice; rather, he’s ingrained in the culture he was raised in:

I mean that's an interesting word: “staying.” That’s where I am. I don’t know if I would even frame it like that…It’s just a culture I grew up in...I don't even know what leaving would look like and I don’t even know if there is such a thing, honestly. So, the question would maybe be to end my marriage which is a different question than leaving.

He later concludes that he cannot categorize himself in terms of having left or stayed, and argues that leaving would imply severing family bonds and staying means maintaining family connection. For Participant 6, “staying” means wearing a *Yarmulke* (cap) and not driving on
Shabbos (Sabbath), which for him, is “not too steep” a cost. He reported he does so to avoid hurting his parents or being shunned by the community, which he is “not ready for.” Participant 7’s definition of staying is situation-dependent, requiring adjustments in appearance, speech, and mannerisms to fit religious settings. Participant 10 views “staying” on a “spectrum” in terms of disclosure, participation, and consequences. For more quotes on defining leaving and staying, see Table 4.

Most participants weigh the benefits of staying against the potential consequences of leaving. They find that staying outweighs leaving due to projected challenges of leaving. Benefits of staying include protection and support from a tight knit community, finding meaning in shared history and language, genuine appreciation of Jewish practices, maintaining jobs, convenience, and familiarity. Leaving, on the other hand, holds the appeal of living authentically and aligning with personal values. Despite the allure of living authentically, Participant 3 reflected on the fantasy of leaving: “I can just start over and probably be really really happy…but then my question…Will I? I don’t know. The grass always seems greener on the other side.”

Projected consequences of leaving, including loss of family and community support, potential loneliness, and challenges in securing employment outside the community, contribute to participants choosing to stay. Participants fear hurting their families and the seemingly impossible task of starting over in unfamiliar terrain. As Participant 6 reflects on the potential losses from leaving: “It is a lot to give up for the sake of personal truth.”

Fear of losing financial support from the community by leaving is a significant factor for many. Participants discussed their fears around being fired, upsetting bosses, and being boycotted upon disclosure. Further, participants worry about finding a job outside the community without secular education or knowledge of the outside world. When asked what led him to stay,
Participant 10 said “[my] job” and explained that “if I quit, I don’t know if I could find anything comparable. I don’t have a college degree.” He worries that if he quits, he will not be able to “pay the bills” and “survive.” Participant 1 shares a similar sentiment:

“My employer is religious, our clients are religious…a golden handcuff…It [golden handcuff] means the community is providing you a good life so to say I’m gonna “come out” and lose that…So trading your comfort and to start from scratch to hopefully make it in the non-Jewish world is hard so…that’s definitely a pull.”

Contrastingly, Participants 4, 7, and 12, who are financially independent of the community, didn’t share this fear, recognizing that they’ve created alternatives for themselves. As Participant 7 remarks, “I switched careers so now I’m more financially stable and more independent from the Frum community. I’m not reliant on them anymore…and I'm not afraid of [leaving and] losing that support.”

Consequences of staying include inauthenticity with loved ones, being under constant scrutiny, sending children to religious schools, high community costs, limited resources for managing a double life, and a restricted social life. Despite these drawbacks, participants find them preferable to the projected consequences of leaving. In contemplating leaving or staying, Participant 5 summed up his challenge with the decision: “It was a question of weighing my options and deciding to try and make it work…it definitely puts a strain on many aspects of my life but…putting all things into consideration, it’s not so bad. Like I can survive it.”

See Table 4 which provides additional quotes about weighing pros and cons of leaving versus staying.

Participants navigate an array of emotions, from complacency to inner turmoil, regarding
their decisions. A common thread is the acknowledgment of the potential for departure under specific circumstances, such as accidental outing, shifts in family dynamics, or achieving increased financial independence. Participant 3 embodies a sense of complacency, noting that he can “mostly” live the life he wants, and the situation is “not bad enough” to prompt departure. Similarly, Participant 10, amidst daily life pressures, doesn’t feel compelled to leave and doubts his ongoing cost-benefit analysis will result in leaving.

Conversely, some recognize the negative implications of inauthenticity and concede that, under certain conditions, they might choose to leave. Participant 12 frequently “battles” with decisions regarding further disclosure or decreased participation. Preferring not to “rock the boat,” he opts to stay for now, and remains open to reevaluation as his children age. In contrast, Participant 2 feels “stuck” in her marriage and community, lacking a way out until she gains more freedom and agency. The disclosure of non-belief could brand her as “dangerous,” resulting in the loss of her children. She compares living a double life to “waking up in the Truman show,” as she notices “all the crazy stuff that…don’t make sense” but cannot leave safely. See Table 4 for the full quote.

For some, living a double life is a tragic reality necessitated by the risks posed by leaving. However, others find empowerment in this dual existence, considering it a significant element of their identity. For example, Participant 8 embraces the notion of choosing to stay and actively participating as a double lifer by his own volition. He equates living a double life to joining a club where adherence is a choice, or “cosplay.” For him, choosing to engage is a beautiful and meaningful experience. For more quotes about attitudes and ongoing evaluations of leaving and staying, see Table 4.

**Theme 5: Negotiating Dissonance and Inauthenticity**
All participants shared their experiences of navigating inauthenticity and detailed the range of actions and adjustments they make to align with a community whose beliefs diverge from their own. Participants vary on how they define and approach inauthenticity, around whom they are inauthentic, and how they understand and negotiate the dissonance that ensues. The challenges of negotiating this dissonance provoke introspection and a range of coping strategies, frequently surfacing discussions around managing non-belief in a faith based environment.

Inauthenticity manifests in various forms: expressing beliefs contrary to one’s own, concealing opinions, performing religious rituals, wearing religious attire, and influencing their children to follow beliefs one does not hold. Some participants feel compelled to maintain a facade in nearly all aspects of life, like Participant 11 who maintains a vigilant facade in private and public spaces due to the pervasive threat of exposure and its consequences:

That's how deep the facade and this double life, living in the closet is. That it's not just “who's gonna see me?” It affects every fucking detail...When I first ate non kosher food, I made sure to eat the non kosher food far away from anywhere because I didn't want to accidentally have a wrapper in my pocket that ended up in the washing machine that my mother would find.

Similarly, Participant 9 adheres strictly to the community’s norms both publicly and privately, revealing his non-belief only to one medical professional. Meanwhile, Participant 2 conceals her true self from her family and community, yet she can be herself around members of the OTD community. In contrast, Participant 7 has carved out spaces, especially at home, where she can be genuine and can openly share her beliefs with her children. She uses different names so she can maintain a dual identity. She goes by one name inside the community where she conceals her beliefs and another name outside the community where she can be completely
genuine. Participant 5 navigates a balance, concealing his non-belief from his children while finding freedom in select public spaces to openly discuss his beliefs. He reported feeling shielded from consequences because he lives in a more open-minded community compared to other participants’ communities. The range of authenticity underscores the intricate negotiation participants undertake in balancing their inner beliefs with outward expectations. See Table 5 for further quotes on defining inauthenticity.

The discomfort arising from this misalignment between belief and action is constant, evoking guilt, internal conflict, and stress. Participants employ varying coping strategies to manage dissonance. To reduce dissonance, some gravitate toward the *Frum* community and some distance themselves from *Frum* life. Those leaning into the *Frum* belief system overcompensate by endorsing conservative political ideologies, actively participating as a *Frum* parent, embracing *Torah* concepts, or putting effort into being a righteous community member. Conversely, those choosing to disengage from the community limit social interactions, strategically reduce public participation, or subtly increase public nonobservance.

Participant 8, as a religious preacher, encapsulates the struggle of bridging dissonance. He acknowledges the need for change while navigating a path towards authenticity. His journey involves reducing involvement in his community based career, redefining his spiritual beliefs to fit better with his community, and partaking in *Frum* rituals that resonate with him. He both moves towards and away from the community in various ways, as a constant negotiation between his religious persona and evolving identity. Refer to Table 5 for more direct quotes on coping with dissonance.

The participants' reflections on their nonbelief and their dissonance between their outer appearance and inner life exhibit a range of perspectives. Participant 3, for example, sees his
situation as a choice between family and authenticity. He ultimately chooses to prioritize family by foregoing his authenticity and finds complacency in that decision. Meanwhile, Participant 7 experiences minimal dissonance and does not feel that double lifing is “lying” since she perceives that the community places an emphasis on appearances. Participant 8 views his authentic self as someone who is “on a quest for truth” as a double lifer, illustrating his proactive approach to authenticity. Participant 10 denies any negative feelings around inauthenticity and instead described feeling liberated from groupthink and a strengthened sense of identity as a double lifer. He explains that pretending to be Frum is a form of “code switching,” or acting that does not oppress him.

Notably, some participants experience relief of dissonance with the loss of belief, finding enlightenment, peace, or mental clarity. Participant 2 expressed how the shift in her mindset lifted a burden of dissonance, but that the judgment from the community transforms this relief into a sense of feeling like a “bad person.” She explains, “When everyone looks at you as a bad person… I internalize… I feel just bad and wrong… I know intellectually that that doesn't make sense but my sense of self has suffered because of that.” The interaction between personal relief and external judgment creates a unique kind of dissonance showcasing the complex emotional position these individuals navigate. Participant 3 talked about negotiating negative misconceptions by his wife and the community as a non-believer, wishing he could be authentic while remaining in the community. He argued that people “in the closet community” are “kind, genuine, intelligent people who are just searching… truth seekers who don’t want to hurt their families” and “don’t wanna make other people go Off the Derech.” It upsets him that non-belief is a “big ugly monster” to Frum family and friends when his non-belief feels “simple” to him.

The desire to believe again surfaces among some participants, like Participant 6 who
wishes to press a hypothetical button to regain belief. He would rather believe again to live a “peaceful life” instead of dealing with the internal conflict he faces when negotiating authenticity and its potential consequences. He said, “It’s not easy. I say it all the time, if there was a button that I could press to just go back and believe and just be part of it, I would press it with both hands.” Similarly Participant 3 remarked, “If there’s something you could take to suddenly forget all of these questions and forget all this, I would take it…I would take it in a second…I wish I could start believing.” Participant 8 agreed, “For a long time, I wish, I still wish I could just go back to believing again because it would be easier.”

The relief found in shedding belief is juxtaposed with judgment that casts a shadow on this newfound liberation. As some express desire to believe again, the internal conflict persists for all, encapsulating the challenging reality these individuals face daily in a position where authenticity and tradition often stand at odds. See Table 5 for more direct quotes on perspectives on inauthenticity as a nonbeliever.
Discussion

The purpose of this study was to provide a thorough understanding of the experiences of individuals living a double life within Jewish ultra-Orthodox communities. The study’s primary findings, revealed through the application of Moustakas’ (1994) coding method to participants’ interviews, coalesce around five themes. These themes most prevalent to the experiences of double lifers include: (1) Navigating Family Issues, (2) Social and Communal Implications and Consequences, (3) Mental & Emotional Ramifications and Coping, (4) Contemplating Leaving and Staying, and (5) Negotiating Inauthenticity and Dissonance.

Participants in the study highlighted the profound impact of family dynamics on their decision to stay in the ultra-Orthodox community, often struggling to balance family ties with living authentically. They also discussed challenges in marriage, including scenarios where spouses may be unaware or unaccepting of their lack of belief, and complexities in raising children within a belief system they no longer adhere to. Socially, double lifers face moral dilemmas, isolation, and constant self-monitoring within a restrictive environment. However, they also found positive aspects in connecting with people outside the community, where they could express themselves authentically. Their primary social concern was the fear of losing the tight-knit, protective community that provided security and established relationships.

Mental health struggles included anxiety, isolation, paranoia, depression, and in some cases, psychosis and suicidal ideation. Coping mechanisms for mental and emotional struggles included therapy, medication, psychedelics, and family support. Participants defined and weighed the pros and cons of leaving or staying. Some reported feeling empowered by their decision to stay, while others were open-minded or frustrated by potential consequences. Participants also discussed what living inauthentically means to them, described navigating
cognitive dissonance, and shared their perspectives on inauthenticity in their narratives of living a double life.

The findings of this study align closely with Feder’s (2020) anthropological research on double lifers in Hasidic communities, emphasizing the complex nature of leading a double life, often encompassing guilt, cognitive dissonance, and compromise to safeguard one’s family. Similar to Feder’s (2020) participants, some individuals in this study find solace in connecting with like-minded individuals online, and hope for recognition within their community as moral individuals grappling with intellectual doubts and advocating for community reform. Moreover, previous research suggests that the concealment of rebellious beliefs and actions in Hasidic communities is driven by a fear of familial and communal rejection (Winston, 2005), which is echoed by the present study’s findings surrounding reasons for remaining closeted. Winston (2005) elaborates on the difficulty of leaving Orthodoxy, emphasizing shared geographical location, practice, beliefs, history, and future among Orthodox Jews. Similar sentiments are shared by participants of this study who highlight the strong connections to their communities that make grappling with nonbelief and the idea of leaving a challenging and complicated endeavor.

This study’s findings fit with previous research on Muslims and Mormons who choose not to disclose non-belief to avoid marginalization and preserve communal bonds (Brooks, 2018; Cottee, 2018; Vliek, 2020). Similar to previous research (Brooks, 2018; Vliek, 2020), the current findings underscore the mental health ramifications of lost faith along with the reluctance to disclose non-belief due to potential social consequences in faith based communities. These studies’ definitions of and implications of disclosing non-belief in faith-based communities ring similar to those in Jewish ultra-Orthodox communities (Brooks, 2018; Cottee, 2018). The
reasons to remain closeted and the costs of living a double life in the ultra-Orthodox community identified in the present study align with those found in Cottee’s (2018) research. Previous research reveals that closeted ex-Muslims decide to stay in their communities to avoid ostracism and protect their parents (Cottee, 2018). These reasons to stay as well as the costs of remaining closeted, such as feeling trapped, frustrated, living inauthentically, and the need to conceal entire identities, are echoed by this study’s findings.

Similar to previous research, attitudes towards hiding non-belief, or remaining closeted, vary amongst participants (Vliek, 2020). This study reveals that some double lifers find being closeted challenging and frustrating, while others are complacent in their decision to be closeted to avoid potential animosity from loved ones, echoing Vliek’s (2020) findings. Research on individuals from the LGBTQ+ community has demonstrated consequences of remaining closeted such as insufficient support, existential concern, and severe trauma. (Faulkner & Hecht, 2010; Gupta, 2020). Similarly, the present double lifer research illustrates comparable effects including potential traumatic, isolating, and existential consequences for closeted individuals.

Participants in this study express desires to leave, or openness to the possibility of leaving, contrary to Trencher’s (2016) data, which reveals that the majority of double lifers do not want to leave. This distinction may be due to the qualitative nature of this study, which aims to elucidate participants’ internal dialogue rather than collect numerical data. This study also reveals that participants’ most prominent sources of comfort are therapy and support from within the community or family, unlike previous research that identifies connecting with like-minded individuals online as a primary source of solace as a double lifer (Feder, 2020). This discrepancy may be attributed to differences in each study’s purpose and design or the diverse demographics
of this study, encompassing various ultra-Orthodox communities beyond Hasidic, potentially influencing access to therapy and acceptance of family and friends.

While previous research highlights the importance of identity and the detrimental effects of denying aspects of one’s internal world by being closeted (Belfon, 2019; Cottee, 2018; Faulkner & Hecht, 2010; Gupta, 2020; Sadek, 2017; Vliek, 2020), identity does not emerge as a central theme in this study. This discrepancy may be attributed to the specific demographic composition of the participants, which was primarily male, married, and professional. These identities hold more privileges in ultra-Orthodox communities compared to female, unmarried, and uneducated/unemployed individuals. Therefore, the sample may not be wholly representative of the double life experience, which may account for this difference between current findings and previous research. However, sentiments on identity are spread throughout participants’ narratives and are connected with other themes. Participants occasionally conflate identity with mental health, connect identity to community, and speak about the stress around hiding identity. Yet, there was not enough data to support that grappling with identity is a central aspect of living a double life in the ultra-Orthodox community. One participant even refused to address the question of “What are the implications of living a double life on your identity?” because he had not considered his identity as a middle-aged member of the ultra-Orthodox community. Therefore, another possibility is that individual identity is not crucial to individuals who were raised and are currently surrounded by those who subscribe to a collective identity.

The current findings also seem to contradict previous OTD research on identity that speaks about prominent issues with identity for OTD individuals (Berger, 2015; Davidman & Greill, 2007). This discrepancy may be due to differences in each study’s sample. The present study’s participants’ do not necessarily consider themselves OTD even though double lifers have
been categorized under the OTD umbrella in existing literature (Trencher, 2016). OTD, however, is typically self-defined and describes a wide range of practices and beliefs (Feder, 2020). Previous research describes challenges OTD individuals have with identity formation as they lack a “script” post-exit from Jewish Orthodox communities (Berger, 2015; Davidman & Greill, 2007). Double lifers remain in the community where they follow the Orthodox script to some extent and where other issues, like maintaining family, community, and mental wellness take precedence over self-expression and identity. Therefore, OTD research may not be generalizable to double lifers, instead these two populations should be evaluated separately in the research. It is also possible that issues with identity do exist for double lifers, but those struggling with issues of identity did not respond to the study’s flier because of the risks inherent in disclosure.

Cottee’s (2018) exploration of closeted ex-Muslims prompted future researchers to investigate challenges faced by hidden non-believers of various faiths, a gap that this study actively addresses. While this study echoes Cottee’s (2018) findings, it adds a unique perspective from a different faith and offers a more profound insight into participants’ decision-making processes, practical aspects of pretending, conflict navigation in double life scenarios, and coping mechanisms for emotional disturbances and cognitive dissonance. Distinguishing itself from Feder (2020) and Winston (2005) studies that primarily focus on Hasidim, this research provides a more comprehensive understanding of leading a double life across ultra-Orthodox communities.

The present study’s qualitative approach provides a deeper inquiry into decisions around staying or leaving which augments previous quantitative research that identifies the prevalence of double lifers in Orthodox communities (Trencher, 2016). The flexible interviewing process
allows for a richer exploration into participants' thoughts, offering nuanced insights into the politics of leaving versus staying and the feared consequences of disclosing non-belief.

Going beyond previous research that identifies avoiding marginalization and hurting parents as main reasons for staying among closeted Muslims (Brooks, 2018; Cottee, 2018), this study identifies participants’ additional reasons for staying, including maintaining family and social connections, enjoying community rituals, setting an example for religious children, and protecting children. Additionally, this study offers a more nuanced narrative of participants' decision to stay, including both positive and negative perspectives on community membership and community shunning. Double lifer’s constant deliberation of staying and leaving along with the diverse reasons to stay are absent in previous quantitative and qualitative research (Feder, 2020; Trencher, 2016; Winston, 2005). Further, this study generally adds to the body of covenantal research, on which there is limited research (Engelman, et al., 2020).

This study also contributes to the broader research on religious de-identification, focusing on the phase of disbelief without disengagement (Van Tongeren and Dewall, 2023). It unveils psychological processes and consequences associated with this specific form of religious de-identification, aligning with Van Tongeren and Dewall’s (2023) confirmation that de-identifying from religion is a nonlinear and complex process with subjectively defined phases. These findings add depth to the understanding of why and how individuals experience religious de-identification, shedding light on the psychological components and consequences at a specific point on the continuum of de-identification.

With a more profound understanding of the experiences of double lifers in ultra-Orthodox communities, the present study bears several clinical implications. Firstly, the findings from the research can serve as a valuable educational tool for clinicians dealing with more insular,
covenental, and faith-based groups generally, illuminating the complex relationship between beliefs and actions in such communities. As the present study and previous research highlight, non-believing individuals in various tight-knit, faith-based groups often experience severe emotional challenges, a pervasive fear of losing community and family, and the need to conceal their identities (Brooks, 2018; Cottee, 2018; Vliek, 2020), pointing to a need for clinician education for treating such individuals. The current findings suggest that most participants attend therapy to address challenges and emotional distress but did not necessarily seek therapy to explicitly address the conflicts and concerns surrounding living a double life. For clinicians, working with individuals from ultra-Orthodox communities facing anxiety, depression, trauma, suicidal ideation, or faith-based stress, exploring the possibility of being closeted and the nuances of living a double life is critical. This study suggests a need for clinician education on this phenomenon, emphasizing its potential role in presenting problems within the Orthodox community. Such awareness could lead to more culturally sensitive therapy, benefitting not only this population, but also other covenental or more insular communities.

The challenges identified in the present findings, ranging from mental health issues to familial and social consequences, may transcend the boundaries of the studied community and suggest potential clinical implications for other individuals living double lives. This emphasizes the need for clinician education and awareness regarding the struggles of those leading double lives generally and the development of culturally-sensitive interventions. Previous research supports this perspective, indicating the prevalence of concealing non-belief among faith-based community members and the complex challenges involved (Brooks, 2018; Cottee, 2018).

While most participants in this study benefit from therapy, there is a noteworthy case of a participant afraid to seek therapy due to potential consequences. Clinicians should be sensitized
to the stigma that may ensue among non-believers in such communities, especially when working with clients hesitant to disclose their concerns. For Orthodox clinicians who may feel conflicted or upset by someone living a double life or grappling with non-belief, this study serves as an educational resource by raising awareness around double lifers’ issues, emphasizing the seeking nature of these individuals. It underscores the importance of supporting clients in their unique circumstances, providing tools for coping with emotional distress and relational conflict. Additionally, the study suggests that therapy for double lifers should extend beyond the individual to include the family unit. Given the inextricable link between family issues and living a double life, addressing conflicts and compromises with parents, spouses, and children is crucial. Clinicians should explore the degree to which clients disclose their religious beliefs with family members and how that impacts family dynamics.

Most participants stay to maintain family and home life and desire compromise with their religious spouses. Development of couples therapy interventions is crucial for those in mixed marriages, which inevitably develops when a married individual decides to live a double life. Couples therapy should focus on the practicalities of navigating the logistical and religious issues in Orthodox culture as each partner espouses an entirely different belief system. Otherwise, the findings of this study point to a need to generally develop interventions to address the broad range of issues experienced by double lifers.

The current findings also underscore the need for further research, both with other types of closeted populations and follow-up studies on the present investigation. Research should explore the possibility of double lifers within different populations and in relation to other non-conforming behaviors or aspects of one’s identity. Qualitative research focusing on closeted populations, who may be empirically marginalized and not represented in quantitative studies, is
IN THE RELIGIOUS CLOSET

essential to giving these populations a voice in a way that is not captured in quantitative studies. Such research can contribute to improving treatments for and destigmatizing hidden communities. Future research on double lifers should also consider a more diverse sample within Jewish ultra-Orthodox communities, including various genders, ages, marital statuses, and employment and education histories. Ethical considerations should be paramount in recruiting participants and gathering data for any research involving closeted populations.

A notable weakness of this study lies in its sample’s heavy presentation of a male and married population. The recruitment process may have inadvertently targeted the male population, possibly due to their greater comfort in sharing about their double life because of gender-roles differences in Orthodox communities. Future studies within this population should be designed to ensure a more representative sample, including females and unmarried individuals, to avoid potential misrepresentation of this population. This study also identifies language as a consideration for future research, emphasizing that ultra-Orthodox participants may not fully comprehend certain terms or the research process. On a few occasions, participants expressed that they did not understand what a dissertation, research, or “implications” means. Simplifying language in fliers and interviews is essential, ensuring broader accessibility and more accurate understanding of participants’ experiences. This study recognizes the need for questions designed with simple language and participant involvement in data analysis for qualitative research to ensure greater reliability.

Strengths of this study are apparent in its procedure, design, and analysis. This study stands out as the only qualitative exploration in the psychological field describing the lived experiences of double lifers in Jewish ultra-Orthodox communities. The measures taken to ensure confidentiality at every stage of the research process add to its credibility. The
semi-structured interview questions strike a balance between standardized queries and spontaneity, allowing for each participant to elaborate on their experience. The study’s questions derive validity from previous research, providing a robust foundation. The open-ended nature of the questions ensures a blend of positive and negative implications of the double life in participants’ narratives. All transcripts underwent careful analysis and coding of multiple coders, ensuring intercoder agreement on themes and bolstering of the trustworthiness of the study. The inclusion of coders from different cultural backgrounds, along with the primary researcher from the Orthodox community, ensures greater objectivity in data analysis as well.

In conclusion, this pioneering study offers valuable insights into those leading double lives within Jewish ultra-Orthodox communities, contributing to the growing body of research on double lifers as well as closeted populations. These findings have the potential to promote a deeper understanding of what drives individuals to lead double lives, ultimately aiming to enhance understanding, empathy, and compassion for these individuals.
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w%20Research%20Center%20estimates%20that,are%20Jews%20of%20no%20religion.


Appendix A

Recruitment Flyer

DO YOU IDENTIFY AS A “DOUBLE LIFER” LIVING IN AN ULTRA ORTHODOX COMMUNITY?

Seeking individuals who feel that they are “double lifers” in an ultra Orthodox community for research. “Double lifers” are individuals who lose faith in Hashem but choose to remain in their Orthodox communities and hide their lack of belief.

The purpose of this research is to describe the experiences of those who are living a “double life.”

Eligibility:

21 years and older

Upbringing in an ultra Orthodox community

Experienced the loss of belief in Hashem or the Torah

Currently resides in ultra Orthodox community and conceals disbelief and has done so for at least one year

No history of psychiatric hospitalization in the past year

Procedure and Time commitment:

One-hour audio recorded Zoom interview with a doctoral student to talk about experiences living in an ultra-Orthodox community as a non-believer

Contact information/details for those who are interested:

If you are interested in participating, please click on the link below for a brief survey:
https://baseline.campuslabs.com/liu/ytc/apsetdlojuonZ2

For more information or questions about the study, please contact Yael Fessel at: yael.fessel@my.liu.edu

IRB Protocol #: 22/11-143
Approval: January 10, 2023
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Appendix B

Eligibility Questionnaire

For Researcher’s Use Only

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability:

1. Are you 21 years of age or older?
   a. Yes  b. No

2. Which Orthodox Jewish Community did you grow up in?
   a. Hasidic  b. Litvak  c. Sephardic  d. Modern Orthodox  e. Other _________  f. Not Orthodox

3. Do you believe in Hashem?
   a. Yes  b. No  c. Unsure  d. Other _________

4. Do you believe that the Jews are the chosen people who received the Torah divinely?
   b. Yes  b. No  c. Unsure  d. Other _________

5. How long have you not believed in Hashem and/or Orthodox Judaism?

6. Do you consider yourself part of the Orthodox community?
   a. Absolutely  b. Somewhat  c. Not at all

7. Do members of your Orthodox community consider you a part of their community?
   a. Yes  b. Somewhat  c. No

8. Do you perform religious practices or refrain from transgressing Jewish Laws (i.e., keeping Sabbath, eating kosher, wearing certain clothing, praying etc.) in the presence of members of your community?
   A. No  B. Yes

9. Have you been hospitalized in the past year for mental health issues?
   A. Yes  B. No
Appendix C

Informed Consent

Date: November 17th, 2022

Faculty Investigator: Orly Calderon, PsyD

LONG ISLAND UNIVERSITY
IRB Protocol #: 22/11-143 Approval: January 10, 2023 LIU Sponsored Projects

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB)

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Study Title: In the Religious Closet:

A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Double Lives of Jewish Ultra Orthodox Nonbelievers Faculty Investigator:

Orly Calderon, Psy.D.
Associate Professor and Director of Assessment
Clinical Psychology Doctor Program
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516-299-3497

Student Investigator:

Yael Fessel,
Clinical Psychology Doctoral Program
Yael.Fessel@my.liu.edu
516-506-8428
You are being asked to join a research study. Participation in this study is voluntary. Even if you decide to join now, you can change your mind later.

1. Why is This Research Being Done

This research is being done to better understand the experiences of people who identify as living a double life religiously in an ultra Orthodox Jewish community. The findings will have implications for clinicians working with Orthodox Jewish who are grappling with conflicting beliefs and actions. It will also contribute to research in the areas of leaving religion and religious identity.

You can qualify for this study if:

1. You were raised in an ultra Orthodox Jewish community
2. You do not believe in Hashem or the truth of the Torah
3. You remain in an ultra Orthodox community, and have remained for at least one year despite your disbelief

You may not be eligible for this study if:

2. You have not been raised in an ultra Orthodox community
3. You believe in the Jewish god or the truth of the Torah
4. You have no affiliation or only minimal contact with your community
5. If you have been hospitalized for psychiatric reasons within the last year

6. What will happen if you join this study?

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to do the following things:

Informed Consent Form July 2021
Date: November 17th, 2022

Faculty Investigator: Orly Calderon, PsyD
Fill out an eligibility questionnaire on Ontology which will determine if you qualify for this study. This will include questions about age, the community you grew up in, current beliefs, connection with ultra-Orthodox community, and any recent hospitalizations.

Specify that you are willing to schedule a one-hour Zoom interview.

Provide your email address on the eligibility questionnaire described above.

If you qualify to participate in this study, you will be asked to write your availability for the one-hour Zoom interview in a scheduling form sent via email.

Meet for an individual interview with the primary investigator, via a Zoom call, where the primary investigator will ask you for some basic information, like your age, gender identity, and marital/parental status, and then will ask 3 questions about your experiences as a nonbeliever living in an ultra-Orthodox community.

Audio recordings:
As part of this research, we are requesting your permission to create and use audio recordings. Any audio recordings will not be used for advertising or non-study related purposes.

You should know that:

You may request that the recording be stopped at any time.

If you agree to allow the audio recording and then change your mind, you may ask us to destroy that recording. If the recording has had all identifiers removed, we may not be able to do this.

We will only use these recordings for the purposes of this research.

The audio recording will be transcribed by the researcher who will keep all data confidential. Please indicate your decision below by checking the appropriate statement:

_____ I agree to allow the study to make and use audio recordings of me (or the participant I represent) for the purpose of this study.

_____ I do not agree to allow the study team to make and use audio recordings of me (or the participant I represent) for the purpose of this study.
Informed Consent Form July 2021

Date: November 17th, 2022

Faculty Investigator: Orly Calderon, PsyD
IRB Protocol #: 22/11-143 Approval: January 10, 2023 LIU Sponsored Projects

____________________________________________________
Participant Signature Date (or Legally Authorized Representative Signature, if applicable)

Will research test results be shared with you?

This study involves research tests that may produce information that could be useful for your clinical care. If you request to read the results, the primary investigator will share this information with you.

How long will you be in the study?
Participation in the study will take approximately one hour.

4. What are the risks or discomforts of the study?

Due to the sensitive nature surrounding religious beliefs, especially when one is part of a religious community, participants may experience discomfort during the interview. The risks associated with participation in this study are no greater than those encountered in daily life.

There is always a chance of involuntary disclosure of participation of this study because of the risk of electronic hacking. This might cause unforeseen social and emotional consequences. The primary investigator will make every effort to prevent such hacking and disclosure with careful protection of data.

You may get tired or bored when we are asking you questions or you are completing questionnaires. You do not have to answer any question you do not want to answer.

After identifiers are removed, the information will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

5. Are there benefits to being in the study?

This study may benefit society if the results lead to a better understanding of living a double life religiously in ultra Orthodox communities. The findings can help bring awareness to the matter and hopefully help clinicians address
any challenges or obstacles and to help provide better care for this population.

6. What are your options if you do not want to be in the study?

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You choose whether to participate. If you decide not to participate, there are no penalties, and you will not lose any benefits to which you would otherwise be entitled.

7. Will it cost you anything to be in this study?

No.

8. Will you be paid if you join this study?

No.

9. Can you leave the study early?

You can agree to be in the study now and change your mind later, without any penalty or loss of benefits.

If you wish to stop, please tell us right away.

If you want to withdraw from the study, please email the researcher that you would like to do so.

10. Why might we take you out of the study early?

You may be taken out of the study if:

Staying in the study would be harmful.

The study is canceled.

There may be other reasons to take you out of the study that we do not know at this time.

11. How will the confidentiality of your biospecimens and/or data be protected?

Any study records that identify you will be kept confidential to the extent possible by law. The records from your participation may be reviewed by people responsible for making sure that research is done properly, including members of
the Long Island University Institutional Review Board (All of these people are required to keep your identity confidential.) Otherwise, records that identify you will be available only to people working on the study, unless you give permission for other people to see the records.

All audio recordings will be saved on a password protected drive and labeled with a code number rather than your name. Once the recordings are transcribed, the researcher will delete them. Transcriptions labeled with code numbers will be saved on a password protected drive. Only the researcher and faculty investigator of this study will have access to the recordings. De-identified transcriptions will be shared on a password protected file with two coders who will be helping the researcher with the study.

12. What is a Certificate of Confidentiality?
Your study information is protected by a Certificate of Confidentiality. This Certificate allows us, in some cases, to refuse to give out your information even if requested using legal means.

It does not protect information that we have to report by law, such as child abuse or some infectious diseases. The Certificate does not prevent us from disclosing your information if we learn of possible harm to yourself or others, or if you need medical help.

Disclosures that you consent to in this document are not protected. This includes putting research data in the medical record or sharing research data for this study or future research. Disclosures that you make yourself are also not protected.

13. What other things should you know about this research study?

What is the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and how does it protect you? This study has been reviewed by an Institutional Review Board (IRB), a group of people that reviews human research studies. The IRB can help you if you have questions about your rights as a research participant or if you have other questions, concerns, or complaints about this research study. You may contact the IRB at OSP@liu.edu.

What should you do if you have questions about the study?

Date: November 17th, 2022
Contact the student investigator (Yael Fessel at 516 506 8428 or Yael.Fessel@my.liu.edu) or the faculty investigator (Orly Calderon at 516 299 3497 or Orly.Calderon@liu.edu). If you wish, you may contact the principal investigator by letter. The address is on page one of this consent form. You can also contact the program director, Dr. Eva Feindler at eva.feindler@liu.edu. If you cannot reach the investigators or wish to talk to someone else, email the Office of Sponsored Projects at: OSP@liu.edu.

You can ask questions about this research study now or at any time during the study.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or feel that you have not been treated fairly, please email the Office of Sponsored Projects at: OSP@liu.edu

14. What does your signature on this consent form mean?
Your signature on this form means that: You understand the information given to you in this form, you accept the provisions in the form, and you agree to join the study. You will not give up any legal rights by signing this consent form.

WE WILL GIVE YOU A COPY OF THIS SIGNED AND DATED CONSENT FORM

_________________________ Signature of Participant (Print Name) Date/Time

_________________________ Signature of Person Obtaining Consent (Print Name) Date/Time

NOTE: A COPY OF THE SIGNED, DATED CONSENT FORM MUST BE KEPT BY THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR; A COPY MUST BE GIVEN TO THE PARTICIPANT.
Appendix D

Interview

Demographic Questions:

*Before beginning our interview today, I would like to gather some basic information about you. How old are you? What is your gender identity? What is your marital status? How many kids do you have?*

Semi-structured Interview Prompt:

*“Today I am going to be asking you questions about your experience in your Orthodox Community. I am particularly interested in the process by which you came to reject the beliefs of the community yet choosing to remain in the community. Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. If you need clarification or do not understand what I am asking, feel free to ask for an explanation. If you need a break, please let me know. Also, you might be wondering about some things about me like where I stand on the issues I ask about. For research purposes, I urge you to give answers that are as honest as possible while putting aside my reactions and opinions. There are no right or wrong answers as this is about your individual experience. When the study is complete, I can send you a copy of the paper which will include information about my background and interest in this topic if you would like. Do you have any questions before we begin?”*

Questions:

1. What is your experience living in an Orthodox community when you do not believe?
2. What led you to decide to stay?
3. What do you think are the implications of your decisions? (Make sure to cover socially, and mental health and identity wise with follow-up questions)
Appendix E

Terms and Translations

Aliyah (blessing for Torah portion)
Amud (in front of the congregation)
Apikores (heretic)
Ashkenazi (Eastern European)
Aveira/os (sin/s)
Baal/as Teshuva (someone who becomes religious later in life. “As” indicates feminine)
Baalai T'Shuva (Non religious people who become religious later in life)
Bais Yakov (ultra-Orthodox girls’ school)
Bar mitzvah (party for a 13yo boy)
Baruch Hashem (Thank God)
Bekeshe (religious garment, a long coat)
Black hat (a black hat indicates ultra-Orthodox group membership in many cases- different kinds of hats signify different ultra-Orthodox communities)
Beis Din (Jewish Court)
Bli Ayin Hara (without an evil eye, literally. Commonly used to ward off evil spirits or bad luck)
Bris (circumcision ceremony)
Chabad (ultra-Orthodox community)
Chabad, Lubavitch (Sect of ultra-Orthodoxy, Chabad & Lubavitch used synonymously)
Challah (bread, customary in Orthodox communities to make every weekend/Shabbat )
Chametz (forbidden foods on Passover, grains)
Chanukah (Hannukah/8 day holiday)
Chapp/ing (understand/ing)
Chas Veshalom (God Forbid)
Chasidish (Hasidic)
Chassan/im (Groom/s)
Chassidus (spiritual teachings inherent in Hasidic/Chabad community)
Chavrusa (Torah learning partner)
Chazal (Rabbinic authority)
Chazanus (cantor singing)
Chesed (charity)
Chizuk (encouragement)
Chol Hamoed (middle days of passover)
Cholent (traditional Jewish stew eaten on Shabbos)
Chumash (5 books of Bible)
Chumrahs (stringencies)
Crown Heights/CH (place in brooklyn where Chabad/Lubavitch Jews live/ultra-Orthodox community in brooklyn)
Daven/ing (praying)
Davka (sometimes “B’davka”) (specifically)
Drasha (sermon)
D’var Torah (words of Torah)
Emes[dik] (truth [true])
Fabrengen (Hasidic gathering)
Fleischigs (meat [cannot eat meat and milk together, so this word is significant in the community])
Footsteps (organization that helps people transition out of the Orthodox community and provides support to individuals who deviate from the community)
Frei (“free” in Yiddish, colloquially used to describe someone who is not religious)
Frum (Orthodox religious)
Frum Yid (religious jew)
Gemara (ancient Talmudic text)
Get (divorce document given by men)
Goyim/Goy (people/person who are/is not Jewish)
Halacha/os (Jewish law/s)
Halachic (regarding Jewish law)
Hashem (God)
Hashgacha Pratis (the idea that there is divine providence in everything)
Hashkafa/s (worldview/s)
Hatzolah (Jewish 911 volunteer service)
Heter (lenient exemption [for Jewish law])
Lain megilah (read a reading in front of a crowd)
Lein/ing (Torah reading)
Kiddush (gathering where people eat and drink on Sabbath morning)
Kiddush club (weekly hangout where men drink at synagogue after prayers)
Kippah (head covering for males, synonymous with Yarmulke)
Kiruv (Organizations that help people come “closer” to Judaism, their goal is to help people become [more] religious)
Kofer (apostate/heretic)
Kollel (learning job/yeshiva for married ultra-Orthodox males)
Lakewood (one of the largest ultra-Orthodox communities, located in NJ)
Maariv (nighttime prayers)
Mamzer (estranged person)
Mashpia (spiritual guide)
Mechalel Shabbos (to desecrate Sabbath)
Megillah (a book part of the Hebrew Bible that is read on a holiday yearly)
Mincha (evening prayers)
Minyan (gathering on 10 people for prayers)
IN THE RELIGIOUS CLOSET

Mitzvah/os (commandment/s/good deed/s)
Modox (Modern Orthodox)
Morah (teacher)
Nachas (joyous pride)
Nebuch (loser/Woes/a term people say to indicate they feel bad for someone)
Neshama (soul)
Nidah (family purity laws)
Niggunim (wordless Hasidic songs)
Olam Haba (The World to Come/heaven)
OTD/ Off the Derech (off the religious “path”)
Parnassah (livelihood)
Parsha (weekly Torah portion)
Pesach (Passover)
Peyos (sidelocks, curls)
Purim (Jewish holiday where people dress up and get drunk)
Rabbanim (Rabbis)
Rav (another word Rabbi who teaches and advises)
Rebbe (teacher)
Rebbetzin (Rabbi’s wife)
Rosh/ei yeshiva(s) (Head administrator of a Yeshiva)
Schmooze (chat)
Sefar/im (Jewish religious book/s)
Seminary (1-2 yearlong girls Jewish studies school after high school)
Shabbos/Shabbat (Saturday, day of rest when JO people disconnect and stay at home and includes many laws and rituals)
Shacharis (morning prayer)
Shaliach Tzibur (chosen leader/messenger of the congregation that leads a specific prayer)
Shalom Bayis (peace in the home/marriage)
Shavuos (a holiday in Spring)
Sheitel (wig)
Shidduchim (matchmaking system)
Shiur/im (lecture/s)
Shmiras Einayim (Protection for the Eyes, referring to measures taken to protect oneself from gazing at women)
Shomer Shabbos (keeping Sabbath)
Shtreimel (hasidic male hat)
Shul (synagogue)
Shulchan Orech (Text with Jewish Law)
Smicha (process by which someone becomes a Rabbi)
Stam[ah] (regular)
IN THE RELIGIOUS CLOSET

Talmid chochom (wise scholar)
Ta/Tatty (Dad)
Tefillin (religious straps used in prayers)
Tehillim (psalms)
The Rebbe (late leader of the Lubavitch community who some believe will be the Messiah)
Torah (Bible)
Torah Misinai (literally meaning the Torah from Mt. Sinai, the idea that the Torah was divinely given to the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai and that therefore, it is true)
Treif (Non-kosher food)
Tshuva (repentance)
Tzedaka (charity money)
Tzitzis (religious garb)
Tznius (modesty laws for women)
Yarmulke (religious head cap)
Yahrzeit (death anniversary)
Yeshiva (Jewish Orthodox male school)
Yeshiva Bochur/im (young male/men in Jewish orthodox school)
Yeshivish (Style/sect of Jewish ultra-Orthodoxy)
Yiddish - (language spoken by ultra-Orthodox Jews)
Yiddishkeit (Jewish Orthodoxy/Judaism)
Yomim Noro’im (High holy days: Yom Kippur [a fast day] and Rosh Hashanah [New Years])
Yuntif (holidays)
Appendix F

Final List of Themes, Subthemes, and Corresponding Quotes

Table 1

Theme 1: Navigating Family Issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Quotes</th>
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| Family as reason to remain closeted/Maintaining family ties | “For me a big piece in this choice is the fact that I am in middle of a contentious divorce. So, until I sign a settlement with terms that I am comfortable with, I don’t want to out myself because that would incite the children’s father to be more harsh and controlling in the settlement terms… I’m in the closet til I can get my divorce settlement signed.”  
“…what the [rabbi] told me was that if you don’t get back in line, if you don’t acquiesce and keep every single Halacha (Jewish law), Kal ad Hachamura (from easy to hard)...I’m going to make sure you don’t see your kids anymore. And his wife told my wife to get divorced. And I love my kids. I love my kids more than anything. I just saw them holding this knife over my kids’ throats…in my head I’m just gonna end up in my mother’s basement…no access to my children... Meanwhile, my wife is falling to pieces…consider myself a good husband, a good father and everyone’s suffering so much because of my choices. So I backed off. I’ll keep stuff, I won’t make the move, I won’t eat Treif (Non-kosher food), I’ll do the thing. I’ll stay in…”  
“Um, 2 things. If I was twenty when I came to this realization.. Unmarried… I would not have stayed…But, I was married. I have 4 children…I figured I’m gonna try and make it work cause I’m married, I have kids, and obviously getting divorced and dealing with raising 4 children as co parenting is not the easiest thing. So for me, it was a question of weighing my options and deciding to try and make it work.”  
“Now it’s my kids who are afraid to tell their friends. They don't wanna lose their friendships, their classmates, so I’m waiting for them now to be comfortable and so I’m doing this for them at this point.”  
“I’m working on compromising with me and my wife…we’ll go to a show in the city and that’s meaningful to me. She’s like what’s the point? Like maybe it would be better to do a mitzvah (good deed) or say tehillim (psalms) or something but it's like okay she gets it like this is important for a relationship. So she’s come a long way too.” |
| Navigating challenges in marriage as a double lifer |                                                                                                                                           |
“My wife… so like going to shul (synagogue) on Shabbos, she'll say, “we live in a community, everyone will notice if you don’t go to shul on Shabbos.” she gets really upset if I don’t go to shul on Shabbos.”

“When I walk around with her, I feel very uncomfortable. If she's not wearing a skirt. Cause then I don't want people to look at me and be like “Wow. He's married to a lady who’s wearing pants.”

“There's some strain on [marriage]- we work through so much of it …my wife knows my situation…she's quite accepting…but I would say there is a small aspect where we don’t see eye to eye on things and our values are not always the same.”

“It pains me to have to hide from my children and to kind of have to. I try not to engage in conversations in which I'll have to outwardly lie but things will come up. I have two older sons- one 13 one 12. Things about homosexuality and sex, and black and white thinking, and…non jews being bad, and us being better… things come up and I would love to be fully honest about how I think but I can't because I have to just stick to the status quo. So it changes my everyday life in the sense that I can't be fully open and honest with my children. That's very difficult.”

“I feel like the implications are very very big. I have little kids. I just signed up my daughter to a… really religious school…the implications are to kind of lead my kids into the same life that I’m not really happy with. But at the same time to make a decision and walk away, that also has very big implications. I think that like keeping part of the status quo and saying okay I’m gonna try better and I’m gonna teach my kids better and I’ll allow them to choose whichever way they want. Hopefully it will work out.”

“But with my daughter, it's actually good. I know if she does not want to join us at a shabbos table because she wants to read…I'm not going to give her a hard time if something Jewish is bothering her. I fully understand that, I can be more sympathetic. She doesn't want to daven (pray), I'm not pushing her to daven. I can be more gentle with that. I don't wanna give her a bad taste of yiddishkeit (Judaism).I don't want to give her a bad association with the secular world, either. You kind of weave your way through the system trying to find the best of both worlds.”
“Also, it’s also very hard with kids. My kids are being inculcated and indoctrinated through these belief systems that I don’t believe in and the longer as they grow up, they get more and more enmeshed and the harder it is to dislodge that…then it becomes permanent and then there’s…issues and traumas with that.”
### Table 2

**Theme 2: Social and Communal Implications**

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<tr>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Quotes</th>
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| Social Challenges | “What social life? There is no social life....if I wasn't *Frum* I'd be doing a million things ... I’d join clubs and I'd join cycling and whatever it is. I'd be doing things but I can’t.”
“And now, I’m quote unquote shunned and people are wondering about me. I don’t feel comfortable with people in public spaces anymore. Whenever I wanna go into public spaces, I have to… strengthen myself in a sense. It’s like “okay I'm gonna do this.” It’s a task, you know? I have to hold my head up and just look people in the eye, but I hate that. I really liked being liked, you know? *laughs* and now I’m not.”
“It’s just difficult for me to build relationships with other people in the community because...I don’t know if it’s just that we're so different or maybe it’s that I kinda feel guilty. I’m living a double life and if you really knew what was going on inside of me, you wouldn’t talk to me. I find it very very difficult to have relationships with other people in this community.”
“.. you try to make friends with Footsteps (an organization that supports OTD individuals) and Facebook...I definitely struggle with that. I’ve seen a lot of people struggle with that because the only thing really tying you guys together is the fact that you're OTD and...people who are OTD tend to be pretty fucked up and we’re all going through this really hard thing… a lot of trauma, a lot of crisis. It’s not like a very great place to foster healthy friendships...and getting friends in the secular world, trying to find friends in your D&D group or your Chess group or your knitting club or whatever, it’s very hard...there’s such a massive barrier I culturally and they’re scary, like I know nothing and they know nothing about me....It’s very hard to build a normal friendship that way and so I ended up gravitating towards the *Frum* people. I had to hide who I was but they were comfortable. We would *schmooze* (chat) … but then you have to hide who you are and the whole thing is kind of silly so it’s lonely... no matter where you turn, there's these huge barriers to developing normal social lives.” |
| Positive Social Interactions and Implications as a double lifer | “Um, but actually in making friends outside the community, that’s where I felt more like I finally have a social life. So I didn't feel like I lost anything in that way as far as friends as far as my own social connections.”
“It depends on what sort of group you’re in...to some extent, I have better friends now than I did...Definitely changed and there were points that it was isolating but yeah it sort of forced me to find a social group rather than sort of coasting…” |
“He was a neighbor, he lived across the street from me… I was discussing with my wife, “hey was their car here last night? It's Shabbos morning and their car was here last night… it could be that they're not religious.” They were pretend religious and then we saw them order UberEats Friday night and then we became close friends. We were like “oh hey…what’s going on?” *laughs* “I guess you guys are not religious.” And now we… can go out on Friday night together and go to non Kosher restaurants together.”

“Fear of Social/Communal Loss and Rejection

“I'm just gonna talk to whoever I’m talking to and say what comes to my mind so I’m probably open about it with people here cause I feel safer here like there’s not gonna be any consequences within where I live.”

“I would love to get a piercing. I'm dying to get a tattoo. For the longest time I wanted to shave my head bald. Not for a specific reason, just because I want to try it. And I can't do any of those things because of fear of customers not wanting to come to my business. I have a fear of people in the community saying “wow this yid (jew) has a piercing in the store. I'm not gonna send my kids to the store. We're not gonna frequent this business.”

“We’re social beings and nobody likes to feel rejected, especially not by the community you grew up in…it’s difficult ...When it [social rejection from being outed] comes back to bite me…I’ll probably go through *nervous laughter* another bout of depression.”

“Another big thing is that I have a lot of friendships in the community which are awesome. I have tons of friends. But like once you stop believing, you’re hiding your identity. Those friendships...become contingent because you’re hiding a huge piece of yourself from them. And although everyone hides pieces of themselves from other people...this is something that they wouldn’t really be your friends necessarily if they would know.”

“I’m always watching myself. What am I saying? Is it safe or not?...There are a few other people that I would love to come out to also and explain “hey, this is me, by the way, and I still like you and I still wanna be friends with you and maybe we could hangout without sacrificing the entire relationship.”
Table 3

**Theme 3: Mental and Emotional Ramifications**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Current Mental-Emotional Struggles</td>
<td>“There's a lot of fear, it's a weird way of living, I don't know. Yeah and it’s lonely, it’s weird, it’s depressing, I know I can get sad...It’s very draining, stressful, draining, anxiety ridden…”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“It’s very difficult. I literally- we had to do it at this time because I just came back from therapy. And like literally, at therapy we were talking about how difficult it is for me to be working in… and not be a religious person… I printed out a list of reasons why it's so difficult for me mentally to work there.”</td>
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<td>“This is something that affects me every day, every minute of the day, until I’m sleeping. When I’m sleeping, this does affect me. If I'm awake and I'm not in my house, this is all consuming. It’s constantly: Who's gonna see me? Who's there? Even if I’m walking in Manhattan and it’s a shabbos afternoon and I know I'm not gonna run into anybody that I worry about, it's still in the back of my head - what if? WHAT IF? Like even if I don’t expect it, the worry is still there. It’s all consuming.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I would say it’s difficult, my mental health is… I’m struggling, …It’s difficult and I feel sad and I feel anxious, I feel depressed.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Um, it was <em>exhales</em>... I already have issues with depression and anxiety...I was pretty constantly depressed I would say for about two years… like suicidal ideation. I never tried to kill myself, but, nonstop suicidal ideation <em>sharp inhale</em>, and I mean when I finally got to a therapist and discussed it, which was actually after I moved...knowing that I wasn’t trapped...helped me kinda work within the framework that I have and lead a, I would say, pretty decent functional life.”</td>
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<td>“I keep changing. I used to think that it was the cause for… for a lot… In 2006, I had to be hospitalized. I had this psychotic break... I ended up in the hospital for the week and I was in and out of this… psychotic sort of state. Like are people out to get me? Am I gonna get killed? Like am I gonna- are people gonna hurt me in some way? I… got detached from reality…”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I’m at a point where I’m at peace with a big part of it. So, I think for myself and for my own mental health it’s…the worst is in the past. The danger zone is in the past.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I was once upon a time on medications, I was suicidal many years ago. Like I'm doing really really well now. So in terms of the impact on my mental health, being that I am I’m not in a victim stance and… I changed my paradigm so I no longer see, whether it’s my marriage, whether it’s my community, whether it’s my beliefs, I no longer see the concept of “I have to do this, I’m forced to do this” as a reality.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Past Mental-Emotional Challenges/Mental Health as a Journey</td>
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Quotes
Coping and Positive Mental Shifts

“I think because of the amount of recovery work that I have done and the therapeutic work that I have done. The trauma work and the therapeutic work…I’m over 11 years in sobriety recovery and really in a good place where…I experience serenity, I experience joy in terms of my mental health.”

“I’m being honest, using weed and occasionally psychedelics has helped a lot.”

“I’m on Lexapro. I’ve been on Lexapro for three/four years now and it’s really really helping…I was really really struggling before that.”

“I’m getting a lot of support…that's probably important. I’m in analytic training, therapy, I have a therapist three times a week, I have a supervisor…I think it's as best as it gets. Like I really have a lot of support that are people from outside that really sort of buffers my psychological well-being.”
## Table 4

**Theme 4: Contemplating Leaving and Staying**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Quotes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Defining Leaving and Staying</td>
<td>“I don’t - it’s hard for me to categorize myself. And I don’t know if I need to. So, I don’t know, I’m somewhere in an in-between zone...Like it’s hard to know if I wouldn’t have children, would I leave my wife? I don’t know. Would I leave completely my family? I don’t know what that means. Not talking to them?” “I mean it really depends on what you mean by leaving. Physically? So there's the physical leaving. I mean leaving and living somewhere else. My ex wife asked that I not do that and I stay close by the kids.” “I always describe- I heard other people in my situation describe it as this- waking up in the Truman show, right? Like, it’s a long time since I watched it but he's aware that something is wrong and he's noticing all the crazy stuff that's going on and the things that don’t make sense but he can’t… he doesn't have the agency…I forgot what it was.. But he can't act out or break out until he can find a safe way out. So I don't know of a safe way out. At this point while I'm still stuck in this marriage…Only my husband has the power to give me a get (divorce document) to free me from his marriage. Until then, he’s free to stay at home with me. He owns me basically. Um, so I feel very stuck.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weighing Pros and Cons of Leaving and Staying</td>
<td>“...I wouldn’t as far as...coming out and saying “hey, I don’t believe”...I’m not looking to hurt my parents and I’m not looking to start from new with a new community. I’m not ready for that. The cost is too little. Not driving on Shabbos, I’m wearing a Yarmulke.” “So for me, it was a question of just weighing my options and deciding to try and make it work and...it’s worki- nobody has a perfect life. It definitely puts a strain on many aspects of my life but the feeling is...putting all things into consideration, it’s not so bad. Like I can survive it.” “Being a husband, being a father. You know those are things that are really really important to me...and being authentic is also important but I guess...each one is on a scale. So, the value side of the scale is way heavier than the authenticity side of the scale to the degree that I can’t be authentic.”</td>
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"I've seen people that left the fold completely like they left the community, they left everything behind and they're known to... they don't believe, they're not religious at all. And things are not that much better. Because you give up a lot for the sake of the truth. And the sake of the truth for your own self... I leave then I am committing to a lifetime of having these conversations with people all the time and I don't think it's worth it. I think that... I'm pretty okay with perhaps... I think that my mental health would be a lot more at risk if I do leave completely because I will get extremely passionate about it and argue and it's not something that I want to commit to. I don't want to find myself in a position that I'm doing that because I'm not gonna change people's minds. I'm not gonna move the needle by a lot and I'm just gonna fight til I die. And I'd rather just try to live an easy and peaceful life."

"I would leave. I would go. I would start over. And I mean I would be lying if I said that didn't cross my mind pretty often. ... The mental drain, the mental comfort... can at times get get pretty intense... and then every once in a while... who needs all this stress like who needs it? I can just start over and probably be really really happy. But then my question... Will I? Will I... I don't know. The grass always seems greener on the other side."

"I do feel also as I get older and my kids are out of school, my youngest is now graduating out of high school, that I do have the opportunity to be a little more freer and more authentic and do what I want kinda thing *laughs* do and say what I want. So I do feel a little bit that the kids are gonna be out of the house, some of them are out of the house already... That I can do less of what I don't want and things like that so that's my part of my hope."

"I had just finished my divorce and I never, my ex husband didn't know [about nonbelief] because I was afraid he would use it against me... Um so I don't regret staying in the closet for that. Because I felt like I was protected and I was able to build a relationship with my kids. I'm less worried about him now... but now it's my kids who are afraid to tell their friends. They don't wanna lose their friendships, their classmates. So I'm waiting for them now to be comfortable and so I'm doing this for them at this point."

"Where I've come to is the real me is the one who's questioning. That's the real me. Like the real me is the one who's on a journey. It's not about I'm gonna discover a truth that I'm really this or really that. No, this is the real me, the real me is the one who's on a quest for authenticity and on a quest for finding my place, finding what I believe and how I practice or whatever it is and that's- I'm already there. I'm already living my truth and my dream right now as I journey."
### Table 5

**Theme 5: Negotiating Inauthenticity and Dissonance**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Quotes</th>
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| Defining Inauthenticity/Pretending | “I have to wear a yarmulke (religious cap). I have to wear tzitzis (religious garb). I have to daven (pray) mincha (evening prayers) with my coworkers. I have to put on a show with all my neighbors…”  

“Another very hard thing is you have to kind of pay lip service to a lot of ethos that you don’t ascribe to. I don’t ascribe to... racist or homophobic ideologies whether it’s someone sharing on the Parsha (weekly Torah portion) with you and you have to nod along and smile. Everyone’s nodding along and smiling but you’re extra nodding along and smiling.”  

“And it's all coming back to the idea that I’m putting on a facade, I’m putting on a show, I'm putting on a fake personality that even in a situation like this I have to make sure to keep up the act. I think that summarizes the whole thing. Even in an emergency, I have to make sure the act is kept up.”  

“I get dressed, I put on my wig, I dress according to the laws of modesty even though I have a lot of feelings about that...I need to dress a certain way even though it's really against my evolving values”  

“It was eating me up, you know, the double life. So, I basically started keeping Shabbos (Sabbath), keeping kosher. Maybe, even tefillin (religious prayer straps) here and there. That happened for a while and on my journey, I came to the point more recently where I realized that as much as my beliefs have changed, but this way of life and this lifestyle is what I was raised in and what I grew up in.” |
| Coping with and Managing Dissonance |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
“But it’s not a life. It's not comfortable to be to that degree of dissonance. And that’s one of the reasons also why I’ve been choosing certain practices. Just because it felt too uncomfortable to be so far removed. Like for example, keeping kosher most of the time because to eat not kosher and to teach Halachos (laws) of Kosher. *laughs* which is what I teach… it’s actually a point of very deep… more than conflict… turmoil. There’s a lot of inner turmoil and I’ve done a lot of work with. I’ve been working with a coach now, my own coach. People who question why are you so turmoilled about it, like why are you taking it so seriously but it is a big issue for me.”

“It just feels like I’m just sitting in a room full of people like caught in a cult who just cannot even look at like the reality around them and don't realize how ridiculous and crazy they look and… I don’t know if the right word is cognitive dissonance but it like it feels like off to me. It feels like this is crazy, I shouldn’t be here, people shouldn’t be like this… if I’m in those kinds of situations, I just walk out of the room and… take a walk around if I can or go hide in the bathroom for hours or something *laughs* or anything to get out of the room. But I also got into marijuana because of it and for me… it’s been a big help and if I’m in a situation where I know I’m gonna be anxious, I bring the marijuana vape along and helps me just kind of get ou-you know, let things slide off.”

“But the reason I write the [jewish] books is because there’s something about singing a childhood song, or seeing a Disney movie that you saw when you grew up. It's something that I'm familiar with. Learning [Torah] is something that I grew up with, learning Torah is what I was taught and writing sefarim (books) is kind of a way to connect with my childhood. So even though I don't believe anything that I’m writing and nothing that I write is about God or observance or anything like that. I feel connected to my inner self because it’s something that I know and something that I am knowledgeable in. That's why I write the books.”

Perspectives on Inauthenticity as a Nonbeliever

“I think of it- as a Harry Potter fan, I think of it as joining a Harry Potter club where you’re supposed to say certain things and you’re supposed to wear certain clothing but of course you can step out any time you want, it’s a choice. But it's like to be fully immersed in cosplay… and that's something meaningful and beautiful to me.”
“What does it mean that you don’t believe? Like it’s this big ugly monster that she [wife] doesn’t even wanna know about cause it’s just so scary. For most Frum people, it’s just so scary. At least the majority of the people who I’ve met in the community… in the closet community, it’s not like that. For the most part, it’s just kind, genuine, intelligent people who are just searching… and just want to know what’s true and if anything they’re truth seekers. And they don’t want to hurt their families. They don’t wanna hurt people. They don’t wanna make other people go Off the Derech (off the path)...I just don’t believe. It just doesn’t make sense to me. It’s as simple as that. I just wish more people knew that and I wish that it was like a sliding scale in the community… I wish I can stay in the community and be authentic.”

"There is the sort of double… kind of code switching thing that you might do. Like sometimes talking this way sometimes talking that way but I do think that… it probably still meshes into one person… I don’t think it confuses me...there is a level of acting that goes into it but… I haven't found that to be extremely negative or anything. It is what it is."

“The community is very much about the outward appearance of belonging more than what you actually care about so I didn't have to lie, really. I didn’t feel like I was lying. It was just wearing a costume…”