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Avigail Hurvitz-Prinz  
Sex and Sexuality of Formerly Ultra-  
Orthodox Jews: Defining Sexual  
Health

### **ABSTRACT**

This is an exploratory, qualitative study of interviews with 11 individuals who self-identify as formerly Ultra-Orthodox from the United States and Israel. It is an examination of the unique dynamics and difficulties faced by formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews as they transition into the secular world, especially around sexual health. This thesis distills some of the specific ways in which formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews understand their own sexuality, how they would define “healthy” and “unhealthy” sexuality, and what they thought of those experiences. This thesis offers guidance to practitioners so that they may better serve these clients with increased attunement to issues of cultural competency and more thoughtful engagement around assumptions about “healthy” sexuality.

**SEX AND SEXUALITY OF FORMERLY ULTRA-ORTHODOX JEWS:  
DEFINING SEXUAL HEALTH**

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2014

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*Chazak chazak v'nitchazek — be strong, be strong, and we will be strengthened.*

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

Formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews are a uniquely vulnerable population. Raised in closed communities with very limited secular educations, they are often cut-off from their families when they join the mainstream world. There are few studies addressing the needs of formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews. These individuals are particularly at-risk throughout their transition. Though there is some scholarly work addressing questions of Ultra-Orthodox sexuality, and some work addressing the transition from Ultra-Orthodoxy into the mainstream, secular world, there is little by way of addressing sexuality as people transition out of their Ultra-Orthodox lives.

A highly visible community, identifiable by their unique dress — modest clothes, long black coats, beards, side-locks and hats for men, wigs and muted colors for women — Ultra-Orthodox Jews react to modernity and secular society by rejecting its norms. Their dress is one way of demarcating their physical separateness from the world at large emphasising their strict gender norms and their values of modesty and *yirat hashem* (fearing the awesomeness of God). Sometimes also called Haredi Jews, referencing the idea that they “tremble in awe of God’s presence,” Ultra-Orthodox Jews can be divided into a few categories. In her memoir, Leah Vincent (2014) defines three different groups of Orthodox Jews:

- (1) the “Hasidic,” who are mystical and loyal to royal popelike rebbes;
- (2) the “Modern Orthodox,” semiassimilated into modern life and
- (3) the “Yeshivish,”

committed to the centrality of the yeshivas — study halls where men ponder ancient legal texts (p. vii).

It is difficult to know exactly how many Jews identify within each of these categories. Vincent’s “very rough estimate” might approximate “close to 1 million *Hasidic* Jews, about 1 million Modern Orthodox Jews, and 500,000 *Yeshivish* Jews, globally” (p. vii). This thesis focuses on formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews, though some of these dynamics would likely translate in Modern Orthodox contexts. There are no numbers on how many Jews leave Ultra-Orthodoxy worldwide, or which communities they come from.

As individuals from closed religious communities move into the “secular,” mainstream world they face a great deal of confusion and difficulty navigating new norms generally, but especially when it comes to learning about sex and sexuality. Ultra-Orthodox Jews are raised with very strict gender roles and limited access to sex education. Some individuals leave Ultra-Orthodoxy after marriage, having had sanctioned sexual experiences and some rudimentary sexual education; others leave having had no physical contact and very limited social contact with people across the rigid gender divide. Dating experiences are very limited, allowing for only a handful of supervised meetings with potential future partners before a wedding and very limited information about physical intimacy or what to expect on a wedding night. These differences are often significant influences on individuals’ transitions out of Ultra-Orthodoxy and do not translate easily into a secular context.

I conducted this study by interviewing a sample of 11 formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews who were willing to share with me their own stories about transition and sexuality. In addition, they attempted to define “healthy” sexuality with me. In order to obtain study participants, I did a snowball sampling by networking with individuals who met my criteria and by reaching out to

an organization that supports individuals leaving Ultra-Orthodoxy based in New York City called Footsteps. For more information about my methods see my third chapter on Methodology.

Similar to the lack of literature related directly to the question for this study, social work programs tend to lack training in conducting conversations about sexuality and sexual health. In addition to the goal of making a contribution to the literature through an empirical investigation, this paper advocates that social work programs to educate their students about culturally sensitive therapy and sexual health. Finally, I hope that this information might also be useful to formerly Ultra-Orthodox individuals as they reflect on their own transitions and experiences.



## **CHAPTER II**

### **Literature Review**

The following literature review will focus on previous research pertaining to the question “How do formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews identify healthy sexuality and their needs developing or maintaining it after their transition into the secular world?” The first section of this review will focus on defining Ultra-Orthodox sexuality, approaching the topic from a “cultural competency” perspective. The second section will include a discussion of some of the key elements of defining “healthy sexuality” more broadly in the literature. The third section will address some of the experiences of the transition itself for Ultra-Orthodox Jews and others leaving restrictive communities of origin and attempt to relate those themes back to sexuality.

#### **An Ultra-Orthodox Theory of Sexuality**

The first section of this paper will address some of the sexual norms and rules of Ultra-Orthodox Jews. This attempt at some kind of “cultural competency” is important for my study, but not without its pitfalls. “Cultural competency” will be understood as a framework that social workers use in order to understand “culturally diverse” communities. This framework attempts a sensitivity to needs and particular communal differences. For example, most Ultra-Orthodox Jews will have some shared expectations as a community that follows Jewish Law (*halacha*) in all things, especially sexual life. It is important to demystify these Jewish laws in order to contextualize some of the difficulty formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews will experience in the secular world. The emphasis on cultural competency has been critiqued for “othering” people whose

“culture” is not of the dominant group (Park, 2005). The cultural competency model also often presumes that a culture is uniform and that all of its members have the same relationship to each of the cultural components, and that those relationships to the culture are static over time.

Despite these valid critiques, it is still useful to understand some of the basic assumptions of Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox Judaism. Bilu and Witztum (1993) published a paper offering some suggestions for culturally sensitive therapeutic interventions which address the needs of Ultra-Orthodox Jews experiencing extreme depression and psychosis. Their work is fascinating and very useful for practitioners working with Ultra-Orthodox Jewish patients, but they do not particularly address sexuality or sexual behavior. Rockman (2003) and Ribner (2003) outline the religious laws and customs regarding sexual behavior within Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities. Each of these authors hope that therapists and counselors working with clients from this community will be more culturally competent and have a better understanding of some of the fundamental beliefs of Ultra-Orthodox Jews. Rockman (2003) points out that the:

Orthodox way of life is a strict and highly structured one...families do not talk about sex openly. This is understandable as the primary function of sex is for procreation...In adolescence sexual experimentation is strictly prohibited and sex is reserved for marital life only. This often leads to a lack of communication between the couple regarding sexual matters, and lack of knowledge, which will not be exposed, because of the secrecy that surrounds the issue (p. 266).

Ribner (2003) outlines influences on Ultra-Orthodox Jewish couples' sexual expression including: sanctifying intimacy, timing (including the laws of *niddah* [ritual purity] and *taharat hamishpacha* [the laws of family purity], modesty, indirect communication and sexual isolation. These themes are very important for understanding the unique cultural needs and expectations of

observant Jews coming for treatment. It is also important, however, to remember that each individual from those communities will have a different relationship to each of those concepts and that the Ultra-Orthodox world is unified by some themes but is quite diverse in and of itself.

Though she works beyond the Ultra-Orthodox community, Keshet-Or (2003) is also invested in helping to bring cultural competence into psychosexual therapeutic work with Jews. She addresses some of the diversity of issues that Jewish women bring into the treatment relationship from her perspective as a Jewish woman and a clinician. Her thesis is that therapy had given many Jewish women a language to understand and express their sexuality in ways that had previously been denied (Keshet-Or, 2003). For Keshet-Or (2003), the treatment relationship provides accurate information and a safe space to talk through sexual needs and desires. Ribner (2003) similarly calls for an integration of health and sexual education and psychological exploration. Keshet-Or and Ribner work with Orthodox Jews more broadly, and stress that the therapist provides accurate and factual information regarding anatomy and physiology, bodily functions as well as creating a safe environment in which to explore the client's specific issues. It is likely that the needs of formerly Ultra-Orthodox individuals will be similar.

As noted above, diversity and uniqueness within groups is to be expected. For example, though dating for marriage is a value of *halachic* Jews, it is not simply accepted as a value wholesale. One qualitative study explores the dating attitudes of Orthodox Jewish young women between the ages of 18 and 29 (Milevsky, Niman, Raab and Gross, 2011). The researchers conducted interviews and collected qualitative data exploring the theme of dating for marriage. Though the subjects seemed to be overall in agreement with the expectation that dating should be single-mindedly focused on marriage they did also wonder about what it would be like to date with less pressure on marriage *only*, to have a chance to explore the fun of a more casual

courtship. However, this study only interviews young women and further exploration of gender differences in these expectations could be very informative.

### **Ultra-Orthodox Sexual Dysfunction — “Unhealthy” Sexuality**

Much of the literature addressing Ultra-Orthodox Jewish sexuality is written from the perspective of providers dealing with what is described as “dysfunctional” sexual behaviors, as identified and assessed by both the provider’s and the client’s communities. One quantitative study addresses the seeming over-representation of “hyper-sexual” behaviors in Ultra-Orthodox male inpatients (Needell and Markowitz, 2004). In this context, the term hyper-sexual is defined by the researchers as: “masturbating in public; exposing their own or attempting to touch others’ genitalia, breasts, or buttocks; questioning others about their sex lives; or, offering unsolicited details about their own sex lives” (Needell and Markowitz, 2004, p. 243). The study was specifically structured to exclude “paraphilias or sex-offending behaviors” (Needell and Markowitz, 2004, p. 243). Sex-offending behaviors, in this case, may include cases of child sexual abuse, which is rumored to have high prevalence within the Ultra-Orthodox world. One organization working with sexual abuse survivors from the Ultra-Orthodox world says that they estimate from anecdotal evidence that over fifty percent of Ultra-Orthodox boys are sexually abused, calling it “a rite of passage” (Ketcham, 2013). *Paraphilias* are defined by the psychological community in the DSM-IV as “recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors generally involving 1) nonhuman objects, 2) the suffering or oneself or one’s partner, or 3) children or other non-consenting persons that occur over a period of at least six months” (APA, 2000, p. 566). Why the researchers decided to exclude those individuals is not clear, but it does seem to imply with these exclusions that there are multiple kinds of “anti-social” or “unhealthy” sexual behaviors. Hypersexuality, in this framework, can be distinguished

from paraphilia and sex-offensive behaviors — but what is “anti-social” sexual behavior and why? In what context?

These notions seem close to a definition of “unhealthy” sexual behavior, but neither do Needell and Markowitz nor the DSM-IV define it that way. Of course, these definitions are not neutral or without history. Gayle Rubin (1992) reminds us that mental health professionals have long policed sexual variation itself, assigning a moral judgment to many behaviors and attributing great meaning to what might otherwise be considered a morally neutral preference, like one for spicy food. The conversation about “healthy” sexuality is equally complicated. De Block and Adriaens (2013) similarly point out that over the last 150 years many different sexual preferences, desires and behaviors have been pathologized and depathologized. They suggest that this reveals the psychological community’s struggle to differentiate “mental disorders” defined as “‘perversions,’ ‘sexual deviations,’ or ‘paraphilias’ from immoral, unethical or illegal behavior.” They see themselves as following Foucault’s intellectual legacy that “what is accepted as normal and healthy sexuality is not determined by nature but changes with the values and norms of a particular society at a particular place and time” (De Block and Adriaens, 2013, p. 277). It is understandable, then, that some behaviors identified as “hypersexual” in an Ultra-Orthodox individual on an inpatient unit might be totally without consequence in another context.

For another queer theorist, sexual shame is one of the ways in which cultures define appropriate and inappropriate sexual behavior. He writes a culture of shame “involves silent inequalities, unintended effects of isolation, and the lack of public access” (Warner, 1999, p. 7). In reaction to this he advocates “more than freedom of choice, tolerance, and liberalization of sex laws” for true sexual autonomy, which seems to be a short-hand for his own understanding of

sexual health (Warner, 1999, p. 7). For Warner, sexual autonomy “requires access to pleasures and *possibilities, since people commonly do not know their desires until they find them*” [emphasis mine] (Warner, 1999, p. 7). Certainly the world of the Ultra-Orthodox is quite bounded by “silent inequalities,” “isolation” and lack of access to information. It is likely that individuals leaving Ultra-Orthodoxy are seeking new access to “pleasures and possibilities,” sexual and otherwise.

Ribner (2010) works in private practice as a Orthodox Jewish sex-therapist, specializing in work with Orthodox Jewish clients. He offers a case report on a brief treatment with a young, unmarried woman who feels an aversion to sex. Referred to him by the psychologist she saw for OCD symptoms she, like many women in this community, felt anxiety about sex and sexuality. He argues that her distress is partly because of a community-wide ignorance about human sexuality, shame surrounding her physical body and sexual responses, and the lack of formal and informal education. His treatment with her was especially educational, explaining some of the mechanics of genitalia, sexual arousal, and intercourse generally. By framing some ideas about sexuality within a religious framework that was consistent with her cultural background, he attempted to help her learn behavioral techniques to better understands her own body and her own sexual response. All of his interventions were aimed at helping her to see sexuality as a positive self-expression within a culturally sensitive framework.

Ribner’s paper is very helpful as a case study, describing a culturally effective treatment. Yet Ribner’s framing and formulation of the case may also be overly simplistic: It should also be asked whether the client herself actually wants this kind of therapeutic success, or if she would rather be left alone? If this patient revealed, during the course of treatment, that she was attracted to women, would that have been supported by him, her Orthodox Jewish therapist? In what ways

is a treatment like this culturally sensitive to some parts of a client's identity but not others? Additionally, this study does not check back in with the client after she marries and engages in sexual behavior with a male partner. It fails to address her progress once faced with the realities of sex. It also is just one case study and it is hard to know how many individuals face these issues and how their treatments may or may not have been successful.

Similarly, Ribner and Rosenbaum (2005) address some of the causes and treatments for Ultra-Orthodox couples that have a difficult time consummating their marriages. As in Ribner's individual treatment case of the young woman, they offer some ways of working in a culturally appropriate manner with these clients who come to him as couples. They are careful to say that the causes of sexual dysfunction "can be varied, complex and interactive," addressing those concerns in gender specific contexts addressing both biological factors and relationship factors. Adding to the earlier work about one woman, this study addresses some Ultra-Orthodox men's issues around sexuality and also details more ways in which women's treatment can be conducted within a couple's context and within a new modality. They also explore a case and frame it within an understanding of the norms and values of the Ultra-Orthodox community when it comes to marital and sexual expectations. The authors are very careful to mention that there are power dynamics inherent in encouraging couples to have sexual relationships and caution against anything that might seem like coercion.

Studying Orthodox Jewish males with reported "sexual addictions," Klein (1994) looks to the educational experiences of young men within the Yeshiva — an all male, religious educational institution where the focus is study of Jewish traditional texts. Sexual addiction is, however, not defined by the researcher. He lists a few examples of behaviors, which if exposed publically, put them at risk within their Orthodox community. These behaviors include watching

pornography, going to massage parlors, exposing oneself to children, phone-sex, cruising, and molestation of children. It may be significant that Klein sees all of these behaviors as basically equivalent, and from the perspective of the Ultra-Orthodox community, perhaps they are. Yet, within the secular world, some of these behaviors could be considered normative while others are stigmatized and others are illegal forms of sexual abuse.

Klein finds that the Yeshiva context is particularly formative and influential on the sexual lives of ultra-Orthodox men. Arguing that “the Yeshiva may function as a catalytic environment that facilitates the development of sexual shame, with its concomitant addictive behavioral spiral” Klein (1994) sees the extremes of Judaic academic achievement and religious piety as key causes of sexual problems (p. 141). Klein identifies three particularly problematic values often taught in the yeshiva that are destructive: masturbation is akin to murder, erotic fantasy is sinful, and erotic pleasure is not a male pursuit. Within the homosocial environment of the yeshiva, teenagers and young men learn about sexuality mostly on their own, within a very constrained framework. He argues, “The lack of discussion in an environment that covertly prohibits the raising of questions mystifies the young person from apprehending his sexuality cognitively” (Klein, 1994, p. 142). He continues, “There is no opportunity for value clarification and choice, because to seek clarity is to challenge the authority of one’s spiritual mentors” (Klein, 1994, p. 142). Klein argues that the Orthodox Jewish community must overcome its denial of sexual addictions and violations before solutions can be available to individuals struggling within that community. This article offers some interesting theories, but is limited in its scope. Ultra-Orthodox women are also taught (and not taught) a great deal about sexuality within their own constrained community frameworks — what are they learning? What are the negative consequences of their education in seminary?



It is also important to consider which behaviors are simply pathologized as “addictions” by mental health professionals. When do a person’s sexual behaviors cause them harm because of the ways they isolate them within their community? When do a person’s sexual behaviors cross a line into harming others? Is this especially true in a closed and very tightly organized community? Which behaviors are negotiable and could be “healthy” within a different cultural context and which are simply too problematic to accept? Is there such a thing as objective “sexual health” or will there always need to be contextual, community-based definitions?

### **Defining “Healthy” Sexuality**

Reviewing public health literature since 1975, Edwards and Coleman (2004) explore the history and context of defining sexual health. They argue that social forces affect the definitions of sexual health. Initially the World Health Organization began with a definition of “health in general,” moved on to defining mental, and then sexual health. Over time, concepts of “mental health,” “responsibility,” and “human rights” have been added to the earlier definitions of sexual health. Edwards and Coleman (2004) use eight major definitions as their anchor and compare them to each other, showing the links between the differing definitions and outlining each of their strengths and weaknesses. They call particular attention to the following definition, from The Sexual Health Model:

Sexual health is defined as an approach to sexuality founded in accurate knowledge, personal awareness, and self-acceptance, where one’s behavior, values, and emotions are congruent and integrated within a person’s wider personality structure and self-definition. Sexual health involves an ability to be intimate with a partner, to communicate explicitly about sexual needs and desires, to be sexually functional (to have desire, become aroused, and obtain sexual fulfillment), to act intentionally and

responsibly, and to set appropriate sexual boundaries. Sexual health has a communal aspect, reflecting not only self-acceptance and respect, but also respect and appreciation for individual differences and diversity, and a feeling of belonging to and involvement in one's sexual culture(s). Sexual health includes a sense of self-esteem, personal attractiveness and competence, as well as freedom from sexual dysfunction, sexually transmitted diseases, and sexual assault/coercion (Robinson, Bockting, Rosser, Miner, and Coleman, 2002, quoted in Edwards and Coleman, 2004, p. 190).

As the authors suggest, the definition is clear, yet overwhelmingly unwieldy. It operates both on a personal and cultural level and addresses external forces that might constrain someone's sexual wellbeing. They also use a definition from the World Health Organization (2002) which defines sexual health as:

a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being related to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled (Edwards and Coleman, 2004, p. 190).

These definitions attempt to define healthy sexuality both in sociopolitical context and within a personal and interpersonal context. The American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors and Therapists exists to promote sexual health by the development and advancement of the fields of sex therapy, counseling and education (AASECT Mission). They see themselves

as the premiere organization working to promote sexuality healing and seek to make more broadly available the highest quality of clinical services in sexual health. Their definition of sexual health begins with an assumption of the “fundamental value of sexuality as an inherent, essential, and beneficial dimension of being human” (AASECT Vision of Sexual Health, 2013). They oppose “psychological, social, cultural, legislative, and governmental forces that would restrict, curtail or interfere with the fundamental values of sexual health and sexual freedom” and “abuses of sexuality including, but not limited to, harassment, intimidation, coercion, prejudice, and the infringement of any individual's sexual and civil rights” (AASECT Vision of Sexual Health, 2013). Given that they are the leaders in the clinical field in defining sexual health it is work quoting their own definition as well.

(1) *Sexual Health and Sexual Freedom*: AASECT believes that healthy sexual activity is always ethically conducted, freely chosen, individually governed, and free from undue risk of physical or psychological harm. AASECT believes that all individuals should be supported in seeking and finding opportunities to pursue a healthy and happy sexual life of their own choosing. AASECT believes that all individuals are entitled to enjoy:

- Freedom of their sexual thoughts, feelings and fantasies. Freedom to engage in healthy modes of sexual activity, including both self-pleasuring and consensually shared-pleasuring.
- Freedom to exercise behavioral, emotional, economic, and social responsibility for their bodily functioning, their sexual liaisons, and their chosen mode of loving, working and playing.
- AASECT believes that these rights pertain to all peoples whatever their age,

family structure, backgrounds, beliefs and circumstances, including those who are disadvantaged, specially challenged, ill or impaired.

Fascinatingly, sexual health and sexual freedom are nearly inextricable for the AASECT. It is also individualistic and contextual, depending on a particular person's own values, body and other personal realities. These definitions, however, seem static and do not address the complexities of people's lived experiences. What of survivors of sexual abuse or those who live with HIV/AIDS? Are they ever capable of attaining and maintaining "sexual health" according to these definitions? Is it possible for something to be culturally understood to be "healthy" sexuality in opposition to the kinds of assumptions a Western, medical model might expect?

### **Transitions Out — Ultra-Orthodox Experiences**

If an Ultra-Orthodox Jew questions his or her own individual path, it is more than an individual choice or personal upheaval; it is, rather, a disruption in the whole tableau of the family and the community itself (Vincent 2014). Within the formerly Ultra-Orthodox world people use a few phrases to describe themselves: "Off the *Derech*" or "OTD," literally "off the path" (of *halacha*, Jewish law) or, formerly *frum* (religious). In Israel they are often called "*datlash*" an abbreviation of "*dati le'she'avar*," meaning formerly religious. Transitioning out of an Ultra-Orthodox life is often a dramatic break with family, community and one's past.

There are some other works on Jews on the margins of the Ultra-Orthodox world like Sands' (2009) study of the social integration of *Ba'alei Teshuvah* (Jews who "returned" to Orthodox or Ultra-Orthodox Jewish life) or Berman's (2009) close look at the ways in which Ultra-Orthodox missionaries from the *Chabad-Lubavich* sect maintain their values of closed community life while also working to form relationships with the objects of their missionary outreach. These works provide a fascinating comparison point to look at when thinking about the

experience of other kinds of Jews who live in the borderlands between (Ultra-)Orthodox life and the secular world.

There is a sub-genre of memoir which addresses the process of leaving Ultra-Orthodoxy. Many of these individuals address their individual experiences with sexuality before, during and after in their transitions. Recent texts in this genre include *Cut Me Loose: Sin and Salvation After My Ultra-Orthodox Girlhood* (Vincent 2014), *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots* (Feldman 2012) and *Exodus* (Feldman 2014) and they are raw portraits of individuals' personal experiences of their own transitions out. Also useful is the monograph by Hella Winston (2006) who edited her sociology dissertation for popular consumption. Her in-depth reporting in *Unchosen: the Hidden Lives of Hasidic Rebels* follows a few individuals in their explorations away from their traditional Hasidic upbringing. Their experiences are described in multiple dimensions, and sexuality is briefly addressed, but it is not the full focus of her work.

Attria (2008) conducted a study based on interviews with Ultra-Orthodox runaways and found that they left their families of origin for many of the same reasons that other runaways left home including, but not limited to, chaotic family environments and abuse. She also argues that family size, "spiritual" abuse and specific religious issues like being from a family where one of the parents is a "*Ba'al Teshuvah*" [the singular of Ba'ali Teshuvah, someone who "returns" to religious observance from a secular or less Orthodox background] are specific reasons why individuals from this population might run away. The Ultra-Orthodox runaways that Attria interviews see burgeoning sexuality as one of the reasons for leaving their families and communities of origin (Attria, 2008).

Male study participants reported that they were taught that giving in to sexual drives

meant the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) was winning and taking over their soul. They said they were given little factual information and although they were told not to engage in masturbation or have any sexual relations prior to marriage, they were not advised about what to do when they felt sexual impulses. . . . A few of the study participants also linked the lack of information to same sex contact/abuse during the yeshiva years (Attia, 2008, p. 81).

This cultural norm was certainly difficult and stressful for the young men who were interviewed and who left their home communities — but what are we to make of those who did not? Are they necessarily living an unhealthy sexuality if they are comfortable not having sexual contact outside of marriage, under the strictures of Ultra-Orthodox Judaism? How does this complicate our own understandings of sexual health?

Davidman and Greil (2007) conducted a series of interviews with formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews, exploring their “processes and narratives of identity change.” They argue that, unlike conversion into religious groups, individuals *leaving* have no easy scripts to guide them through their transition. The article uses a case-study to explore some of the themes of those accounts including “scriptlessness, anomie, and a lack of a readily available language with which to tell one’s story” (Davidman and Greil, 2007, p. 203). They argue that people leaving “new religious movements” with the help of the anti-cult movement often “tell ‘captivity narratives’ that employ metaphors of warfare and hostage rescue.” In this framework, individuals leaving the Ultra-Orthodox world seem to “construct narratives that emphasize their individual heroism in surviving departure from a community that emphasized how leaving would involve personal and group danger.” In what ways does sexuality play into an individual’s story of leaving the Ultra-Orthodox world? How might someone experience or imagine sexual health in a setting of

“scriptlessness” and “anomie” which might accompany their transition out of a *halachically* organized, closed and traditional religious community?

### **Transitions Out — Other Fundamentalist Religious Communities Experiences**

A Mormon himself, and a Divinity school student, Seth Payne’s (2007) paper explores the dynamics of ex-Mormon’s narratives about leaving the Latter Day Saint (LDS) church. Payne outlines three general types of people who disaffiliate from the church: 1. defectors, 2. whistleblowers, and 3. apostates. He defined *defectors* as those who leave quietly, without making a public issue of their departure. *Whistleblowers*, Payne suggests, may try to reform the organization they leave in a public protest. *Apostates* will not just leave, but ally themselves with an oppositional organization. He also explores the general narrative arc of online storytelling done on some common websites for former-Mormons. He breaks down their stories into the following segments (1) Introduction – Establishing Credibility; (2) Statement of Disenfranchisement or Detachment – “The Apology”; (3) Doctrinal Problems – “The Laundry List”; and (4) The Testimony – “Out of Captivity,” and uses those sections to map out the themes folks will explore in their narrative process. Payne argues that “these exit narratives describe a process driven by cultural estrangement and supported and perpetuated by LDS doctrinal and historical problems” (Payne, 2007, p. 32). Seeing these narratives in a tradition of “apostate” narratives he identifies “feelings of captivity and eventual freedom and almost universally act as a warning against the dangers and ills of Mormonism.” Payne writes that though their structure is artificial, the feelings they convey and the process of disaffiliation they describe are genuine. It may be that formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews will use similar tropes and embody similar dynamics in their own processes.

In a 1994 study, Brent wrote a paper about Protestant Fundamentalists who left. It is a qualitative study compiled based on interviews with seven individuals and attempts to classify the steps of transition. He presents the following “sequential and essential phases” to the transition (Brent 1994). They are: (1) Participation in the Fundamentalist Context; (2) The Initial Disillusionment; (3) Tolerating the Tradition; (4) Leaving the Tradition; (4) The Emotion-Laden Aftermath; (5) Establishing New Horizons; (6) Living With Problematic Residue. This is a very useful outline that may help organize the narratives of formerly-Ultra-Orthodox Jews as well as formerly Fundamentalist Protestants, however, it is unlikely that those categories are as sequential and linear as he proposes. Additionally useful is Brent’s suggestion, quoting Evans and Berent’s 1988 book *Fundamentalism and Its Heartbreaks* that the process of leaving Fundamentalism as a kind of emotional and psychological trauma in its own right which is one of the assumptions of this study as well. Though his distillation of the stages of the process of transition and the subsequent challenges befalling former Fundamentalists are both very useful models, his paper utilizes a very small sample. Additionally, Brent is not very specific about his methodology, which may put into question its reliability.

However, Brent’s general notions align well with a 1994 paper by James Moyers outlining some of the psychological issues that former fundamentalist Christians might experience, as Moyers reminds us, “they are subject to the same pathogenic factors as everyone else” (Moyers, 1994, p. 192) and they often struggle with the psychological effects of having left their home community long after their transition seems to be at an end. Moyers sees that “Long after fundamentalists condemnations of non-marital sex have been consciously rejected, sexual inhibitions, compulsions, frustrations and guilt may persist” (Moyers, 1994, p. 192), yet does not



go into detail about how or what those challenges might be or why. This seems to be a gap in the literature about formerly Fundamentalist Christians as well as Formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews.

Moyers' paper also recommends some treatment suggestions for clinicians working with formerly Fundamentalist Protestants. He proposes using a developmental model for helping people contextualize their Fundamentalism as a life stage that they have outgrown but a part of their treatment needs to acknowledge that they may not have a map or a guidebook after their transition, leaving individuals feeling without an anchor. This idea parallels the above idea about "scriptlessness" from Davidman and Greil (2007). Moyers also offers the idea, shared by the author of this paper, that "fundamentalism in its essence is more an outlook on life than it is a set of doctrines," (1994, p. 191) which is a part of why works on Fundamentalist Christianity and Mormonism can be useful in thinking about formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews as well. He also advises clinicians working with this population to support their process of questioning, which shows the clinician's commitment to a different kind of orientation than the Fundamentalist experience of their upbringing (Moyers, 1994). In this way, clinicians support an individual's own searching as a part of the process, empowering the individual to find their own questions and their own answers (Moyers, 1994).

Also particularly relevant to this study is Brent's reference to Richard Yao, the founder of Fundamentalists Anonymous who listed the following challenges befalling formerly Fundamentalist individuals. These are (1) Loneliness and isolation; (2) Sexual difficulties; (3) Fear that evil will befall them or their loved ones; (4) Chronic inability to trust people; (5) Bitterness and depression over lost time; (6) Occasional lapses into "Fundamentalist consciousness"; (7) Feeling of great letdown; (8) Inability to talk about past involvement and background; (9) Fear of harassment or persecution by Fundamentalists. Each of these dynamics

is likely to appear in formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews as well. It is very likely that each community of formerly Fundamentalist individuals whether it be Later Day Saint, Amish, Muslim or other kinds of Protestant would have their own culturally specific incarnations of these difficulties.

This literature review clearly demonstrates the need for a good deal more research into the relationship of formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews to issues of sexuality. This very initial study may raise more questions than it can answer at this early stage, but it is clear that clinical social workers and other professionals working with formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews (and others of similarly fundamentalist backgrounds) will need to begin to work with these questions. This review of the research pertaining to the question “How do formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews identify healthy sexuality and their needs developing or maintaining it after their transition into the secular world?” In doing this, we looked at three major ideas: (1) defining Ultra-Orthodox sexuality; (2) defining “healthy sexuality” and (3) addressing the experiences of transition out of Fundamentalist contexts, both Jews and non-Jewish and attempted to relate those themes back to ideas of sexuality.

## CHAPTER III

### Methodology

This study is an attempt to answer the following question: How do formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews identify healthy sexuality and their needs developing or maintaining it after their transition into the secular world?" The first inquiry of its kind, this study utilizes exploratory methods. Exploratory methods are generally used for learning how people navigate the particular setting or phenomenon under question and the meanings they give their own behaviors (Engel and Schutt, 2013). This methodology gives a researcher a chance to learn, colloquially, "what's going on" in any given situation (Engel and Schutt, 2013). Often these kinds of qualitative studies are good at capturing a breadth of knowledge (Engel and Schutt, 2013) that can be both subtle and complex but sometimes the forest can be lost for the trees, giving too much attention to a few specific cases without being as able to generalize. This study pursues the ways in which formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews experience their sexuality and is interested in both gathering the facts about their experiences as well as *how* they understand those experiences. An initial foray into this material, this study will also point out some relevant themes for future research attempting to understand the needs of formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews in developing and or maintaining healthy sexuality.

Qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and a subsequent thematic analysis, are most appropriate for a study of this kind. Qualitative methods are most useful when the object of the study is exploration and description (Engell and Schutt, 2013). For the purposes of

this research, the complexity of individuals and their sexual beliefs, identities and behaviors is best captured in their own words, allowing their own understandings to come through in a thematic analysis (Engel and Schutt, 2013). A study on this smaller scale may be particularly useful for meso-level program directors and micro-level practitioners (Drisko, 1997), whereas policy makers might be more invested in quantitative studies on a broader scale.

Though there may be a need for more quantitative research and studies of a bigger scope, this study is an initial exploration of a topic not well explored in the academic world. Though recent articles in the Jewish press have identified the problems with silence around sex in the Ultra-Orthodox world (Chetrit, 2014) or the unwillingness of Orthodox Rabbis to talk to boys about masturbation (Gellberg, 2014), or offering suggestions for raising sexually healthy Orthodox girls (Rosenbaum, 2014) or detailing sex abuse in Satmar Williamsburg (Yarrow, 2013) there is very little addressing the transition process and sexuality.

Interestingly enough, as this project was unfolding, two formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews were developing their own survey to assess their own community and the relationship of women in the “OTD” community and their experiences of sexual assault. This seems to demonstrate the relevance of this research, both for academic purposes and for individuals within the community. In fact, my willingness to work with these two woman as they developed their own survey likely provided me with more access to my own research subjects. It also allowed me the opportunity to begin with a sense of the needs of formerly Ultra-Orthodox people themselves, rather than simply imposing my own values. I believe it was also important to my participants that they knew that I was Jewish, that I expressed some knowledge and fluency about *halachic* Judaism. A few were interested to know about my own upbringing and background, which I shared with them as I deemed appropriate.

There is very limited extant research about this community in general, most of it collected informally through the work of a community-based organization in New York City called Footsteps, an organization working to support formerly Ultra-Orthodox individuals in New York City, or other-not-for-profits. This research was conducted with their informal assistance and some participants were reassured to learn that I was friendly with the staff and knew about Footstep's programming. They were helpful especially in the initial phases of envisioning this project and provided the researcher with access to their listserv for sampling purposes. Footstep staff members have expressed their interest in utilizing these results in order to help to strengthen their programming.

Although this is a very specific study of a very specific population, some of the circumstance and experiences may be transferable. For example, at great risk for isolation and poverty, other religious and social groups with an insular structure may have similar dynamics. It may be that by studying this population we can gain more insight into the needs of other groups of people leaving closed religious communities (e.g. Later-Day Saints, the Amish, fundamentalist Muslims, etc). It is also possible to draw a parallel with LGBTQI sexual development as both groups often find themselves attempting to navigate sexuality without having had relevant, contextually specific sexual education or peer/parental guidance. There is a lack of research about these transitions broadly but especially related to the intersection of sexuality and transition from these closed religious communities into the broader, secular world.

### **Sampling and Recruitment**

This study includes a sample of individuals who self-identify as formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews. For the purposes of our interviews, they needed to be English speaking, though some do not speak English as their mother tongue. This limitation was necessary in order to conduct my

research, as I am an English speaker with some command of modern Hebrew and very limited Yiddish and Aramaic, languages that are very fundamental to the self-expression of formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews. Some ideas in the interview were explored in Aramaic, Hebrew or Yiddish but they were often clarified in English. In order to meet the inclusion criteria participants needed to be over 18 years old at the time of our interview in order to ensure that they were adults for the purposes of research. Participants either met me in person or made time to speak to me over Skype. Each participant was also asked about their community of origin to learn more about their personal histories and to see if there were patterns that could be drawn, in a larger study, about the different kinds of experiences of different kinds of formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews. Questions were also asked about marital status in order to assess their access to religiously sanctioned sexual expression and sexual education. Their sexuality and gender identity was also explored in an organic way, using open-ended questions. All of my participants currently live in the United States, though most had spent significant time living in Israel.

In order to recruit participants this study utilized a non-probability method of sampling called the *snowball method*, where group members may be able to connect the researcher with each other (Engell and Schutt, 2013). This methodology is especially useful when there is a marginalized population that may know each other, but a more randomized method would not easily grant access to study participants who might have been otherwise difficult to reach or somewhat underground (Cohen and Arelli, 2011). By using the qualified participants' own connections, I was able to generate a sample of formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews. However, one of the limitations of snowball sampling is that the researcher cannot ensure a sample that fully represents that category of people (Engell and Schutt, 2013), in this case, formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews. In order to recruit potential participants I utilized my own personal networks

through email and Facebook and worked with Footsteps (a copy of that text is attached as Appendix B). Interviews were coordinated either through email or by phone. They were asked to read and sign the Informed Consent Agreement (Appendix C). Before data collection began, a thorough Human Subject Review application was submitted and approved by the Smith College School for Social Work Institutional Review Board (see Appendix E for the HSR approval letter).

### **Informed Consent Procedures**

In order to preserve the confidentiality of the participants, recordings and interview notes were identified with a pseudonym. In addition, consent forms, recordings, and interview notes are and will be kept locked (either digitally protected with passwords or in paper form, physically locked up) during the thesis process and for three years thereafter, in accordance with federal regulations. After such time, I will either maintain the material in its secure location or destroy it. In the written thesis, demographic information is only used to reflect the subject pool in the aggregate. In this way, participants will not be identifiable in the written work. Finally, the transcriber used in this study signed a confidentiality agreement.

### **Data Collection**

The attached Appendix A contains some of the open-ended interview questions that I asked my participants. Interviews that are “open-ended” are useful for gathering information about new fields of research and are intended to facilitate information as broadly as possible without potentially limiting the responses (Engell and Schutt 2013). The openness and the potential for broad and creative responses to the questions is a strength of open-ended interviews, yet they are limiting as they are quite affected by the individual personalities of the people

answering the questions. They also can produce a great deal of data, including a high risk for potentially irrelevant data (Engell and Schutt, 2013).

The data for this study was collected between January 2014 and March 2014 using a semi-structured in-person or Skype interview. Some people signed their form in person after having received it first electronically. Interviews were recorded on a password protected iPhone using the “Voice Memos” app and uploaded onto a password protected MacBook Pro using a pseudonym. Once they were uploaded to the MacBook they were deleted from the phone. They were transferred to the transcriber by way of Dropbox which was also password protected. The demographic data I gathered was kept according to their pseudonym.

### **Risks and Benefits of Participation**

Some study participants may have found that these interview questions could trigger negative thoughts and feelings like guilt, shame, embarrassment or sadness. It is also possible that these conversations would trigger some of the conflicts they may experience between the world of Ultra-Orthodoxy and the secular world. However, it was my hope that this study would serve as a chance for formerly Ultra-Orthodox individuals to continue to make meaning and explore their own transitions out of their community of origin. By participating in this study, interviewees had the opportunity to contribute to a neglected area of research, to convey the need for Masters in Social Work programs to prepare their students for work with formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews, and to help us refine our definition of “healthy sexuality.”

### **Analysis**

The open-ended interview questions were structured so that I could elicit unique information about individuals’ personal histories, especially their experiences of sexuality and transition from Ultra-Orthodoxy. These questions were both directed and broad, addressing a



range of themes including facts about their family and community of origin, experiences of sexuality in their community of origin, the process of leaving and their feelings about defining, developing and maintaining healthy sexuality at present in the secular world. The in-depth interviews allow these individuals a voice in their own experience of being study subjects. These interviews, once transcribed, become texts to which I applied a thematic analysis to — coding each interview and distilling the themes that will be addressed in the following Findings chapter.

Thematic analysis is thought of as a fundamental, widely used and theoretically flexible method of qualitative research (Braun & Clark, 2006). It is a way of identifying, reporting, generalizing and analyzing patterns found in research in order to identify themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). In this process of analysis I followed multiple coding steps. Firstly, to generate my initial codes, I coded the first three transcripts quite thoroughly. At that stage I also shared excerpts of anonymized transcripts with two colleagues and my advisor, which they also coded thoroughly. In this way we attempted to increase validity and enhance reliability between researchers. At that stage I coded the remainder of the transcripts, applying the more relevant codes to all of the data. Some of the codes included concepts like “modesty / *tzniut*,” “Ultra-Orthodox sex-ed,” and “desire.” Then I began to search for thematic resonance from my “critical realist” theoretical orientation, believing that individuals create their own social worlds within real structures (Houston, 2001) and attempting to understand what some of those realities are. This was an iterative process of “continuous meaning making and progressive focusing” throughout where I, as the researcher, drove a process of attempting to distill patterns, themes and useful categories (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009, p. 77) by continually asking what the data was telling me and reflecting it back to my research question and then engaging with the relationship between those two pieces. Braun and Clark (2006) are careful to remind us that the

process for looking for themes across a dataset is an active one, themes do not merely “emerge,” the researcher is looking for patterns that help to relate to their research question.

## **Discussion**

As with any study of this kind, there are limitations. The primary difficulties assumed about qualitative research are that it is difficult to validate externally. Triangulation during the coding process was an attempt at increasing the validity of my research. With a sample this small, and one gathered through snowball sampling there is a question about generalizability. There is obviously a bias in non-random sampling. Because people came to me through word of mouth, through friends of people who know me and were self-selecting, it is very possible that there are certain traits that are over-represented. Additionally, qualitative works are often criticized for being too variable depending on the uniqueness of the researcher. While this may be true, I have done the best I can to name the ways in which I might be a very specific person with whom formerly Ultra-Orthodox individuals might relate. It would be interesting to imagine doing this work with a team of researchers of different genders — though I did not experience any difficulties as a result, there were certainly moments where I was very aware of my own female gender presentation and the way that may have opened specific doors with some individuals and potentially closed some doors with other individuals.

## CHAPTER IV

### Findings

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jew's relationships to sex and sexuality. The interviews I conducted were an attempt to answer the following research question: How do formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews identify healthy sexuality and their needs developing or maintaining it after their transition into the secular world? There is a great deal of material about Ultra-Orthodox Jewish norms about sexuality but not about individuals in transition.

#### Demographics

This chapter presents data collected from 11 interviews with formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews from *Hassidic* and *Yeshivish* backgrounds. General demographic information was collected from each of the participants in conversation. This addressed their communities of origin, their marital status before and after transition, and their age. The participants include six men and five women, they range in age from early 20s to late 30s with five participants in their twenties and six in their thirties. Seven were raised in *Hassidic* households including three Chabad, two Vishnitz, Satmar and Belz; the other four were raised *Yeshivish*. Ten of my participants were raised in the United States and one was raised in Israel though the majority have moved between two countries in their lifetimes. The majority of my participants left the ultra-Orthodox

community as single people, though three were engaged, and two were married and subsequently divorced or separated as a part of the process of leaving.

## **Findings**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to learn about individual experiences of sexuality before, during and after their transitions. These are not concrete, objective times which can be easily demarcated — did a transition begin the first time someone trimmed a beard, wore brightly colored tights, read a secular book, ate in a non-kosher restaurant, bought a pair of jeans, or simply decided that they wanted to go to college even if they had never spoken it aloud? But in as much as it can be captured, this study looks at these formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews own experiences of sexuality in their transitions and attempts to define “healthy sexuality.”

When I am addressing transition I am interested in detailing the process by which an individual moves between the Ultra-Orthodox community of their upbringing into the secular world. This process parallels the experience of immigration for though there might not be a dramatic geographical relocation there are other kinds of dislocation and cultural change. These are partly about language, many of them having been raised in non-English speaking homes, but are also about much more. Most formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews did not have sanctioned access to pop-culture like Elvis, Disney movies, The New York Times, or other iconic cultural referents, so learning to navigate the secular world is a process of assimilation and acculturation into a foreign culture.

In the first section of this chapter, I identify three major themes related to definitions of healthy sexuality that emerged in my analysis of the interview transcripts. The three themes are the following: *1. rejecting past models 2. exploring personal sexuality and 3. integrating desire and expression.* The second section of this chapter will also explore the context and development

of these definitions, focusing on their experiences growing up Ultra-Orthodox and the subsequent obstacles they encountered in cultivating a “healthy” sexuality. In the third and final section of the chapter, I offer some further observations pertaining to their learning processes of developing healthy sexuality.

## **Part 1: Defining Healthy Sexuality**

### **Rejecting Past Models**

In attempting to define “healthy sexuality,” these formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews used their own experiences as a guide. Many of the individuals interviewed contextualized their current relationship to sexuality as a rejection of their past Ultra-Orthodox models. One woman described her sexuality as a place of self-exploration where she can “do whatever the fuck I want,” which felt exciting and healing coming from a place of “don’t do this, don’t do that.” Leaving the Ultra-Orthodox world of strictly bounded rules felt liberating and powerful.

Leaving behind old concepts of modesty, the laws of family purity or sexual exclusivity, many formerly Ultra-Orthodox individuals thought of their sexuality through their transition as a renunciation of their old world. Seeing her past as a negative model to reject, another individual spoke of her own desire to “get it right” when it comes to sexuality and gender. She described thinking about her sexuality at present as “fueled by justice and right thinking” and “an insistence that they [Ultra-Orthodox Jews] were doing it wrong.” For her, this meant rejecting extreme gender segregation, modesty norms and patriarchal values and replacing them with new values more in line with her chosen secular world. She went on to describe ways in which her current sexual practices are in dialogue with her Ultra-Orthodox upbringing, yet rejecting many of the Ultra-Orthodox assumptions about appropriate sexuality. Her construction of her present sexual life is about righting past wrongs and doing “it” differently than she was raised to do.

Sexuality was an important place where formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews explored their own identities during their process of transition from Ultra-Orthodoxy. Some of those outlets were ways of closing doors to their old lives and opening doors into their new, non-Ultra-Orthodox lives. This was particularly true in thinking about “first times”: first conversation across gender, first touch across gender, first kisses, first intercourse. Each experience enabled individuals to mark their process of transition away from the norms and values of their community of origin and into the new world. This theme will be addressed again later in this paper. These experiences were often exciting, confusing, dangerous, and a way of asserting mastery over a part of themselves that had long been disowned.

One woman described that it was her instinctual understanding that sex itself was not healthy. She described the notion that sexuality could only become healthy in service of procreation and contained within heterosexual marriage as it had been taught to her in her Ultra-Orthodox childhood. Her own attempts at trying to develop what she sees now as a “healthy” sexuality that is non-marital, non-procreative and directed at partners of different genders is in opposition to the world she came from and a new way of asserting herself as no longer Ultra-Orthodox.

### **Exploring Personal Sexually**

Many formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews talked about the importance of knowing their own desires as fundamental towards developing their own sense of healthy sexuality. One woman described that she had found her own way towards a healthy sexuality that worked for her. She continued “it’s very much about who I am as a person and who I am sexually, and maybe that is really what healthy sexuality is, about understanding who are you as a person.” Her sense of healthy sexuality is very much about knowing her own self and understanding her sexuality as

specifically her own. She included in her definition a sense that she was responsible for her partners' own health as well; refining her own individualized construction of health with a relational focus.

For some participants, "healthy sexuality" was the opportunity to acknowledge sexual feelings and feel some permission to act on them. For one individual, healthy sexuality was only possible within a framework where he was allowed to make mistakes. Many others also emphasized a process of exploration, experimentation and new developments. Another participant defined healthy sexuality as knowing his own body and feeling good in the act itself; another person described her own process of healing around sexuality as learning to be open, comfortable and really share herself with another.

These are individualistic perspectives potentially construed in reaction to a more communally-oriented understanding of sexuality from their Ultra-Orthodox upbringing which deemphasizes individual desires. In the Ultra-Orthodox world the publicly accepted norm is that sexual pleasure is not acknowledged in the public realm and sexuality is mostly invisible. Non-sexual physical contact between differently gendered family members is rare and physical pleasure mostly unacknowledged. When sex happens, it is in service of procreation and the possibilities for pleasure may be deemphasized. Sexual desire may be talked about as "*yetzer hara*," (evil inclination) something that may exist (in men) but needs to be controlled within the constraints of marriage and *taharat hamishpacha* (the laws of family purity). Sexual desire is triggered by women's bodies, yet women themselves do not desire and are thought not to have *yetzer hara*. For formerly Ultra-Orthodox men and women to acknowledge their own sexuality, desire and interest in acting on it is a dramatic departure from the values of their community of

origin. For women this is an especially radical move, as they were told that they had no sexual autonomy or identity of their own.

### **Integration Between Desire and Expression**

Once they were able to notice and acknowledge their own sexual feelings, participants were attentive to the possibility of having choices for sexual expression, especially choices within a broader frame of possibility than before. One participant used the idea of “integration” of parts of herself in the present moment as a way of defining healthy sexuality. For her, it was a sense of comfort in her sexuality as a place of creativity, self-expression, dancing and play. For one man, healthy sexuality was about honesty and a lack of inhibition to express his needs and wants. Feeling something internally, understanding it as arousal or desire and then feeling a wider range of choice about how to express (or not express it) was a fundamental part of their understanding of healthy sexuality.

For another, healthy sexuality was understood as “sex positivity,” a sense that after ensuring safer-sex practices (using protections against sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies) and ensuring consent, all sexual expression is permissible. That individual also included “GGG,” a coinage developed by sex-advice columnist and podcast host Dan Savage which stands for “good, giving and game” — “good in bed, giving equal time and equal pleasure and game for anything within reason” (Savage, 2007) in his definition of healthy sexuality. He drew his definition from popular culture and media that he would have had little access to while still Ultra-Orthodox.

A sense of “healthy sexuality” then, is one that integrates needs, wants, desires and expression. The precise experiences of “healthy sexuality” seemed to be very individually constructed, but individuals seemed to agree that it depended on an ability to recognize one’s



own needs and desires and find ways of behaving that were conducive to achieving those needs on their own terms.

## **Part 2: Cultivating Healthy Sexuality**

### **Enacting the Transition**

For many research participants sex became a place where they enacted their transition process. One woman described feeling that by having sex she could demarcate herself as having left her Ultra-Orthodox religious community. It was a way of “following a script,” of doing what she was previously not supposed to do. Another woman described having sex as a “cheap shot” way of leaving the Ultra-Orthodox world and asserted that that was not the way she chose to enact her departure, though she certainly knew others who did. Though some people were sexually active before formally thinking of themselves as no longer Ultra-Orthodox or having departed their community of origin, if they were unmarried, all of their sexual behaviors were unsanctioned and considered sinful. Some people were engaged in sexual activity that was “everything but,” setting aside penile-vaginal intercourse as off-limits.

For another woman, thinking about her virginity was of critical importance in her Ultra-Orthodox life and much less significant in the world she moved into, yet it did demarcate a way in which it would be difficult to move back. No longer being a virgin did change her status within the Ultra-Orthodox world, potentially limiting her range of marriageable partners based on the strict application of Jewish law. Virginity for Ultra-Orthodox people, especially women, is a way of “not going back.” Having intercourse creates a break between worlds. Though the act itself had different meaning to different people, being a virgin or not was a way of identifying with one community or the other.

Similar to the way virginity could be used as a tool for distinguishing between past and future selves, sex more generally could be used as a way of sorting through an individual's identities. Another interviewee remarked on her experience of forcing herself to have sex with men at a time when she was questioning her attraction to women. She remembers that experience as punishing herself for her desires by sleeping with men she did not like. Her punishment was a kind of rebellion at the same time as it was a private acting out. She seemed not to perceive her deviance as enjoyable (as we will see in other examples) but instead as a punishment. By forcing herself to sleep with people she was not sure she desired while trying to explore desire with women she was acting out in a multiplicity of ways.

#### **After the Boundaries Come Down — What Are the Rules?**

One dynamic facing formerly Ultra-Orthodox individuals was the difficulty they experienced trying to decide what they wanted to do sexually. Even if they had shed the restrictive boundaries of their upbringing it seemed that they did not know what choices they had available to them or the right questions to ask. Some people identified not knowing their own bodies and their own desires. Many of them described their urge to find “rules” for appropriate behavior. This may have been a kind of carry-over from Ultra-Orthodoxy that there are clearly delineated rules for behavior of what is acceptable and what is not. Within an Ultra-Orthodox upbringing — “permissible” and “sinful” exist in clear opposition with little ambiguity. One person explained that he felt a kind of security in the Ultra-Orthodox framework around dating and sexual behavior. He described desiring the “black and white rules and authority figures” that helped him navigate:

what's allowed and what's not ... if there's any area that I missed about the Jewish world is that the dating and relationship things were so much easier. It was so much

more straightforward, it was so less confusing.

There are a several ways in which this need for rules and structure play out in experiences of confusion for individuals who were formerly Ultra-Orthodox. These difficulties were reflected in how to express desire, identify sexual partners and decide which kinds of behaviors to engage in.

Not understanding the rules but also constantly being told that there are no rules caused participants a great deal of stress and confusion. One man found it hard to appropriately express his sexual interest. He expressed his frustration, asking when he is allowed to express interest in a woman sexually. He used the example of a woman walking on a beach in a bikini, saying “if I openly express [that she is sexually provocative] and it’s not welcome by her, then I’m labeled a pervert” but if his attention is welcome, it is permissible. His sense of sexuality is still governed by a sense of appropriate and modest behavior in women; seeing a woman in a bikini is necessarily sexual and invites sexual attention. For this man, expressing his desire and interest was fraught with possibility for discomfort and anxiety. He continued by asking how he was supposed to know the difference. He understood the ways that the cultural norms of his upbringing are in conflict with the cultural norms of the secular world. This comment illustrates the process of transition in seeing the conflict. This is not a linear process of transition where one world’s norms are substituted for another, rather some ideas persist in overlapping ways. Some may be left behind, whereas others may persist forever. For this man, and for others as well, the process is continually unfolding about what to maintain and what to reject. Another man explored a similar tension between being a “creeper or a player” and tried to identify the difference between them. Without the context others might have, these individuals struggle with their confusion around appropriate expressions of their desires that will not have negative ramifications.

There are specific ways in which formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews seem particularly mystified by trying to relate to individuals across gender difference. The difference between platonic relationships and sexual ones seemed incomprehensible for people early in their transitions. For one young woman her first experiences of platonic relationships with men were confusing, describing that at the beginning it was difficult for her to gauge “what a guy wants when he talks to a girl.” Coming from a sex-segregated environment she wondered “If a guy already has a girlfriend, then why is he laughing and making jokes with me? Is he flirting or is that just normal?” Confusion about friendly interactions with individuals perceived as the opposite sex may relate back to the segregation of the sexes in Ultra-Orthodox communities. Another man experienced a kind of similar bewilderment about casual contact with women. As he described it even though he was no longer Ultra-Orthodox, he still felt uncomfortable talking with women:

Because every girl, you think like ‘oh, my gosh, oh, my gosh, I’m speaking with a girl.’ Like ‘oh, my gosh, maybe we are going to get married.’ ‘No, you just spoke with a girl.’ But ... but it’s a big thing.

This particular quote mirrors a theme that we will return to later in this paper of the “domino effect” of sexuality, but disorientation about the meaning of casual cross-gender contact was a frequent theme among these formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews. The participants expressed their lack of understanding at the difference between friendly interaction and sexual interaction.

Similar to the above difficulty telling the difference between friendly interactions and sexual ones, the transition from a closed community into the broader world brought with it some expectations about the casualness of sexuality. As one interviewee reminisced:

my idea of college was like these just kind of like nightly, if not constant, orgies ...

this is idea, like if you're going to college, of course, you're having sex like constantly, you know. And maybe once in a while you read a book, but that's just to like to you know, to keep the cover up.

His exaggeration points to another kind of misunderstanding that he experienced in moving into the broader world. From their Ultra-Orthodox upbringing there was a sense that sex in the secular world was everywhere, uncontained and ever-present. However, in their actual experience of secular world things was not their experience causing confusion.

Formerly Ultra-Orthodox people expected easy access to sexual experiences, yet often individuals had a difficult time finding sex partners. Generally speaking, they were poor at setting themselves up for the kinds of sexual experiences they were interested in, not fully understanding the social codes for sexual expression. For one man this was as simple as not understanding why he was not chosen as a sex partner:

And I was like ... if they [male friends of his] could do it, why can't I? And I was friendly with that girl. I'm like, wait a minute. I know that girl liked me and then she has sex with this [other] guy?

Deciphering desirability and sexual attractiveness without a "native speaker's" sense of the language was confusing for formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews. Participants struggled to express desire and interest in socially acceptable and effective ways. One woman had decided that she was interested in having sex, yet had difficulty "picking up guys." She told this story:

I'd see someone on the subway, and I'd say, "do you want my number?" Seriously, that's what I'd say. And people that would just kind of walk away, kind of slink away, and be like "yeah, sure." I'd even say things to men, like "hi, do you want to have sex?" And apparently, you know, like when you say that to a guy that's kind of

normal, they actually think it's a little strange.

Learning how to get what she wanted was no small challenge. Navigating the unspoken codes of courtship and attraction were awkward and embarrassing. These dynamics played out in public while dating, causing anxiety about paying on dates or behind closed doors where people did not know how to say no to sexual experience they did not want, an idea we will return to later in this paper. Many people articulated their desire for rules to help them navigate perplexing realities that they had difficulty deciphering.

Moving from the world of the Ultra-Orthodox often came with unforeseen complications. Once people shed strict interpretation of *halachic* ideas they made a certain break with Ultra-Orthodoxy, but individuals change their level of observance and still be caught up in Ultra-Orthodox thinking. One participant remembered even his process of moving from Ultra-Orthodoxy to Orthodoxy was fraught. He recalled that he was living between worlds, generating a great deal of conflict for him and his then-fiancé as he tried to live a Modern Orthodox life but maintained a great deal of Ultra-Orthodox thinking about sexuality and relationships. For him it was not the *halachic* or formal ways in which his thinking was challenging, but the more cultural “stuff” that lurked in the background about sexual roles, cross-gender friendships and more.

Fascinatingly, though, one man argued that the secular world was in a sense similar to the Ultra-Orthodox world about dating and sex, saying:

So they had first date, second date, and third date, you need to make decision if you go to the bed or not. No, I want more time. What's the problem with you? Right? So it's like no, you can't have more time. And even if you take more time, it's like an issue, so he doesn't kiss me, or like you ... you have these tensions, so you have this pressure, so you do things, not exactly when you want to do them, but you do it

because you know that you need to do it, because this is a spiel, this is a game. According to this man, the rules of the secular world are just as Ultra-Orthodox as the Ultra-Orthodox world's rules, but learning to navigate them was the real challenge. The rules may be unspoken, but there are rules nonetheless, leading to added confusion and frustration among formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews.

### **After the Boundaries Come Down — Choosing What To Do**

Similar to the ways in which one individual described his sexual interest in *all* of his female friends, formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews had difficulty making distinctions between what they might have perceived as available to them versus what they might actually have desired. One woman found herself asking “if everything sexual has been labeled sin and bad for you and also pleasurable and you take away the sin, does that make everything pleasurable?” Coming from a world split between permissible and sinful decided outside of themselves, it was a new challenge to make sense of their own desires internally and make their own decisions. The world they came from was “either / or,” with no ambiguity and no in-between. In her framework, anything sinful was also linked to pleasure. But by rejecting the concept of sin and forbiddenness, the remains a question about everything being as pleasurable as it “ought to be.” Unlike the other woman who used her deviance as punishment, this woman described her deviance as increasing her pleasure, an experience echoed by others.

A few individuals had learned that just because something is possible or someone is available, does not necessitate it be pursued. This same woman continued by sharing that there are “so many sexual experiences that you *could* have” that “you are really not going to like” and wanted to give others permission that even if all of the “boundaries have come down” there are still experiences they do not need to have. This idea seems to be one developed over time, for a

few people described an earlier feeling of urgency, feeling that if they did not take an opportunity when it was presented, they might never have another chance.

The transition out of Ultra-Orthodoxy also made possible new ideas and new choices about gender. Moving from the extremely separate gender roles of Ultra-Orthodoxy into the secular world gave people chances to re-envision their own gender performance. This was partly about dating and also a broader sense of possibilities for desirability and attractiveness — one woman described wearing men's underwear, others described keeping their hair short. One woman described the importance of her sense of herself as a mother and as a sexual being concurrently, ideas that seemed incongruous in her Ultra-Orthodox upbringing. In describing his early dating process one man found himself disgusted by the models he saw for himself in secular masculinity.

Like, seriously, I was disgust[ed] by men. Like why you ... you can't be sensitive and ... and why you don't speak about ... about spirituality and why do you speak like that about girls? Like, what's wrong with you, man? So I never felt ... so if ... and when I was *Chassidish*, I wanted to be friend[s] with women, here it was *like I am a woman*.

This man was able to reflect upon his own gender identity through the process of his transition and make new comparisons and come to new understandings. Dating was not just about looking around and exploring desire but also about trying to explore one's own identity in the process — gender and otherwise. Sexuality and gender performance were intimately linked. Both could be explored at the same time and with some of the same people, leading to new kinds of self-expression. Individuals were choosing sexual behaviors to engage in and learning potentially new ways of being in the world simultaneously.



## **The Power of Sexuality**

The Ultra-Orthodox world draws clear boundaries around sexuality in order to contain its explosive power, yet individual's experiences of the secular world tended not to confirm this assumption. One man described his sense of women in his Ultra-Orthodox youth as "sex-bombs," a dynamic that did not carry over into his secular life. One participant reflected that she found herself somewhat disappointed by her lived experiences of sexuality after her Ultra-Orthodox upbringing. So much of her early learning about sex was about the ways it was "explosive" and uncontrollable, yet, when she actually did begin to be sexual she felt that it was a "let down." While she was religious she had felt that "coming like one inch close to it [sex] was so exciting" and more recently she had felt that sex was "disappointing, a lot of the time, because it doesn't live up to like what they claimed its power would be." Another man spoke about his difficulty unlearning the assumption that women should not want sex and any woman who does is necessarily "promiscuous or a slut." Unlike what they were taught, sex did not have hugely explosive power over men and women.

## **The Seriousness of Sexuality**

After the extremes posed to them from their upbringing, Ultra-Orthodox Jews were still able to be critical of the secular world's expressions of sexuality. Some of them articulated feelings that secular sexuality lacked intimacy, seriousness, holiness and sensitivity. One person described his sense that, maybe in the Ultra-Orthodox world, people end up in bed before they are emotionally ready to engage in sexual activity, but in the secular world too "physicality come[s] before you have any feelings." Someone else echoed this thought

some people in the secular community who treat sex like it's ... candy, like it doesn't have any weight. Like its just this thing you can throw at something...it doesn't feel

deeply meaningful and it feels like something that can be exposed, but in its exposure, becomes very superficial. And I think there is some value in caring for your sexuality and holding it, not necessarily private, but like honoring the intimacy of a connection and what happens there.

Interested in a sexuality that still preserves some of the sense of “holiness” or intimacy that they were taught as children, some participants, both men and women, articulated that they were able to be present with their partners, were not interested in cheating and felt that they had been raised with a higher expectation of devotion and commitment than their secular peers. Formerly Ultra-Orthodox individuals expressed that they missed the kind of clarity that they experienced within the Ultra-Orthodox world, knowing that in that context “you go for a date and you speak straight to the point. This is what I want, this is kind of a family I want.” When not dating in Ultra-Orthodoxy, there was less clarity about what dating or sexual expression means.

### **Integrating Past and Present Values**

A few women critiqued secular sexuality through the lens of *taharat hamishpacha* [the laws of family purity]. One woman suggested that the “on and off dynamic” of Ultra-Orthodox sexuality preserved a kind of specialness that secular sexuality did not have. Another woman also found this “sometimes on, sometimes off” dynamic in Ultra-Orthodox Judaism appealing and described that she had found her own version of that in her own “pseudo open relationship.” She suggested a parallel between the time apart of *taharat hamishpacha* [laws of family purity] and polyamory, suggesting that taking time apart and then coming back together, or being with someone and then coming back together can “reignite” a connection. Her attempt exemplifies a kind of integration of her Ultra-Orthodox history with her present in a way that feels healthy for her and her partner.

## Confusion Around Seeing Oneself as Sexual

Many people spoke of their confusion in leaving the world they had been raised in and attempting to navigate the new norms in the secular world. One person described her process of leaving Ultra-Orthodoxy as her chance to reconnect with her physicality. Yet, with permission to (re)connect with physicality and desire in the secular world, new challenges arose. An emergent difficulty was that of understanding oneself as desirable and a sexual being. One man described this as a fundamental conflict in his own process of self-understanding:

viewing oneself as sexy, as sexual, as having a sexual identity, it's something that I struggle with so much.... Like I can't see myself that way, it's just so unnatural to me to view myself as sexy, as having a sexual persona. But yeah, I want to have sex, that's true, and I consider myself moderately attractive, and I know people find me attractive, but I just don't view myself as like sexy or as sexual.

Participants explained that finding themselves in sexuality or comfortably expressing their sexual selves has taken years and continues to pose a difficult challenge, as being an outwardly sexual person is not consistent with Ultra-Orthodox values. For another man, physical activities like dancing was so influenced by his upbringing that it could be extremely frustrating:

You go to a disco and you dance. And you can't take it out, but because all your life you dance with Torah, you dance with *Chasidim*. You, like, when I dance in a club, automatically pages of Talmud come to my head. You can't ... you can't dance like that. So ... I mean, you can't dance like that and ... try to ... in a club and ... and think to date with a girl.

For this man, trying to be in touch with a more sexual side of himself was blocked by his own experience having been raised Ultra-Orthodox. For one woman a part of her departure from

Ultra-Orthodoxy was about “integrating ... my relationship to my physical body” generally, but especially sexually. Another individual spoke about her own desire to explore sensuality as her desire for men had been experienced as “deviant.” As a result, she “disconnected” her from her sexuality, which taught her “what comes natural to me [sexual feeling] is just wrong.”

Integrating a sense of oneself as sexual, sexy and having a sexual persona seems to be a persistent challenge before some formerly Ultra-Orthodox individuals.

### **Hyperawareness**

Sexual experiences, or even coming “one inch” closer to sexual possibility also put people in a position of hyperawareness of themselves. One man reflected on his first kiss:

I was like shaking, it was just like ... it was so powerful and I remember also thinking that like everyone knows that she kissed me... And that like it was like this big red mark on my forehead, you know, that said like ... it was like the mark of Cain, you know, like *this person like was kissed by a girl*.

Using a biblical allusion to express his experience, this man felt that the power and excitement of the kiss was also fraught, complicated by his hyperawareness and his perception that everyone knew.

For another female participant, her first kiss was also an overwhelming experience. She reflected that she “couldn’t be fully present with it” remembering that she wanted to do it “right,” like she had seen on TV but also recalled that there was “none of me in it.” For another interviewee, this excitement continued to play out even in conversation. The sense of excitement was clear for another interviewee whose first sexual experiences felt exciting, yet also conflicted. He also reflected on his own experience of being “torn about it.” For this man, when he has sexual experiences he’s “in his head” and says:

I can't fully just enjoy the experience, I'm all questioning myself and questioning whether she's okay with what I'm doing. Questioning whether I'm okay with what I'm doing. I'm questioning whether she's going to find this offensive or insulting or whatever.

For many formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews expressions of sexuality outside of marriage come with a kind of hyperawareness of their own behavior and difficulty feeling relaxed in their own physicality.

### **Vulnerability, Boundaries, Assault and Rape**

Individuals leaving Ultra-Orthodoxy were very much at risk for exploitation. Formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews had very little information about safer sex, birth control, boundaries or consent. Many individuals talked about finding themselves in sexual situations where they felt “in over their heads” but unable to express that to their potential partners due to a combination of naïveté, curiosity, confusion, an absence of language around sexuality and more. One woman described herself at that time as having such “unhealthy boundaries” that she did not “really understand if somebody else was invading” hers.

A female participant told me in the context of our interview:

I think you should interview me about the risks of, like, being thrown into a place of unhealthy sexuality, because that's mostly what I've had experience with, when I left the community. And I ... like I said, from anecdotal evidence, so far, I know that I'm not the only one.

Referring to her own experiences of sexual assault and her sense that those experiences were more common in her community, this woman was able to identify her history as being full of “unhealthy sexuality.” Like this woman, many of these individuals were particularly at risk of

being taken advantage of by who would victimize and abuse them. Some individuals identified their experiences as rape and assault, others did not use that language, but the theme was clear — that there were sexual experiences that they had had that they did not fully know how to consent to.

One woman described her early sexual experiences with a sense of her own detachment from herself, a kind of robotic or mechanistic way of going through the motions reminiscent of a dissociative response. She was getting some of what she wanted by physically engaging in sex, but has only begun to identify ways in which she had felt disconnected from her body. She identified her sense of detachment as an unhealthy way of being sexual that enabled her to get something that she wanted but without being her full self. This dissociation and disconnection from their physical selves during sexual activities is a theme among formerly Ultra-Orthodox individuals and a few articulated their desire to be more present during sexual experiences as a part of their own healing processes.

In one woman's reflection she spoke about the way in which, because of the restrictiveness of her upbringing, she put herself in situations that were very disempowered in order to experience desire.

it's a very difficult and nuanced thing to say, but I think that a lot of the situations where ... I was sexually assaulted or sexually compromised, that's entirely true and the blame is on the assaulter, but I also think that there was some part of me that was trying to experience sexuality and that was the only way I could do so, by putting myself in a position of victimhood because I wasn't allowed to acknowledge that I had desire.

For some formerly Ultra-Orthodox individuals, any sexual experience was bound to be fraught or bound up with a great deal of complicated feeling. For this woman in particular, and for other women who were told that they had no sexual desire, in order to experience sexuality at all, it almost needed to be in a position of vulnerability and without their consent. Curiosity about sexuality in a vacuum of information about sex led many individuals into a space of confusion and awkwardness at best, and assault and rape at worst.

Another woman spoke about her sense that she was “driven to have sex for the wrong reasons” which caused her to wind up in places she “shouldn’t have been.” She suggested that though she might have intended some parts of those experiences, she also found that her naiveté put her at risk. But she also articulated that she “just simply” did not have the “courage” to say, “I don’t want to sleep with you.” She used the language of courage, but it also is about feeling empowered to set one’s own terms sexually which she did not feel that she had.

Men expressed a similar confusion and discomfort around trying to understand sexuality, consent and the potential for assault. One man expressed his concern that even though he had consent from an individual that they might not actually be as willing to be sexual. He also struggled with the ways in which “no means no,” except for when it does not — when “people say no initially, but they really want to see you fight for them, you know. So how do I know, but the cost of making a mistake?” The confusion he identified exists for him on two levels, one about being or being identified as a “rapist” and the other is about putting too much pressure on a person or putting them in a position where they are uncomfortable. As he asked “how do I know what this is? Like how do I know how much assertiveness ... where I’ve crossed that line is pressuring someone?” This man’s reflections bring together a crux of issues about power, consent, play, communication and other dynamics that are not clear cut in sexual encounters of

any kind, but the bottom line is that for him, sexuality is full of confusion and the potential to misunderstand and be misunderstood — with serious consequences. He hopes for a place of sexuality where he can come as a learner, where he can make mistakes without feeling attacked or being called a “chauvinist,” a “sexist,” a “rapist” or other names.

### **Guilt and Shame**

Others seemed to be more in touch with their own physical desire but found their emotional state after sexual experiences to be very complicated and often dark. For one woman guilt and shame were very much a part of her early sexual experiences

I felt horrible before [in the past], like I felt like guys would — obviously I was with the wrong guys — but would pressure me and make me feel guilty and I would feel like ... I just felt like I had betrayed them and I hadn't done my duties as a woman and it was just such twisted thinking

A few women spoke about their own experiences of not feeling able to say no to men, especially because of their Ultra-Orthodox, patriarchal upbringing and would find themselves stuck between wanting to be sexual but also not knowing how to say no and then feeling guilty about wanting to say no. This woman's observation that she was “with the wrong men” also raises the question about who she would have felt the right men would be.

Other ideas from their Ultra-Orthodox upbringings set people up for confusion and pain as they tried to explore their sexual selves. As one woman remarked “I feel bad about sex. And I can't shake it.” She continued that feelings of guilt about sex was “definitely” something that came from her Ultra-Orthodox background. Ideas about modesty, exclusivity and all sexual expression needing to be within the framework of monogamous, committed relationships or



marriages would cause discomfort to individuals. For one woman this meant that she could not have sexual encounters without guilt.

If I was with a guy, I would cry afterwards, like almost every single time ... “I’m going to go to hell, I’m being immodest.” It just like everything that had been told to me, it was still in my head and then I was like I’m doing something so wrong, so bad, and he doesn’t really love me if he’s not married to me. And if he doesn’t love me, then he’s abusing me.

For this individual, there was no room to explore sexuality outside of the monogamous marriage, the place she had been told was the only proper context to be sexual. A man expressed similar confusion about his own expressions of sexuality being very much tied to commitment and exclusivity. He reflected on feeling unable to be with someone, or believe that someone would want to be with him sexually if they were not planning to get married. He felt that an unintentional deception and subsequent feelings of guilt were always part of sexuality.

### **Domino Effect**

One of the interesting dynamics around sexuality that a few people mentioned was an experience of a kind of domino effect where one behavior almost pre-determined the next. For one woman it was a “natural” process of sexual expression that also meant that she was less interested in keeping the rules of modesty around dress. For one man, however, this was a stressful experience. In his words, “I remember feeling that as soon as I did anything, it kind of committed me to the future of the next thing,” and he continued by saying “it was like when I held hands, it was like proposing, in a sense ... it’s a statement of commitment, in my mind, that’s what it was.” For some people it was difficult to see that they had choices about what behaviors to engage with and that each decision could stand alone. They had no way of

imagining that just because they had engaged in a particular behavior once did not mean that they necessarily needed to do it again nor did they need to escalate their intimacy each time in some kind of linear fashion.

### **Sense of Failure to Meet Developmental Milestones and Playing “Catch-Up”**

Individuals coming from this community experienced many obstacles in developing a sense of themselves as having healthy sexuality. Many of them spoke about feeling like they had had limited access to education about sexuality and learned about it “late.” In part, this was about access to resources about the physiological facts of sex, but also about more than that. As one woman put it “to actually, like, understand sex as a 3D experience, like I didn’t learn until a long time after I started having sex.” Another woman expressed her difficulty connecting with sensuality and pleasure broadly because of such a long experience of feeling disconnected from her physical self.

This idea that individuals were “late” often came with a sense that their early learning about sexuality was unhealthy or negative. As one person talked about her early experiences she described sexuality as “so poisoned” by bad experiences and “many mis-learnings, that it then took so many years to untangle that to arrive at a place that begins to feel somewhat healthy.” Early experiences with sexuality were often experienced in opposition to communal norms. Other experiences may have been non-consensual or simply without context for the physiological realities of sexual exploration.

Many people described their feeling that their sexual experiences were delayed. They felt they were somehow behind their age-contemporaries and people ten years their junior:

I’m 37, and I feel very comfortable, very comfortable [in my sexuality]. And years of work, years now ... I mean, a few years of psychology [therapy], but ... but I look on

the girls who are 24, or 26, that I meet, and how they walk in the world. I mean, they feel so comfortable. And I would never have it.

This seems to lead people to feel jealousy, a sense of shame and other emotional difficulties. One man described feeling that struggling with sexuality is much harder in his thirties than it would have been in his twenties or as an adolescent, and that he feels that at this stage in his life he is not allowed permission to make mistakes. Another described a sense that he had missed the rulebook that his age-peers had gotten and that he was “going blind.”

Some people described their experience as one of needing to play “catch-up,” trying to make up for lost time in an urgent and potentially insatiable way. One man described his relationship with sex as parallel to his experience with reading books, needing always to feel that he’s read enough or had enough sex with enough people:

Because I was starved, sort of intellectually in terms of the types of books that I was allowed to read and because I was starved sexually, like, I feel like I always need to make up for lost time, even though if you look empirically, you know, it’s entirely possible that I’ve read more books and had more sex than the people I’m supposedly competing with.

This man’s experience of intellectual and sexual starvation made him feel a scarcity around his sexual development. Rather than a process of curiosity and exploration, it was an experience fraught with competition and urgency. One man remarked that he wished other people considering transition out of Ultra-Orthodoxy would “understand that the sex and sexuality is there, and that you had such huge desires for years, and doesn’t mean that you need to jump and do it” before one is ready. Multiple people had experiences where they had felt like they had had sexual experiences under pressure, with a sense that if not then, it would never be available

again. Excitement and pressure were nearly indistinguishable. Others described a feeling of making up for lost time.

Sexual experiences, long perceived as scarce by formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews, became more available to them throughout their transition processes. Yet, just because they felt that they were accessible, they did not always know how to make choices about what they might have wanted. A few people described having ended up in sexual situations that they had not been particularly interested in but also feeling that they felt unsure that they would get the chance again, contributing to a pressure to say yes. Feeling behind, feeling insecure, feeling pressure to explore sexually in order to make up for lost time contributed to feelings of urgency and competitiveness for many formerly Ultra-Orthodox individuals.

Remarking on her own experience of feeling “behind” one participant recalled that men would often treat her “like their little baby” keeping her in a subservient position because of her sheltered Ultra-Orthodox upbringing saying “I felt like they weren’t allowing me to grow, but they wanted me to be in that place where they were saving me.” She felt that they needed a “little ex-Orthodox ... trophy girlfriend” who they could “save” even when she no longer needed to be or wanted to be seen in that way. Paralleling that immigration experience, these men seemed like the idea of themselves as not just a guide, but a savior to this particular woman as she moved between worlds.

### **Difficulty Shedding Old Ideas**

Another man expressed his confusion reflecting that within his religious upbringing men are taught that women have no real sex drive. He described the discomfort he felt seeing women being very sexual and the assumption that “she’s a slut or very sexually promiscuous” was difficult for him to unlearn. Other ideas from the Ultra-Orthodox world reappeared for people in

other ways as well. Having learned that one should never say anything to one's wife that would compare her to someone else, or that one should never express attraction to anyone else he struggled to express his own desires and fantasies to any partner:

Like you might want to see the person wearing certain lingerie or certain fantasy or certain kind of roleplay, because you've seen that somewhere else. I feel, kind of like, overly self-conscious when I'm with someone and I want to do something that's not quite how things are going.

Old lessons about what was permissible may not be as relevant in his current world, but making the transition has been difficult. This same man also described a kind of splitting of desire and emotional connection, struggling to put together the pieces of loving someone “and you're attracted and you can have a sexual thing, and they're allowed to go together.” One man articulated his experience of having been raised *Chassidic* and thinking about dating as very much tied up with creating a spiritual home together. As he remembered, this makes sense because of the speed with which a couple dates and moves in together — but the concepts, again, in his experience do not easily translate to dating in the secular world. Upon reflection about other norms that she had a difficult time releasing from her Ultra-Orthodox upbringing one woman mentioned her relationship to the “laws of family purity,” saying

I was very shaped by this idea that *taharat ha mishpacha* [laws of family purity] you know, right, is necessary in order to keep sex good in marriage ... I am and was super-skeptical about monogamy and sexual safety on an emotional level. And that teaching that *taharat ha mishpacha* [laws of family purity] is the only way to ensure your marriage survives, has sort of fed into that paranoia.

For this woman who does not presently keep the laws of family purity, her sense of “sexual and emotional security” depended on a Ultra-Orthodox religious framework which she has rejected. There have been psychic consequences that she has been making efforts to unlearn. The ways in which Ultra-Orthodox ideas have stuck with individuals long after their departure from Ultra-Orthodox life sometimes came as a surprise to individuals and were much more about cultural assumptions than anything concretely *halachic*.

### **Part 3: A Dialectical Learning Process**

Many of my interviewees had thoughts about how to continue to build healthier sexualities for themselves and in other people who may be transitioning from Ultra-Orthodoxy. Some part of that process was about admitting to their present limitations and struggles. For one man it was about learning to integrate emotional commitments within sexual relationships. One woman felt that she was interested in being open about the possibility of connecting sexually with men and with women, whereas a few expressed their difficulty talking about sex with friends but wanting more spaces to do that. One man seemed to want some release from the “pressure” he felt around sexuality

if I don't kiss them, so what does it mean? Like so, okay, so he doesn't want it, but he really enjoyed [the date]. And it's ... it's ... it's not clear, it's so ... so it's ... like it's so not clear because you don't speak about it, but it's so clear because everyone knows what society expect you to do.

His sense that there were clear societal expectations that he was potentially failing to meet was echoed by another person who remarked:

it's very private, it's just much less likely for an OTD person to befriend, you know, a ... a mainstream person, and say, so tell me, how exactly do you have sex? What's

your favorite position? When did you ... when did you move from ... from, you know, from ... from oral sex to ... to ... to real sex? Like, you know, people are just less likely to ask or answer those questions.

There are questions that remain unanswered for this group of people and questions that they do not even know to ask until later in their process. There is a sense of desiring comparisons with others, an ability to be in a kind of “normal” place with sexuality as compared with others. Yet, as one person reminded himself, his potential partners who may have had more sexual experiences would never have gotten a chance to pray and sing in small gatherings of the Rebbe and just a few Chassidim.

One participant who felt that she had developed a healthy sexuality described it as a process in development. She related that it “took a long time for sex to be fully wonderful and beautiful, or for it to have that potential.” Another person echoed that idea in his interview with me describing learning about sexuality as “a very dialectical process” where you read a little, have some sexual experiences, speak to some friends, always revising one’s own knowledge. Their sources for learning were varied. One woman described the ways she learned about dating and sexuality as partly about “trial and error”:

My only access to any information of just, like, secular dating and men and women connecting with each other was by watching movies and music videos on YouTube. And reading books, reading magazines, about celebrities dating, right, and breaking up and crying and then ... and then just seeing people on the street, like seeing that there are non-Jewish couples who hold hands and walk around and hug each other.

People also explicitly mentioned manuals or books like *The Joy of Sex*, *Sex for Dummies* or *The Guide To Getting It On* or self-help books generally. Of course, as one woman put it “there’s

always like you know, reading the book and then experiencing it, is obviously very different” and another person described the pitfalls about learning about sex from books in retelling a story about a friend who asked when to use the words “conjugal” or “copulate” while talking about sex, words that this individual felt were inappropriate to the context they were being used in.

Others mentioned learning from internet personalities like Dan Savage. Some mentioned watching pornography, popular movies and YouTube videos produced by sex therapists. One woman described watching a sexual scene in a movie and feeling that it was an “affirmation” of her own experiences, that “this is normal, like this is what teenagers do, they are excited about each other” and “interested in having sex.” That experience affirmed for her that she “could feed these desires like this person is feeding his desires on the screen.” For another participant, however, learning about sex through mass media potentially constrained the way her also formerly Ultra-Orthodox partner imagines sex “should play out as it does in porn and in movies.” Again, there is a difficulty in translation and access for people who are, in a certain way, non-native consumers of contemporary media culture. One person explained that popular media, as helpful as it may be, needed to be taken “with a grain of salt.”

Some people learned about sexuality in relationship with friends and lovers. As one person described:

The OTDers I’ve spoken to ... they become like *mini-social scientists* ... because they develop sort of wacko theories. But the point is that they develop theories that again, I think a lot of mainstream kids don’t necessarily do that, they just live their life, again, with or without the guidebook, but they you know, more or less just do it. People developing theories about the world, (wacko or not) are trying to make sense of sexuality as a kind of immigrant and non-native speaker of a sexual language that others may have been



able to inhabit from birth. They continued to learn in bits and pieces, putting together all of the resources they had access to and trying to derive meaning and create a kind of fluency.

Besides asking their secular friends about their own experiences, some people attended a group at Footsteps devoted to dating and sexuality. Many people also remarked that they learned about sexuality from their partners and from the “good relationships.” Others learned about sexuality through sexual experiences with other formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews with some mixed feelings. As one person remarked

I’ve also felt like the best person to work through these issues with me would be another person from my background. But the truth is, in many ways, I suppose for some people it might work, but there’s also a big downside to that because you both basically ... all the problems are exacerbating each other.

Finding appropriate partners who are constructive for people in learning about their own sexuality can be a challenge, possibly especially for people who have had such limited modeling of healthy sexual relationships.

This chapter has been an attempt to 1. define healthy sexuality for formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews; 2. review some of the unique dynamics facing formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews; and 3. explore some of the ways in which they feel that they are engaged in learning healthier sexuality. The next chapter will consider these findings in light of the literature more generally.

## CHAPTER V

### Discussion

This study of formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews and their experiences of sex and sexuality is an initial look at the particular needs of this community. It is an exploration of the unique dynamics and difficulties faced by formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews as they transition into the secular world especially around sexual health. By distilling some of the specific ways in which formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews understand their own sexuality, how they would define “healthy” and “unhealthy” sexuality, it is my hope that practitioners working with this community and others leaving closed religious communities may better serve these populations.

Though there is some work in the literature addressing questions of Ultra-Orthodox sexuality generally (Rockman, 2003; Ribner, 2003) or “unhealthy” sexuality (Klein, 1994; Needell and Markowitz, 2004), there is little by way of addressing how those norms and values affect people as they transition out of their Ultra-Orthodox lives. There are studies of transition from Ultra-Orthodoxy (Attia, 2008; Davidman and Greil, 2007) or from other kinds of fundamentalist groups like Mormons (Payne, 2007) or Protestants (Brent, 1994). Those studies elucidate some of the dynamics confronting individuals leaving closed religious communities, but they make only passing reference to the difficulties individuals might have around sexuality.

#### **Ultra-Orthodox norms of sexuality and cultural competency**

Interviews with my participants seemed to confirm what the literature detailed about Ultra-Orthodox sexual norms. Most Ultra-Orthodox Jews follow Jewish Law (*halacha*) in all

things, especially sexual life, and individuals coming from those communities will have some relationship to many of these laws. This means practitioners working with individuals coming from Ultra-Orthodox communities should know some of the major *halacha* about Jewish sexuality, as well as some of the norms beyond Jewish law. These cultural and religious norms might include, but are not limited to, 1. controlled access to sexual education; 2. a de-emphasis on physicality; 3. gender segregation; 4. ideologies about modesty, the laws of family purity, monogamy, and the sublimation of sexual desire in the framework of procreation, among others (Ribner, 2003).

One individual in particular even expressed her hope that clinicians working with her population do their own work to become more culturally competent, especially around ideas of sexuality. “Cultural competency” for the purposes of this paper will be understood as a framework that social workers use in order to understand “culturally diverse” communities, attempting sensitivity to needs and particular communal differences. This, of course, does not guarantee effective treatment (Brown, 2009; Shonfeld-Ringel, 2001), but it can be an important foundation upon which to build a therapeutic alliance.

My findings suggest that although often explicitly rejected as a part of an individual’s rejection of Ultra-Orthodoxy more broadly, these norms will never be simply let go of in an all-or-nothing way. Each person has an individual relationship to those concepts within the Ultra-Orthodox world, and their relationship to each of those norms as they are leaving and once they have left are unique and specific. For example, individuals who were no longer observing the laws of marital purity might still believe that they risk their relationships by not observing some of those rules even while having sex before marriage. Or, another individual might see women as his full peers but seeing them dressed in a bathing suit is necessarily provocative and sexual.

Some of my interviewees continue to feel very committed to monogamy as a principle to aspire to even if they are not monogamous while others feel conflicted about sexual fantasy and others are exploring polyamorous relationships. They have all rejected their Ultra-Orthodox way of life to some degree, but have differing relationships to some of its principles as identification can also involve rejection.

### **Identity Development**

Further research may be useful in looking at identity development broadly with regards to this cultural group. My findings related to this point build on studies of bicultural identity development, which are often applied to the experiences of immigrant groups who undergo a process of acculturation when different cultures come into contact with each other (Berry, 1997; Cabassa, 2003). Though Ultra-Orthodox Jews themselves are not immigrants, some of the dynamics have a great deal in common with other migrants between cultures. It may also be helpful to consider formerly Ultra-Orthodox individuals as moving between these cultures in a way that creates a new, third space as explored in the works of Homi Bhabha and other theorists. Neither “secular” nor Ultra-Orthodox, these individuals may represent something completely new.

Some observations that arose as a result of my findings included the fact that there were actually a great many parallels between LGBTQ identity development and the identity development of this sample of formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews. Individuals from both of these groups share a sense of being behind their age peers, often lack parental and peer modeling in their home communities and often find themselves in very vulnerable situations when beginning to experiment with sexuality. This would be an area for future research.

### **Defining “Healthy” Sexuality**

The more work I did on this topic, the more I struggled with defining “healthy” sexuality and identifying individuals who felt like they “had” it. Finding a static definition seemed impossible, and the more reflection I did, the more I found myself seeing “unhealthy” sexuality all around and struggling to find its healthy opposite. Similarly, healthy sexuality was understood by my participants often by exclusion, sharing with me their own sense that they had spent a great deal of their lives experiencing “unhealthy” sexuality and articulating the ways in which they were now acting against that, or learning new ways that were more healthy.

The definitions generated by my sample had a great deal in common with the definitions from the (secular) literature. For example, the definition from the AASECT focused on individual autonomy, desire, pleasure and other themes that the Ultra-Orthodox world was not primarily invested in. This is consistent with the way Ultra-Orthodoxy exists partly in rejection of secular values, especially around gender and sexual norms. Secular organizations embody a definition of healthy sexuality that is constructed in an individualistic frame. Professionals, even observant Jewish professionals also frame their understanding of healthy sexuality in terms of pleasure and individual fulfillment but within a religious Jewish framework. Those individuals who have made the move from Ultra-Orthodoxy into the secular world define “healthy sexuality” in a way that has more in common with the values of the secular world.

The process by which individuals come to define and redefine “healthy” sexuality seems to be challenging at the very least, and quite dangerous for individuals who are exceptionally vulnerable as they move between worlds. As one woman remarked to me:

modesty and patriarchy are a very toxic combination. When ... have this relationship to your sexuality, defined by modesty, and you are totally groomed to always be submissive and more than that ... to constantly please any male in your presence,

because they are going to be the authority and the person that will define your life, that's a really toxic combination.

This individual reflected on her own sexual journey and identified her own “toxic” experiences. Not only did she critique the values of her community of origin, she also was aware that those values left her particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation and assault when she was no longer operating within that universe. Individuals of all genders leaving Ultra-Orthodoxy will have to contend with the various ways Ultra-Orthodox values may create confusion and potential for exploitation.

The data I was able to collect were of surprising complexity and depth. Individuals were very willing to share of themselves in our interviews, making themselves incredibly vulnerable in talking about very private subjects with a near stranger within an hour. Many of them articulated their support for this research in the hopes that my findings would help to support future individuals who would someday transition. Individuals within this sample were also doing a great deal of their own work to better understand their own sexual lives. Many write, academically and otherwise, about gender and sexuality, others are doing academic study around sexuality in the Ultra-Orthodox world, some are doing lay-research on the prevalence of sexual assault within the formerly Ultra-Orthodox community, and others are artists playing with these subjects visually.

Interestingly enough, our interviews followed a parallel process with the literature itself — we often spent a great deal of time talking about the values of Ultra-Orthodoxy when it came discussing to sex or the ways in which they were actively rejecting values of their “unhealthy” Ultra-Orthodox upbringing. It was as if they wanted to ensure **my** cultural competence and also wanted to clarify for me that they believed that Ultra-Orthodox sexuality was dysfunctional for

them before articulating what they believed was healthy sexuality. This might be comprehensible by understanding that their leaving Ultra-Orthodoxy was a rejection of the values of their community of origin, not only about sex, but especially about sexual values and gender roles. They potentially saw me as inhabiting some of the values of the secular world rather than the Ultra-Orthodox one and needed to clarify the norms they had grown up within before aligning themselves with ideals that, perhaps, they saw us embodying together.

### **Limitations & Recommendations for Future Research**

Generally speaking, the closer you get to a community, the more you are able to see its diversity. Upon reflection, I wondered how my sample represented the full range of formerly Ultra-Orthodox individuals — and how many of them were also somewhat extraordinary. Jews from *Chabad* backgrounds were somewhat overrepresented in this sample group. Are they also over-represented in the community of formerly Ultra-Orthodox individuals? Each of them had a range of exposure to secular culture, and some of them had secular family who supported them in their transition out. It occurs to me that there might be some differences in the data if I had been able to communicate with Yiddish speakers or had worked with people who happened to be more recent in their transition processes. Would my findings be similar with individuals from Modern Orthodox backgrounds as well? What would this work have been like if I had been non-Jewish? Not a woman? What would this work actually be like with other closed communities like fundamentalist Muslims, Later-Day Saints, etc.? Though I had a couple of women identify as bisexual, I wonder what unique experiences other GLB individuals might have contributed. Similarly, no one in my research self-identified as transgender but I imagine that sexuality and gender identity would be a salient area for further study with other formerly Ultra-Orthodox individuals.

## **Implications for the Social Work Field**

Therapy often touches on themes of sexual identity development, intimacy, love relationships, sexual satisfaction, health and other complicated issues close to the materials addressed within this study. Individuals from many backgrounds come to therapy for a chance to learn new ways of being sexually — therapists can be a critical part of that process. The American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists (AASECT) describes a vision for sexual healing for clients. They articulate that we live in a world where there is a “prevalence of sexual practices that are unhealthy, and unhappy ... and many people struggle with sexual distress, disorder, and dysfunction” (AASECT Vision). As they write, “there is an urgent need for sexual healing practices ... to be made available to all people, who are compromised in their pursuit of sexual health and happiness.” They continue:

AASECT further believes that opportunities for sexual healing should be accessible to every individual interested in furthering their capacity for erotic pleasure as well as for gratifying emotional relationships, and that such services should be provided in a manner that secures the client's or patient's privacy, confidentiality, and self-respect.

The potential for sexual healing and sexual health should not be limited to just formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews, but rather, is of critical importance for all of us doing work with a variety of patients. Their goals are worthy, and it is important that those individuals working with formerly Ultra-Orthodox patients are attuned to some of the common themes articulated by these individuals and their vulnerability in attempting to learn about sexuality.

## **Implications for Theory**

In reflecting on these questions of sexual health I began to distill my own categories for thinking about these complex questions. It is possible to distinguish between two general kinds



of sexual health needs for individuals: physical/medical needs, and mental/emotional needs. These are, of course, interrelated but simply speaking, it can be a helpful dichotomy for thinking. By physical, I mean concepts like physiology and sexual response, Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), information about pregnancy and other mechanics. Many of the participants in my study, for example, described not understanding anatomy or the mechanics of sexual behaviors. By mental-emotional, I am referring to boundaries, consent, assault, pleasure, desire and other concepts. Both are of critical importance to individuals coming from these communities and may need to be introduced in different frameworks.

The individuals I interviewed had their own ideas for what would be useful to people like them and what they would ask any professional working with formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews to know. They suggested basic information as a part of a standard curriculum for organizations like Footsteps and simply naming issues around sexuality, assault and other difficult topics with regularity in email or on posters. One individual suggested a short film series or other recording which would help provide “other voices” for individuals leaving Ultra-Orthodoxy about sexuality, specifically featuring other formerly-Ultra-Orthodox “voices that are a little further along.” It would be important to consider what models we have for comprehensive sexuality education — and for this community it might make sense to consider a kind of secular *chatan/kallah* class.

One of the difficult tensions around talking about “healthy sexuality” with this group was posed to me by one of the women I interviewed. She warned that any professional working with formerly Ultra-Orthodox individuals working on developing “healthy” sexuality would need to work delicately. She described:

for a professional working with this population, you have to understand, I think, that a

lot of people ... are going to have a really strong urge to be non-conformist, even in the secular world. I think you lose credibility if you try to tell people like “don’t ... be promiscuous, be safe”... like how do you give practical safety that respects that desire for adventure and expression?

Is it possible to have a safe adventure? What kinds of conformity are we asking people to embody when we are trying to acculturate them to our professional or personal notions of healthy sexuality? Is this a question that clinicians are considering beyond those who are explicitly trained as sex therapists? And *if* we do have our own agendas about helping our patients develop a “healthy sexuality” (Edwards and Coleman, 2004) — which we have long seen is culturally contextual — and that Social Workers and other professionals have been complicit in pathologizing sexual difference (Rubin, 1992; De Block and Adriaens, 2013). If we are attempting to acculturate individuals to our own notions of sexual health, it will be critical to do this with some cultural sensitivity. And, as much as we try to disentangle sexual difference from sexual dysfunction historically, we have long confused one for the other.

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## Appendix A

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

- Tell me a little bit about yourself and about your process of leaving your home community.
- In what ways do those values still influence your life? what do you miss the most?
- How do you identify yourself Jewishly now? before you left your home community?
- Is *halacha* (Jewish law) important in your life at present? If so, in what ways?
- What sexual values of your home communities still influence you? What are the values you treasure? What are the values you most struggle with?
- Were there ways in which sex or sexuality was a part of your decision to leave?
- In what way was sex or sexuality talked about (or not) in your home community? What did you learn about sex in childhood? What did you learn about sex once you were married? Who did you learn about sex from?
- What have been some of the hardest things about sex / sexuality / dating / relationships in the context of the world you live in now? The easiest? Who did you learn about sex from in the secular world?
- What would be helpful to you in trying to understand the sexual culture of the world you lived in then? Live in now?
- If you were to offer support and guidance to someone about sex and sexuality who is trying to transition into the secular world right now, what would you want to tell them? What means of outreach do you think would work for people just beginning to make this transition?
- What should I have asked, but didn't, about the way you think about sex and sexuality?



## **Appendix B**

### **Recruitment Email and Facebook Post**

Hello,

My name is XXXXX and I am a student at the Smith College School for Social Work. I am working on a project for my Masters thesis that explores the development and maintenance of healthy sexuality for formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews. It is my goal especially to help Social Work professionals to support healthy sexuality for members of this community.

I am currently looking for study participants, and would greatly appreciate your help. I am seeking formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews, over the age of 18, who are English speaking. You can also send this email along to people you might know who meet the criteria and might be willing to participate.

If you are willing to be a part of my study please call me at XXXXX or email me at XXXXX and I will send you a consent form to participate and a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Once I receive your signed consent form, we can set up a time for an interview.

Please feel free to contact me with concerns or questions.

Thank you!

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent Agreement

Dear Potential Research Participant,

My name is XXXXX, and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a study on how formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews define, develop and maintain healthy sexuality. Data obtained in this study will be used in my master's thesis.

Your participation is requested because you self-identify as a formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jew. If you are interested in participating in this study, you must be over the age of 18 and have left the Ultra-Orthodox community. If you choose to participate, I will interview you about your experiences, thoughts and feelings about learning about sex and sexuality. In addition, I will ask you to provide demographic information about yourself .all of which will be kept privately and only accessible for my research. The interview will be conducted in person or over Skype, will be audio-recorded (not video recorded), and will last approximately 90 minutes. I may also telephone you after the interview for the purposes of further clarification and/or elaboration if necessary.

The risk of participating in this study may be that some interview questions could trigger negative thoughts and feelings. You may also trigger some of the conflicts you experience between the world of Ultra-Orthodoxy and the secular world. It may also be that you will feel some social risk by participating in this research. If you experience psychological distress as a result of participation in this study please take advantage of support resources on the attached page. I have included mental health resources you can use if you do experience difficulties as a result of this study and there are resources in New York City with experience working with formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews, most especially Footsteps ([www.footstepsorg.org](http://www.footstepsorg.org)).

The benefits of participating in this study are that you have the opportunity to contribute to a neglected area of research, to convey the need for Social Work programs to prepare their students for work with formerly Ultra-Orthodox Jews, and to help us refine our definition of "healthy sexuality." Unfortunately, I am not able to offer financial remuneration for your participation.

Your participation in this study will be kept confidential. Though I will know your name and demographics, I will label my recordings and interview notes with a pseudonym instead of your real name. In addition, I will lock consent forms, recordings, and interview notes in a file drawer during the thesis process and for three years thereafter, in accordance with federal regulations. After such time, I will either maintain the material in its secure location or destroy it. In the written thesis, I will not use demographic information to describe you (or others); rather I will combine the demographic data to reflect the subject pool in the aggregate. In this way, participants will not be identifiable in the written work. Finally, if an additional data handler, transcriber, or analyst is used in this study, I will require that person to sign a confidentiality agreement.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any interview question(s), and you may withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty from me or from any of the organizations that you may have learned about this research from by indicating in writing that you are no longer interested in participating. You have until March 1, 2013 to withdraw from the study; after this date, I will begin writing the Results and Discussion sections of my thesis.

**YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.**

**Signature of Participant**

**Date**

Please return this consent form to me as soon as possible to indicate your intention to participate in the study (I suggest that you keep a copy of this consent form for your records). If you have any further questions about this study, participation, rights of participants, or this consent form, please feel free to ask me at the contact information below.

Thank you for your time, and I greatly look forward to having you as a participant in my study.

Sincerely,

XXXXXX

## **Appendix D**

### **Resources for Additional Support**

National **Sexual Assault** Hotline  
(800) 656- HOPE (4673)

National **Domestic Violence** Hotline  
(800) 799-SAFE (7233)

Child Help USA: National **Child Abuse** Hotline  
(800) 422-4453

Planned Parenthood **Reproductive Health, Pregnancy testing & Abortion Services** Hotline  
(800) 230-PLAN (230-7526)

American Social Health Association: **Sexually Transmitted Disease** Hotline  
(800) 227-8922

**Alcohol & Drug Abuse** Hotline  
(888) 729-6686

**Gay and Lesbian** National Hotline  
(888) THE-GLNH, (888) 843-4564

Nine Line: **Crisis Intervention for Youth & Parents**  
(800) 999-9999

The Samaritans of New York **Suicide Prevention** Hotline  
(212) 673-3000

New York **Suicide & Crisis** Hotline  
(800) SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433) / (800) 273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)

#### **UJA**

<http://www.ujafedny.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ouragencies>

Caring for those in need, rescuing those in harm's way, and renewing and strengthening the Jewish people in New York, in Israel, and around the world.

#### **Depression**

<http://www.psycom.net/depression.central.html>

This site is Internet's central clearinghouse for information on all types of depressive disorders and on the most effective treatments for individuals suffering from Major Depression, Manic-Depression (Bipolar Disorder), and other mood disorders.

#### **Alcoholism**

<http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org/index.cfm>

Alcoholics Anonymous® is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.

### **JACS**

<http://www.jacsweb.org>

Jewish alcoholics, addicts, family and friends working together to deal with the problem of addiction.

### **The New York City Alliance Against Sexual Assault**

[http://www.nycagainstrape.org/survivors\\_hotline.html](http://www.nycagainstrape.org/survivors_hotline.html)

This site contains information for survivors and friends and family of survivors of rape, sexual assault, child abuse and neglect.

## Appendix E

### Human Subjects Review Committee Approval



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**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

December 9, 2013



You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.  
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: David Byers, Research Advisor