DOUBLE LIVES

Jewish Doubt in the Digital Age

Ayala Fader
## CONTENTS

Chapter 1. Introduction  
Chapter 2. The Jewish Blogosphere and the Heretical Counterpublic  
Chapter 3. Ultra-Orthodox Rabbis versus the Internet  
Chapter 4. The Morality of a Married Double Life  
Chapter 5. The Treatment of Doubt  
Chapter 6. Double Life Worlds  
Chapter 7. Family Secrets  
Chapter 8. There’s a Crack in Everything/ That’s How the Light Gets In

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The Jewish Blogosphere and the Heretical Counterpublic</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ultra-Orthodox Rabbis versus the Internet</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The Morality of a Married Double Life</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The Treatment of Doubt</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Double Life Worlds</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Family Secrets</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>There’s a Crack in Everything/ That’s How the Light Gets In</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter Seven

Family Secrets

(Draft. Do not cite or circulate)

One day Blimi posted on Facebook the following exchange she had had with her
teenaged daughter, Hindy, at home. Blimi wondered how to respond to Hindy’s worries
about her spirituality, since it was Blimi’s own double life that had created them:

Hindy: Mami, I’m a very spiritual person, and you are not.

Blimi: What do you mean?

Hindy: Don’t play stupid, Ma, you know you don’t have strong belief. And because I
am just like you, I am so worried that when I will be older I won’t be a spiritual
person either:(

What were the ethics of keeping secrets from one’s own children? Of trying to model other
ways of being, while children continued to live ultra-Orthodox lives? What were the
implications for children and teens, sensitive, as so many were, to what was not said? How
does one parent’s life-changing doubt, even kept secret, instigate changes for the rest of the
family even while things look the same on the outside?

When I asked men and women living double lives what they hoped for their
children, they consistently told me that they wanted their children to have a choice in how
they lived their lives, something they felt they had never had. Ending up ultra-Orthodox or
secular was less relevant than the opportunity for their children to choose their own paths.
This involved teaching their children that living as ultra-Orthodox Jews was not the only
way to be moral Jews, that questioning was healthy, and that they should pursue their own happiness, wherever that took them.

Double lifer Boruch told me, for example, “My job is to make them comfortable that they’re allowed to question, and it’s normal to question, and it’s normal for people to have different opinions about everything. Most important to be tolerant of somebody who has a different opinion.” Blimi used the language of happiness and self-fulfillment to describe her dreams for her children. She told me that she wanted her kids to be “the best they can be” no matter if they stayed Hasidic or left, and she hoped that they had happy loving marriages (and if they didn’t, she hoped they “cheated”). Double life parents told me they wanted their children to have choices they had not had as children, just like so many other parents do all over the world.

Double lifers’ commitment to their children’s right to make their own choices, though, was not neutral or history-free. Choice was part of the double life moral system, one which aligned with contemporary American liberal values about the individual, in direct contrast to ultra-Orthodoxy. In double lifers’ moral framework, individuals used their autonomy to make ethical choices in the context of their secretly shared liberal values of pluralism, tolerance and striving for personal fulfillment. This was a very different model from what they had grown up with or what their own children were learning to participate in. Part of ultra-Orthodox alternative modernity that I described, engaged many of the same categories of the self as American liberalism but came to very different conclusions since they rejected pluralism, tolerance and personal fulfillment for its own sake.

For example, in ultra-Orthodoxy, individuals have moral autonomy, but the process of growing up included learning to use that autonomy to submit to hierarchies of religious
authority. This was what defined a mature, responsible Jew. Among the Hasidic children I spent time with, Gentiles were often portrayed to children as selfish and immature because they simply did what they felt like. Freedom or individuality, in that schema, was actually a negative value because it spoke to the unwillingness or inability to discipline the self. Hasidic children and teens, in contrast, learned that their increasing ability to “fit in,” to discipline themselves and do what was expected, was what would actually lead to lasting and true happiness and fulfillment, in this life and the next (not to mention hastening the coming of the messiah).\(^1\)

Those living double lives were then in the ethically tenuous position of socializing their children to reproduce the very system that they felt was morally wrong, while subtly encouraging their children to become critical thinkers, to develop tolerance for difference, and to fulfill their own individual dreams. By secretly introducing a different structure of authority into the intimacy of the home, double life parents tried to quietly encourage liberal values without going too far out of the lines of ultra-Orthodoxy, lest they draw the unwanted attention of school, rabbinic authorities, and extended family.

To use anthropologist Joel Robbins’ language, double lifers socialized their children into both “the morality of reproduction,” the moral action that reproduces already existing patterns of behavior, and the “morality of freedom,” people’s need to make difficult moral choices between hierarchies of values.\(^2\) Robbins lays these out as opposing tendencies within different societies, but we can see that these could easily be tendencies within the same society, maybe even within the same person. This would account for the competing moralities that are so often at play in most people’s everyday lives. Indeed, there was growing concern among the ultra-Orthodox that “mixed marriages,” between a religious
and non-religious spouse led to moral “confusion” for the children. This confusion, between choosing to change or stay the same, was believed to put them “at risk” for life-changing doubt.

The contemporary anthropological study of morality and ethics has tended to focus on the individual cultivation of virtue. Fewer have focused on morality and ethics in the context of families, especially in childrearing and gender dynamics. This is especially the case in ethnographies of religious orthodoxies. Perhaps this is because children, as not fully culturally competent community members, trouble the imagined individuals of moral philosophers: rational adults who make considered ethical judgements toward some good or as anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly describes it more accurately, among conflicting, “best goods.”

However, it is precisely the diversity of individuals, with different forms of agency that make families such rich and complicated sites for the study of morality and ethics. Family dynamics, especially across generations, often include negotiations between competing moralities with their attendant gendered sentiments. Families are also junctures, where different relationships of scale meet, from the institutional to the individual, the public and the private. Anthropologist Meirav Shohet’s work, for example, on a Vietnamese woman’s search for romantic love or a mother’s grief at her son’s death from Aids, were narrative accountings which expose inevitable discrepancies between official state ideologies and personal experiences. Family dynamics, as anthropologist Veena Das shows us in her analysis of a forbidden love match between a Hindu young man and a Muslim young woman, have political implications way beyond the family, speaking to the formation of political categories of belonging and difference. Double life stories about
their childrearing and their children’s experiences having double life parents, highlight the poignant, ethical implications of trying to instigate change, while staying within the system.

Double Life Parenting: Moral Changes According to Age and Gender

Double life parenting was shaped by gender and age. A very young child would rarely question or even notice how often his father put on tefillin or whose mother let her watch Barney on the iPad. However, once children entered gender-segregated schools (around 3 years old), there was consistent continuity across home and school, by design. At that point, children often began to notice discrepancies in that continuity, which could require them to be complicit in the secrets of their double life parent to everyone’s moral discomfort.

Further, as children matured, mothers were increasingly in charge of their daughters’ upbringing and fathers in charge of their sons’. Toby, for example, told me that she had been able to have such an active double life because she had only had sons, who were off in yeshiva from early in the morning until late every evening, giving her freedom and privacy to do as she pleased. For double life parents with the same gender children, in contrast, there was the possibility of sharing secrets. The intimacy of revelation, though, was a double-edged sword when pious teens felt betrayed or called out the hypocrisy of a double life parent.

Double life mothers and fathers encouraged their children to make choices and think critically based on their own gendered positions of authority within the family. Chavi, for example, used everyday interactions around domesticity as opportunities to encourage tolerance for Jews and for Gentiles. For example, she told me that she corrected her
children when they told her that the “goyte” (Gentile cleaning lady) had arrived, a very common expression among Hasidic children and parents. She told them that it wasn’t “nice” to call someone a “Goy” to their face. Instead, they should learn her name. She said, “I try always to say all human beings have the capacity to be good, just because you’re different doesn’t mean you’re not good. You know, you can have a Jewish person who does really bad things and you could have a non-Jewish person who does really good things.”

Chavi said her eight-year-old son who was in school had the “hardest” time with that message, since his teacher told him many stories about how “the Goy is so bad.” When he would repeat what his teacher said that day recounting his day to his mother, he would qualify his use of the term “Goy” as “I’m just saying what my rebbe told me. I know you don’t like this story.”

Chavi also used her own changing standards of modesty and feelings about her body to encourage tolerance for Jewish difference, though she did so less openly than tolerance for non-Jews. She had recently begun wearing pajama pants to bed, something her younger children did not question. Her son, however, asked her point-blank why she was wearing pants, something Hasidic women never do. She told him they were actually more modest for bed since they “didn’t roll up,” which he grudgingly accepted. Her goal, she told me, was to accustom her children to seeing her in pants, and perhaps accustom them to think more flexibly about what constituted modesty, not to question modesty itself. Soon she began wearing leggings under her skirts in cold weather and when she got home, would take off her skirt and hang out in leggings. By then, however, her son had an explanation for her pants, and when he came home from school and saw her in leggings, he merely said, “Oh, you’re in pajamas already?” I was struck that he was so clearly anxiously keeping an eye on
her and her clothing to begin with, not sometime that many eight-year-old boys would, Hasidic or not.

More upsetting for him was when Chavi stopped shaving her hair and, if her husband wasn’t home, left it uncovered after a shower to dry. Her pre-school aged daughters were curious and asked to touch her hair, but they did not seem troubled. When her older son saw her, though, he recoiled, saying, “Oh you’re not dressed yet. I’ll come back when you’re dressed.” She was, of course, fully dressed. Chavi told me she asked him why he found her hair so “jarring” and he said (in Yiddish), “A mother, who is supposed to protect me, who loves me, looks almost like a person who is scary (i.e. a non-Jew).” Note he still avoided the use of the word “Goy,” since he knew Chavi didn’t approve. She told me, “That he didn’t feel safe with me, that bothered me, so I got into it with him, telling him I’m always going to be his mother and that no matter what, I’ll always love him.”

Not shaving her hair, experimenting with “pants,” were all part of Chavi’s changing attitudes to modesty and her own body, which she shared with her children over time. When, for example, Chavi’s three-year-old daughter ran out of the bath and danced around the living room naked, her oldest son yelled in disgust, “She’s a *khazer* (pig)! She’s a *khazer!***” Chavi told me she immediately tried to teach him the difference between “privacy and shame.” In fact, other women who had curvy bodies had told me about their own senses of shame around their bodies, also using the image of that most unkosher of animals, the pig. Blimi told me her mother, for example, had made her and all her sisters wear girdles once they hit puberty around twelve, so they would not look like such “*khazers.***” Chavi was encouraged that her young daughters so far seemed to be
unembarrassed about their bodies even at ages three and four, unlike other girls she knew who were already aware of and worried about covering their knees and arms to be modest.

Nosson and his wife, living a double life together and each pursuing a career in social services were similarly concerned with offering a more tolerant, matter-of-fact education about the body for their three young children. They had already introduced the concept of reproduction and had books at home on the way the body worked. This was rarely discussed at all in ultra-Orthodox homes. Nosson told me that his professional training shaped how he and his wife had decided to rear their children.

Men living double lives, in contrast to women’s domesticity and modesty, were able to use their positions as the leaders of spirituality (rukhnies) and ritual in their homes to challenge the very basis for certain beliefs, often using that very dangerous register, laytsunes, mockery, to drive home their point. Boruch, for example, told me that every year around Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, his children would come home from school having learned that pomegranates graced the holiday table because each fruit had 613 seeds, the exact same number of Jewish laws. He said:

Every kid comes home with a paper at the seuda (the celebratory meal) and ... I tell my little kids...every single time, how about we open up and we start counting?
Every time my wife storms away. But I still do it because it bothers me so much. This bothered me when I was still extremely frum. You take bullshit and you make it like this is the real deal...The kids all start laughing... it becomes a joke in my house. My wife doesn’t like it.

As the leader in his family, Boruch was able to challenge what his children were learning in school, with a fact-finding, hands-on experiment based on his own religious
authority. He even told me he had found an online article that he had shared with his children, that showed the incredibly varied numbers of seeds in pomegranates. He juxtaposed this article, their own experiences, and what his children had learned in school, which he showed to be false. He offended his wife, but his children just laughed, apparently used to their father’s questioning the authority of their teachers, and by default, the whole system. They knew, even the little ones, though not to talk about their father’s pomegranate challenge in school, which would have gotten everyone in trouble.

Similarly, Layzer’s gradual move to atheism shaped his own choices as the family leader in ritual. He told me, for example, that when the family lit candles to commemorate the anniversary of a death (yartseit), the responsibility fell to him to choose to a religious text to share. He explained,

So I would always struggle which story to pick because if the story has any spirituality in it, or any superstition, I can’t relate, I can’t tell the story. So I would always look for a story that just says nice things about the person, like he was so nice because this and this, these nice things. So that’s the message I try to convey.

Layzer’s changes were subtle in that he still chose standard religious texts, and he still led the family ritual. However, by exclusively presenting texts with moral, more humanistic messages, he effectively made his case to his family that one could be a good person without as he said, “spirituality or any superstition.”

Both Layzer and Boruch’s still-religious wives, though, were put in an ethical bind by their double life husbands, in some sense similar to that of Shoshana, the still-religious spouse in Chapter Four, who had to make kiddush for her family when her husband became an atheist. Because of women’s more limited fluency in religious texts and their
subordinate positions to their husbands as faithful wives, they were effectively silenced from contradicting their husbands’ efforts to undermine religious authority or take on that religious authority themselves. Boruch’s wife, for example, stormed off when he annually made his pomegranate seed challenge, expressing her anger but also silenced, unable to respond.

Layzer told me, sadly, that his wife sometimes tried to be more of a leader at home, but she just did not have the knowledge to do so, a legacy of gendered education. For example, he told me that he never verbally marked the importance of certain special days of Jewish holidays to his children, a practice the man of the household usually did:

So I wouldn’t say, ‘Today’s a big day.’ I never say it. Even on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur I wouldn’t say it. So zos khaneka, the last day of Hanukah, while I was tsinding (lighting) the candles, she says, “Kids, today is zos khaneka, it’s a big day.’ And I felt so bad for her because she doesn’t know what to say anything beyond those words. And she was hoping I would take over from there. But I didn’t.

At the same time that still-religious wives were disappointed or silenced, they were hearing from other male authorities—a father, a rabbi, a brother-in-law, a therapist—that they should, in fact, be trying to do it all: keep peace in the marriage by capitulating to their husband’s religious changes, uphold the level of religiosity to the best of their ability in the home to protect the children, and wait patiently for their husband’s eventual return to emune. Still-religious wives were, in essence, given an impossible set of tasks to protect their own homes.

Both fathers and mothers living double lives valued fluency in English, the language and culture of American childhood and popular culture, especially for boys. Still-religious
spouses often shared this goal since boys’ limited English and math skills have become a real concern among many. However, encouraging boys’ English proficiency, through leisure reading, often on an Ipod, a phone or in the library, was subversive, since it took time away from Torah study (*bitul toyre*, wasting Torah). English literacy also prepared boys to participate in the wider world if they chose as they grew up. Indeed, a number of Hasidic men I had met living double lives felt their own shaky English was one reason that they were trapped and had stayed; they wanted their sons to have more options than they had had.

Women living double lives, much more fluent in English than men, agreed. Many bought English books, exposed their sons to English-language children’s television programming, and used time together, for example, setting the shabbes lunch table, to introduce new English words. Blimi offered her son a monetary incentive for learning new English words—a dollar a word. Rivky did what, she told me, many Hasidic parents did. She had her son’s English assessed by an outside literacy professional in his yeshiva. Since he was below grade level, he qualified for free tutoring, which was basically a way to get the school to provide free English instruction after school.

The Intimacy and Complicity of Shared Family Secrets

*Learning to Keep Secrets from School*

Double life parents generally tried to keep their own breaking of mitsves hidden from their children as much as possible. Layzer told me that he sometimes adjusted the air conditioner on Shabbes, but he never let his children see him do it. Others took their phones into the bathroom on Shabbes or closed their bedroom doors and texted under the
covers. One man living a double life described on Facebook how he would move his tefillin bag around the dining room table every day, so it would look like he had gone to pray. When I asked Boruch how much his children knew about his religious practice or lack thereof, he said, “They know I’m open-minded. But I don’t want them to know the extent. It’s going to cause too much conflict for them.”

As children grew older, what they were learning at home from their double life parent or observing as children do, clashed with what they were learning in school, especially in the usage of digital technology. Children and teens had to keep their parent’s secrets from their teachers or even from a still-religious parent, both in order to protect a double life parent and/or to continue to use the technology. In their effort to introduce tolerance or critical thinking a double life parent might expose their children to technologies that their schools expressly prohibited. For example, most of the Hasidic schools for boys and girls did not allow Internet at home. However, in his effort to teach his teenaged daughter to think critically, Boruch helped her write an essay that compared pseudo-science (handwriting recognition) to legitimate science. His daughter did some research with him and he “secretly” taught her to use Wikipedia, without his wife knowing. His goal was “to tell her (his daughter) that everything that someone says is science, another person is going to call pseudo-science. I want to teach her to form her own opinions.”

However, his daughter innocently told her class during the presentation of her essay (all in Yiddish) that she had gotten her information from Wikipedia. Boruch told me that the next day he got a call from the principal, who told him that there had to have been a “mistake.” Their school was not one where students could see anything on the Internet she
elaborated. Boruch’s daughter soon found out that her principal had called and was “devastated that she got him in trouble.” She asked him, “Why didn’t you tell me not to say anything?” Boruch told her that he would never let her do something she was not allowed to, though technically he had. He explained to her that her school had a problem with the Internet not because of Wikipedia, but because of other things on there. He remembered he said, “As a big girl you have to use your judgment about what to talk about and what not to talk about. You will never hear me tell you ‘don’t say anything’ unless I’m buying your mother a gift.”

Boruch told me that from his perspective, anything he introduced his daughter to was fine, and she could tell whomever she wanted. He said, “I didn’t want to make secrets.” But Boruch ended up giving his daughter a mixed message. While he denied any wrong doing by himself or her, Boruch also told his daughter that she needed to use her own ethical agency, her judgement, about what she chose to reveal and to whom. Was the real point that the school’s rule was to protect her from something much worse than Wikipedia, which legitimated their using it and thus breaking the rule and perhaps lying about it? Or was the real take-away that she, as a “big girl,” was able to make a moral determination all on her own, something that for the ultra-Orthodox really was an unacceptable form of individual authority, a slippery slope which could certainly lead a girl off the derech (path).

Other parents living double lives similarly struggled with moral ambiguities, secrecy and lying around use of technology. None wanted to tell their children to lie about what they did at home with a double life parent, but they found themselves having to say point blank: if you want to continue, for example, to use the iPad or watch television on the computer, you have to know who you can tell and who you can’t. This was often framed as
a mature “smartness,” about figuring out what was appropriate in a range of ultra-
Orthodox contexts, which could give a child a sense that morality and even truth might be
relative, again a potentially dangerous threat to the authority of ultra-Orthodoxy. Chavi
told me, for example, that when she let use her school-aged kids use the iPad, she gave
them this mixed message about truth and lies:

... I’m not looking to confuse them, but I do want to open their minds, so I did
explain to them look, the school does not always allow this. Ok, I happen to have the
iPad because I need it for work.... and I hate telling you to keep secrets, but just be
smart, that’s all. You don’t have to keep a secret, but if you don’t keep it a secret
we’re going to just have to stop watching it. Not like, don’t tell anyone about it.

New media, like cell phones, ipads, or the Internet do not themselves necessarily
traffic in secrecy or challenges to authority. What they do, though, is sometimes create new
avenues for how knowledge travels and who gets access to it. Anthropologist Julie
Archimbault, for example, describes how cell phones in Mozambique, which were the
medium for young women’s illicit trysts that benefitted their families, covered up “an
unpleasant public secret.” She writes, “The Cabral household directly benefits from, not to
say relies on, its young women’s intimate networks. But for everyone to serenely sit around
the table without asking questions, there has to have been an effort at concealing the
source of the “nice breakfast.” That is, the very “nice” food on the table was only possible
for the family because their daughters had had sexual encounters for which they were paid.
Those sexual economic exchanges, however, were only traceable to private texts on
cellphones and so functionally invisible to the rest of the family, who were complicit in
their silence.
For double lifers and their children, access to digital technology was a shared pleasure, but one which required that all be complicit in the fact that their watching or game playing or listening actually was against school and hence, communal rules. A double life parent, by allowing a child to participate in forbidden media, was asserting their own authority to make decisions that might differ from the school. Their choice to do so revealed a chink in what was usually a united front of parental, school and religious authority.

*Shared Gendered Secrets at Home*

Secrets were sometimes kept along gender lines at home. Take the unusual case of Shimon, who had written that letter to the religious psychiatrist in Chapter 5. He had one son and six daughters, and he had an agreement with his still-religious wife: he would be in charge of his son, and she in charge of their daughters. One night, over dinner, Yoely and Tsippy told me about the “secret” that Shimon and his son had together. From the time he was nine, Shimon had chosen to include his son in his double life, who, according to them “didn’t have a problem with it.” He had come completely clean with his son, who still continued to go to yeshiva. However, every Friday night (the eve of Shabbes) and on Jewish holidays he and his son drove away to spend the weekend elsewhere. His wife and his daughters were all still religious. Yoely and Tsippy were unsure about the ethics of this. They were, as they told me, “struggling with it, debating if it was healthy or not.” On weekends, Shimon had a tutor come and teach his son about American popular culture and English. They did martial arts together and visited other double life friends. The one thing they never did was go to synagogue. Shimon was in touch with a therapist, someone who
knew the community but was not Jewish himself, who helped guide him in this unusual parenting. What are the ethics of including one of your children, but not others in your double life? Shimon’s son not only had to keep his father’s secret from school, but he now had to keep his own from his mother and sisters. The distance that Hugh Gusterson describes for secrets kept in families (see Chapter 4), include children whose lives are changed in all kinds of ways as they keep their parent’s secrets.

In some cases, a child, influenced by his double life parent, came to have his own doubts in ultra-Orthodoxy. In that case, parent and child quietly and less explicitly than Shimon, shared a secret from the rest of the family without actually physically separating themselves. Layzer’s son, for example, had decided for himself early on that, as Layzer said, “What rabbonim (rabbis) say is just nonsensical.” In a variety of ways, Layzer’s son let his father know that he was allied with him. Once Layzer remembered, his son brought home a note from school letting parents know that any food students brought in had to have a particular rabbinic stamp of approval (hashgokhe). The class had learned that eating any food with a different kosher stamp would clog up or pollute their minds (farshtup de kop) and make learning difficult. Layzer proudly told me that his son had said to him, “I don’t understand. So this hashgokha, it’s obviously kosher for someone else, but not for us. How does the food know not to clog up someone else’s head?” His son asked the question in a way that Layzer felt required no answer; he was merely pointing out the silliness of the system and expressing his alliance with his father.

Sometimes a double life father, like Chaim, gained the allegiance of some of his children, who then kept his (open) secrets, along with their own from their still-religious mother or other, younger siblings. Two of Chaim’s ten children, his oldest son and
daughter, had both started questioning, which actually led to rabbinic pressure on his wife to finally divorce him after many years. Chaim told me he had caught each of his children texting on Shabbes, something he did too but never in front of them. His eldest son soon quit yeshiva when he turned seventeen and secretly got a job at Home Depot for the summer. He begged Chaim not to tell his mother, which he didn’t. Soon after, Chaim’s sixteen-year-old daughter began to experiment with boys. She asked her father to keep a pair of jeans in his car for her, which he did next to his own secret pair. She even told him when she had her first kiss, something he could never tell his wife. When his daughter wanted to see a pet dog (something an ultra-Orthodox religious family would never have), he arranged for her to go visit an OTD friend who had one. She even took the bus on Shabbes there while he “covered for her.” What kind of ethical choices did Chaim and his teens make, constrained by the structure of their lives, which included secrets kept from a still-religious mother, which eventually led to divorce?

Double life women and their older daughters were similarly often allied, though this could backfire. Blimi, for example, often confided in her oldest daughter, Hindy, walking a fine line between protecting Hindy, while simultaneously pushing her to think critically and rely on herself. Fourteen-year-old Hindy often confronted Blimi, with difficult questions, such as the one which opens this chapter. Blimi told me that after one interaction, she finally conceded that she didn’t know what she believed. She remembered telling Hindy, “Nobody knows, and whoever tells you they know, they’re lying. They haven’t been there. Whoever tells you they know for sure, they’re lying.”

Others living double lives, like Sheyndie and her husband, decided not to share their double life with either of their daughters, at least explicitly. She told me, “We’ve talked
about it, and it’s too big a burden for them to keep.” However, by the time her older daughter was in high school, Sheyndie thought she had figured them out and was probably living a double life herself. Her younger daughter, though, was a “real rebestin,” earnestly religious. She watches us, Sheyndie said laughing a little. She tells my daughter and me to pull down our skirts.

As Sheyndie and her husband got more involved in a double life small group and grew bolder, they eventually spent part of Passover break away with an OTD family. On that vacation, her younger daughter realized that the other family was not fully observant. She pulled her mother aside and anxiously asked her, “You would never answer a phone on Shabbes right? Or do those things?” Sheyndie told me she had reassured her daughter because it was clear that she “needed her to.” As she said, “Sometimes lying is the right thing to do.”

The intimacy of a mother-daughter or father-son relationship could be comforting to guilty, worried double parents anxiously trying to do the right thing. Sometimes though, it was parental relationships across gender lines that caused most anxiety. For example, Blimi told me that she was “pretty sure” that once her daughter found out everything about her, “she wouldn’t blame me. Even about my affair. She will understand.” Blimi wasn’t so sure though about her eldest, a sixteen-year-old boy, who she described as “really frum.” He and some of her other children might judge her harshly if they knew who and what she really was. She said:

See, the things that do bother me-- the only things-- sometimes I think to myself, oh my God, if he would know what I do, that my kids would judge me and hate me.

That’s the piece that I really, more than anything else. It sometimes hits me.
Nosson, the social worker living in Monsey, who had, in his own words, “heretical ideas,” worried about the effects of keeping secrets in a family, from a professional and personal standpoint. He told me about a daring question he had asked one day at a lecture between a kiruv rabbi who worked with at-risk-teens and a religious therapist, about the health of secrets in families. During the Q & A session, audience members could write anonymous questions, which were read out loud. Nosson wrote, “Should a frum person tell his children that he doesn’t believe in God?” He was terrified, he said, but he needed to ask not only for his practice, but also for his own family. Additionally, he told me, he had a “secret agenda.” He wanted other professionals and rabbis to know that “this is a real thing.”

The therapist responded first, with a joke, “Ok, I see it’s time to go,” indicating the question was a tough one. Then, more seriously he answered that if a parent was struggling with issues that did not directly affect their children, there was no reason to share that struggle. A four-year-old, he said, does not need to know that you are doubting God. When a parent’s struggle with doubt did affect the child later on, then it would be important to be able to discuss that in an age-appropriate way. The kiruv rabbi, in contrast, completely avoided the question, remembered Nosson, and recycled an old chestnut, that disbelief in God was a symptom of depression, and once treatment was given for the depression faith would return.

Double life parents, within gendered spheres of authority, made their own ethical decisions about raising their children, rather than relying on rabbis, schools or even a still-religious spouse. Moral ambiguity, the reliance on their own authority and their peers’, were all in opposition to the moral certainty that ultra-Orthodoxy claimed. Double life
parents were also in the particularly poignant position of wanting to share their new, changing ideas with their children and provide them with chances they never had, and yet doing so could be their own, and their children’s, very undoing. As Moishy said, when I asked him if he thought of leaving, “I might have, but I look at my kids, and I know the stigmas that they’re going to face. And I just can’t do it.” Their only recourse was half-truths, secrets kept together, and slow, gradual exposure to different experiences and ideas. Perhaps it was a slow, quiet revolution or perhaps it was merely one idiosyncratic parent who had little effect at all. Only time will tell.

Teens of Double Lifers Talk Back

There were all kinds of reactions and outcomes—even within families—when teenagers figured out that one of their parents or even both were leading double lives. Some teens grew more fervently frum and others went off the derech or led their own double lives until they could leave. Religious adults in their lives—a parent, a teacher, a relative—could make a big difference, keeping them in the fold. Some, especially boys for whom success in Yeshiva could be socially rewarding, decided to continue to fulfill communal expectations regardless of their own belief and despite a double life parent who did not. Layzer, for example, told me that when his son turned eleven, his wife had begged him to start taking him to the men’s mikve (ritual bath), as he would be expected to go regularly after his bar mitzve (age 13). Layzer had refused because he found the mikve “disgusting” and meaningless. Soon enough, with no discussion, his son simply began going to the mikve by himself in a little synagogue near their house. Layzer understood the situation this way:
So I think he made the distinction. He’s one thing, his father is something else, and it doesn’t make a difference. For now, he’s going to live the yeshiva bokher (boy) life, and he has a very good kop (head), so he is the top of his class, so it’s part of the package. You can’t be a very good bokher in your class when you don’t do the other things. So he has to (i.e. go to mikve). He does the whole program, why not?

Some children, then, stayed frum with little angst, comfortable enough with themselves and their double life parent to tolerate the moral ambiguity. Sometimes humor helped a teen tell a double life parent he was on to him and was going to be different. One of Chaim’s children was a “very frum” sixteen-year-old boy, not like the two eldest who seemed to be going OTD. Chaim told me that his son regularly teased him, saying, “Tatty, you’re a complete shaygetz (Gentile).” However, this teasing was, according to Chaim, done in a “totally loving way.” Teens like these seemed to accept that their parents struggled with their own emune, while they continued to live their own lives as “good” boys and girls. That is, their parent’s moral struggle did not challenge their own emune, though it might impact them when it came time to arranged marriages.

Identifying with the still-religious spouse, especially if the same gender, could provide an alternative moral model for a teen. Leye, a young woman who was herself deeply conflicted about her mother’s double life, told me that her older brother was able to separate himself from his mother in a loving way and retain his “black and white” morality, considered positive among ultra-Orthodox Jews. Leye told me the following story to explain what she meant. One day, she found some ice-cream in their freezer, which had an Orthodox Union (OU) hekhsher, rabbinic stamp of approval. This was not a hekhsher her family accepted, and ordinarily she would never eat OU. But there it was, looking delicious,
right in her own home. She was about to scoop herself a bowl when her seventeen-year-old
brother, Laiby, came into the kitchen, saw her and told her to put it back. Leye was
annoyed, saying, “Excuse me! Mommy brought it home.” He explained, “Mommy has her
temptations, and she has to deal with them on her own. But we’re Tatty’s (Daddy’s)
children, and we have to go according to Tatty.”

Laiby reframed his mother’s doubts as “temptations,” that is, interior provocation
from her inclination for evil. He was able to understand his mother’s refusal to participate
in the system not as heresy or intellectual doubt, but as an individual moral weakness,
something that was her own particular burden to struggle with, not his. This was a similar
interpretation to some of the life coaches or activism, askanim, who believed that
religious doubt always had an underlying mental health explanation or the rabbis who
suggested that social media awakened one’s evil inclination or even actually was the evil
inclination. These interpretations of life-changing doubt assumed that ultra-Orthodox life
was morally normative and effectively neutralized any intellectual or emotional challenges
to the system as simply a sign of personal spiritual weakness.

Not all teens were so confident in who they were though. Some, especially girls who
identified closely with their mothers, were troubled and confused by what they heard and
saw at home, especially when it directly contradicted what they were learning from other
adult women they admired in school. In some cases, a teen might fear that her own mother
was a bad influence on her and lead her astray or hurt her chances for a good marriage.
One teen, Faigy, whose parents were divorced and whose mother led a semi-secret OTD
life, told her, “Mommy I know you’re going to tell me things that are not good for me to
hear. Please don’t tell me.” Faigy never refused to spend her custody time at her mother’s
house, but she was fearful enough to remind her mother that she had to protected from inappropriate things her mother might say when she came over.

One teen, similarly struggling with her mother’s double life was Leye, whose mother Brachy, introduced us. Leye agreed to talk to me (with her mother’s permission) because, as I would learn, she had her own agenda. She wanted people living double lives to know how “unfair” and “wrong” it was to confuse their own children with their “hypocrisy.” Leye, an earnest, bubbly young woman with a dimpled chin, lived with her Hasidic family in Williamsburg. I met her for our first interview in a public park on a summer day. She was sixteen then, dressed very modestly, with dark hair and bright blue eyes. I had told her that I was doing research on the Internet and faith because I was not sure exactly how much she knew about her mother’s double life.

Leye described her own transformation from someone who “didn’t want to be religious” to the stringently frum young woman I met that day, a change that began in her junior year of high school, an unusually open school with all kinds of Orthodox girls. When she was younger, Leye told me that she knew her mother “wasn’t your typical Hasidishe (Hasidic) woman.” That didn’t bother her though since she herself “didn’t believe in hashem (God) either.” She had been exposed to forbidden media from a young age, often with her mother, watching movies, listening to Taylor Swift on Youtube or passing around pictures of Justin Beiber with some “bummy” school friends. At that point, like so many teenagers, she was determined not to live her life like her mother, like a “hypocrite,” imagining that she would not be religious at all when she grew up.

As she started high school, though, she began to change influenced by her teachers and especially her school principal, all of whom she admired greatly. Her mother’s
hypocrisy, in contrast, began to bother her more and more, and she worried about its effect on her own emune. Why, for example, should she have been exposed to so many movies for adults on an iPad, snuggled against her mother at night in bed? Why was she able to read any of the inappropriate English books lying around the house, like *Fifty Shades of Grey?* (Actually, her mother was upset that she had read that without her permission. She felt it was inappropriate). Why did her mother go out so much at night with friends, some of them men? Leye began to question and challenge her older brothers and her father. “How could you be such a coward,” she yelled at her father, “Why do you let her go off at night?

Over the course of high school, Leye became increasingly observant. She got herself a kosher flip phone and stopped watching movies or even texting. Instead of college, something Brachy had hoped for, even expected, Leye began planning to go to a girls’ seminary upon graduation. She prayed every day, hoping to be a model for her younger sisters. Her skirts got longer, her blouses were all buttoned up, and she stopped wearing long earrings. She began reading inspirational books on faith. The summer before she had convinced her mother to send her to a Hasidic girls’ camp, in fact, the same one her mother had attended as a girl. There she met a counselor who would become a mentor to her, someone she eventually confided in about her mother’s double life.

As Leye began to tell me about this counselor, she got upset. Her voice broke, and she asked me to turn off my tape-recorder. Then she started to cry in earnest, saying to me, “I’m sure you know about my mother, right?” Upset myself at her tears, I mumbled something non-committal and kept patting her shoulder. “My mother’s not frum! She’s living a double life,” she said. She was afraid, she told me, that her mother was teaching her to live a double life too, showing her how to cheat the system because she knew Brachy
wanted her to be like her. With the brutal honesty of a teenager (in fact, she was exactly the same age as my son), she said, “Well, wouldn’t you be upset if your son became frum?” To which I could only nod and blush because of course I would be if he lived his life in a way that excluded me and embraced such different values and political beliefs. Leye described how her mother tried to encourage her to push the envelope of religiosity. When they went shopping, Leye told me, her mother tried to convince her that a hem just grazing her knee looked better, while she begged her mother to buy extra material to lengthen her skirts.

Leye was angry that her mother had made her feel so confused about faith. I ventured that maybe confusion could be productive, helping her make up her own mind. “That’s what my mother always says too,” Leye retorted. She was emphatic that a Jew could never rely exclusively on their own authority or trust themselves. “It says that in the Torah,” she said. Moral ambiguity, competing voices of authority, reliance on her own judgement, were all the dangers she felt her mother had exposed her to.

A year and a half later, I was very surprised when she called, asking to meet again because she wanted to explain why she had gotten so upset. This time we met in my office, and she confronted me, “Is your research really about people living double lives?” When I admitted it was, explaining I hadn’t known how much she knew about her mother when we first spoke, she said, “I knew it! Talking about my mother is pure loshn hure (idle gossip), but maybe it’s a little like therapy too.” I reminded her guiltily, that I was not a therapist and that I was writing a book. She said, “That’s fine, as long as you don’t write my name. That’s why I wanted to meet you again. Because I want people to know this. Because people from double lives are going to read it.” This was what she wanted to tell parents living double lives:
Parents out there, you're being utterly cruel...because you're really, really confusing the kids. *Fr um* (religious) in our perspective is like our life... It's not like you're Christian and you believe in Jesus. It's a whole way of life. We live with Hashem (God) every single day, and either you're *frum* or you're not *frum*. You cannot be both. Do you know what I'm saying?... They're so selfish. They think they're being unselfish but they're really being selfish, because they're letting the kids be so confused.

Leye described what it had been like for her to grow up with moral contradiction which she understood as the danger of confusion. She remembered that when she in 9th grade her mother took her and some of her younger sisters on a trip to a water park in Pennsylvania one summer. Brachy took off her wig once they got there, shaking out her long curly black hair. Leye told her she wouldn't go out of the hotel with her like that. Her mother said, “Leye, there are no Jewish people here. We're good.” But for Leye, the hypocrisy of taking the wig on or off depending on context was unacceptable. She said to her mother, “Would you take it off in Williamsburg?” Her mother answered, “You know I can’t do that.” Leye said, “Either you take it off or you wear it all the time.” She told me how confusing it had been since they had learned in school for years how “terrible” it was for a married woman to uncover her hair. Why, she wondered, was her mother spending thousands of dollars in school tuition and then telling her the exact opposite of what she had learned. “It was very painful,” she told me. She began anxiously watching her mother’s behavior more carefully after that trip, never quite sure what was her imagination and what was real, worried about her mother’s transgressions and their impact on her.
A turning point for Leye came when she met that camp counselor with whom she spent many hours discussing faith, God, and eventually, her mother. Until then, she told me, she had felt something was amiss at home, but she was never sure what because she did not have the “terms.” When she confided in her counselor, Mrs. Gold, Leye remembered, “She got it right away. Your mother is living a double life.” Leye had never heard that expression before, but the pieces suddenly fell into place for her. At the end of camp she felt scared to go home. She wanted to stay religious, and she did not want to be influenced by her mother. Desperate, she called an aunt, her mother’s sister, who was very open with her, acknowledging that her mother had always been a “bit like a rebellious type.”

Her aunt encouraged her to go home, but with her phone call, Leye she had activated a network of religious relatives and educators who were all advocating for her. They consistently told her she had to respect her mother, but they made it clear that she also needed to make plans to leave. Her aunt soon called another relative, and they told Leye’s school principal, who recommended she go to therapy, something Leye’s parents did not feel she needed. In her last year of high school, Leye continued to ask for advice from her principal, the camp counselor and her relatives. When her mother wanted to take her to the movies, for example, Leye called her grandfather and asked his advice. Go, he said, it’s kibud av-ve-em (honoring your parents), but leave the theater if it gets too inappropriate. It was this grandfather, her father’s father, who agreed she should go to seminary, in part, to leave home.

Leye acknowledged to me that her mother was a good person but “selfish.” What she meant, she said, was that “in our world, children come first, and I don’t see that with my mother.” Was her mother selfish, I wondered, or was she simply less willing to sacrifice
herself for a system she no longer believed in, like other parents living double lives? Leye understood that her mother had had questions that were never answered and had resorted to living “in two worlds.” What she found “immoral” was less about religious questioning and more about hypocrisy and lying, things like having an affair, or “cursing” or wearing immodest clothes, or taking off her wig.

At the same time, in an about face that seemed the epitome of adolescence, she confessed that she felt she was a “horrible daughter” who was always angry at and critical of her mother. “She’ll have a wonderful life when I’m not there to mix in,” she predicted. About her own faith, Leye felt she had to remain vigilant, but she did acknowledge the power of choosing to be religious, saying “I know I’m real. I chose it (being frum), so that’s amazing.” And that sense of choice, ironically exactly what her mother had hoped to cultivate, was something she planned to pass along to her own frum children one day.

“Mixed Marriages”: Supporting Children’s Choice or Creating Religious Confusion?

Conflicts with their children and teens were confusing and upsetting for double life parents. Unlike religious parents, they could not ask their parents or their spouses or friends for advice, because they were not trying to socialize their children into the same ideologies. Instead, many used virtual and real spaces to ask for advice from others living double lives, to encourage each other as they secretly tried to change some of the dynamics in their own families. Avi, for example, regularly posted on Facebook to ask other parents for recommendations for leisure English reading for his young son, who had minimal English instruction in his Hasidic school. One of his recent posts asked about series similar to Harry Potter or Magic Treehouse, both of which his son had loved. Friends posted
multiple suggestions providing a reading list that contributed to a new kind of Hasidic male literacy: leisure reading in English. More mainstream Hasidic boyhood valued memorization, concentration, fluency in liturgical Hebrew and Yiddish, logical argumentation and limited contact with girls. It certainly did not include reading about wizards, Hogwarts, or the brother-sister team, Jack and Annie, who time-travelled. Avi’s son, who attended a Hasidic yeshiva, was simultaneously becoming literate in English and popular American young adult culture, with its emphasis on individuality, independence, and imagination.

Social media like WhatsApp or Facebook also created spaces where a double life parent got recognition for the subtle changes they were making in their childrearing, changes that if successful went unnoticed by a spouse. Chavi, for example, told me her father had asked her young sons to prepare two questions about the *khumesh* (bible) they had studied in yeshiva that week. She shared the questions her children had written “with the guys” (a group of double lifers we both knew). She was gratified when they quickly and enthusiastically complimented her, saying, “You’re training questioners.”

Avi, similarly, posted an interaction in which his son (the reader) asked him if Moses was “real.” Avi said he did not know and asked him what he thought. His son replied that he did not think he was real because he was just in the Torah portion (*parsha*). A Facebook friend commented, “You have this sewn up,” patting Avi on the back for having taught his son to doubt the truth of the Torah.

Double life parents also debated among themselves the ethics of their own efforts to introduce more liberal values at home, trying to perhaps legitimate the unusual arrangements they found themselves in. Tsiri, for example, told me how her seven-year-old
daughter, Esty, accepted that there were certain foods she could not eat at home because they did not have the correct rabbinical stamp of approval. Esty knew her mother ate those foods though, so she explained it this way, “I’m allergic to OU (Orthodox Union rabbinical stamp), right?” This was a simple explanation using childhood allergies to explain why she and her mother held to different standards of kosher food.

Tsiri herself, pushed back against the idea that children needed to have one consistent message, that any difference of religiosity between parents would be confusing. This was increasingly called a “mixed marriage.” She told me, “I hear that you can’t have the mixed marriage situation because the kids are confused a lot. I kind of disagree with it because I don’t think my daughter is confused. I kind of have this feeling of telling people, ‘You’re confused. My child is not confused, you’re confused.’” A mixed marriage disrupted the consistency that ultra-Orthodox children grow up with, where home and school support each other. Hearing or reading about different ideas, relationships with someone who was not a believer, all of these could be dangerous for the development of faith.

That mixed marriages confused children, potentially leading them astray from ultra-Orthodoxy was explicitly expressed in a 2015 Mishpacha (Family) Magazine article, “A House on Shaky Ground.” The journalist, Malkie Schwartz, profiled four women whose husbands had become cool to Judaism. She told me, in a phone interview, that she had been unable to find any women heretics whose husbands had not ultimately divorced them. This was more evidence that custody battles were at least one reason why women double lifers might be warier about expressing and acting on their life-changing doubt. The article, Ms. Schwartz told me, went through many rounds of edits because the topic was so
“controversial.” She concluded in her article that the real issue of mixed marriages was the danger they posed to children:

The million-dollar question for couples of different religious levels is how their relationship will impact their children. What would be better for the kids—staying together or breaking up? ... living with someone who has undergone a serious spiritual lapse requires herculean effort. In some ways it’s similar to living with someone with a debilitating illness, only it’s a spiritual malady in this case...

Note that she compared a “spiritual lapse” to a debilitating illness, a kind of “spiritual malady.” The remainder of the article focused on the heroic efforts of the still-religious spouse to keep children religious and their families together. The editors, she told me, wanted something inspirational.

Soon after the Mishpacha Magazine article, I heard about the formation of a closed group on Facebook called, “Mixed Marriage.” On that site, people supported and advised each other on parenting and legal matters in cases of divorce. Some in the group were openly OTD and others were in the closet. The group also met in real life and went out to socialize, usually hanging out in bars and restaurants together. After multiple attempts to get invited, it was finally Tsiri, unrecognizable to me without her wig and in jeans, who invited me to join a small gathering at a bar in Manhattan because she felt nervous going out alone with two other guys.

The conversation that night focused on parenting and marriage. The two men, Ushy and Bentsy, were clearly intrigued to hear about Tsiri’s experiences as a woman living a double life. Sitting in a booth with beer, they updated each other about their children. Ushy, who was Yeshivish, was recently divorced and openly OTD. He told us that his teenaged
daughters had agreed to spend shabbes with him, a real triumph since some children of divorced parents refused to stay at the non-religious parent's home, called “parental alienation.” Bentsy, a Hasid who was still in the closet, fist-bumped him.

But then Ushy told another story, a heartbreaking one. That week-end at his house, his daughter was working on a paper for school about Maimonides. Ushy offered to help her, since as he said, “I know this stuff.” He daughter politely refused his help, saying she did not want his help because he was “a hypocrite.” Ushy mimed a knife being stabbed into his heart as the others expressed sympathy, patting him on the shoulder.

Tsiri described how her daughter had reacted to her increased use of English cursing which had begun with her doubting. Esty had said, “Nor a mommy ken zugn 'fuck it.'” Everyone but Ushy, who did not speak Yiddish, laughed. Tsiri translated for him, “Only a mommy can say ‘fuck it.’” In fact, Blimi had told me that she could tell who among her sisters was on the Internet by the profanities they knew. One of her sisters innocently asked her what “bitch” meant, suggesting to Blimi that she had never gone online.

There was talk about their still-religious spouses. Bentsy asked Tsiri if her husband was worried she would have an affair because his wife was terrified of that, more than any beliefs he might have or not have. They asked Tsiri how it felt to wear pants the first time. She described how wearing them helped her “blend into” public places like bars or the train, so that she actually felt more protected, and not constantly sticking out. Perhaps this was part of the shift in publics that having life-changing doubt led to. It was common for those living double lives to want to blend in more with other New Yorkers, to look less marked as ultra-Orthodox. Ushy shyly asked Tsiri if she was a good cook, to which she replied that her husband no longer ate her food because he did not trust her to maintain a
certain level of kashrus. She described how her husband’s family had gone through him to ask her to buy a dessert this past Hanukah rather than make one because again, they could not trust her.

There was a lot of playful joking around, especially about gender perhaps because mixed-gendered hanging out was a relatively new experience. Bentsy quoted a Hebrew text against walking between two women and mentioned that he was sitting between Tsiri and me, which was supposed to harm his memory. At one point, both men took their hidden yarmulkes out of their pants pockets, a small velvet blue one for Ushy and a big velvet black one for Bentsy. They tried each other’s on, laughing, and then Ushy put his on Tsiri to their amusement, which led to Tsiri’s telling of the family fall-out when she took her hat off of her wig. Talk or teasing about clothing, hair or head-covering acknowledged the emotion-laden, gendered signs that double lifers performed as they walked a dangerous line between self-expression and risk of harming those they loved.

Tsiri, for example, described telling her daughter a half-truth about herself and her clothing that had upset her just that very evening. Esty had watched her getting ready to go out, putting on jeans under her skirt. She asked, “Why can’t you just wear the pants, without the skirt?” Tsiri had answered, “A Jewish mother can’t do that.” And while that statement was true, at the same time Tsiri was a different kind of Jewish mother. Within twenty minutes, safely on the train, she would actually just be wearing her jeans. A certain other kind of Jewish mother would not wear jeans at all, let alone under her skirt, and she felt she had to at least perform and uphold that truth for her daughter, if she was going to stay married, live in their community, send her daughter to the “right” schools, so she could eventually make a match with a nice family.
Changing and Staying the Same: Double Life Matchmaking

One day in May 2016, I got a private message on Facebook inviting me to Moishy's daughter's wedding. Moishy was one of the first of his double life generation to “marry off” a child. His double life friends had all watched closely to see what, if any, effects his double life had on his daughter's chances at a good match. Moishy had sent invitations on Facebook to many of his double life friends, along with his OTD friends, work colleagues and of course, Blimi. I asked him on WhatsApp about the decision to invite his secret heretical friends to this most public of family celebrations. It was not, he told me, such a risk. Some were Hasidic men “who looked chassidish (Hasidic) and no one knows they're RM (Reverse Marranos).” Others who were OTD could be mistaken for his work associates.

He said he was a little “concerned” about someone like Yoely, a prominent OTD person whom many would recognize. But Moishy figured Yoely would probably understand and not come, though he told me he would welcome him happily if he did. The same applied to some of the double life and OTD women he invited. He wanted to let them know about the simcha (celebration), but he did not expect most of them to come. In fact, it turned out that a WhatsApp group had exactly this discussion about attending the wedding, with each member letting the others know if they were going to go. Yoely read between the lines of Moishy’s invite and posted, “I wouldn’t be doing him any favors if I went, so I won’t.”

Blimi had to be at the wedding. “This woman is my life!” Moishy wrote to me. They knew everything about other’s children. In fact, Blimi had been very involved in the
matchmaking for Moishy’s daughter and planning the wedding. He wrote to me, “She acted as a sounding board and helped me analyze every shidduch (match). All that said, she’s the one person who must be there for her sake and mine. But I can’t have her come to the dancing (after the ceremony) because it’ll ruin the night for my wife.” I bumped into Blimi on the street just as I arrived. She told me she would not actually be going in, just watching the ceremony from the street. She had texted me earlier, “It’s a huge event in his life. I have to be there.”

Hasidic weddings take place outside, under the stars and under a khupa (wedding canopy); every wedding hall has an outdoor space or a ceiling which opens to the sky. The veiled bride came out, holding tightly to the arms of her mother and future mother-in-law, each holding a candle, to meet the groom in a sunken courtyard. I followed along with the other guests. Then, I remembered to look up to the street-level. There, leaning against the chain link fence, stood Blimi, silhouetted against the purple-pink twilight sky, looking down on the bride and groom. No one else looked up at her or noticed. She could easily have been a curious onlooker from the street, and not the intimate she was, the lover of the father of the bride.

The celebration followed the ceremony, with a big meal and dancing. There was a shadowy double life celebration alongside the official one, which included secret texting and surreptitious meetings for men and women. For example, I had an ongoing WhatsApp thread with Blimi, who remained on the street. She wrote, “It if ain’t too much trouble, can you send me pictures?” She wanted to see the bride dancing, and the dress of the sister of the bride she had heard all about. I took pictures and sent them to her, feeling both a thrill and a twinge of guilt at my complicity. Then Blimi sent another text telling me to make sure
to check out Moishy’s wife’s fancy diamond necklace, which she had helped pick out. Yitsy and Avi texted me from the men’s section, suggesting we meet up by the mekhitza, the wall separating the men and women, where we chatted and watched the men’s dancing. Shmuel texted next, and I went outside to find him and Blimi on the street hanging out together.

Moishy had made a good match for his daughter. Apparently, Moishy’s secret life had not been the issue he (and Blimi) had feared it might be. He had kept under the radar sufficiently and had been successful enough in his non-Jewish job, making money and getting promotions, that his family’s reputation had not suffered. Somehow, he told me, everyone thought he was davening (praying) at another synagogue, and no one really caught on that he wasn’t davening much at all.

Moishy, for his part, had done what he could to make sure his daughter would be happy even as she stayed in the system. Small things, Blimi told me, to create a romantic setting for the new couple, like putting a little table with two chairs out on the balcony. Blimi told me she had been involved in every step, helping him choose a boy, who seemed like a good fit for his daughter from a good family. Despite Moishy and Blimi’s disillusionment with the system, despite their doubts, Moishy had embraced arranged marriage for his daughter, which she wanted too, although she was also talking about college and nursing school. He had not made revolutionary changes, just subtle small ones designed to ensure his daughter’s happiness in her marriage, while keeping open the possibility of higher education and even a professional degree.

Exactly six months later in December, Blimi invited me to her oldest son’s wedding. Despite her own fears that her reputation had suffered, she felt, she told me, “vindicated” by the match with a “very nice girl” from a “good family.” Indeed, Toby had predicted that
Blimi would have problems finding a good family because of her reputation, especially her tight clothing. However, Blimi’s son was a “top boy,” earnestly pious, and Blimi herself was from a popular, wealthy family, well-known for their scholarship and piety. This wedding was in a different, fancier hall—a cream and gold, Louis XIV dream, with women in swirls of silk, feathers, sequins, jewels, and furs. Soon, we all went outside into the frosty air, where the black-velvet wedding canopy was set up on the sidewalk this time. The groom was waiting, flanked by his father and father-in-law to be, shukling (swaying) back and forth, praying and crying. Then the bride came out covered in her veil, Blimi holding tightly to one arm and her mother the other, holding candles and all wrapped in white fur stoles and matching muffs.

Standing there, I suddenly recognized Moishy, by himself across the street wearing his everyday hat, no special occasion shtramel (fur hat). I gave what I hoped was a discreet wave, and he beckoned me over. “I could use the company,” he said. He had snuck into the hall to see Blimi all dressed up. He said, “She looked amazing. It’s such an emotional time for her.” “Is it for you too,” I asked? “Of course, it is, but I feel excluded,” he said. He told me that he knew all about Blimi’s son, the match and wedding, but even more, he knew how Blimi was feeling, and he wished he could share in the celebration with her. I mentioned that I had seen Blimi look across the street a number of times during the ceremony, and Moishy lit up. As the newly married couple and their parents went back into the hall, Moishy predicted Blimi would look back at him one last time. But she didn’t, and he was left alone outside in the cold. And yet, Blimi and Moishy’s secret love affair had been important to the matchmaking of both of their eldest children. Despite never meeting each other’s children, they felt they knew them intimately. Their relationship, with all its secrets and
betrayals, had ended up reproducing some form of ultra-Orthodoxy after all, but perhaps with some subtle changes.

The Morality of Individual Choice

Rearing children to participate in a dominant public ideology, while simultaneously and secretly undermining that ideology was ethically complicated. The compromise many living double lives made was to claim that they were creating “choices” for their children, the opportunity to choose what their lives would be like. But the concept of choice for children, in particular, was also complicated. Children have agency, but their agency is constrained in ways that is different from adults because they are not fully culturally competent adults; they are fully competent children.10

Further, choosing to be religious or not, even as a young adult was not simply a matter of deciding between a Christmas Tree or a Hanukah menorah. Children’s entire socialization through adulthood was bound up with ultra-Orthodoxy. Their social and economic worlds, whom they might marry, the languages they spoke or read, all were forged in ultra-Orthodox institutions, which all taught the same things. The choice to follow a heretical parent and choose a different way of life would be fraught with the loss of all that children were taught was good and true, along with their means to earn a living, chance to get married, to live among family and friends. Individual choice that went against the status quo was not something to be undertaken lightly. Perhaps the choice to live an ultra-Orthodox life, to feel that one had chosen it, maybe that was enough.

Even those living double lives were often ambivalent about what kind of choices they were providing to their children, and how they would feel if their children ended up
too different from them. Rueven, for example, a man living a double life, told me a little wistfully that he would not mind if his son ended up living a secular life. If he is a lawyer, he said, that would be fine, except then we might have very little in common. The ultra-Orthodox habitus, the embodied, cultural sensibilities, of double lifers continued to be important and to color double life efforts at making changes at home.

Similarly, Pessy, a woman who had left her Hasidic group but remained Orthodox told me that she couldn’t really understand why she still so strongly wanted her son to go to a Hasidic yeshiva, but she did. “Maybe I was brainwashed,” she said, “and I don’t exactly understand it, but I want him to have the experience of feeling special.” Special is a word that many Hasidic Jews use to reference a high spiritual level, going beyond what was required spiritually. When a girl chooses to wear tights when she could be wearing knee-socks, her teacher might say she was “special.” In Pessy’s case, I understood that she wanted her son to feel that he, as a Jew, was specially chosen by God. She and her husband planned to supplement their son’s Hasidic education with a tutor for secular subjects, however, she wanted her son to experience the moral certitude and the feeling of Jewish triumphalism of her own Hasidic upbringing.

Her father had actually had to step in and use his leverage when the Hasidic yeshiva rejected them for being too different, too modern, but it was worth it for Pessy to involve him. She told me, in a flash of insight, “If I put my son in public school, he also won’t have a choice. He will just be secular. Maybe I’m fooling myself. I don’t know.” Neither a public school nor a yeshiva provide children with much choice since each have an explicit ideological slant be it Hasidic or “secular.” The actual choice Pessy wanted for her sons, then, was access to an ultra-Orthodox education with its claims to Jewish exceptionalism,
supplemented by exposure to secular subjects (i.e. English and math). Perhaps this was the way that “Hasidic lite” or more “enlightened” ultra-Orthodoxy would actually be created (see next chapter).

My exchange with Pessy reminded me of another conversation I had had with Nosson, in which his own awareness of an irreconcilable moral conflict between individual choice and ultra-Orthodox claims to Jewish authenticity were exposed in a slip of the tongue. We had been having coffee one fall afternoon, and our conversation touched on holiday preparations for the upcoming Rosh Ha-Shana, the Jewish New Year. I mentioned something about my own family preparations, and he said, “Oh, you remembered you were Jewish!” By the time I had walked the few blocks home, he had texted me to apologize for what he said was his “judgmental” comment. In truth, after growing up in an ultra-Orthodox community where consistency, moral certitude and sense of being “special” were reinforced in every institution, I understood his slightly sarcastic comment to me, someone whose Judaism really was about choice with very little sense of obligation. Nosson’s self-awareness, his effort to both live in and reject aspects of his own moral universe was what was notable to me.

The stuff of small everyday exchanges made between and among children, mothers and fathers amidst domestic mundanity—around supper tables, in bedtime stories, and holiday celebrations, for example—were actually the very basis for unexpected social transformations. These transformations were lived in gendered realms of authority, where mothers, fathers, sons and daughters all had different stakes in what constituted an ethical person. And what exactly constituted change was subtle and partial; nevertheless, the
tension between ultra-Orthodox moral authority and double lifers’ gendered ethics of choice opened up the possibility for other ways of being Jewish.
There has been much debate about what should constitute the terrain of the anthropology of morality and ethics. Zigon makes the compelling point that the underlying approach in much of philosophy, which forms the basis for anthropological work on morality and ethics, is a rational actor who strives for the good. Instead, he advocates for an emotional person who sustains relationships. This seems to me to be unnecessarily polarizing, since morality and emotions are mutually constitutive (see Shohet 2017).

Veena Das' analysis tracks the everyday moral decisions made over time by parents and children when a Hindu young man and Muslim young woman fall in love and marry. Community members there struggled, weighing consequences and outcomes, in their attempts to make sense of a forbidden love. She writes, "What moral projects might be embedded in everyday life in the context of the agonistic belonging of Hindus and Muslims as neighbors in the same local worlds—local worlds that are, however, inflected with national and even transnational imaginaries that shape Hindu and Muslim identities."

Pesochim 11a and Horayos 13b, both note that walking between two women harms a man's memory (koshoh leshikchoh).

For a discussion of the intricacies of Hasidic matchmaking see Fader, Mitzvah Girls, Chapter 7.

Berman argues for the term "aged agency," the agency relevant to particular points on the lifecycle.