

# 1

## Life-Changing Doubt, the Internet, and a Crisis of Authority

Yisroel was an earnestly pious boy growing up Hasidic in Brooklyn, New York. With his side curls grazing his shoulders, thick plastic glasses, and big black velvet yarmulke, he looked like all the other boys in his yeshiva, where he studied the Torah and its commentaries from early in the morning until late at night. But when he was thirteen, Yisroel began to notice contradictions that troubled him in the religious texts he was studying. He didn't initially doubt the truth of ultra-Orthodox Judaism, but he had problematic questions—what are called in Yiddish *emuna kashes* (questions about faith). Only once did he timidly confide in his teacher, a rabbi, who angrily warned him that such questions came from the sin of masturbation. From then on, confused and ashamed, he kept his questions to himself and tried, as he told me, to “push them under the rug.” At eighteen he got married, and he and his wife, Rukhy, whom he barely knew but grew to adore, had five children in quick succession. To support his growing family, Yisroel eventually stopped studying Torah and began, as many Hasidic men do, to work in information technology.

However, in 2003, when he was twenty-nine, his questions began to nag at him again. And this time, thanks to his work with computers, he turned to the internet, secretly searching for and reading forbidden scholarly articles on theology, biblical criticism, and science. He hoped to finally find answers to his questions about faith in these non-Jewish sources, but they only provoked more questions. He decided then, he told me, that he had to “take his questioning all the way.”

Late at night, sitting alone in the kitchen after everyone had gone to bed and the only sound was the humming of the two dishwashers (one for meat and one for dairy), he began reading some of the then-popular heretical ultra-Orthodox blogs, like *Hasidic Rebel* and *Shtreimel*. These led him to online forums of the day, where writing under a pseudonym in Yiddish and in English, Yisroel debated with ultra-Orthodox Jewish doubters and even some who had openly left Jewish Orthodoxy altogether to go “OTD,” or “off the *derekh*” (path). He tried to convince them (and himself) that they were wrong. All of his searching, he told me, remembering his anguish, “tortured” him, but he could not stop.

Eventually, his questions gave way to doubt in the central premise of ultra-Orthodox Jewish authority: that God revealed the Torah to the Jews at Mount Sinai through Moses. Yisroel was in such agony at this heresy (*kfira*) that he secretly began to make phone calls to consult rabbis outside of his community who specialized in answering questions of faith. Their arguments failed to convince him. Despite continuing to observe the *mitsves*, the 613 prohibitions and commandments that had always directed every aspect of his life, he began to doubt their divine truth.

The first time he ever violated one of the commandments was on a Sabbath evening in 2012. His youngest was crying, and he knew that turning on the musical mobile above her crib would calm her down. Observant Jews do not turn electricity on or off during the Sabbath. He stood alone in the dark with his hand on the switch for a long time—yes, no, yes, no, yes, no? And then he switched it on. Each time he broke another commandment, like using his phone on the Sabbath, or skipping daily prayers, or even eventually sneaking nonkosher cold cuts into the pocket of his jacket to nibble on at home, he told me, he felt a sense of “freedom,” finally “in control of his life.”

That was when he became one of a growing number of what most ultra-Orthodox call in English “double life” or “ITC” (in the closet), or what Yiddish-speaking ultra-Orthodox call *bahaltena apikorsim* (hidden heretics), those who feature in this book: men and women who practiced religiously in public, including at home, but who often violated the commandments in secret because they no longer believed them to be God’s words to his chosen people. Yisroel and others like him kept their double lives secret to protect their families and for fear of being cast out in a world they were ill-prepared to navigate.

In 2014, after Yisroel had developed a growing network of double-life friends on social media and in person, his wife, Rukhy, finally confronted him. She had noticed that in the intimacy of their bedroom, he had

stopped “washing *negl vasser*,” the ritual handwashing upon waking each morning. She asked him if he still prayed. If he kept the Sabbath. Did he still believe? Hiding in their bedroom closet and whispering late at night, so their children would not hear, he told her everything. She was devastated and told me she cried for three days straight. Then, just a few months later, the *vaad ha-tsnius* (the Committee on Modesty), a group of self-appointed activists and rabbis, contacted Yisroel through his brother-in-law. They somehow knew that he had just bought a book on science from Amazon for his twelve-year-old daughter, which included a section on the theory of evolution, which Hasidic Jews reject.

Yisroel’s world was literally falling apart, and that was when I met him. A mutual contact, Zalman, who had been forced to leave his own ultra-Orthodox community a few years earlier for heresy, introduced us, knowing I was conducting anthropological research with those living double lives and those who tried to help them. Over the next year, Yisroel and I met periodically in a wooden booth in the back of a dark bar on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, amid the safe anonymity of Columbia University students. He still had his long side curls along with a long beard, thick glasses, and a big black velvet yarmulke. However, as a small personal rebellion, he had taken off the high black velvet hat most Hasidic men wear, and instead of the usual Hasidic men’s long black jacket, he always wore a cardigan or a parka.

Yisroel told me his story as it was unfolding. Although he was always anxious about protecting the anonymity of his family, he seemed to need to talk, often asking me about his legal rights, something I knew little about. When we couldn’t meet, we communicated on WhatsApp, the secure phone messaging app that so many ultra-Orthodox Jews used. He told me how he and his wife were trying to figure out how to make their life together work again. He had promised her that he would keep practicing in front of the children. He hoped it was enough.

With her permission, he gave me Rukhy’s number, and I began to talk with her, too, on the phone and on Facebook. Rukhy, who used to rely on her husband for spiritual guidance, told me how his doubt had begun to affect her: how she worried about her own faith *glitshing* (slipping); how she had begun to reach out to other women in similar situations online; and about her new sense of responsibility for the *rukhnus* (spirituality) in their home, traditionally the authority of the husband. Yisroel’s secret was hers now too. She could tell no one, not even her mother or her sisters who lived across the street. She told me she was scared, angry, and heartbroken all at once.

The Committee on Modesty wanted Yisroel to sign a contract promising he would stop using any social media, part of the growing effort by the ultra-Orthodox to control the internet and protect the community from what was increasingly called the “crisis of *emuna*,” or the crisis of faith. This made Yisroel angry, and he brought up his constitutional right to privacy, having only recently learned about the existence of the Constitution at all. He was not rebellious, he insisted. He was simply following his conscience. Then the committee threatened to expel his children from school and to tell Yisroel’s parents unless he and Rukhy agreed to see a religious therapist, someone who worked with a rabbi and then reported back to the committee. Many ultra-Orthodox Jews believe that religious doubt might be symptomatic of an underlying mental illness, perhaps depression, a trauma, or anxiety, something that could be treated and cured. Afraid, Yisroel and Rukhy tried a number of different therapists, religious and secular, but none helped Yisroel regain his faith.

What Yisroel called his “journey” was still unfolding. Would he and his wife stay together, and if they did, would her faith continue to slip? Would the religious authorities and institutions be able to control the decisions Yisroel and his wife made? Would they expel his children, which would have serious repercussions for the entire family’s life, especially when it came time for matchmaking? Where did his responsibilities as a parent lie, especially as his children got older? Was there anyone, a therapist or a rabbi, who could help Yisroel regain his faith, something he still wished for?

Yisroel’s story was but one of many, the uncharted territory of ultra-Orthodox hidden heretics living double lives where belief and practice were at odds; these were men and (fewer) women, who no longer believed in the literal truth of divine revelation at Mount Sinai. Nevertheless, they felt bound by love and a sense of moral responsibility to stay with their still-religious spouses and children. Keeping secrets from those they were closest to, double lifers upheld the public appearance of adhering to ultra-Orthodoxy, even as they explored forbidden worlds, online and in person, beyond their own.

Those living double lives are part of a broader twenty-first-century generational crisis of authority among the ultra-Orthodox. Despite their robust demographic growth, there have been increasingly loud struggles over competing knowledge and truths. The internet facilitated the formation of a public oppositional voice, one that included anonymous expressions of life-changing doubt and validated radically changing perceptions of oneself in the world. Gender was key to the experience of and possibili-

ties for living double lives, since gender structures authority in both ultra-Orthodox life and its alternative public. Begun in online spaces, but soon crossing over to meetings in person, this alternative public gave a platform to dangerous questions: Who should have the authority for making life choices? What and who defined Orthodox Judaism or self-fulfillment or an ethical life? The pages ahead ask what double lifers' everyday struggles can tell us about religious doubt and social change in the digital age.

\* \* \*

Until recently, ultra-Orthodox Jews experiencing the kind of life-changing doubt that Yisroel did had trouble finding others like themselves. One might suspect from outside signs that a cousin or friend was doubting—maybe he had hidden an English book in his Hebrew prayer book in *shul* (synagogue) or maybe her skirt had gotten an inch shorter—but reaching out meant possibly risking everything. Back then, living a double life was very lonely unless you had the means to venture out of your community. For example, Tsvi, a Hasidic man in his sixties who had lived a double life for decades, told me he had found kindred spirits among less observant Jews he met in public libraries or Jewish seminaries in Manhattan. Women living double lives, especially with children, generally had much less independence than someone like Tsvi, so they were even more alone than men.

Since the early 2000s, however, the internet has created new possibilities for those living double lives to find each other and build secret worlds together. Through blogging and then later on social media (forums, Facebook groups, and texting platforms like WhatsApp), many began to anonymously critique, parody, and mock what they called “the system,” the structures of rabbinic authority and their affiliated institutions, such as schools, synagogues, charities, kosher businesses, and summer camps. They also wrote about and discussed, in gendered varieties of Yiddish and English, their changing sense of themselves in the world. Once they trusted each other, they met up in person too, secretly exploring their new desires, ideas, and feelings in and around New York City.

Those living double lives formed an anonymous public with its own morality. This public, selectively rooted in North American liberal morality, included ideals of individual autonomy, choice, and self-fulfillment. Double-life women had fewer avenues for participation in this public, however; they had less access to new technologies, less mobility for getting together, and were sometimes less comfortable speaking up or writing in mixed-gender groups.

In reaction to this growing chorus of anonymous critics, ultra-Orthodox Jewish rabbis, rebbes (Hasidic leaders), educators, and self-appointed communal activists (*askonim*) began to rethink their approaches to what they called “the internet” or, in Yiddish, *tekhnologiya* or *keylim* (devices), and especially smartphones. They came to the conclusion that the internet was more dangerous to Jewish continuity than the Holocaust. As a public poster that circulated on WhatsApp warned: “The Holocaust burned our bodies, but the Internet burns our souls.”

At the same time, rabbinic leadership began describing the contemporary period as “a crisis of faith.” They claimed that exterior material signs and embodied practices (*khitsoynius*)—for example, distinctive clothing (*levush*), head covering, ritual practice such as prayer—could no longer assure, as they had in even the recent past, the cultivation of shared interior faith, one strong enough to resist the temptations of the Gentile world. As a rabbi noted in the popular ultra-Orthodox magazine, *Ami*, “Before *levush* was enough. . . . Nowadays we have the Internet, where everyone is anonymous and no *levush* can act as a shield.” To staunch what many worried was a growing wave of secret doubters and those leaving the faith, rabbinic leadership began speaking explicitly about how to protect and cure Jewish interiority (the *pnimiyus*)—hearts, minds, and souls.

Rabbinic leadership’s public talk and writing about interiority integrated two different authoritative bodies of knowledge, or what anthropologist Talal Asad called “discursive traditions”:<sup>1</sup> Jewish theology and American popular psychology. To protect Jewish souls against the corruption of the internet, rabbinic leadership began holding fiery anti-internet rallies (*asifes*), including the 2012 event in Citi Field Stadium in Queens, which drew over forty thousand men and boys. In rallies, leaders denounced the internet for disrupting the healthy struggle of each Jew to defeat the innate inclination for evil (*yeytser hora*), including a willingness to submit to hierarchies of religious male authority. They posted edicts limiting access to the internet and enlisted the ultra-Orthodox school systems to support them.

However, when life-changing doubt was revealed or confessed, rabbinic advisers almost always referred the person to a religious (*frum*) therapist or less formal satellites—Orthodox Jewish life coaching or outreach (*kiruv*) rabbis. Religious therapy as a discipline was founded in the nineties, and there was a wide range of professionalization: some held master’s degrees from reputable universities, while others practiced without licensing or training. Some therapists cast life-changing doubt as a symptom, either of insufficient spiritual education or of underlying emotional issues.

They pathologized doubt using medicalized models of emotional health, which designated faith the normative default. This was a change from decades past, when those who left or doubted were seen less as a threat and simply as weak and undisciplined, in thrall to their evil inclination or Satan.

In this latest chapter of North American ultra-Orthodox life, the crisis of *emuna* and struggles over the internet should be understood as a wider crisis of authority. On the heels of political, economic, and social conflicts, in the context of exploding population growth, a small, homegrown generational backlash has begun challenging the authority of ultra-Orthodox leadership and their claims as the legitimate arbiters of tradition (*mesoyra*). In this social drama, the internet became a lightning rod for wider communal debates about religious authority through public discourse about interiority. While numbers of those living double lives and fellow travelers are not reliably known, with individual estimates varying from a hundred to tens of thousands worldwide, they increasingly figure large in the ultra-Orthodox imagination.<sup>2</sup> Using the public yet intimate anonymity of the internet, those living double lives rejected the heightened religious stringencies of their communities following the Second World War and wrote their changing interior lives into being. Ultra-Orthodox leadership, in contrast, defined the contemporary crisis of authority as the latest threat—the most recent in a long history of such threats—to the very survival of the Jewish people.

Arriving in the 1950s after the Holocaust as refugees, primarily from Eastern Europe, ultra-Orthodox Jews today make up about 10 percent of the estimated 5.3 million Jewish adults in the United States, with 89 percent living in the Northeast, especially Brooklyn and upstate New York. In the eight counties that make up the New York area, 22 percent are ultra-Orthodox, roughly seventy-two thousand households. Despite public talk about the crisis of faith, in fact, demographically ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities continue to grow, owing to so many having large families (48 percent have more than four children).<sup>3</sup> There was a growing fear among many ultra-Orthodox that as they have grown increasingly comfortable in the United States, further from the trauma of the Holocaust with its moral imperative to rebuild, new dangers from outside and within were gathering force, most concretely from the internet.

In many ways more similar politically and culturally to Christian Evangelicalism than to other denominations of American Judaism, ultra-Orthodox life is all-encompassing despite so many living in the middle of New York City. Children attend private ultra-Orthodox gender-segregated



schools affiliated with rabbinic leadership, with different curricula and languages for boys and girls. These schools later feed into arranged marriages, often brokered transnationally. With limited secular and English education, especially for Hasidic boys who speak primarily Yiddish, ultra-Orthodox married men often continue their religious study for some years until they go to work, either self-employed or in cash businesses that do not require degrees or even proficiency in English, such as accounting, real estate, information technology, local and online business, or teaching in ultra-Orthodox schools. And as I learned in the research for my first book, *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing Up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn*, ultra-Orthodox women often work as well, even as they rear large families. Their greater fluency in English helps them negotiate the secular world, so that men and boys can study the Torah undistracted and with pure hearts, which hastens the coming of the messiah for all.

Ultra-Orthodox men and women in New York participate in the economic, political, and recreational life of the city, but only in order to build up their own communities, not from a shared sense of citizenship; instead, religious leaders, educators, and parents endeavor to create communities for their children and themselves where they can be protected from knowledge, technologies, or people that might corrupt, distract, or challenge their commitment to an ultra-Orthodox way of life. They might live and thrive in the diversity that is New York thanks to federal, state, and city policies, but the ultra-Orthodox are sure that they alone are God's chosen people, waiting, as they have for over two millennia in diaspora, for the final redemption.

To tell the story of the contemporary crisis of authority, I organized this book around two ultra-Orthodox perspectives: (1) men and women living double lives, primarily married adults in their late twenties, thirties, and forties and their friends and families, and (2) rabbis, educators, and activists who tried to protect the faithful from doubt and those who treated doubt once it became intractable: Torah therapists, outreach rabbis, and Jewish life coaches. Those living double lives fell along a continuum of doubt, with implications for their belief and their practices. Further, men and women double lifers had very different opportunities and experiences, so that gender shaped the experience and enactment of doubt. Outreach rabbis, religious therapists, and life coaches made a living using therapeutic and religious talk to strengthen faith, to cure doubt, and to reinscribe gendered hierarchies of authority. In their struggle over definitions of ultra-Orthodoxy, those living double lives and the faithful both appealed to an idealized shared Jewish past and drew on



contemporary North American and Jewish theological discourses of the interior self.

An ethnography of a relatively small population of ultra-Orthodox Jewish doubters, those who tried to help them, and the role of the internet raises all kinds of questions about dramatic personal and social change. These questions are relevant not only for scholars of religion or of media, but for anyone interested in how people struggle to live morally meaningful lives in the digital age. What, for example, were the ethical dilemmas of those living double lives, who publicly practiced a religious life they no longer believed in and secretly violated? How did they talk about their doubts and keep secrets from their spouses, and how did their rabbis and therapists respond? What can ultra-Orthodox struggles over the internet—which double lifers used as a lifeline, while rabbinic leadership claimed it contaminated Jewish souls—tell us about the possibilities and dangers of digital media? And how did those living double lives subtly try to teach their children what they called “tolerance” and “critical thinking,” negatively valued as moral relativism in their own communities? To develop an anthropology of life-changing doubt, this book examines semiotic forms and practices—language, the body and clothing, digital technology, food and activities (like bike riding or praying)—to tell the story of the everyday moral compromises and dilemmas of those living untenable contradictions.

## The Anthropology of Life-Changing Doubt

Ethnographically studying doubt productively complicates conceptions of religious lives and how anthropologists might study them.<sup>4</sup> I distinguish between two kinds of doubt. The first is doubt that defines or refines faith. Anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann, for example, has shown that for contemporary Evangelicals that she studied in the United States belief in God was “made real” through playful, ongoing narrative expressions of doubt and skepticism.<sup>5</sup> For ultra-Orthodox Jews it was the discipline of religious practice—the adherence to the commandments and prohibitions (*mitsves*)—that ensured that interior *emuna* would always return, despite what all agreed was the inevitability of doubts, questions, and uncertainties across the life cycle. That kind of doubt remained private and contained, never acted upon and rarely spoken about, though one could and should seek out *khizuk* (moral strengthening) from books or listen to *shiurs* (inspirational lectures) given by respected rabbis.

My focus in this book is another kind of doubt, what I call “life-changing doubt.” This was a kind of doubt that dramatically troubled a person’s faith in the truth of all they had grown up believing, maybe even obliterating it for good. Life-changing doubt was so profound that it could no longer be contained inside, unspoken, not acted upon. People experiencing life-changing doubt sought out new truths with other doubters, which led them to change how they perceived themselves and their worlds. And just as with the doubt that defines faith, few anthropologists of religion have studied life-changing doubt.<sup>6</sup>

Life-changing doubt almost always provokes individuals to make larger, public changes in their everyday lives, with social and institutional repercussions. For example, religious studies scholar Philip Francis wrote about this kind of doubt in his study of a college “semester-away” program that exposed Evangelical young adults to poetry, literature, art, and music. The experience of listening to Bob Dylan or seeing a Rothko painting in a London museum led some students to experience life-changing doubt and subsequently leave Evangelicalism altogether. Francis notes that leaving did not just entail “tinkering with belief” or making an intellectual adjustment, but rather involved a “recreation of one’s being in the world.”<sup>7</sup>

The ultra-Orthodox Jews living double lives that I write about experienced similar life-changing doubt, and they too re-created their lives. But they did not leave. They felt they could not. There was no rupture of everyday life, like those Evangelicals, Mormons, or even other ultra-Orthodox Jews who have had crises of faith and then left, a kind of reverse conversion story.<sup>8</sup> Those living double lives stayed, and they kept their doubting secret, even as they made gradual and subtle changes to their everyday ultra-Orthodox lives, eventually including secretly breaking many of the religious commandments that had been part of the very fiber of their being since birth.

This kind of life-changing doubt became threatening to ultra-Orthodox leadership because it was a doubt that refused to remain in individual interiors where it belonged. One man living a double life remembered his Orthodox therapist “screaming” at him impatiently, “Why can’t you be like everyone else and just keep these doubts to yourself? . . . Your *emuna* will return if you just keep practicing [the *mitsves*]!” The crisis of authority, then, was not about life-changing doubt per se, but about interior individual doubt that became social and discursive. That is, those with life-changing doubt discussed it together and shared and explored other ways of being and living. They did so at first anonymously and secretly online, but eventually in person as well.

Once interior doubt became a discursive social practice, it also became public, which was the most threatening to rabbinic leadership of all. By public I mean that life-changing doubt was made real with others across all kinds of technologies, in written and spoken languages (Yiddish, English, and *loshn koydesh*: sacred Hebrew and Aramaic), on changing bodies where beards were trimmed or hair grew long, in changing clothing and in everyday practice. Those with life-changing doubt moved through unsanctioned spaces, such as social media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook, as well as New York City parks, restaurants, private homes, or Broadway plays. People and digital texts went to places they should not be, doing things they should not do, arguing about the existence of God, falling in love, or taking off their wigs in the subway on their way to Manhattan bars. And because those living double lives continued to look and act mostly the same to their families and communities, it was the new medium of the internet that was initially blamed for enabling those with life-changing doubt to form an anonymous heretical public that was so frightening and challenging to rabbinic authorities.<sup>9</sup>

Both secret and public, life-changing doubt morally threatened the very integrity of ultra-Orthodox religious authority and, as such, it needed an explanation.<sup>10</sup> Double lifers had grown up exposed to the truth and beauty of ultra-Orthodoxy. How could that not have protected them from growing *kalt tse yiddishkayt* (cool to Judaism, i.e., vulnerable to doubt)? Those living double lives could not be dismissed merely as what were called, bums or *bumtes* (feminine, bum), or for yeshiva boys, *tshillers* (chillers), that is, ultra-Orthodox Jews who were lax about religious practice not because of intellectual questioning, but just because they wanted to have a good time and were too weak to fight their inclinations for evil, their own *tayves* (lusts, desires, urges). Bums and *bumtes* were open about their “lifestyle,” repenting every year during the high holy days, though they and their families were marginalized accordingly, especially in match-making. Double lifers were different. They had questions that could not be answered, questions that made it impossible for them to continue living as they always had. This was unfathomable and disturbing to the faithful. I remember visiting a community college class catering to Orthodox Jews, invited by a double-life professor of sociology. At the end of the class, a Hasidic student asked me eagerly, “What have you found? What really makes these people lose their *emuna*?”

There were, in fact, few consistent predictors of why a person raised in ultra-Orthodoxy experienced life-changing doubt. Esty, a Hasidic woman who appears frequently in this book, brought up this example. Her friend

had told her that once she read Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, that was it. Her world changed, and she eventually left. "But," Esty said with a shrug, "I read *Little Women* too, and I was as *frum* as ever until much later in life."

Almost all of the men and women I spent time with remembered having had doubts and questions as teens, but many ultra-Orthodox teens do. That is the kind of doubt that defines faith. Most of them had had good reputations before they were married, and came from "good" families. Few had been labeled "at risk," a category that lumps questioning in with other pathologized behaviors such as addiction, promiscuity, or self-harming. Almost all steered clear of any connection to Footsteps, an organization that counsels those who are questioning or have left their ultra-Orthodox communities. None that I met claimed to have been sexually abused—those who have more often leave altogether. The majority of those I met living double lives were also not gay or queer, something that can make staying, one woman told me, impossibly lonely. Most reported that as teens they had been merely *naygerik* or curious, not rebellious, though perhaps a few were called "*ongelaynt*" (suspiciously well-read), class clowns or cynics (*letsonim*). What those living double lives did share was that at the particular time of the life cycle, married with young children, that their *emuna* was supposed to be getting more and more *ernst* (serious), as their parents' and grandparents' had, their earlier questions and doubts resurfaced. However, this time the doubts and questions refused to be denied, and this time there was an online public to support them.

The life-changing doubt of those living double lives was not uniform or consistent. Not all became atheists, as I had assumed at first. There was a continuum of doubt, complete with nuanced local Yiddish, Hebrew, and English categories that shaped religious practice or lack thereof. At one pole were the *ofgeklerte* (enlightened), those who had become more "open-minded" about religious doctrine and exposure to diverse perspectives (Jewish and non-Jewish). For example, *ofgeklerte* individuals might dip into academic articles about biblical criticism or evolutionary biology, along with religious texts not sanctioned by their own community (e.g., the writings of Rav Kook, founder of religious Zionism, taboo for Satmar Hasidim who reject the State of Israel). Their reading might eventually lead them to break some Jewish laws in private, but not necessarily.

In contrast, *apikorsim* (skeptics), were more explicitly critical of ultra-Orthodoxy and its leadership. They publicly denigrated the sages and rabbis, read all kinds of heretical literature, and even rejected certain core

ultra-Orthodox doctrines, such as belief in the resurrection of the dead upon the arrival of the messiah (*tkhiyes ha-meysim*). *Apikorsim* were boundary pushers and social critics, but they were not necessarily atheists either. *Kofrim* (heretics) were similarly critical of ultra-Orthodox leaders and the system, but that was because they had more broadly come to reject the truth of the divine revelation at Sinai (*matn toyre*), which brought the entire narrative of ultra-Orthodoxy tumbling down. Even so, some heretics continued to believe in God of some kind. Both skeptics and heretics often violated Jewish laws, though only in secret as well.

At the far end of the continuum of life-changing doubt were atheists or agnostics (terms used in English), who rejected belief itself. Atheists might not feel obligated by Jewish law or believe in God, but some, not all, still retained an emotional attachment to what they called the “lifestyle” of ultra-Orthodoxy with its close-knit ties and sense of shared purpose, especially in contrast to their perceptions of the emptiness of other ways of life.

These were not hard-and-fast categories, since real people never fit so neatly into boxes. And time was a factor too. Some living double lives stayed put at one end of the continuum of doubt, while others moved along it over time. When I first met Yonah, he was *ofgeklert*, still committed to keeping all the commandments, what is called “Orthoprax,” but not necessarily believing that those commandments were truly God’s words. A few years later, though, I realized he was texting me on WhatsApp on the Sabbath, something he had never done before. What the internet and, later, social media offered, all double lifers agreed, was a safe space to gather with like-minded others. This made them feel less alone and fear a little less for their sanity.

The continuum of doubt denied women even the possibility of intellectual doubt, since it referenced exclusively male categories. For example, some men living double lives called themselves *maskilim* (Jewish Enlighteners), the male Jews who challenged rabbinic authority in an earlier crisis of authority, the eighteenth- to nineteenth-century Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment). Women I met did not use that term for themselves, nor did they generally call themselves *ofgeklerte*, *kofrim*, or *apikorsim*, words that appear in religious texts men study. Women I met often claimed they were “spiritual” even if they no longer believed in the system or the divine revelation at Mount Sinai. Though there were fewer women living double lives for structural reasons of mobility, opportunity, and access, even when a woman expressed life-changing doubt, male authorities (husbands,

rabbis, fathers, therapists) almost always blamed emotional problems, dissatisfactions, or sexual promiscuity. As Shmuel, a Yeshivish blogger who figures prominently in the pages to come, wrote to me on WhatsApp: “Women [double lifers] are below the radar to the authorities. . . . [They] would probably ignore a woman’s profession of doubts as the real issue and attribute it to a wandering uterus if you know what I mean.”

Living a double life happened over real time and was sometimes enacted before my very eyes, since ethnography happens over real time too. For example, in our first meeting at the Atlantic Avenue subway stop in Brooklyn, thirty-year-old Hasidic Gavriel asked me to walk several yards ahead of him, so no one would see us together in public. We slunk into a nearby Starbucks, where he tentatively tried a cappuccino, his first. He looked nervously over his shoulder the entire time and spoke practically in a whisper, asking me not to use my tape recorder. When I met with him again, a year and a half later, at my university cafeteria, he was still living a double life, but he was, as he said, “less paranoid,” since he had come clean to his wife, and she had decided not to divorce him. He seemed relaxed and confident, eating whatever was being served that day (not worrying about what was kosher), and talking openly, though he still asked me not to record him. For some, living a double life was temporary before they decided to finally leave altogether or were kicked out. For others, those in this book, there were more incremental changes over years, a process of making ethical compromises, often with a still-religious spouse, but ultimately remaining in their ultra-Orthodox communities. Those communities have experienced dramatic changes over the past twenty years or so, which ignited the contemporary crisis of authority.

## Jewish Orthodoxies in Crisis

Ultra-Orthodox Jews are part of the New York City landscape. Men’s distinctive black and white dress, their beards and side curls, yarmulkes and hats have been featured on subway murals, television, and in movies. Women’s and girls’ modest clothing and hair is less marked, until the summer months, when their stockings, long skirts, and buttoned blouses are suddenly very apparent amid shorts and tank tops. Ultra-Orthodox Jews share city spaces, resources, amenities, and citizenship with the diversity of New Yorkers, but their interactions are limited: bumping elbows on crowded streets, voting, buying electronics or renting apartments, invoking nostalgia for tourists and more liberal Jews, or instigating conflicts over resources and real estate.<sup>11</sup>

Ultra-Orthodoxy is quite different theologically from more liberal Jewish denominations, such as Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist, especially in terms of belief and practice. In the Reform Judaism I was raised with, for example, belief meant belief in God, not belief that God literally gave the Jews the Torah at Mount Sinai. And belief in God was something to be discussed not assumed. In the Hebrew school classes I attended, Jewish laws seemed, at least to me, like ethical suggestions rather than obligations. I learned that Judaism was a religion of questioning authority, not a religion of submission. It was only in graduate school, as I prepared to do research with Hasidic Jews, that I read about the history of Reform Judaism, as a legacy of nineteenth-century German Jews' efforts to make Judaism align with emerging European modernity, something it ironically shared with earlier struggles over Jewishness.

What is now called ultra-Orthodoxy was a traditionalist movement that arose in eighteenth-century eastern Europe in response to the rapid social changes modernity provoked.<sup>12</sup> Contemporary ultra-Orthodoxy includes two major strands of Ashkenazic (European) Jewish Orthodoxy, Hasidic and Yeshivish.<sup>13</sup> These were originally opposed to each other, with each claiming traditional authority.<sup>14</sup> After the Holocaust, though, as ultra-Orthodox Jews successfully rebuilt thriving communities in the United States, Canada, South Africa, England, Belgium, and Israel, to name a few places, Hasidic and Yeshivish communities grew less oppositional, especially in contrast to the American rise of Modern Orthodoxy, a denomination that attempted to balance adherence to Jewish law with full participation in the world.

Nevertheless, there remain significant differences between and among Yeshivish and Hasidic ultra-Orthodox Jews. For example, different Hasidic communities who most often trace their lineages to towns and cities in eastern Europe are each led by a rebbe, the spiritual leader of a Hasidic court (*hoif*). In contrast, Yeshivish communities are organized around a prominent rabbi, a *rosh yeshiva* (head of a yeshiva), and the yeshiva itself. Hasidic and Yeshivish communities are further distinguished by religious practice, education, language, and exposure to the *goyish* (Gentile) world and its media. For more about distinctions between the Hasidic and the Yeshivish, particularly about multilingualism and educational practices, as well as my transcription conventions, see the appendix. The glossary that follows provides definitions of key terms and concepts.

Ultra-Orthodoxy is an admittedly vague and even judgmental term, as in who says who is "ultra" or even Orthodox? Ultra-Orthodoxy also masks important Jewish Orthodox diversity of many kinds. However, I still



decided to adopt the term for a number of reasons. First, it is commonly used by many community members themselves.<sup>15</sup> Second, in order to protect the anonymity of those living double lives, I was unable to name particular communities beyond Hasidic or Yeshivish lest I accidentally “out” someone, so the wide-ranging, often subtle distinctions among the ultra-Orthodox are somewhat muted here. Third, despite its shortcomings, I have found that the term ultra-Orthodoxy encourages a wider category of analysis than has been common, one that accounts for diversity and debates across Jewish orthodoxies as they happen on the ground. Finally, my use of the term should be understood as an approach to religious life that foregrounds the importance of ethnographically examining competing claims to correct belief (*doxa*), which I consider a form of religious practice (*praxis*). This approach puts struggles over authority front and center, in addition to the more common terrain of religious law, canon, and ritual. This allows me to recuperate the notion of interiority, especially belief or faith, showing that in moments of social change interiority can become public and political, made visible and audible in technology, in writing and reading, and on and through bodily practice.<sup>16</sup>

While there is the ever-present temptation to see ultra-Orthodox Jews as throwbacks to a lost past, as communities that resist modernity, social scientists including myself have unequivocally shown otherwise. Ultra-Orthodox Judaism could exist only in a place and time where religious difference was tolerated, where the structure of the state provided support like food stamps or subsidized housing, which many ultra-Orthodox Jews rely on, and where participation in democracy made the ultra-Orthodox a powerful interest group.

Ultra-Orthodox Jews, as I have argued, are better understood as part of an alternative religious modernity, whose leaders have increasingly used the authority of religious stringency rather than leniency in observance of Jewish law to bolster their claim to Jewish authenticity. An example of religious stringency can be traced through the prosaic example of head coverings. Married women are obligated to cover their hair, and in the 1960s many merely wore a wig over their hair. However, those same women’s daughters and granddaughters are now often obligated by male authorities within families, schools, and rabbis to wear wigs covered by a hat or a kerchief. Wigs and hats were merely one way that ultra-Orthodox authorities built more and higher “gates” (*gedorim*) around every aspect of life, hoping to protect their communities from the influence of Gentiles.

Over the past twenty years, those living double lives have tapped into a wider generational backlash of men in their late twenties, thirties, and

early forties, Hasidic and Yeshivish, who were frustrated by these religious stringencies, which limited their educational and economic opportunities in what has become a very expensive way of life. Leyzer, a Hasidic double lifer texted me, “What we’re seeing now in my generation is a rebellion.” He elaborated that he and some of his peers (fourth generation in the United States) were rebelling against leaders who treated them as children, incapable of setting their own moral limits (my translations in brackets):

Like, first of all, stop telling me that goyim [Gentiles] are all pigs and wanna kill me. Stop telling me that an iPhone is gonna make me burn in hell. Stop telling me that making eye contact with a woman is gonna make me have sex with her. Stop telling me those things because you’re disempowering me. You’re not allowing me to have choices. Don’t tell me that the only thing I can do in this world is to sit and learn [i.e., study Torah and Talmud] . . . it’s demasculating [*sic*].

The wider political and social context of this generational rebellion is important for understanding the contemporary crisis of authority. The turn of the twenty-first century brought the end of a generation of important Hasidic rebbes and Yeshivish rabbis born in Europe, who wielded moral authority by dint of charisma and/or their ties to a lost European past. Their death led to public political infighting over succession, with a number of major Hasidic groups in particular splintering off.<sup>17</sup> The very visible and human political machinations over resources, wealth, and power made some ultra-Orthodox, especially certain groups of Hasidim, quite cynical about their once-revered leaders.

This cynicism occurred just as populations, real estate prices, and the cost of everyday life in New York soared. Many men expressed frustration that they had not been prepared to support their large families (birth control was forbidden), including never learning much English or math.<sup>18</sup> Ultra-Orthodox life became increasingly expensive, with private school payments, special clothing, kosher food, and conspicuous displays expected for holidays and frequent family celebrations, such as weddings and bar mitzvahs. Without even high school diplomas and with strict adherence to the Jewish holiday calendar, options for employment were limited if married men did not or could not continue to study Torah full-time. Most relied on work in ultra-Orthodox or Orthodox Jewish businesses or social institutions, while some were self-employed. Women, who often did have high school diplomas, worked as teachers, or in offices or stores, until they had a few children, after which many stayed home with their families. Despite extensive and active ultra-Orthodox charitable organizations

(*gmakhim*) and participation in federal and state aid programs, such as food stamps or Section 8 housing, making a living in New York could be a challenge.

Along with economic challenges, public charges of sexual abuse especially in boys' yeshivas, which broke in the Jewish and mainstream presses in 2006, added to a growing disillusionment for some. The coverage followed other exposés of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, the Boy Scouts, elite private schools, and football teams. An anonymous ultra-Orthodox blogger kept running lists of well-known Hasidic and Yeshivish rabbis accused of impropriety but never prosecuted. The *New York Times* reported on the Brooklyn district attorney's complicity with Agudas Yisroel, the leadership and policy organization of ultra-Orthodox rabbis, to try the accused in their own religious courts. All these cases involved struggles over a great deal of money, public perception, and the political power of some institutions to reject the authority of the federal, state, and municipal legal systems. The broader media coverage, in particular, forced ultra-Orthodox parents to acknowledge that their leaders had put the reputations of accused rabbis before the protection of their children.<sup>19</sup>

The loud and increasingly popular Jewish blogosphere, including such bloggers as DovBear, Rabbi Natan Slifkin, and Hasidic Rebel, mocked and parodied ultra-Orthodox leadership as materialistic, corrupt, and power hungry. As their followers eventually printed out the blogs for them to read, rabbinic leaders, in turn, slowly began to rethink their internet policies, formulated ad hoc in the mid-1990s. Controlling internet access, however, proved more complicated than any other new medium or technology had since the invention of the printing press in Europe centuries before.

The ultra-Orthodox strategy for a new medium of communication has historically been either to transform and control the content or have rabbinic leadership censor it altogether. Every community has its own standards and rules, and often as new media become available, the old media come to seem more "kosher." For example, newspapers, magazines, and novels in Yiddish and English with Jewish content became readily available to all groups from the 1950s on. Television was banned in the 1960s, though many from that time remember watching it at their grandparents' homes. Tape recorders, which were originally forbidden by some Hasidic communities, had become kosher by the time CDs and DVDs made their appearance in the early 2000s.<sup>20</sup> Making a medium of communication Jewish was quite similar to the process of making a language Jewish. Lin-

guistic and technological transformations were possible because of a semiotic ideology, a cultural and religious belief about signs, that almost any medium could be redeemed and put in the service of Jewish intention. In practice, this meant that if a medium (such as novels or CDs) carried Orthodox Jewish content or actually changed its form by adopting Jewish signs (such as using Hebrew letters for English words or a Yiddish accent in English), it could become kosher.

The internet was different. It was difficult to censor, and it remained critical to the growth of ultra-Orthodox communities. Men without degrees, for example, found work in information technology companies; the internet was used for independent small businesses; and federal aid programs could only be accessed online. (Food stamps were accessed online, for example.) Ultra-Orthodox politics and news were increasingly reported online, and shopping, wedding lists, and charities all were shared online. Even ties across national borders among extended families were kept up on social media.

From the 1990s on, there were efforts to make the internet kosher, much as other new media had been uplifted and made Jewish. There were increasingly online Orthodox news sites, inspirational lectures, and all-men's forums where any *kfira* (heresy) was blocked. WhatsApp texting was regularly used by all kinds of families to share invitations and special news. For example, one Hasidic mother sent all of her children, living in Brooklyn and Israel, a weekly WhatsApp message with a picture of a single red rose, reminding them the exact time to light candles and wishing them a joyous, peaceful Shabbes.

Different ultra-Orthodox communities had their own policies about internet use. Lubavitcher Hasidim, for example, were unusual as early adopters of the internet, although they have drawn the line recently at social media, such as Facebook for girls. Satmar Hasidim, in contrast, tried to limit the internet to men's "business" (i.e., work) in offices and keep it out of homes. Yeshivish Jews were much more open to the internet initially, as they have been to other innovations. More recently, however, Yeshivish activists in Lakewood, New Jersey, have become the center of efforts to control the internet through their organization, Ichud Ha-Kehillos LeTohar HaMachane (Union of Communities for the Purity of the Camp). Since 2006, they have been holding rallies against the internet and its dangers to *emuna*. They also developed a well-funded filtering service, Technology Awareness Group (TAG), that anyone owning a smartphone was increasingly expected to adopt. All of this anti-internet activism was good for the ultra-Orthodox economy, since it created new jobs

for ultra-Orthodox men and revenue streams from filtering, which had become a requirement for any parents wishing to send their children to ultra-Orthodox schools.

The time period of my research was particularly volatile, when Hasidic and Yeshivish leadership began to join forces to try to control the internet, especially smartphones. By the mid-2000s, many began to equate the internet, embodied in the material object of the smartphone, with outside contamination that led to the slippery slope of religious doubt, part of the wider fear that more and more were leaving ultra-Orthodoxy. I first learned about the crisis of faith and its relationship to the internet when I met Toby through a mutual friend. Originally, we had planned to discuss my first book, which she had just read. Instead, we ended up talking about her double life and the wider crisis of faith, something I had never heard of despite my years of fieldwork. I realized then that ultra-Orthodoxy was changing in all kinds of ways, and I wanted to know more.

### Ethnographic Collaborators or “Guinea Pigs”?

Writing about secrets, authority, and the internet shaped how I conducted ethnographic research. Anthropologist Graham Jones, writing about secrecy, notes that anthropology as a discipline is itself premised on the revelation of secret or invisible knowledge to its readers, which gives anthropologists their own kind of authority.<sup>21</sup> I would add to this that conducting research “at home,” which for me was also New York City, in shared online and in-person spaces added other layers to the politics of fieldwork, discussed by so many other anthropologists.<sup>22</sup> These included who defines what constitutes data and the object of study; responsibility for ethical representation; and the problematics of collaboration between anthropologists and those with whom they work.

A conflict—the crisis of *emuna*—organizes this book, and it also shaped my fieldwork. Many sociological and anthropological accounts of ultra-Orthodoxy have tended to portray discrete, bounded communities rather than the messy actuality of urban movement and diversity. In contrast, I followed networks of friends, relatives, and professionals; I crossed lines of ultra-Orthodoxy and Orthodoxy when and where they did.<sup>23</sup> Many, though not all, of the double lifers I got to know were Hasidic, including the very different groups or “courts” of Satmar, Pupa, Belz, Lubavitch, and Bobov. Most often, those who tried to help double lifers were Yeshivish or Modern Orthodox rabbis, educators, and therapists. To protect anonym-

ity, I do not use the real names of any people I met (except two public figures) or the names of specific Hasidic groups, and I have changed all personal details or kept some of them intentionally vague, especially ultra-Orthodox New York neighborhoods and double lifers' jobs and educational paths. I am always aware that my primary mandate must be to write in a way that does not compromise anyone's double life.

The crisis of *emuna* was lived in online and face-to-face spaces, which meant my research crossed those boundaries too, which is not at all uncommon in anthropological research. Many anthropologists these days include posts from social media in their ethnographies, while some conduct fieldwork exclusively online. Digital fieldwork, especially with a smartphone, does erase any lingering illusions of the discreteness of home and the field, something I experienced, for example, watching a Hasidic music video posted on Facebook in between making dinner or writing this book.

Anthropologist Tom Boellstorff suggests—and my experience supports this—that ethnography in online spaces is not that different from fieldwork in person.<sup>24</sup> However, there were times I wondered what kind of fieldwork spending time on Facebook or texting on WhatsApp actually was. What exactly was I observing and participating in when I responded to someone's blog or read as a comment thread unfolded? Digital material has its own insights and limitations, as do, of course, field notes taken after participating in an event or an audio-recorded interview. To clarify these different kinds of data I initially decided to focus on the medium that both the digital and the face-to-face share: language, written, printed, or spoken. However, I quickly realized that while language was certainly important, what was more interesting was the ways that language intersected with other semiotic forms, such as material culture, the body, and practices (like skiing or having a beer). To account for this wider semiotic lens, I drew on writing in popular magazines, on blogs and social media, as well as participant observation in real life events, interviews (often with the same people over years), formal lectures, rallies, conferences, celebrations, and also embodied and material forms of social life, such as clothing or children's anti-internet trading cards. I came to understand that while the internet was indeed a new medium for the twenty-first century, the ultra-Orthodox world had struggled with new media in prior historical eras, each with its potential for introducing heretical ideas and challenging existing structures of authority. I recorded and transcribed where I could, which was primarily in public events and individual interviews. When I quote people's speech it was either in a text, recorded speech, or occasion-

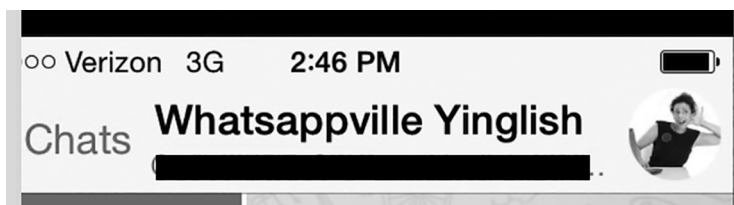
ally, reproduced from memory in my field notes. By integrating field notes, transcriptions, and digital data, mine is an account of life-changing doubt where and how it was lived.

The ultra-Orthodox faithful and those living double lives each had their own agenda for my research and its eventual publication as a book. The ultra-Orthodox who tried to help those with doubt did not want to expose their methods or even the existence of doubt to public scrutiny, non-Jewish or Jewish. As one ultra-Orthodox life coach told me, she did not want to “air dirty laundry,” especially to someone who was not ultra-Orthodox, a fact about myself that she quickly sussed out when she asked what my husband did (he’s a television producer). I turned instead to publicly available recorded and live events, which were plentiful. In contrast, many professional religious therapists were curious about my research, generously opening up their conferences, seminars, and listservs.

Those living double lives had different investments. Many hoped my research might show them to be moral people with legitimate intellectual doubts, not mentally ill or in thrall to their evil inclinations. Others hoped a book might help bring about social change to ultra-Orthodoxy itself. Their investments made access to double-life networks surprisingly easy. Some had already read my first book and as autodidacts were interested in talking to a professor. Others told me that an interview was like therapy, offering relief in narrating their lives. They referred me to their friends and even some of their still-religious kin, who had their own reasons for agreeing to speak with me. There were some living double lives who refused to talk with me or come to events if I was there. For years, for example, I tried to gain access to a closed Facebook group for those living double lives. There were, I was told by an insider, discussions about me, but some did not want any outsiders on the site. One person posted, “I don’t want to be a guinea pig,” a refrain I heard in various guises at many other events I attended.

As I began to get to know a loose network of double lifers, our relationship changed from anthropologist and her “informants” to a kind of collaboration. To avoid being “guinea pigs,” those living double lives took the lead in our encounters, and I followed. When, for example, I realized that the circulating posts on WhatsApp groups would be rich places for ethnography, I asked Zalman if he would invite me to join a group of his. In fact, I asked many times. Finally, his girlfriend said to him, “Have pity on the poor woman.” So Zalman made a mirror group of one of his groups, naming it “WhatsAppville Yinglish.” He used an icon of a woman, who even looked a little like me, listening at her computer.





Later he changed the image to two Hasidic men in deep conversation.



Description  
Genizeh for Yinglish Cultural Ongoings and Trends  
Sharable on Social Media

Zalman introduced the group this way (my translations):

1/7/14, 12:41:43 PM: This is a group to copy and paste text and WhatsApp messages as it is used in Hassidic circles, from simche [celebration] and fundraising announcements, personal or group communications (as much as you feel comfortable sharing, with personal information omitted), to messages making the rounds on news and gossip in the community. From Yiddish to yinglish to English, in both Hebrew and English characters. Ayala would be looking at both the language and subject matter. Please advise if you wish to leave the group. Any additional members joining would have to be agreed upon by all members. Feel free to simply say, "I would rather not," no explanations necessary.

In effect, those on WhatsAppville Yinglish curated the messages, images, audio, and video they received from their own WhatsApp groups, along with their commentary for my research purposes and for themselves too. Members controlled my access by choosing what they felt was meaningful to post or repost, much as people do in face-to-face interviews. WhatsAppville Yinglish members created, then, a digital public, what Zalman described on the icon as a *geniza* (a repository for written Hebrew texts) of about fifteen people, a living window onto what they considered the wider ultra-Orthodox public and its critics, as they interacted among themselves and with me.

WhatsAppVille was an ongoing resource to the research. I crowd-sourced questions, bounced around ideas, and tested hypotheses. When, for example, I got interested in Hasidic theological ideas of the soul, I had a group of thoughtful and knowledgeable Hasidic men and women to ask. I also got to know many of the group members in person, interviewing and hanging out with some. The members of WhatsAppVille kept me on my toes, reminding me that they were never guinea pigs. For example, in the exchange below, Shmuel and Motti joke (sort of), that they were “studying” me too, echoing back my own words I had used to reassure them:

[1/21/2016, 9:06 AM] Shmuel: Ayala, what you don't know is that we're also amateur anthropologists studying anthropologists.

[1/21/2016, 9:19 AM] Ayala: Shmuel I'm afraid!

[1/21/2016, 10:24 AM] Shmuel: 🙄🙄

[1/21/2016, 10:37 AM] Motti: Don't worry, Ayala. We'll show you everything we want to publish beforehand.

[1/21/2016, 11:02 AM] Ayala: Witty!

[1/21/2016, 11:04 AM] Motti: 😏

Sometimes those I worked with disagreed with my analyses or writing choices. This was even true of the term “double life” that I decided to use (except in the title) after much deliberation. Some of those on WhatsAppVille Yinglish and beyond complained that they did not like the term because it had “duplicitous connotations.” At the same time, others did not feel that the increasingly common “ITC” (in the closet) completely represented their experience either, given its provenance in LGBTQ communities. Only Yiddish-speaking Hasidim used the term *bahaltena apikorsim* (hidden heretics) or the abbreviation אב“ש (אנשי שלומנו), meaning “us” or “people like us”). I learned from Dovid that in Israel, the Hebrew term *anusim* (the forced), that is, forced to be religious, was used. My own experience was that despite many people’s ambivalence, the term “double life” was quite common, for both Hasidic and Yeshivish ultra-Orthodox. I decided to use it since I felt it foregrounded the moral complexities of lived experience when what you believe no longer aligns with what you do. As for the “duplicitous connotations,” I would just note, as the Urban Dictionary does, that spies and lovers lead double lives, but so do superheroes.

In my efforts to collaborate and always aware of the primacy of protecting anonymity, I asked two double lifers, Shmuel and Chavi, to read drafts

of talks and articles before I went public. I realized how important this kind of collaboration would be when once, at an academic lecture I gave, I accidentally “outed” someone, in my anxiety to acknowledge his contribution. The ensuing conflict ended our relationship, since the person immediately heard about the slip from a community member at the talk, who posted about it on that same closed Facebook group, where it then blew up. After that, Shmuel agreed to read a draft of this whole book to ensure that no one’s identity would be compromised, and of course, to give all kinds of feedback. In fact, over the years I have gotten messages on Facebook and WhatsApp, and phone calls, asking me how the book was going, wondering when it was going to be published, or in some cases worried that my account of religious therapy might be too negative. I remain very aware, as I write, that double lifers and those who try to help them will be carefully reading, though of course, this account of the crisis of authority remains my own.

### Cast of Main Characters and a Road Map

I talked to and spent time with all kinds of ultra-Orthodox and Orthodox Jews, but a smaller circle of friends became key figures. Many in this circle were also at some point on WhatsAppville Yinglish and often spent time together. **Shmuel**, for example, a Yeshivish intellectual, seemed to know everybody and everything. **Zalman**, the OTD Hasid I mentioned, was a similarly well-known figure in double life and OTD circles, especially friendly with double lifers **Leyzer**, **Boruch**, **Menashe**, and **Shimon**. There were long-term double-life Hasidic couples who had “flipped” their spouse, like **Tamar** and her husband or **Pinny** and his wife, and long-term double-life lovers, like **Blimi** and **Moishy**, each married to still-religious spouses, feeling they had the best of all possible worlds. Some couples were unhappily in “mixed marriages” with a still-religious spouse, like **Dovid** and **Shoshana**, **Miriam** and her husband, and **Tsiri** and **Aron**. Some women, like **Chavi**, **Toby**, **Sheyndie**, or **Esty**, looked outside of their communities for fulfillment of different kinds, including higher education. **Yitsy**, **Motti**, **Yonah**, and **Gavriel** were Hasidic male friends who all hung out regularly. Chavi had a traumatic experience with religious therapists, outreach rabbis, and life coaches, as did Miriam, Esty, and Pinny. **Leyeh** was Toby’s teenage daughter, who had a lot to say about her mother’s longtime double life.

I also got to know a number of religious therapists well, one of whom, **Nosson**, had experienced life-changing doubt himself. **Eitan** was a well-trained Yeshivish therapist who was critical of the system, while never losing his faith. **Dr. Rosenberg**, a Modern Orthodox psychologist, patiently answered many questions despite our never meeting in person, and his comments on the listserv were always informative. **Rabbi Tessler** figures prominently and is an influential and very well-known psychiatrist and rabbi. Shimon, who felt hurt by an extended exchange with him, asked that I use the rabbi's real name, but I decided that would be both inconsistent and unethical. I frequently cite a column by **Mashy Blum** in *Mishpacha* magazine as public musings on the dilemmas of religious therapy. Finally, I was able to talk with two life coaches, the Lubavitcher **Mrs. Klein**, and Modern Orthodox **Coach Levine**, each of whom so generously shared their insights.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I follows the trajectory of the crisis of authority as it has been unfolding over struggles about the internet. From the turn of the twenty-first century to 2019, I tack between perspectives of those living double lives and rabbinic leadership. Chapter 2 ethnographically traces the contemporary crisis of authority to the Jewish blogosphere in the mid-2000s, which created an alternative, anonymous heretical public both online and in person. This public referenced an earlier crisis of authority, the Jewish Enlightenment (mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries in Europe), when a generation of Jewish men exposed to the European Enlightenment used innovations in print culture to take on traditional Judaism and its leadership. Chapter 3 follows contemporary rabbinic leaders, who increasingly blamed the crisis of authority on an external Gentile medium: the internet, particularly social media. In public rallies and printed edicts, they declared that the internet corrupted innately pure Jewish souls, leaving them unable to fight their own inclinations for evil and infecting them with invisible doubt. To protect the faithful and preserve the coming generations, rabbinic leaders attempted to leverage schools and mothers to enforce emerging standards for kosher filtering, which simultaneously reinforced existing male hierarchies of authority.

Part II focuses on the experience of life-changing doubt and its implications for families, friends, religious authorities, and institutions. Chapter 4 turns to the diversity of those living life-changing doubt and their still-religious spouses, especially the distinctive experiences and implications for men and women. Double lifers elaborated and navigated a changing

morality influenced by liberal values, often in conflict with the ultra-Orthodox morality of their still-religious spouse and children. Chapter 5 follows those whose life-changing doubt was discovered by or confessed to a spouse and the therapeutic professionals who tried to help them, especially Jewish life coaches, outreach rabbis, and religious therapists. The profession of religious therapy was itself in the midst of a moral struggle as to which authorities they owed their allegiance: their own religious orthodoxy or their clients' individual autonomy.

Chapter 6 recounts the secret social lives of double lifers as they experimented with other ways of living, writing, and feeling in digital and face-to-face spaces. The inescapable changes these experiments wrought on exterior forms—on bodies and clothing, in writing or speaking—were efforts by those living double lives to feel more comfortable in their own skins and hints to their loved ones that they were slowly changing inside. Chapter 7 focuses on the moral implications for children of parents living double lives. Despite keeping their life-changing doubt secret, double life parents often tried to subtly introduce new ideas to offer their children more of a “choice” than they had had. This led to ethical and emotional dilemmas, especially for ultra-Orthodox teenagers.

I have spent many years as a mostly secular Jewish anthropologist attempting to understand ultra-Orthodox life in New York, the city where I was born and brought up and have now, with my husband, brought up our own two children. This led to the intellectual questions I explore in this book, such as what and who defines moral responsibility; how age and gender shape ethical judgment; what the politics of ethnographic fieldwork are in shared online and face-to-face spaces; how media of many sorts—bodies, languages and technologies, material culture—can create publics with their own authorities; and the ways that new digital media might actually be changing human interactions, expression, and concentration as we know it.

But there are emotional questions at play too. The stories of those living double lives and those who minister to them are about moral struggles over change—generational, technological, spiritual, intellectual—and they are filled with human pain, contradictions, and unexpected discoveries. My hope is that they speak to a wide audience, as they have so eloquently to me, so that this particular historical moment in Jewish ultra-Orthodoxy might provoke conversations about the moral ambiguities of humans attempting to live ethical lives in the digital age, whatever and wherever those might be.