

Article



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When Rabbis Lose Faith: Twelve Rabbis Tell their Stories about their Loss of Belief in God

Rabbi Paul Shrell-Fox

The Schechter Institutes for Judaic Studies, P.O. Box 16080, 4 Avraham Granot Street, Jerusalem, Israel.

Abstract | Religious intuition evolves over time. To the degree that belief in a supernatural God is a derivative of religious intuition, it is safe to assume that over one's lifetime, intuition and attitudes towards a belief in God is subject to fluctuation. Dennett and LaScola found this to be true with priests and ministers. That study was the catalyst for the current study of rabbis' shift in religious beliefs in general, and belief in God in particular. Approximately 25 rabbis voluntarily submitted vignettes concerning their shifts in religious belief. These vignettes were solicited via rabbinic list-serves. Those rabbis who denied a belief in a supernatural being were interviewed to explore the evolution of their religious faith and its impact on their religious practice and behavior. In as much as Judaism places a great emphasis on communal deeds rather than cultural creed, the rabbis still feel comfortable functioning in communities, school settings and informal educational roles. We therefore may expect little existential angst; this was found to be only partially true. Some have found other expressions of their talents, while others anxiously await the opportunity to find alternate means of financial support. Specific issues of Jewish dietary practice, Sabbath observance and daily prayer are addressed, as well as an exploration of the rabbis' connection to the Jewish people, despite waning practice.

***Correspondence** | Rabbi Paul Shrell-Fox, Ph.D. The Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, Israel; **Email:** shrell_fox@schechter.ac.il
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Guest Editors | John R. Shook PhD, Ralph W. Hood Jr. PhD, and Thomas J. Coleman III

Introduction

Belief in God has been shown to be an intuitive belief given our neurobiological makeup (Henrich 2009; Wright 2009; Shenhav, Rand, and Green 2011). Intuitive reasoning also tends to change over the lifetime to the degree that one's frames of reference change over time (Tversky and Kahneman 1974; 1984). It therefore stands to reason that belief in God may also change over time. Indeed, a number of studies found this to be the case (Desmond, Morgan, and Kikuchi 2010; Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, and Robinson 2004).

For a teacher, computer programmer, psychologist or any other professional this may be called a spiritual

quest. In the event that this quest leads to questioning one's earlier beliefs, it may be a powerful experience, it may shake spiritual foundations, but it does not follow that one's job may be at risk.

But what if one's chosen profession is clergy? There is no reason to think that rabbis' (or other clergy's) intuition, even religious intuition, would not develop or evolve. As such, we would expect to find that over the years of their careers, the intuition that led one into a life of religious service might change. Indeed ongoing projects (Dennett and LaScola 2010; 2013) have shown that Christian clergy do indeed experience this type of change. Some of the clergy find this distressing, others liberating. Either way, it seems that being

“ordained” does not inoculate one against questioning belief in God, even to the degree of adopting atheistic positions on the non-existence of God. It stands to reason, that just as there are non-Jewish clergy who have changed their views of God and now find themselves out of sync with their congregants, there are rabbis who would fit this category as well.

Dennett and LaScola characterized the preachers in their studies in a number of ways. All were happy to discuss their predicaments. Indeed, for many, it was the first time they had the opportunity to do so. They expressed a deep sense of loneliness, keeping their plight from those closest to them, in some cases even their spouses. The financial predicament was another major focus for these preachers, especially those who lived in the church’s parsonage. If they admitted to atheism, they feared they would lose their jobs. Some were sad, others were frustrated. For most, family concerns were central. Finally, a sense of internal deception lead them to feel “in the closet” in very real ways.

It is important to note crucial differences between the various denominations of Christianity and classical rabbinic Judaism practiced by the different streams within Judaism. To a degree Christianity is a religion of “creed,” that is of professing a certain set of beliefs (Armstrong 2009). On the other hand, Judaism is best characterized as a religion of “deed” (Armstrong 2009; Sacks 2011). There are branches within Judaism that emphasize practice less than others, and in that sense are more akin to their non-Jewish counterparts. However, the rabbis interviewed below come from those streams that emphasize “deed” over “creed.” In fact, one rabbi interviewed, who identifies with the more liberal Reform branch of Judaism said it quite clearly: “It’s different within the reform movement. The whole issue of belief and practice is just different.” As such, the existential angst many of the non-Jewish clergy studied by Dennett and LaScola was not a generalized finding in the current sample.

Jewish belief and practice

A comprehensive review of Jewish belief and practice is beyond the scope of this paper. However, to set the stage for this study, what follows is a brief historical overview of the evolution of belief and practice within Judaism beginning with the biblical period culminating in modern Jewish philosophies. Crucial to the understanding is that although Jews trace their ritu-

al roots back to the Hebrew Bible, Jewish religious practice developed over the course of the late first and second centuries BCE and into the sixth century CE. After that, rabbis of each era based their legal rulings on the rabbinic compilations known as the *Mishna* and *Talmud*.

“*Emunah*”: “Belief” in the Bible

The Modern Hebrew word for belief is *emunah*. This word appears in its different forms related to “belief,” professing consent or fidelity nearly 200 times in the Hebrew Bible. The biblical linguist Jepsen (1974) traces the meaning in different texts. He concludes that the root carries a number of different definitions including trust, loyalty and confidence. Jepsen summarizes his exposition by saying that the root most likely refers to “*conduct* that grows out of reliability.” (p 323 italics mine). That is, according to the Hebrew Bible, to be faithful, to be a believer meant that one *behaved* in a certain way. The faithful Israelite *did* the commandments; his inner intent was not an issue.

Early rabbinic period

Rabbinic writings during the first to seventh centuries CE placed a similar emphasis on *doing* rather than *believing*. The rabbis from the time of the *Mishna* or *Talmud* did not, in general, concern themselves with abstract beliefs (Armstrong 2009; Leibowitz 2005; Sacks 2011; Sosis and Kiper 2014). Indeed, the type of abstract thought required to assess internal states developed only at that time, within the context of Greek thought and inquiry (Armstrong 2009).

There are a few exceptions in the rabbis’ rulings where they seemed to place a focus on internal beliefs. If a prayer leader were to repeat certain words, or request God’s mercy in a particular way, they feared that saying those prayers belied an internal state of heresy. Further, if a certain prayer was omitted it could reveal the prayer leader’s allegiance to a group antagonistic to the emerging Judaism of the time. Nevertheless, largely, and remaining consistent with biblical precedent, the religious deed was more important than the religious creed.

Medieval “*emunah*”

Medieval philosophers of all western monotheistic religions grew more concerned with belief systems than their predecessors. Eastern religions developed this type of thought as well, but it did not necessarily translate into abstract belief systems per se (Arm-

strong 1993). Inasmuch as Jewish philosophies were influenced by the developing philosophies of their time, they were not to be outdone. Saadia and Maimonides were the foremost Jewish philosophers of their times and their influence is considerable even today. They were among the first to codify a list of articles of faith that all Jews were expected to adopt. This was the first time in Jewish history that tenets were proposed.

There was no way either to verify or falsify these beliefs – talk is cheap and if someone asks “do you believe with a perfect faith that...” and you desire to be part of a community, then the only answer is “yes.” Does a simple yes or no statement reflect an internal state? It does not matter. We all believe that others tell the truth (Aamodt and Custer 2006; Reinhard, Greifeneder, and Scharmach 2013; Wright 1994) at least to themselves. It is always much easier to detect the absence of practice in general and religious practice in particular than the absence of belief in general and religious belief in particular (Alcorta and Sosis, 2012; Wildman and Sosis, 2011; Purzycki et al 2012).

Modern Jewish philosophy and practice

Not much has changed in the intervening millennium for those who identify with traditional Judaism. Some modern Jewish philosophers were less preoccupied with practice than their predecessors (Buber 1948/1963). Others emphasized both ritual practice and abstract belief (Heschel 1962; Kaplan 1957). Others emphasize the primacy of practice while taking belief for granted, immeasurable and ultimately, perhaps, irrelevant (Leibowitz 2005). It should be noted that not all modern scholars accept the universal truth of Maimonides’ assertions and articles of faith. Shapiro (1993) provides a detailed critique of the universality of the 13 articles of faith. Be that as it may, for the average non-scholarly synagogue member, Maimonides may be the last word in Jewish catechism, a fact the rabbis in this study confront regularly.

For the purpose of our discussion, we now turn to a brief delineation of the types of Jewish religious practices. This will be useful when we try to analyze how the rabbis have come to terms with their loss of belief. It should be clear, though, that the issue of belief could, potentially, be a non-issue for those who remain in the Jewish tradition. There is plenty of room not to ask what someone, even a rabbi, believes, rather assessing their practice and assuming that they are part of the fold.

Divisions within Jewish ritual/religious practice: mitzvot

There are a number of ways to categorize the commandments in Jewish law and practice. One is along the God-Man divide. That is what Jews are supposed to do vis-à-vis God and what they are supposed to do vis-à-vis other Jews and in certain cases members of other peoples. Another division is along the active-passive divide. Laws that a Jew is supposed to **do** and what s/he is supposed to **refrain** from doing. Some are supposed to be followed blindly – because of God’s command. Some have some apparent logic behind them. Some have clear pro-social consequences. Others have a less obvious impact on the world around us.

No Jew can know which of the *mitzvot* is more or less important than other *mitzvot*. However, three in particular, play a crucial role in differentiating the “observant” from the “non-observant” Jew in modern parlance: Sabbath observance, Jewish dietary laws and daily prayer. Indeed, in an informal survey of rabbis, I asked them to identify the five behaviors that identify observant Jews. These three came up in over 90% of the responses. Interestingly, belief in God was mentioned only once in the more than 100 (5x20 responders) replies. There are many other areas of behavior that are associated with Jewish observance, but these three very public observances are often seen as a benchmark against which observance is measured. As Sosis (2006) points out these all have a great impact on a Jew in the community. Indeed, they fit nicely with his model of the Three-B’s: Behaviors, badges and bans, each encompassing one or more aspects of the model. However, these three are generally seen to fall into the category of *mitzvot* between a person and God. Indeed, these are the ones the rabbis, discussed below, struggled with as their belief set changed and as their practices changed as well.

Method

Interviewees

The rabbis interviewed for this study live on three continents, residing in Israel, Europe and North America. The rabbis identify (and some continue to identify communally) both as Orthodox and Conservative¹. In addition, they are all men. This, too, may be a coincidence based on a small sample size. However, we know that women tend to be “more spiritual than men” (Bryant, 2007) and that, too, may be a contributing factor. In addition, to date there are very few

female orthodox rabbis, though this is open to some dispute depending upon what is considered “ordination.” This number is certain to change in the next few years with the founding of an orthodox rabbinical school for women in New York in 2008.

One other interesting note. The rabbis who have school-aged children continue to educate their children in some form of Jewish setting. This may be by sheer virtue of living in Israel, or may be a choice to send their children to Jewish private day schools in North America (at great financial cost to many) or Europe. This trend has been described (Manning, 2013) and studied (Ecklund and Shultz Lee, 2011) by others as well. It is not uncommon for atheists and other non-religiously affiliated to provide a religious education to their children despite their own belief set.

Interview

After receiving IRB approval from the Schechter Institutes, I solicited participants from rabbinic listserves of the major streams of Judaism. An initial vignette was received from 25 rabbis. All responders were contacted, even if they did not meet the criteria of denying a belief in a supernatural agent that created and works in the world. Those who did not meet these criteria were thanked and not contacted again.

The others were contacted and consented to be interviewed. They were informed that the interview could be stopped at any point with no prejudice. None ended the interview prior to completion. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted for about one hour. Nine of the interviews were done over Skype and three were conducted in person. If the three rituals noted above, Sabbath observance, daily prayer and dietary laws, had not been addressed, the plan was to bring them up. However, all rabbis addressed these issues spontaneously.

From the initial 25 responses, eight were deemed appropriate for this pilot study. Six agreed to the in depth interview. Initial findings were presented at a conference in Jerusalem in July 2013. Immediately after that conference an additional six rabbis contacted me. Twelve rabbis have been interviewed at the current writing.

Results

Interviews

The most parsimonious method to present the results

is to organize the initial impressions based upon the interviews. The simplest way to organize them is according to interviewee. Through their individual stories, I believe major themes will become clear to the reader. The discussion section will focus on the commonalities on the public-private axis, God-other axis and the positive-negative (behavior-ban) axis. I have consolidated the 12 stories in to six fictitious figures using details from similar stories to, at once, create believable characters, while, at the same time, maintaining discretion and minimizing the possibility of identification. I will, occasionally, highlight the themes as they arise in the vignettes.

Baruch²

Baruch is in his mid-50's and resides in the north of Israel. He was born in the center of the country, was educated in the United States, where he received rabbinical ordination and a PhD in Jewish Philosophy. He returned to Israel in the late 1980's. He lectures in an academic college that trains teachers for the religious school system in Israel. Though his position in is the area of philosophy and science, he was hired with the assumption that he is religiously observant. Indeed, at the time that he accepted the position, he was. His courses focus on preparing teachers to teach science in elementary and secondary schools and Jewish philosophy in high schools.

Approximately seven to ten years prior to our interview, Baruch began to read books and articles by philosophers of science that included those written by those who identify themselves as the New Atheists. Though Baruch always assumed Darwinian evolution, he was able to maintain the classic Gould (1997) stance of non-overlapping magisteria; that is science and religion endure separately since they exist to answer different questions. That is until his exposure to the New Atheist literature. He found it much more convincing than he had previously. He is not quite sure why. He agrees that there is a certain polemical nature to the writing that was absent in the past. Living Israel in 1990's and early 2000's highlighted the tensions between Islamic fundamentalism and western culture at least as much, if not more than it did in the rest of the West. Indeed, Baruch left Jerusalem to accept his current position during the period of frequent suicide terror attacks in that city.

In addition, the tensions between the religious and non-religious Jews within Israel grew at the time. The

ultra-orthodox became increasing self-sequestered and the anti-religious became more entrenched in forcing the ultra-orthodox out of their ever-growing resistance to national service. The ultra-orthodox still received a great deal of public financing for their educational frameworks; frameworks that accepted Israeli tax monies and are educated to avoid any form of national service: army for boys and civilian national service for girls.

Baruch has seven children ranging in age from 10 to 25. His wife grew up in “modern religious” settings in North America. She herself is religious, always was and maintains her belief in a supernatural creator. The couple has educated their children in the religious public school system. Both boys and girls do or will do army service, though Baruch assumes that one of his daughters will choose the civilian national service program.

Baruch has always felt a deep emotional tie to his synagogue community. There he found friends with whom he could talk about philosophy. Many are themselves rabbis. Others are also versed in philosophy, education and the like. Baruch finds his conversations with these friends much more compelling than those he has with most of his colleagues at the college.

At some point, due to a disagreement with the municipality, funding for his synagogue was significantly curtailed. As a result, the community that Baruch loved split. Some of his friends went to one place, others to another. This coincided with Baruch’s exploration of evolutionary philosophy. He assumes that his attachment to the community that disintegrated over seeming trivial differences fueled his spiritual crisis. “If I could not believe in community, what was the point of believing in God? he said.

[We see here Baruch’s connection to community, particularly centered on synagogue life. He does occasionally attend public worship, though he is often frustrated by the perception that he appears to be praying despite his atheism. He can be seen studying classic Jewish texts or reading articles related to his research.]

Baruch says that he found the dissolution of the community very upsetting. The weekly meeting with his friends was the one thing that kept him going. To be sure, he attended daily prayer services fairly regularly, but those meetings were not the same. Neither he nor his “buddies” had time to talk at length during the

week. The Sabbath was the time and Baruch floundered without it.

Recently I met Baruch at an academic conference and asked him how he deals with the conflicting beliefs and practices. He does have a certain sense of “why am I doing this?” when he has to demonstrate that he performs certain rituals, even though he does not do them. He did express an internal conflict; at times feeling like what he has done is silly. But this is generally relegated to rites he performs in private. In the public setting, he says the prayers with a focus on internal growth rather than petitioning to the divine. In the past he would be very particular about saying all the words, now he’s less concerned. Again, the sense that Judaism is what keeps Jews together, and in the face of rising anti-Semitism he feels that public Jewish religious practice is an evolutionary-community need. The divine is not a factor. And since there are those who persecute also non-practicing non-believing Jews he feels it crucial to maintain the practice. Indeed, he continues to be influenced by his studies of evolution and views religion (and an idea of deity) as a purely human invention. So his public practice is not an issue.

Do people believe that he believes differently based upon his behavior? “Probably. But that’s not my issue. How can anyone know what anyone else is thinking about when they are *davenning* (Yiddish for praying)?” As an example of this Baruch related the following anecdote. He found the sense of community so overwhelming on a recent trip to Europe. He took a tour of one of the many communities destroyed by the Nazis during the Holocaust. As the group, mostly non-Jews, was getting ready to leave the main synagogue in the town, the urge to “*daven mincha*” (say the afternoon prayer) overcame him. He said that it was one of the most meaningful experiences he had had in a long time. The divine was not involved. But, “I felt a connection to 2500 years of history, my history, in those 12 minutes.”

[The theme of Sabbath observance, as it related to Baruch and his family.]

In the name of “*shalom bayi!*” (keeping the family at peace) Baruch continues the same level of Sabbath observance as he did during his believing days. “My wife and kids don’t need to suffer a radical, upsetting life-style change because of my mid-life spiritual crisis.” Broadly speaking, Baruch does not use electricity,

cook, travel in a motor vehicle, write or perform other activities that are defined as creative labor.

In addition, Baruch maintains a fairly strict adherence to Jewish dietary laws. He has, on occasion, been tempted, but fears that his family would be angered if he did. Further, he could not keep it from his family if he did it on his own. Though it is not tantamount to marital infidelity, he sees it as a transgression of the tacit agreement he and his wife made when they were married. Finally, and equally as important, Baruch still feels an emotional connection to the dietary practices he grew up on from birth. Since he still feels a deep connection to the Jewish people, this practice is one that has, for better or for worse kept the Jews Jews for the 2500 years of their dispersion. To turn his back on that would be a hard step to take. This seems to belie Baruch's attitude towards the "deed" of Jewish practice that does not always trump the "creed" instilled within.

[Jewish dietary laws, as one other rabbi put it, are habits that are hard to break.]

Eli

Eli identifies himself as a member of the nationalistic ultra-orthodox sector of Israeli society. He lives in a small settlement just inside the "green-line" in the Jordan valley. His story is somewhat different than the others'. He still believes in God, though not the classic God often associated with ultra-orthodox beliefs. He does not believe that God created the world some 6000 years ago. He accepts current scientific assessments of the age of the universe, yet still feels a presence in his life. He is well known in his circles for giving inspirational talks.

However, Eli's struggle is largely the same as the others' since he does not believe that the God he does choose to believe in cares whether he prays (Eli does not) observes dietary laws (he generally does) or rests on the Sabbath (only when at home). Where does his struggle lie? At the very forefront of his society's values. His reference group cares very much about these external practices – perhaps more than the internal belief set. They care if the fried chicken is kosher, if the lights are turned on or off on Saturday and if one prays three times daily. Indeed, if it became known that he did not observe the practices he and his family would be shunned from their town, he would lose his livelihood; his children would have trouble mar-

rying. A lot is at stake so Eli maintains a façade of religious practice, though he experiences a great deal of internal conflict. It is assumed that he performs all of the *mitzvot*, complies with the restrictions and even abides by the stringencies of his community.

He has shared some of his doubts with his wife. "She was shocked," although she had suspected that something was amiss for some time before he told her. It was clear that when he "returned from synagogue" in the morning that the external signs of the phylacteries were not visible. Eli still places them so that his children will assume that he has been to prayer services. He, like others, believes that there is a value to living in the religious sectors of Israeli societies. Additionally, he has no friends or support systems anywhere else – his children even less. Eli assumes that he will tell them when they are all old enough to understand. Seeing that his youngest is nine at the time of this writing, he has a long time to continue hiding.

Eli said that he often hears a little voice in his head telling that what he preaches is false. However, he said that once he left the strictures of Jewish practice and was true to himself, he could refocus his talks to center around Jewish people hood, Jewish spiritual practice and the like. He counts on the fact that some of his listeners are not sophisticated enough to appreciate the differences. Is this a somewhat tainted approach? Perhaps to someone who does not know his population intimately? The ultra-orthodox sector in Israel feels that it is under attack from all other Israeli sectors. As such, anyone who can provide a reason for the youth to stay "in the fold" is seen as a great asset. In as much as Eli feels that the religious way of life in general is a good way of life, his actions are not insincere. To the degree that people hear what they want to hear, this puts him in a place to continue to do what he does well, and not feel that he betrays himself.

Joseph

Joseph is the rabbi of a medium sized synagogue community in a suburb of a large US metropolitan center. He has served this congregation for decades. He has presided at rites of passage at births, weddings and funerals of multiple generations of the same family. He comes from one of the more liberal branches of Judaism, but sees himself as one of the more traditional rabbinic members of the group. He points to a specific instance when he realized that his belief in God "waned and eventually died." He was watching

a nature show. He was a fan of these. Suddenly he “saw a lion take down a zebra and eat it alive. How could a merciful God create a world that allows such suffering?” Indeed, Joseph has less of a problem understanding the Holocaust. That he sees as *manmade*. Humanity’s free will overtook God’s goodness (as he believed until the lion and zebra) and only when the allied forces overcame the Nazis, could God’s presence be felt again in the world. However, the lion and zebra do not have a choice in their battle for survival. The lion cannot lay down with the zebra and discuss the advantages of veganism. “If this is what God had in mind, then that God is not who I thought [he] was.”

[Daily prayer is still an issue, due to Joseph’s employment.]

Joseph, like most, still attends services, though he was relieved that by his final contract – he is approaching retirement – the community has allowed him to attend weekday services less frequently. They understand it to be a slow “letting go” of the reigns to allow a new and younger rabbi make her mark. Why does he still attend any service – beyond his contractual agreement? “I like to do Jewish things with Jewish people. Some of my best friends are Jews.”

Do his congregants know? There are those who seem to catch on. When they ask the why questions: why did this happen to me? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why did God allow this to happen? Joseph no longer dodges the issue. In those intimate moments, he reveals his belief, in a non-judgmental non-proselytizing manner. He calls on the teaching of his teachers and helps those suffering find meaning in their lives, despite the tragedy they may have just now encountered. He counsels them to seek comfort in their community, not necessarily in God. He knows the community for more than 50 years, he says. They will be there for you, and you will not have to look too hard to find their support. He says, “If you retain a belief in God, it is hard to understand the work of God’s hands,” but people, you know what they’ve done for whom and when. Further, Judaism, like all religions, grew out of the need for community, “so rather than trying to search for something that may not be there—find what is.”

Joseph said that if he was about to choose a profession and his beliefs were as they are today, he likely would have chosen other avenues of employment. Now, as

his career is in the final 7-10 years or so, he does not wish to change jobs. I suspect that there is a certain dissonance that resonates within. On occasion he has certainly preached that Judaism is not about god, but about Jews. When asked in private, he does not hide his beliefs and said that there have been congregants with whom he has shared his beliefs, mostly in the private context of the congregants’ theological crises. These congregants have responded differently, and have taken solace in the fact that their communities have provided comfort, regardless of belief or commitment to regular ritual practice. As in most professions, his candidness (candor) helped others find comfort in his words, even if the words were unexpected.

Nachshon

Nachshon works on a college campus in the Midwest of The United States. He has a long history of swaying beliefs. However, he was sure that he had come to the end of his journey when he entered rabbinical school. Indeed, he felt the calling to return to his Jewish roots while on a spiritual journey in India. His connection to both the spiritual world and Jewish world grew side by side.

He entered the rabbinical school of one of the modern movements and quickly rose to become a leading student. However, soon after ordination, he felt his commitment to the belief system and practice of Judaism wane. “Of course,” [he] had married and had a child or two along the way.” Like the some of the other rabbis, his wife knows of his struggles, but Nachshon described his wife as very spiritual and very religious – in a modern way. Like Baruch, he loves and respects his wife’s choices and would not compel her to change her beliefs.

In the context of his job, Nachshon must portray a belief in God. His advantage, compared to other rabbis, is that the context of his professional life is on a college campus, a place where questioning prior “realities” and “truths” is encouraged and even expected. So Nachshon “loves it” when a student comes and asks him why God would let his grandmother die two weeks before her granddaughter’s wedding. In the office of the campus rabbi, he can ask, “Why do *you* think *God* did this? Why do you think there is a God at all? He challenges the students (usually Jewish, though not exclusively) to reexamine their beliefs because he assumes that they, like he, will find comfort in them.

It is rare that college students ask him if he believes. An interesting aside: Nachshon says it that was during the one year he served in a congregation he was questioned more on his belief in God than he has been on the campus. Nachshon worked for a year as an interim rabbi in a suburban community. During that year he was asked numerous times by congregants, “Rabbi, do you believe?” At the time he did. In fact, he felt his own questioning rise towards then end of the year and that is why he decided to leave the pulpit and pursue a career on a college campus. There, Nachshon felt that he could focus more on the Jewish people, his support for the state of Israel, which remains unfaltering, and other more pressing issues to North American Jewry than the belief in God.

Nachshon finds that his college students question his religious belief less than the adults he worked with in the synagogue; they take it for granted while the adults are more subtle in their questioning and listening. When asked directly, he never lies. He’s just not questioned very often.

What is next? Nachshon’s job has him in a university setting, a setting where there is a department for advanced Jewish studies. At the time of the interview he was exploring the possibility to begin doctoral studies, “in Jewish philosophy – of course.”

Lee

Lee’s story is somewhat different than others. He has the loosest ties to formal Jewish religious practice. He works as a tour guide. His title “rabbi,” which he received from one of the more liberal rabbinical schools in the United States, adds an additional draw as he works primarily in Israel. It should be noted that he also works as a translator of Judaic texts for a number of organizations in the US and Europe. Again, his ordination is not a requisite of the job, but it certainly helped him obtain the first set of jobs.

[The Sabbath as a formative observance]

Lee has a history of swaying religious beliefs and practices. Raised in a “traditional though not religious” home, his recollection was that his family was culturally Jewish, attending services a few times a year. At some point, he connected to a very charismatic rabbi who convinced him, then eventually Lee’s family, to become more religious – i.e. to practice more behaviors that are religious. By the time Lee was 15

his family was fully Sabbath observant; they did not use electricity, did not drive anywhere and refrained from other creative activities. Lee was the leader, but his family members were willing participants.

Lee spent his undergraduate work studying Jewish philosophy and “dabbling in theology” in a university with a large Jewish population. He travelled to Israel for his junior year of college and fell in love with his future wife and future residence. He returned to complete his BA, married and returned to Israel. He quickly realized that he did not know enough Hebrew to integrate truly and that there was not much to do with a BA in Jewish Philosophy.

[The catalyst of the Jewish people and Jewish homeland]

Lee enrolled in a tour-guiding training course and quickly learned Hebrew. He found that his love for Israel was replacing his love for religion, and his love for the Jewish people grew. A few years later Lee met another rabbi – he lead a tour for her synagogue, and Lee decided it was time to pursue a rabbinic career. The family set out for a “five year adventure which turned into about 10 or 12.” Lee studied in a rabbinical seminary and was identified as a charismatic leader. He held two pulpit positions but his wife missed her family who were Holocaust survivors and his children were becoming increasingly assimilated into American, not particularly Jewish, society.

At the same time, Lee was beginning to doubt his practice and his faith. If he was so successful at inspiring his congregants, why didn’t they practice more Jewish rituals? Why didn’t they attend service more regularly and why didn’t they express a more mature belief in God – beyond the old man with the white beard portrayed in kindergartens. He found that they would not engage with him on the philosophical level. Lee found this faith shaking and he began to take a more cynical look at his own religious practice and beliefs.

Lee says that he probably would have left the pulpit anyway, but two tragedies, in his family and in his community accelerated his departure from religious practice and faith. He only shared sketchy detail, choosing not to engage in the deep emotional scars that still exist some 15 years later.

Upon return to Israel, Lee found it hard to build a

tour guiding business because of the security situation at the time. He started to translate Jewish texts as a freelancer, and discovered that he was good at that, too. Over time, the “situation” in Israel became better and his tour guiding picked up. He still has the flare for translating and during the down seasons he takes a few jobs to fill the gap.

[Holidays – the cultural connector]

Does Lee believe in God? He says – usually no. There are occasions when he works in a community on holidays and the melodies and tunes that stirred him and inspired him “create a type of transcendental experience that reminds [him] of God”. Nevertheless, even in those moments Lee does not believe that that God would care about his actions. And as soon as the holidays are over, God is no longer in the picture. Lee says that he does not pray regularly, although he does attend synagogue on a regular basis when he is not with a group. When he is with a group, he actually goes out of his way to bring them to tourist attraction synagogues when there are prayer services going on. “Do I pray? No. I read the words and often arrive at some new linguistic insight that helps me with my next translation. If I am not with a group, I take along a translation project in order to learn the material. This way I can recreate the texts, not just write it in a new language.”

[The people in its homeland:]

Lee believes very strongly in the non-religious liberal Zionism. He feels that despite the assimilation he saw with his own children, another Holocaust “is just looming” in the wings in North America, South America or Europe. “Even if I decided I was not Jewish. Even if my kids married non-Jews, my grandchildren would still be rounded up and... persecuted. So we can only rely on Israel to protect the Jews.”

Lee sees Israel as a member of the world of nations, whose entry was the assassination of its Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin in 1995. Lee was the only rabbi who addressed political issues directly. He sums up his belief and practice by saying: “I love guiding Israel, building the emotional connection between Jewish people, both Israelis and non-Israelis, to their land. I love translating Jewish texts. , building the intellectual connection for those who cannot understand the Hebrew to their cultural history. And I love eating

shrimps³ at the end of the day that I’ve done one, the other or both.

Simcha

Simcha was ordained in Israel in an ultra-orthodox setting, though he “never felt quite at home” in that world. He was dismayed by the shunning of modernity. His family was not permitted to own a television or computer. However, his family did keep a laptop that they hid when guests came. In a sense, Simcha was used to keeping things in the closet.

After ordination, Simcha took a position at a Jewish Community Center in Europe. There he was slowly exposed to European atheism. He saw happy, loving people who were Godless. In his upbringing, this was not possible. “The Godless were sinners,” worse than those who did not practice.

Being intellectually curious, he began to read whatever he could find trying to understand how happiness could be possible without a God. He found books by the new atheists intriguing and eventually convincing. Like Baruch, he had trouble reconciling the evolutionary account of the world with his fundamentalist upbringing. He had been taught that fossils were placed in the world by God to appear millions of years old but this was a test of faith. However, as he read about carbon dating and other scientific evidence of human and animal evolution, he became more and more convinced by the science than by his up-till-then blind faith. He also read books on modern biblical criticism, further challenging his fundamentalist belief. When he approached his rabbis, as is common in these circles, they reprimanded him, accused him of faltering faith and instructed him to stop asking heretical questions. They told him that he should attend lessons on ethics.

This process took place over the course of a decade. During that time he and his wife, whom he married during his rabbinic studies continued to have children. He has shared some of his transition with his wife, who essentially swore him to secrecy. Externally they still look orthodox. Internally, he is eternally conflicted. When there was some marital strife, the same rabbis he often turned to told him to stop whining and complaining; he will learn to love his wife “with time.” At times, when he travels to Israel on his own, he revels in the anonymity and enjoys the occasional bacon cheeseburger. He has not shared that with his wife.

He is seeking other professional opportunities, but did not want to share them, “in order to avoid the evil eye.”

When Simcha teaches classes in Jewish history, Jewish law (*Mishna*) and even bible studies at the community center, he does not experience any internal conflict., “What does atheism have to do with Jewish peoplehood, Jewish history or the state of Israel?” Like the others, Simcha still feels a deep connection to all three.

When does the conflict arise? Occasionally he must lead the children’s service in the synagogue his family attends; his own children are young and the parents take turns leading. Jewish prayer forces him to maintain the façade of belief. The rotation requires him to pray with his and other children. He understands the role of ritual in solidifying cultural identity, but he finds it hard to engage in the prayer ritual. “Prayer” he says, “takes out all the theological and philosophical cards and puts them right there on the table for the worshiper to look at. You just cannot avoid it.” He still teaches prayer, but is comforted by the knowledge that he doesn’t need let himself be counted towards the quorum of 10 required for adults, because he feels that he so far afield that it would be too deceitful to allow himself to be counted.

Simcha’s summary statement during our interview was one of the most poignant. It reflects many of the feelings and thoughts expressed by many of the interviewees: “Falling out of belief happens slowly. You’re not always aware of the process. It can happen over a long period. And they never really prepare you for it in the Seminary.”

Thematic analyses

As noted earlier, rabbis point to three hallmark practices or guideposts that identify traditional Jews: Sabbath Observance, Dietary Practice and daily prayer. In addition, the private–public issues play a large role. These will be addressed individually below. In many ways, the god–man divide was less prevalent in the stories. All the rabbis interviewed made it a point to say that to be a good Jew you must also be a good person. You must maintain good interpersonal morality and ethical standards. It is not that their Judaism holds them to a higher moral standard. It does push them, however, to reach for a high degree of interpersonal morality. This became clear when talking to the rabbis about the effect their changing beliefs had

on their families. It was common for them to share their doubts, at some point in time with spouses and children whom they deemed mature enough to understand. Their personal integrity and their beliefs that honesty is a prerequisite for marriage led them to discuss the issues openly. Some did it sooner in the process and others later, only one has not. In addition, when asked directly by those who they saw as their spiritual charges, no rabbi ever lied. One, Simcha, who works in the community centre, did not report having ever been asked except in the context of this study. He has spoken to his wife; their children are still young.

Also less prevalent was the positive–negative commandment divide. Many of the bans of Jewish law are related to food and Sabbath. Only two made a point to say that they eat non-kosher food with any regularity. As we will see below, the others maintain this behavior for various reasons. Other bans have less to do with daily observances and have much to do with proper interpersonal actions.

The Sabbath

When asked directly, each rabbi agreed that Sabbath observance is a true hallmark of Jewish behavior. Here all but one made the distinction between the public and private spheres. The rabbis who function in synagogue or educational communities maintain a strict, though communally defined, level of Sabbath atmosphere. Generally speaking, their synagogues avoid the extraneous use of electricity, do not prepare food on the Sabbath and do not allow the blatant use of fire (e.g. smoking). In general, they do not allow photographs to be taken. Those rabbis who function occasionally in communities maintain a similar adherence to a strict practice of Sabbath observance along these same lines. Finally, the rabbis who work in educational settings keep up the façade of strict observance in the public spheres.

At home, their stories are somewhat different. One rabbi, divorced, does not maintain any of the prohibitions mentioned above, unless he hosts friends or congregants to whom that would be important. “As far as they know, this is how I live every week.’ When he is alone, however, he will watch television, listen to music, draw, write. All activities that would be forbidden.

The married rabbis maintain the level of observance that evolved during their marriages. However, when they are alone, either on a trip, or at home, some are

less stringent. When asked why, the bottom line is that they do not think that the small details are important. They do believe that a Sabbath experience is crucial to human existential being. Only one will travel by means other than foot. They all feel that this is a true value in the world we live today. A day in which one can detach from electronics, email, and the constant din of everyday life is a true “blessing.” As such, they typically stay close to home, spend “quality time” on their own or with family members and generally do not respond to emails and the like. This grew out of the respect they have for the lifestyle that evolved over time.

Dietary laws

All but two of the rabbis interviewed made it a point to say that they still practice some semblance of Jewish dietary practice. They maintain a separation between meat and milk, wait a certain amount of time after eating meat before they will partake of milk and do not eat certain, non-kosher, foods. In addition, they only eat meat that was prepared according to the laws of ritual slaughter. As one rabbi put it, “certain habits die hard. I cannot imagine eating bacon; it was so ingrained in my upbringing.”

At least three of the rabbis grew up in homes where non-kosher food was permitted. Two of these feel that they may, some time in the future, eat non-kosher food. However, they will likely do it out of their wives’ and children’s eyes. They have discussed it with their wives, and to date there is little common conclusion.

As noted, two rabbis make it a point to eat non-kosher food when they can. They feel that since their families still maintain some level of dietary restrictions, when they themselves have the opportunity, they indulge. “It tastes good; why should I pass it up?”

Daily prayer

This area proved to be the area that raised the greatest level of ambivalence for all but one of the rabbis. This rabbi, Lee, has decided that prayer is just not part of his life anymore. However, on the occasions that he finds himself in situations where he is expected to pray, he says he tends to study the texts and tries to gain new insights into his philosophy of life. Since much of Jewish prayer is comprised of poems from different periods of Jewish history, Lee actually finds this endeavor fascinating. Since he also leads services on holidays for different communities, he finds this a helpful outlet to address his own philosophical

qualms and quandaries. To the degree that he is also a translator, this in depth study of words is also helpful.

Two other rabbis, Eli and Nachshon, take a similar approach to prayer. They have the “fortune” of not having to be anywhere where regular prayer is expected. Eli, as noted, does leave signs for his children that he has attended a prayer service each morning. However, he does spend the time in contemplative activities anywhere but in synagogue. Nachshon, who works on a college campus, also engages Jewish prayer as a philosophical endeavor. He, like the others, still believes in the importance of Jewish continuity. He also finds ways to stimulate discussion though the words of prayer, even if the words are not said for that propose.

The rabbis who work in congregations have taken an interesting path, similar to one another. They must be in synagogue for the daily services. Joseph, whose story reflects the combination of two rabbis’ stories, would say that those congregants who are acute observers of human behavior will be able to tell that he is not praying. There are certain motions a praying Jew makes. He does not make them. There are certain times when one is expected to mouth words, or say them aloud; he does not. He does stand and sit at the appointed times as a matter of respect for those who do.

Baruch and Simcha have the hardest time dealing with this area. Simcha professionally and Baruch personally. Simcha does not pray on his own, ever. He delays or avoids going to synagogue all together. However, Simcha works in a community centre school. There is an expectation that he will teach his pupils the mandate of prayer and its efficacy. This poses a daily struggle for him. As noted, this is the only area of instruction (indoctrination perhaps) that causes him such anguish. He must teach something he just does not believe.

Baruch still “prays” occasionally. What does this mean for one who does not believe in God? For Baruch it means that, like the others, there is philosophical and educational worth in the words. What can these words, uttered for over 2000 years, teach someone in the 21st century? Of one thing he is sure: prayer teaches us that daily introspection is important. How can he be instrumental in educating others; what is humility’s place in the world; how can the unheard in society become heard? The words are the contextual catalyst to help him identify areas of his personality and in his

day-to-day doings in which he must spend more time.

Baruch and Eli face another challenge, not explicitly mentioned by the others. Both are well-respected prayer leaders in their communities. On occasion, they are asked to lead their communities in public prayer. They both find this interpersonally rewarding. “I create an atmosphere in which those who believe that prayer is important can have a very meaningful experience. Do I fake it well? Perhaps. Do I feel like a fake – no”.

Eli and Baruch have another similar experience. Since they both believe that the religious communities in Israel are their ethical and moral homes, they both believe that it is important for their children to develop a set of ritual practices that keeps them in contact with this community. “It’s not that all religious people are more ethical, I know that that is not the case at all.” However, there are certain areas, particularly in the area of sexual development, that both feel the religious communities handle better. Neither advocate specifically for chastity until marriage. Nevertheless, neither is supportive of “free love” or engaging in multiple short-term sexual relationships. Eli admits, “There are some very messed up attitudes towards sex in my community.” However, both say that their open relationships with their daughters and sons help them counteract the poor messages “out there.”

Discussion and Summary

The limitation of this current study is clear. With only 12 respondents, it is impossible to make sweeping conclusions. Is this, as Dennett and LaScola found and as many of the rabbis suggested, just the tip of the iceberg? There is no way to know at this time. An avenue for further study would be to explore certain personality traits and see if there is some trend to be identified even with this small sample size.

These men’s stories raise a wide variety of issues. This final section will integrate the theoretical understanding presented at the outset of the paper and address how these rabbis, had they lived at some other point in Jewish history, may not have faced the crisis they face today. First, we return to the ideas put forth by Durkheim (1912/1995) and later by Pinker (2002). In one case, Joseph said it explicitly. “Seek comfort in community. You know what they can do for you.” This is an unambiguous statement that religion is about people comforting and supporting people. He also

points out that it is unclear how God can comfort someone in any real, practical sense.

Similar to Dennett and LaScola’s (2010) findings, the rabbis felt a great sense of relief that someone “out there” was willing to ask the question. Lee put it succinctly: “Where have you been ‘till now? What took you so long to ask?” Although strict confidentiality was maintained, like the non-Jewish clergy, the rabbis were relieved to know that they were not alone. They find comfort in the knowledge that there are other rabbis in similar positions. There was a variety of emotional responses, like among the Christian clergy. A clear difference was the ability of some of the rabbis to find other work that kept them tied to their beloved communities, and still provide for their families. Some, however, still had the need to live “in the closet” for fear of financial ruin.

Over time these rabbis came to terms with the fact that religious beliefs evolve over time (Desmond, Morgan, and Kikuchi 2010; Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, and Robinson 2004). None bemoaned the fact that their teachers did not prepare them for it. One, recently, contacted his rabbinical seminary discreetly, to inform them of the process he has undergone. This was with the hope that the training of future rabbis will provide them the possibility to read studies of this type and buffer future rabbis’ potential suffering.

The question then arises, at least for those rabbis still employed within the Jewish community: How do they confront their conflicting beliefs and practices? Do they have an internal sense of hypocrisy and if not, how have they come to terms with their practices in as much as they are not in-line with their beliefs?

In addressing these questions, I will first make the distinction between two groups. As we will see, there are individual differences, especially with Baruch, whose job is not within a Jewish communal setting per se, but still must portray himself as a religious man.

First I will address those who do not work in a communal setting. For them, their practices and beliefs are in line. Lee, who became a tour-guide/translator, has no sense of inner conflict. When he does attend a religious service it is for communal or familial responsibilities. This does not bother him as he does not do anything that would conflict. He reads the words, but does not pray, per se. The same holds true for

Nachshon who works in a university setting. He rarely attends public prayer services aside from familial and communal responsibilities. When either of them is called upon to lead a service, such as on holidays, they do so with a sense of responsibility to communal cohesion. The continuity of the Jewish people is tantamount in their lives. They realize that these services provide an opportunity for Jews to meet and interact with other Jews. And if this is a place that that can happen, it does not pose an internal challenge.

The question stands then, in these cases, are the rabbis' concerns justified? That is would their jobs be at stake if they preached publically the beliefs they hold privately. To the degree that their perception guides their decision, we may never know. One rabbi was hopeful that as his career draws to a close that he will be able to preach what he believes, and inspire others to adopt his beliefs. He is nearly certain that by then (7 years hence) he will have enough "credit" with the members of his congregation that they will see religion - Judaism - the way he does, a human-social construct that provides comfort, support and companionship, regardless of and separate from a belief in a god.

One of the rabbis, Simcha, who is employed in a more conservative setting, truly experiences the difficulty, but only at certain times. His main position in an informal educational setting allows him to teach subject matter that does not conflict with his belief. However, since he leads the children's service once each 4-6 weeks he finds it much more difficult. He has, until now, maintained the façade that is expected. He feels somewhat hypocritical, yet cannot find a way around the matter at this point.

However, he feels anger at the system that allowed him to get to this point. There was a sense of vengefulness in his interview. "They (the orthodox religious establishment) got me here; they will deal with me until I decide to take the next step." He does not intend to hurt anyone intentionally. Yet he feels that he has every right to preach what he does not practice or believe, because he sees levels of hypocrisy that go far deeper. Issues of truth and honor have been broken so many times, in his own view, that deceiving others does not trouble him (any more).

The ministers in the original Dennett-LaScola study felt a great deal of angst as they went through their changes. The rabbis in the present study each had some

sense of that angst at the outset. Yet these are mature thinking men. They are also practical. Angst will not pay the bills, so they work to make sure that what they do is in concert with what they believe. Baruch said, with a witty smile, that it would be easy to start believing in god; the idea occurs to him in *shul* all the time. Then he does another scan of his systems, assumes his oxytocin⁴ is sky-high, feels his heart beat and moves on, with a knowing smile, one that only he (though he suspects that one if his kids gets it) understands.

All of the rabbis have maintained their connection to Jewish communities in their various communities. This, too, is in line with Durkheim and Pinker. In order to remain part of these communities they are living proof that Sosis' (2006) Three-B's understanding of religious commitment is parsimonious. Most perform many of the behaviors and maintain the bans – at least when they are in the public sphere. The bans include Shabbat observance and dietary restrictions. The behaviors can include attending prayer services though not actually praying. And, when appropriate, they cover their heads, don prayer shawls and phylacteries. A few maintain the dress associated with their particular stream of Judaism. Most do not find this to conflict with their beliefs. They perform the community practices to strengthen the community. "Who knows what... lurks in the hearts of men? Certainly not me", Joseph said. "We all play roles." These rabbis engender the hypothesis that practice can trump belief, or better yet, live in an internal world of ever changing beliefs. Belief in god is no longer the motivator; belief in community, people hood and Jewish history is. Therefore, it makes sense to keep kosher, observe the Sabbath and pray, at least in public.

The rabbis gave various reasons when asked about their decisions to continue the religious education of their elementary and high school aged children. The reasons were consistent with Manning's (2013) descriptions and Ecklund and Schultz Lee's (2011) findings. Some felt that their children should have a choice to participate in religious communities in the future. Given the emphasis placed upon practice and actions in the Jewish religious communities, they feel it crucial to provide their children with a behavior set so that they can ultimately feel comfortable, should they choose to remain part of the practicing Jewish communities. In addition, some felt that the morals, ethics and values taught in the religious schools were more in line with their own. These included, though were not

limited to sexual mores, charitable acts and general altruistic rather than individualistic modes of behavior.

As for asserting belief in a God who created the world and is active in it, none, even Eli, espouse this belief in any meaningful way. Had they lived in an earlier period of Jewish history, the issue of belief may never have arisen in their minds. Since they do not perform many of the behaviors in private, it is clear that the concept of a supernatural creator/punisher commonly associated with religious behavior and motivation (Johnson 2011; Schloss and Murray 2011) is not something that worries these rabbis. At some point it became clear that some of the rabbis had read Sacks (2011) and Armstrong's (1993; 2009) books. Some found them validating, others found them apologetics. They all agreed that the understanding of Judaism until the Middle Ages was more practice and less thought. However, they were, for the most part, unwilling to find comfort in that divide. It is hard to argue with Maimonides' influence on Jewish thought and practice, even with most persuasive arguments (Shapiro 1993). They do not remove themselves from the community, but they feel a certain longing despite their non-belonging.

They do not hold out hope for any great reward from on high if they perform any of the *mitzvot*. They do gain a sense of fulfillment when they function "religiously" in public. The fulfillment comes from the community. They have no fear of punishment during their lifetimes which perhaps, explains why they do not, as a rule, maintain much private practice. In the event that they do, it is to keep up the appearance of being honest to their communities and peers and equally as important to themselves. As David Hartman, a modern or even post-modern Jewish philosopher wrote: "Regardless of how one interprets the notions of revelation and election, it is clear that... [p]eoplehood and nationhood are the central frameworks for building spiritual meaning in our daily life. Israel prevents us from identifying faith as 'the leap from the alone to the Alone'." (Hartman 1990, 184)

When taken together and when approached honestly, catechism in Jewish philosophy, even as put forth by Maimonides and his later explicators, need not be central to Jewish religious public leadership. It was not true in the biblical or Talmudic periods; neither do modern Jewish philosophers see catechistic "belief" as a prerequisite to Jewish membership and leadership. One can still be an effective leader without holding or

professing a firm set of beliefs, and even taking them on. What seems to happen is that the belief itself evolves from a belief in god to a belief in the people and nation of Jews. Therefore, private practice is separate from that in the public sphere. I need not pray at home; that would reflect a belief in god. But if I am in a setting where the people expect me to pray, then my belief in the future of the Jewish people becomes the focus of my practice.

In the final analysis, the modern Jewish philosopher from the second half of the 20th century put it succinctly: "Beliefs without deeds are not long for this world" (Leibowitz 2005). However, it appears that the opposite may not hold true, that is that Jewish (religious) deeds in the absence of belief may have a longer more reliable shelf life.

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Endnote

[1] The one rabbi from the Reform stream of Judaism does not experience the same type of dissonance. This may be coincidental, but there may be a theological reason as well. Reform and Reconstructionist Jews, humanistic Jews and others do not necessarily hold on to the tenets put forth by Saadia and Maimonides, nor to the fundamentalist belief that God created the world in six days and therefore God has the right to command us. As such his story is not related here.

[2] All names and identifying information has been changed in order to maintain the rabbis' confidentiality. These details include name, but may also include country, geographic area with the country etc. Occasionally, details of the stories have been merged as have been statements so as to provide on additional level of discretion.

[3] A clear and blatant transgression of Jewish dietary laws, similar to ham in its symbolic qualities.

[4] This idea draws on the physiological/biological findings of spiritual practice that he reads.