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To the editor,

I am writing in response to Rachel Tanny's article, "Religious Jews Leaving Religious Life," printed on June 14, 2013, and distributed last week via email.

I was raised in a loving Orthodox household in the wonderful Jewish community in Sharon, Massachusetts. But the intolerance I faced at Maimonides School in Brookline and the disinterest I had in continuing a lifestyle with so many prohibitive restrictions on my interaction with the modern world led me to stop leading a religious lifestyle when I left for college. As I made this decision, and as I have continued to work out how I would like to lead my life and raise a family, I have felt accepted and supported by my religious family, friends, and members of the Sharon community.

Rebbetzin Tanny's article was written in such a way that it would resonate very strongly with relatives and friends of those who have chosen a different religious path, but the tone of the article — which made it sound as though the relatives of religious-turned-non-religious Jews should actively try and bring them back into the faith — was such that anyone who has decided not to be religious would be turned off simply by reading it. When I read the article, I thought it came across as exceptionally judgmental and patronizing of those who have made the active choice not to continue leading a religious lifestyle. Many of the factors that she listed as justification for religious Jews leaving Orthodoxy were accurate — but she failed to mention that sometimes a person chooses to leave Orthodoxy completely of their own volition, and that there is nothing a relative or a friend could do to prevent it or change their mind.

Rebbetzin Tanny's article had the right intentions, but it should have given the audience one final piece of advice: that it's okay if someone chooses to practice their religion in a different way. If the author had written that Judaism is a religion of tolerance and acceptance, and that as Jews we must embrace people for who they are, she would have done a service to religious and non-religious readers

alike.

I hold no animosity for people who choose to live a religious lifestyle because for me and others like me, choosing how to live my life had nothing to do with ‘going off the derekh.’ It was about choosing to discover my own.

Ari Massefski, 22
Sharon, Massachusetts

Dear Ari,
Thank you very much for your letter sharing your views on my recent article, “Religious Jews Leaving Religious Life.” Please understand that this article is a mere summary of some of the main ideas in the book “Freiing Out,” written by my husband, Rabbi Binyamin Tanny. In the conclusion to his book, he writes, “This entire book is a summary,” thereby giving rise to the challenge of writing a summary of a summary. I apologize if the tone of the article was hurtful to you in any way.

I am glad to hear you hold the Sharon community with high regard. My husband spent a lot of time with people from there and is in fact an Eagle Scout from Sharon’s Jewish scouting group, which is chartered out of the Brookline school. It is possible you even know some of the same people!

I am sorry to hear you had a troubled time in school, an experience with which you are not alone. Problems in the educational system are quite common among people who choose to leave religious life. Please read Rabbi Binyamin Tanny’s book “Freiing Out” and you will see that there are others like you who have gone through similar – or possibly even worse – situations.

You write, “Sometimes a person chooses to leave Orthodoxy completely of their own volition.” I would not say ‘sometimes;’ but rather, ‘all the time.’ Anyone who leaves orthodoxy does so of their own volition. Those who are confident in their decision and happy with their choice and their new lifestyle will take the credit personally. Those who are angry, frustrated, and unsure will blame others, such as their parents, rabbis, religious institutions, etc.

You also write that “it sound[s] as though the relatives of religious-turned-non-religious Jews should actively try and bring them back into the faith.” The religious person should always try to bring their fellow Jews to the beauty of Judaism. The truly religious and spiritual Jew knows how beautiful a Friday night Shabbat meal with the family can be, how much brilliance is transmitted in the Torah, and how much love their can be in a harmonious community. Why should

they not want to share this with their fellow Jews? To not share is to not care.

Finally, you say you “hold no animosity for people who choose to live a religious lifestyle.” I am happy to hear this because part of our religious lifestyle is to spend time every day finding Jews who have not experienced a beautiful Judaism and actively try to bring them back. They may not like us for this, but we are okay with that because as long as they feel some irritation there is still a fire burning.

Thank you again for your letter and my husband and I both wish you a peaceful and meaningful life that you find spiritually and emotionally fulfilling.

Rebbetzin Rachel Tanny