Religious Jews Leaving Religious Life

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“Then you begin to give up the very idea of belonging. Suddenly this thing, this belonging, it seems like some long, dirty lie ... and I begin to believe that birthplaces are accidents, that everything is an accident. But if you believe that, where do you go? What do you do? What does anything matter?”
—Zadie Smith, White Teeth

Going off the derekh is one of the greatest epidemics facing the religious Jewish community today. You would be hard-pressed to find a frum family untouched by this phenomenon, whether it is a child, sibling, spouse, cousin, friend, or schoolmate who has left religion behind. In the wake of the individual leaving is a tempest of emotions—confusion, guilt, anger, hurt, and sadness.

All too often, the religious Jews left behind are focused on their pain, their hurt. “How could my child do this to me?”Alternatively, anger and bitterness lead to blame. “There is just something wrong with him.” “There are problems with the community.” But neit¬her of these attitudes is constructive. If we want to cure this spiritual disease, we have to turn these questions on their heads.
We must look at the situation from the point of view of the person who has gone off the derekh. We must ask ourselves instead, “How does he/she feel?” We must ask ourselves, “What could I have done differently? What can I change to help him/her return and prevent any similar future occurrences?” Only by asking these difficult questions and facing their (often painful) answers head-on can we learn

what we could do differently the next time and, if we are lucky, we will learn what we need to know to help bring them back and to offer healing.

Freedom without Limits

In Yiddish, going “off the derekh” is called “freiing out,” from the German word frei, to be free. When religious Jews leave the practice of their religion, they are “free”—free to eat or drink anything, free to do anything at all on Shabbat, free to socialize with and date any person they want. Suddenly nothing is forbidden. Suddenly there are no limits.
But how free is freedom without limits? And how good does it feel when it is accompanied by rejection from all that you once knew and loved? The life of the frei is no utopia. They discover very quickly that a life of freedom from religious restrictions is not the paradise they once envisioned.

They have spent their lives as a part of something bigger: not just a family, but an entire community where they belonged. Now where do they fit in? Their friends and family are on a mission to bring them back—and if not, they simply no longer have things in common. In some cases, they feel anger and bitterness toward their family and previous lifestyle. They feel confusion, shame, and guilt for hurting their family and friends.

Yet, how can they fit into a world of which they have never been a part? They have limited shared background, no shared memories with people outside of the religious community, and no friends to turn to. They have been educated to believe that everything they are now doing, along with the people they are doing it with, is wrong.

The freid-out individual may still want to connect with family, but he/she is left in conflict. Can such a person go to his parents’ house for Friday night dinner and enjoy his mother’s chicken soup and challah—or will it end in a fight when he leaves to see a movie with friends? Freid-out people want the best of both worlds, but no longer know where they stand.

Freiing out is a long and difficult process. Beginning to understand the pain and emotional tumult involved is the first step to healing—and to learning what we can do differently to prevent it happening in the first place.

Why People Go Off the Derekh

“Children’s nerves are easily affected; great care ought to be taken to avoid any disturbance in their lives, until they are practically mature. But who realizes that

for some boys at school an undeserved imposition may cause as much mental anguish as the death of a friend will later on? Who really appreciates that something quite trivial may cause in certain immature minds an emotional upset which may in a very short time inflict incurable damage?”

—Guy De Maupassant, “Looking Back”

The reasons people go off the derekh are as varied and individualized as the people themselves. Each person’s unique set of life experiences, personality, strengths, and weaknesses contribute to his/her ultimate decision to leave religion. Nonetheless, the reason one leaves can generally be placed into at least one of six main categories.

Religious Misery

People do not voluntarily give up something they enjoy. If Judaism is bringing happiness and fulfillment into someone’s life, they will not leave it behind. Remember, we all find happiness in different things, so what attracts you to Judaism might not attract someone else. In fact, it could even repel them.

On the other hand, if you can figure out what they like about Judaism and you make that a focus for them, they will not want to leave. You have to make their passion your priority, regardless of whether or not it is a passion you share. People going off the derekh are often angry or depressed. If you see a child, a student, a friend, or even yourself in one of these states for an extended period of time, these are warning signs. You need to respond right away. Find out what the underlying problem is. If a person is miserable in any sort of Jewish context, they are at risk.

Judaism can be an overwhelming religion. It controls what and when you can eat, what you can wear, and even with whom you can socialize and how. So logically you might be tempted to think that it is this avalanche of restrictions that eventually snows people under. But it is not so.

The reality is that the small things often cause the most suffering. Instead of wishing he could eat bacon cheeseburgers at McDonald’s, your at-risk child is more likely wondering why he can’t eat at his friend’s home, which, although kosher, is not kosher enough.

The solution? Pick your battles very carefully. How important is the battle overall if you bear in mind that by winning you could be losing in much more significant and long-term ways?

When you have a dispute with your child, change your priorities. Instead of focusing on being right and teaching them to be just like you, ask yourself how you can make them happy. This does not mean compromising on morals and values, but on finding a way to help your child or friend maintain a positive connection with Judaism and with God.
For example, if you know music resonates with a person, find music they can connect to that will convey your message. If they enjoy studying, find a text that addresses the issue. And at the end of the day, remember to always pick your battles wisely.

The same applies to adults. For instance, a married man may want to go to university and study for a degree, but he is stuck working a simple job amidst a Hassidic community that doesn't approve. Or the newly married ba'alat teshuvah living in Tzefat who occasionally wants to go to Tel Aviv and watch a movie but her husband forbids it. I know both of these people. Sadly, they both grew frustrated and left their families and communities.

I do not mean to advocate what is right and wrong when it comes to how we choose to observe our Judaism. However, we must realize and accept that often it is these types of things that build up the religious misery experienced by individuals going off the derekh.

Role Model Discredit

Being a religious Jew is not a simple decision that affects only the individual who practices religious Judaism. When you wear the garb, walk the walk, and talk the talk, suddenly other people look to you as a role model. Deciding to be religious is a conscious decision to be a role model, like it or not.

Think about it: You never encounter someone who says, "Oh, that guy just stole something! All secular people are thieves!" However, you do hear people say, "That man with the black hat and beard just cursed me for dressing differently. Those religious Jews are so judgmental!" When you decide to present yourself as an observant Jew, you are representing the entire Jewish people.

There are two levels of role model discredit: discrediting only what a person says, or simply discrediting the person or institution as a whole.

When a child constantly disagrees with a parent, he or she is unlikely to discredit the parent as a person, but will almost certainly discredit what the parent says. If this occurs, it is not irreversible. If the parent can learn to look into the child's point of view and can show this, the child can still respect the parent, even if he

or she persists in disagreeing. The same applies for a judgmental friend or spouse.
However, when there is not such a strong personal investment as there is between a parent and child, or between spouses, as in the case of an educational system, it is easier simply to discredit the person—or the institution—as a whole. If a child is a member of a Jewish baseball team and his or her teacher or principal tells the child this is not acceptable and that they should be spending more time studying, it is easy for the child to discredit the entire system. The child may think, “I love baseball. I make so many friends and get exercise. But if Judaism is against baseball, then maybe Judaism is not for me.” Once again, the individual religious person becomes a representation of the entire system.

The above example may not apply in a Modern Orthodox community, where it could be acceptable to play in a sports league. But this example can apply to anything that is slightly out of the norm in relation to the particular community, such as joining a Jewish scout troop or taking up surfing.

Adults can also discredit their rabbi or religious mentor, if he (God forbid) ends up in prison for crimes such as fraud, child abuse, or theft. When this happens, it can create a mountain of emotional turmoil as the individual reflects on the years of hypocritical teachings they listened to.

Complicating the matter further is the issue of respect. Respect is only given in return for respect received, or when it is earned. Unfortunately, children often do not feel respected in a religious setting. The teacher who chides his student for playing baseball will almost certainly lose any respect the child previously had for him if baseball is fundamentally important to the child.

If you are dealing with an individual who has lost respect for you or is discrediting what you say, you must first rebuild their trust and regain their respect. Only once this breach in relationship is repaired can you begin to work on bringing the individual closer once again to their Judaism.

Being Prejudged or Labeled as Frei

The self-fulfilling prophecy is a very real danger. A study was done in which a teacher was given a classroom full of remedial students. Instead of being told they were remedial, however, both the teacher and the students were told they were in a special class for gifted students. Astoundingly, in spite of previously diagnosed learning disabilities, all the students in the class performed at a gifted level.

The converse is also true. When we are told repeatedly that we are stupid, we will begin to think we are stupid. And if we think we are stupid, we will begin to act stupid.

So, too, with the person who is told they are freiing out. They may not think of themselves as frei just for wearing jeans or eating non-cholov yisroel ice cream in a Hassidic community… but if the world begins to tell them they are, they will begin to believe it. And once they believe they are freiing out, they will begin to do more frei things. Because, after all, if they are frei anyhow, they might as well! Too many people have said, “Going to university makes people frei out” or “Joining the Israeli army will make you go off the derekh.” This is the wrong message to send! Saying any career, hobby, or passion will lead to freiing out is a dangerous message. Not only can it lead to role model discredit, as discussed above, but it can also force a person to make a difficult decision: to choose between their passion and their Judaism.

Before you ever say the words, “You cannot do that and still be frum,” or “What you want to do is not a Jewish profession,” or “If you do that, you will go off the derekh,” make absolutely sure that you know what you are talking about. You may be planting the idea into the person’s head that they need to go off the derekh if they want to do the things that they love, as opposed to allowing them to try to think up a way to pursue their interests and still keep their Judaism.

Instead of planting the idea in the person’s head that he or she must go off the derekh to do what he or she loves, try asking the person how he or she plans to keep up with Judaism when they do it. Or, better yet, help the person think of ways. How can you work Judaism into that person’s passion? Unless the person is pursuing something very extreme or dangerous, such as drug use or pursuit of another religion, there is almost always a way to fit Judaism in. You just have to find a way to do it—and to help your friend or family member find that way, too.

Rejection and Conditional Love

Perception is everything. The day outside may be bright and beautiful, but if a person is blind, she will still say it is dark. To her, it is dark, and it does not matter that the sun is out.
All too often, we focus on what the objective reality of the situation is, but this is the wrong attitude to take. We can argue all day with the blind woman that it is bright out, but it will not change the fact that to her it is dark. Her subjective perception, even if at odds with scientific empiricism, is her truth and her reality. If we want to deal with her, we must accept that and treat it as reality.

Normally, parents love their children unconditionally. I cannot ever imagine my son doing anything that would take away my love for him, and I am sure other parents feel the same. Yet, through our actions we can convey a different message.
Imagine a home where Torah study is strongly rewarded. The parents praise their children when they spend time studying Torah or succeed in Torah-related pursuits. But then when their children excel in something unrelated, such as music, art, sports, or other secular studies, they ignore them—or worse, tell them they should be studying Torah instead.

Of course those parents are proud of their children. Of course they want them to succeed. Of course they love them. But what message are they sending?

Judaism should be a source of joy and security for a child, but in a home like the one I just described it becomes the opposite. It becomes at best a burden for the child to bear, at worst the child's competition for a parent's approval and affection. The child begins to feel the parents' love is conditional. If they don't feel they can meet their parents' expectations—or don't feel they even want to—then they begin to feel rejected. This starts the child on a downward spiral, often ending in depression. Once the child is depressed, they are vulnerable and their Judaism is at risk of declining.

But this is not true only in a parent-child relationship—it is true of any person regarding their relationship with the community as a whole. Any person who feels rejected by the wider Jewish community, or only loved by the community at certain times, is at risk just as that child is.

The solution is to show love at all times, not only when the child, spouse, student, or friend shows interests in common with yours. Of course, show pride in Torah study achievements. But, even if it is hard, also show pride in the mundane, worldly things in which the individual has taken an interest.

If your child is not interested in doing the things you want him or her to do, try thinking of new ways to phrase things. Have you ever told your child, "You must come to shul and daven; you cannot go play outside now"? Perhaps you could rephrase it as, "I need you to sit next to me while I'm in shul. I have a hard time keeping up with the hazzan, and I need you to help me!" Instead of telling your child to sit and study Torah, sit down and study Torah yourself—then tell your child you are having a hard time understanding and need his or her help. Try to think of something positive that will make your child happy to do it. As a bonus, your child will feel respected and needed.

Finally, never use anything related to Judaism as a punishment. All too often, parents and educators use Judaism in the wrong way, which gives the child negative associations. Telling a child to copy over the bentching (grace after meals) for talking during bentching will certainly not give them warm, fuzzy feelings toward these texts.

Dysfunctional Home and Abuse

It may seem obvious that abuse would lead to someone going off the derekh, but often it is overlooked. Abuse comes in many forms, some of which are not so obvious. It is one thing if parents beat their children or someone sexually abuses them, but what about emotional or psychological abuse? What about spousal abuse? What about a home that is simply “dysfunctional”—where the parents fight all the time, or are divorced?

Any type of abuse or dysfunction, whether overt or hidden, is a major risk to a person’s relationship with Judaism. As with any abusive situation, there are a few strong and enlightened individuals who are able to overcome this, but the majority of people cannot. For anyone abused, especially by a parent, spouse, teacher, member of the clergy, or even a member of the community, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate the religion that person supposedly stands for from their negative and harmful actions. Similarly, a child growing up in a dysfunctional home, although not abusive, is at risk when Judaism is a large part of the home life, and the home life is problematic. It is easy to confuse the two of them.

Sadly, many people refuse to have anything to do with Judaism on account of past abuses. One man, although in his 60s, still insists that Judaism cannot be a very good religion to follow if his grandfather, who wore a black hat and beard, could beat his children and grandchildren in such a violent way. The outwardly religious grandfather represented to this man everything that Judaism stands for and—even as an adult and even with his grandfather dead for over 40 years—he cannot emotionally disentangle the two.

Even if victims of abuse can be rational enough to see that their abuser and their religion are not intertwined, their Judaism is still at major risk. Victims of abuse often suffer from low self-esteem and feelings of rejection, and are prone to depression and anxiety, all of which are risk factors for freiing out. Children in dysfunctional homes are also likely to feel these same emotions. Additionally, they may not receive the love and attention they need when their parents’ energies are pointed elsewhere.

Abuse must be dealt with before addressing anything relating to religious observance. A professional should be involved if the victim needs counseling to help with the recovery process. Sadly, however, many people live in denial. Parents who fight constantly, for instance, may refuse to admit to themselves that theirs is not a happy home. Unfortunately, when this occurs, the denial is likely to continue, even when (God forbid) the child is out doing drugs with friends.

The Mind

The mind is a powerful creative force in our lives. It has the power to do some truly extraordinary things and to enable us to accomplish unprecedented feats. Unfortunately, it also has the power to control and harm us, even when we are not aware of it. This is because our subconscious mind is constantly working, making associations and influencing our emotions and reactions.

Have you ever felt unexplained anxiety, fear, or paranoia? Have you ever felt negative feelings toward someone who has done you no harm, or given you no reason to dislike him? What about feeling highly stressed by a seemingly benign situation?

All of these are reactions that may be governed by our subconscious mind. It does not matter if the fear has a basis in reality or not. Perception is reality for the person who is experiencing it. To the child who is afraid of the monster under the bed, it is very real no matter how many times you explain that monsters do not exist.

Often when we have either strongly positive or strongly negative experiences, our subconscious mind forms associations. My grandfather fought in the Second World War, where he no doubt saw and experienced many traumatic things. From then on, he was terrified of flying and would never set foot in a plane. His fear of flying was real for him, even though we tried many times to explain that statistically planes are much safer than cars.

This is true also when it comes to Judaism. Negative experiences can color our reactions. If a child has had bad experiences with being forced to wear a yarmulke, for instance, he may not only try to avoid wearing one at all costs, but he may also feel an unexplained dislike for anyone he sees wearing one. He himself may not even understand why he feels this way.

This problem is compounded by the rigid system imposed by many religious groups. In the Chabad Lubavitch system, for instance, a boy is expected to attend

yeshiva (with no secular studies), followed by more yeshiva, bachur shlichus, Smicha, marriage, one year of kollel, and then shlichus (to work in a Jewish community). Boys growing up in this system are often taught this is the only option available. They feel pressure to conform, especially if they are from a prominent family or they want to get a good shidduch. But what of the boys who don't fit in?

To the individual who recognizes where this path is heading, it is no longer a subconscious matter and it becomes even stronger as he becomes more aware and conscious of the situation.

Not everyone is cut out to follow the same path. Some men can sit and study Talmud all day every day of their life and feel content and fulfilled… but not everyone is like this. Boys who do not fit the mold may slowly feel more and more anxious and stressed, sometimes without even understanding why. A girl may feel stressed by having to conform to a path of getting married at a young age and starting a family, when really she prefers to wait to marry and perhaps go to university.

When pressure builds up, without being confronted or released, eventually it will "explode." When it does, these boys and girls are left running for the nearest exit. Instead of maintaining their Judaism and simply following a different path, they leave their Judaism altogether. They just didn't know there was any other way.

Children of ba'alei teshuvah have yet another stumbling block before them. They frei out much more frequently than children of frum from birth (FFB) parents. Why? Because they have no family precedent when it comes to this rigid path set before them. Children of FFBs are often following the same road their parents, grandparents, and other relatives took, and so are more comfortable with it. But children of ba'alei teshuvah look at their parents and their extended families and see them all following completely different paths. They will then be less comfortable conforming to the path set before them.

Be very careful not to give children (or anyone, but especially children, who are most impressionable) negative associations with Judaism. What may seem like a small thing to you as a parent or educator could have a huge impact on the child or student in their relationship with the matter later in life. Learn to recognize the warning signs within yourself and your friends and family. If you have unexplained negative feelings toward something or someone within Judaism, stop and ask yourself why. Take some time out for quiet reflection and see if you can trace it back to an experience in your past. At least then, if you confront it, you

can begin the healing process.

Maintaining Individuality

The secular world is a vast and enticing place. With individuality as one of the core values embraced by secular society, how can we expect Jewish youth, no matter how cloistered their existence, to remain unaffected? Yet Judaism is a religion designed to roll with the punches; that's how it has survived so many centuries. So how do we fit individuality into a seemingly conformist religion?

The first, and most important, thing to realize is that Judaism is not as conformist as your own group would have you believe. In Judaism, unlike Christianity, we do not believe that just because I am of a certain group, God will only accept my worship, while everybody else will be rejected or eternally punished. When it comes down to it, our disputes are minor. All major Orthodox Jewish groups agree with one another on a great deal of points.

Unfortunately, we spend our time arguing about and focusing on that minor set of differences. You don't hear Jews sitting around arguing about whether or not we should give more tzedakah, invite more guests for Shabbat, and visit the sick more often. You don't hear people debating if it's necessary to study Torah, go to shul, and keep kosher. What we do hear are arguments about whether or not the Lubavitcher Rebbe is moshiach, the style of a hat, shietle, or kippa, and how many call-ups there should be to the Torah on a Shabbat morning. But in the main, these are issues that are in constant change when we compare them to the overarching beliefs central to the Torah.

Judaism is in constant evolution on the peripheries. However, at its core it is unchanging and it is on this core that we must focus.

If a child, student, or friend chooses to follow a slightly different path in Judaism, embrace it. Sure, you may have 1 percent in which you differ, but you have 99 percent in which you agree—and that's pretty good! In our family, we have many different strains of Orthodox Judaism, from Chabad to Belz to black-hat Yeshivish. If you relax and let individuals find their uniqueness within the 1 percent of differences, hopefully they will not need to seek it in the other 99 percent.

The Modern World

Of course, there are many temptations in the secular world to which we and our children will inevitably be exposed. The question is in our management of them. Some things in the secular world are indisputably dangerous, while others

actually stand to benefit us, even as religious Jews.

Clothing

Many sects in Judaism adhere strictly to a certain dress code. Males must wear black pants and white button down shirts, a certain color of socks, or a certain kind of kippa. Some groups will tell girls they cannot wear certain colors. But if an individual chooses to do something outside of the norm, you have to ask yourself, is this outside of halakha or just our minhag?

We Jews have always moved around and this has affected our manner of dress. The Jews in Russia wore streimels and long kappatas because it was freezing cold outside. The Jews in Africa wore turbans, hijabs, and long flowing robes to keep cool. Some groups of people, such as the Jain people in India, have lived in the same location for thousands of years and so have not needed to change their way of dress—but this is not true for us.

It is true that we are supposed to maintain our own style of dress and not follow after the non-Jewish fashions, yet what does this really mean? We are taught that if all the non-Jews begin to wear a certain color of shoelaces, we should not change the color of ours. But we are not told we are not allowed to use shoelaces! They are practical and useful for tying shoes onto feet and we are permitted to use them.
Too often we see people going off the derekh because of what I call “black hat issues.” They struggle within a community that puts so much focus on the brim size of a hat or even as silly as the frame style of a pair of glasses. Some people leave their Judaism behind because of trivial matters such as these and how they have affected them growing up.

Modern Media

In the modern world, it seems that communication is everything. From books to television to the Internet, we as religious Jews must confront a variety of secular influences contrary to our Jewish values. What should we do? What can we do?

The first step to addressing these outside influences is to ask ourselves about their benefit. What positive uses does this instrument have? How can it be used to improve our lives? How can it strengthen our Judaism? Or, conversely, will this damage our Judaism?

A lot of people like to blame the blandishments of the outside world as causes for people going off the derekh. However, the welcoming world is not at fault. It only

permits the process to take place. It is a lot easier today for people to move away from the Jewish community and establish themselves in a secular world then it was ever before in history. Instead of pointing the blame at the secular world with its inventions and influences, we need to decide on how best to manage it within our own society. We need to figure out what we can do differently.

Dealing with Someone Who Is Off the Derekh

How do we respond if someone in our family is going or has gone off the derekh? How do we interact with them when they seem to be rejecting everything our beliefs stand for? One thing is clear: We cannot help them heal and bring them closer again to Judaism if we cannot open the lines of communication. That must be the first step.

If, as we explained above, the single greatest cause for going off the derekh is depression, anger, or general unhappiness with Judaism, then the single greatest way to bring people closer once again is to make Judaism a source of joy. Judaism is a religion that is conducive to joy and happiness. It does not encourage severe deprivation or require its adherents to fast for an entire month out of every year. It does not necessitate vows of silence or celibacy. There are no hot coals to walk over, no self-flagellation, no beds of nails. Instead, there are candles to light and songs to sing. There are big family meals and a strong sense of community. Judaism is equipped with absolutely everything we need to create a joyful atmosphere.

The problem comes when someone is discontent with some part of Jewish ritual or observance. If we can identify what is making a person unhappy, we can infuse that part with happiness. The individual who does not want to go to shul finds it uninteresting and unfulfilling. Could another shul be found with a different style of davening? Compelling them to go to a shul where they are bored will underscore their negativity. Jewish practice needs to be rewarding and meaningful.

Shower your children with love and affection. Give them a regular gift better than a weekly allowance: your time. Spend time with your children doing normal, fun things. Find out what they enjoy and do that with them, whether it is going camping or kayaking, doing arts and crafts, or even learning some new musical instruments and forming a family band. Bonding with your child will create a positive relationship whose power cannot be underestimated.

In nine out of ten cases where children have gone of the derekh they felt the parents put religion before them. There is the story where a Rav went to be

menachem avel (comforting mourners). The house of the deceased was filled with Jewish religious books, yet all the children were obviously not religious. The Rav asked them what they thought of all their father's Torah books. The children replied, "These books were our competition for time spent with our father."

Take the time to listen and try to understand your child (or your friend), even if you initially disagree. It may take some time to gain enough trust from your teenager for her to open up to you, but when she does, sit quietly and listen; do not judge. If she tells you that she feels like you don't understand her, don't argue and tell her you do, just try to accept that she feels that way. Ask her what she thinks can be done to improve or resolve the situation. If she has somewhere to turn, a shoulder to cry on, someone to lean on in a difficult situation, then she is less likely to turn away from Torah when her beliefs are put to the test.

Pick your battles wisely. When you see what you perceive to be a fault in someone, think again before you approach them. Remember, you may succeed in getting the person to change his kippa for one that may be more kosher to you—a velvet one for a knitted one, or a knitted one for a suede one—but keep in mind, the individual may be in the middle of a battle that is trying to blast the kippa totally off his head.

Instead, find a way to put a positive spin on the situation. Maybe your daughter does not enjoy staying in shul during Torah reading, but she is happy to run a program for children. Maybe your friend comes to shul every Shabbat but never walks inside. He does not like to daven, and instead volunteers as security. Find a way to get them involved in something positive and fun from their point of view, and you're on the right path to getting them to stick with their Judaism.

Make the very language you use positive: Stop saying what should not be done, and start saying what should be done. Give your child some action to grab onto and focus on. Find ways to permit things rather than prohibit them. Instead of taking the muktza toy away on Shabbat with a, "You cannot play with that on Shabbat," hand the child another toy and say, "You can play with this toy now." Instead of saying, "I hate having to interrupt my afternoon to pray minha," try saying, "I get to take a break in the middle of my busy day to relax, refocus, and reconnect." If you start changing the language you use, you will be amazed at the positive impact it has on both your own outlook, and on the people around you.

Allow for some individuality. Not everyone fits the mold and not every road is the right one for every person. All too often communities present themselves and their way of doing things as the one and only true way to serve God. But this is

not so! Judaism is a diverse religion, with many ways to serve Hashem available. If we make this known to our children, students, and friends they will not feel trapped within a system they do not fit into. They need to know and trust that they can make a choice to do things a bit differently and still be accepted. In this way, they can follow their own individuality while still adhering to their Judaism and feeling themselves a part of the community.

One thing many communities can do better to this end is to embrace spirituality. All too often there is so much emphasis placed on prayer and ritual observance that the spiritual and emotional aspects are glossed over or ignored completely. For most people who frei out, emotions are a huge part of the reason they go off the derekh. So why not embrace the emotional ties to God that spirituality can help forge? Spirituality is the reason why so many great teachers, from the Ba'al Shem Tov to Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, advocate going into the fields to pray. For many people, being alone in nature confronts you emotionally with the power and majesty of God. Just going through the motions is not enough. Spirituality imbues ritual with passion. We need to make shul a place of spiritual experiences, not just somewhere to conduct rituals.

One of the most beautiful things about Judaism is that it embraces and encourages people to ask questions. Education about our faith is the main goal of the Pessah seder—and one of the vehicles used is by asking questions. (Incidentally, the Pessah ritual also incorporates storytelling, song, food, and prayer, thereby catering to many different types of learning.) People today are asking more and more questions. As Jews, we have to learn to answer the tough questions like, "How do we know God created the world?"—and not just belittle them if we feel we do not know how to respond. If people feel safe and secure in asking hard questions, and they get the answers they seek, they will feel their faith has a foundation and it will be more likely to stand rather than fall. Judaism is not a religion of blind faith.

We also need to work on our educational systems. Education on issues such as why we believe what we believe and why we do what we do (hashkafa) gives children a sturdier foundation. Education on middot teaches them how to behave and why. Yet, these topics are virtually non-existent in most yeshivas. It is all well and good for children to sit and learn Gemara, but this is worth very little if they do not know how to act or why to believe. Try adding a class on hashgaha peratit (divine providence), bitahon, or emunah to student courses and you may find yourself inspiring your students like never before.

Finally, we need to focus on ourselves. While it is important for us to concentrate on the people in our community who are freiing out, we also need strong supports in order to deal with situations as they arise. Form groups of people who are concerned, groups of “People Who Care.” (Topics like “Dealing with Children at Risk” often result in a debate about what it means to be “at risk” and whose child is more at risk than another, which is counter-productive.) Parents need to be able to lean on one another for support, and to offer ideas and suggestions. Together, we can find solutions.