



Unchosen: The Hidden Lives of Hasidic Rebels

By Hella Winston



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An exploration of Hasidic Jews struggling to live within their restrictive communities—and, in some cases, to carve out a new life beyond them

When Hella Winston began talking with Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn for her doctoral dissertation in sociology, she was surprised to be covertly introduced to Hasidim unhappy with their highly restrictive way of life and sometimes desperately struggling to escape it. *Unchosen* tells the stories of these “rebel” Hasidim, serious questioners who long for greater personal and intellectual freedom than their communities allow.

She meets Malky Schwartz, who grew up in a Lubavith sect in Brooklyn, and started Footsteps, Inc., an organization that helps ultra-Orthodox Jews who are considering or have already left their community. There is Yossi, a young man who, though deeply attached to the Hasidic culture in which he was raised, longed for a life with fewer restrictions and more tolerance. Yossi's efforts at making such a life, however, were being severely hampered by his fourth grade English and math skills, his profound ignorance of the ways of the outside world, and the looming threat that pursuing his desires would almost certainly lead to rejection by his family and friends. Then she met Dini, a young wife and mother whose decision to deviate even slightly from Hasidic standards of modesty led to threatening phone calls from anonymous men, warning her that she needed to watch the way she was dressing if she wanted to remain a part of the community. Someone else introduced Winston to Steinmetz, a closet bibliophile worked in a small Judaica store in his community and spent his days off anxiously evading discovery in the library of the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary, whose shelves contain non-Hasidic books he is forbidden to read but nonetheless devours, often several at a sitting. There were others still who had actually made the wrenching decision to leave their communities altogether.

In her new Preface, Winston discusses the passionate reactions the book has elicited among Hasidim and non-Hasidim alike.

**Named one of *Publishers Weekly's* Ten Best Religion Books of 2005.
Honorable Mention in the 2012 Casey Medals for Meritorious Journalism**

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. While other excellent studies by Sue Fishkoff, Stephanie Wellen-Levine and Lis Harris have examined the inner lives of Lubavitcher Hasidim in a mostly positive way, this account distinguishes itself by focusing on the "rebels," not just among the Lubavitch but in other Hasidic communities as well, including the insular and right-wing Satmar sect. Winston, a doctoral candidate in sociology at CUNY, unfolds a world-within-a-world, where some young Hasidim sneak televisions into their apartments in garbage bags, change clothes on the subway to frequent bars in Manhattan and blog about their double lives online. She builds fascinating case studies, inviting readers into her interviewees' conflicted, and often painful, lives. One chapter profiles a famous Hasidic teacher who in fact no longer believes; another offers a walking tour of a Hasidic 'chood (slang for neighborhood); and another chronicles the hopeful and inspiring story of Malkie, a college-age woman who is building a sort of halfway house for others, like her, who have chosen to leave Hasidism. Winston shows us a Hasidic underworld where large families and a lack of secular education have resulted in extreme poverty and some serious at-risk behavior among youth. Her story of courage and intellectual rebellion will inspire anyone who has ever felt like a religious outcast. (Nov.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

From [Booklist](#)

The Jews that are this book's subjects are members of the extremely insular Satmar in Brooklyn, one of the largest Hasidic groups in the U.S. Responsible for bearing and raising as many children as possible to husbands they have met only once or twice before marriage, the women are expected to focus on maintaining a Jewish home. The men are obligated to study, and they must pray three times daily. The author, a secular Jew whose mother is a Holocaust survivor, wanted to talk to them for her doctoral dissertation in sociology. Some of these people, Winston found, are able to cope fairly easily with the compartmentalization required of such a life. Others suffer terribly, and often alone, not wanting to live as hypocrites, but also knowing that making the decision to abandon the community's way of life would likely cause rejection by their families and community, and guilt about bringing shame on their relatives and abandoning their traditions. An important work of scholarship and an absorbing account of these Hasidic Jews. *George Cohen*
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Review

Complex and heart-wrenchingly compelling. --Caroline Leavitt, *Boston Globe*

"Winston . . . builds fascinating case studies, inviting readers into her interviewees' conflicted, and often painful, lives . . . show[ing] us a Hasidic underworld where large families and a lack of secular education have resulted in extreme poverty and some serious at-risk behavior among youth. Her story of courage and intellectual rebellion will inspire anyone who has ever felt like a religious outcast." --*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"Good for Hasidim, non-Hasidim and every reader who responds to one of the oldest plots on Earth—the need of some people to leave the community that raised them, and figure out the world for themselves." --Carlin Romano, *Philadelphia Inquirer*

"Dives fearlessly into a fascinating topic . . . Winston channels the exhilaration of her subjects' newfound freedom, without losing all compassion for the disappointed—even angry—community they are leaving behind." --Holly Lebowitz Rossi, *Dallas Morning News*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Ira Gonzalez:

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