

To our beloved family and friends:

As you have probably heard by now, we have made the shocking decision to go “off the derech” as a family. This follows many, many years of careful thinking and research, as well as countless hours of painful soul-searching, talking with others, and second guessing ourselves. You are likely full of questions about what in the world just happened. You probably have very little idea what to make of all this or how to process it.

In this letter we want to explain a little bit about what has led us to make what to you must seem like a terrible, shocking, drastic decision. We will explain a little more about what we do and do not believe, what our plans are now, and why we are leaving the community as opposed to staying “in the closet” or becoming Modern Orthodox. We will also try to address some of the concerns and questions that you understandably have.

We do not expect or ask of you that you should approve of our thought processes or decisions. We only ask that you try to understand a little, and to possibly one day come to accept us as the same wonderful people you’ve always known, just with a different belief system. We do not want to lose our connection with you, and it is for that reason that we are writing to you in the hope that you can come to accept us instead of rejecting us. The goal is acceptance and a drop of understanding, not endorsement or approval.

(Note that we are not going to go into any actual arguments against Judaism here, because we assume you probably won’t want to hear those. We have included an appendix that is very slightly more explicit about a few sort-of arguments as they pertain to some of the questions in the FAQ. Feel free to skip the appendix if you want though.)

I. The five main points we’d like to get across

1) We really do not want to lose our connection with you. We would very much like to keep as many close friends and family connections as we possibly can.

Our families and friends are extremely important to us. We love you very much. The entire point of this letter is to try to keep a relationship with family and friends to whatever extent possible, and the reason why we stayed in the closet for so long was precisely because we did not want to risk losing you. At this point we feel we need to come out of the closet (for reasons which we will discuss in a later section), but we would very, very much like to keep our connection with you.

We understand that you are probably worried about how it will be possible to keep a connection with us. Are we going to try to convince you to stop believing? (No.) Will we be respectful at family gatherings or in our families’ houses? (Yes.) Will our children be a bad influence on their relatives? (We will try hard to avoid that.) How could we possibly have a meal together? What would we even talk about? Are you even halachically allowed to *not* cut us off?

We address many of these questions in the FAQ, and we hope that our responses there will allay many of your fears and concerns. We know many other people who have left the frum community but who have

been able to maintain wonderful relationships with frum family and friends, and we would like to find ways to do the same. Let's sit down and discuss, and let's work together to see what we can do to make this work.

2) We did not want to stop believing. We did not ask for this, and if we could we'd prefer to stay in the frum community. Leaving seems like a terrible option to us – but all of our other options seem even worse, so we do not see any real alternative except to leave.

Imagine that there is a couple with young children just like us, but they grew up in a very religious Mormon household instead of in Orthodox Judaism. They were taught that all the stories in the Book of Mormon are literally true. They grew up not being allowed to drink any coffee or tea or wine, and not being allowed to go anywhere or watch TV or even play games on Sunday. (Yes, these are real things that many religious Mormons keep.) They did their two year missionary work abroad, they send to religious Mormon schools, and they donate a lot of their money to the church.

(Note that this mashal is NOT meant to compare Mormonism to Judaism. We are not saying that we feel Judaism is as plausible or implausible as Mormonism, and we are not trying to compare the religions at all. We are simply using it as a mashal for understanding our psychology, nothing else.)

Now imagine that the Mormon couple does some research and they come to the conclusion that Mormonism isn't really true. Joseph Smith did not really receive the Book of Mormon from the Angel Moroni, and there weren't really huge technologically advanced empires that fought massive wars in pre-Columbian North America. The couple is devastated by these realizations, but on the other hand they have very close beautiful relationships with their families and community, and they don't want to lose those.

What are these people to do? Should they go to therapy and maybe somehow they'll manage to brainwash themselves into belief again? Clearly they should look at the arguments that the Mormon Church uses to defend its beliefs, talk to Mormon leaders to see if they have answers, and so on. But what if after extensive research they still think it's all false?

Again, we are not trying to compare Mormonism to Judaism. But we do feel that in terms of relationships and psychology we are in a similar situation to this Mormon couple. In terms of relationships, all of the emotions and concerns that our family has expressed to us could equally well apply to that Mormon couple. In terms of psychology, we would love to be able to believe in Judaism. It would make our lives so much simpler! But we can't. From our perspective, the Torah *really isn't historically accurate*. It just isn't. We've done our research, we've talked to rabbis, but we simply don't believe it's true. And no amount of therapy is likely to be able to brainwash ourselves out of that. The only thing that would work would be seeing strong arguments or evidence that the Torah really is true, and seeing plausible answers for the various questions against the Torah. But after all of our searching we have not found arguments or answers that satisfy us, and we do not believe they exist.

So what should we do? Go to therapy? Almost certainly wouldn't work. Talk to rabbis? We've done that. Do more research? We've done that. Just try to forget about it and pretend to ourselves it's all true? We've

tried that too. But once you learn what we've learned, you can't unlearn it. Again, *this is not something we wanted*. It would make our lives so much easier if we could just believe, but after trying for years to believe despite what we had learned, in the end we just couldn't do it.

Now, that's all regarding belief. What about leaving the frum community? Well, technically we could choose to stay in the closet, or we could choose to keep all of halacha despite not believing, or we could choose to at least stay in the frum community and send to frum schools. And in fact we've been trying for about a year to find ways for those options to work out. In a different part of this letter we discuss the details of why we feel we need to leave the community. But for now we'll just say that we've given these options a *lot* of thought, but however attractive we find them to be in theory, in practice we haven't found a way to make them work. We've even discussed these options with our parents and with several rabbis. But so far nobody has found any practical alternative, and even our parents have grudgingly admitted that leaving might be our only practical option.

3) We are still the same people. We are not jumping off a cliff into a life of total moral depravity.

We were raised to think that only believers could be really good, moral people. We were also taught that the secular world is a cesspool of violence, immorality, and meaninglessness. But in the past few years we have come to know plenty of extremely moral, upstanding, wonderful nonreligious people. We have also come to know the secular world better, and we have talked to many people who we trust about the differences between the religious and the secular world, including the potential pitfalls of the secular lifestyle. They all assure us that the secular world is not nearly as depraved as many frum people make it out to be. There are some pretty bad places to live, and there are some schools that nobody wants to send their children to. But there are also plenty of nice communities where people are just ... normal. Not blindly running after their taivos. Not steeped in depraved materialistic meaninglessness. Just regular, good, ethical, normal people.

We still have many reservations about certain secular values and certain aspects of secular culture, and we are going to try hard to give over to our children many of the frum values with which we were raised. For example, we are going to try hard to instill the importance of family, good middos, chessed, and not chasing after taivos or materialism. (Although to be honest, all of those values are pretty common in many secular communities, and they are unfortunately lacking in many frum communities.) We are also planning to direct a significant part of our time and income towards altruistic causes. We are not suddenly losing our values, and we are not about to suddenly go chasing after our hedonistic taivos.

We have also studied secular approaches to morality and meaning. In fact, philosophers have been discussing these subjects for thousands of years, and the study of ethics and morality took up a large part of Philo's philosophy classes. It is difficult to explain this to believers, and it took us a long while to understand it ourselves, but for now you will have to trust us that there *are* completely secular approaches to both morality and meaning. (We discuss this in slightly more detail in the FAQ, questions #20 and #21.)

4) We are not crazy, we have not been physically or emotionally abused, and we are not just running after our taivos. We have thought about this long and hard, and our careful research has led us to the conclusion that many of the beliefs we grew up with are false. Maybe we're wrong about our conclusions, but we aren't crazy.

We realize that this can be a very hard point for many people to accept, perhaps too hard. We were brought up to believe that every normal, rational person, if they could only recognize and experience the beauty and depth of the Torah and Yiddishkeit, would embrace Judaism. And certainly if somebody learns about the various arguments that demonstrate the truth of Judaism, then such a person could not fail to believe. We were taught that it is only those who nebech have emotional or mental issues who leave, or who are rebelling against abusive parents, or who are seduced by the allure of the secular world, or who have never truly experienced the beauty of Yiddishkeit to begin with. If an apparently normal, intelligent, well-adjusted person abandons Judaism, then there *must* be something else going on under the surface that we don't know about. Anybody who claims to have stopped believing for intellectual reasons is just making excuses, and in reality there is some other more significant reason that they are hiding.

But the fact of the matter is that the arguments and evidence are not as straightforwardly obvious as many kiruv rabbis make them out to be. Perhaps ultimately we really are mistaken about our conclusions, and Judaism really is the one true religion. But it is still the case that smart, rational, intellectually honest people can come to different conclusions about this given the available evidence and arguments.

And in fact, this should not be too surprising. After all, isn't there a concept that we need to use our bechira to believe? If belief was something that every rational person would necessarily and easily come to, then where would that leave much room for bechira? There is also a concept according to many rishonim and acharonim that emunah peshuta is a good thing, and that looking into the basis for our beliefs can be a very dangerous thing to do even for otherwise normal people. Clearly, these sources think that it is possible for well-meaning people to look into the basis of the religion and come to the conclusion that it's not true – which means it can't be quite so obvious that the religion is true.

Similarly, there are a great many Orthodox (and especially Modern Orthodox) intellectuals who will tell you that the evidence or arguments are not enough, and you ultimately need to just believe on faith. For example, R' Aharon Lichtenstein (one of the gedolim in the Modern Orthodox world) once wrote an article titled, "The Source of Faith is Faith Itself," in which he writes that ultimately his faith is mostly based on emunah peshuta rather than on evidence or arguments.

These intellectuals are saying that you ultimately need to believe on faith. So then why should it be so surprising if someone does not have the personality type to make a "leap of faith" of this type? On a personal level, we have both in fact tried in the past to make this kind of "leap of faith" and to believe without regard to the evidence. But ultimately we found that we could not maintain it. "Belief on faith alone" just feels like wishful thinking to us, and our personalities are such that we cannot get ourselves to maintain a leap of faith given what we know. We wanted to believe, but we just couldn't find a way to do so.

We are actually very confident that if you would know the same things that we know, then you would agree with us that the matter is far from obvious. Not that you would agree with us that the Torah is manmade, etc., and not that you would necessarily change any of your current beliefs at all. But we are at least convinced that you would come to agree with us that we are not totally crazy for not believing, and that smart rational people can agree to disagree on this topic. And in fact, among those frum people who *do* seem to know the same things that we know, the vast majority seem to agree that smart, knowledgeable, well-meaning, intellectually honest people can easily come to not believe in the Torah.

5) We do not think that you are irrational or foolish for believing, and we do not look down on frum people at all. We think that smart rational people can agree to disagree about this.

We think that religious faith can be a very good thing, and it is the right thing for a lot of people to believe. Religion connects people to others, and it provides meaning, structure, purpose, comfort, spiritual fulfillment, and moral direction. It just happens to be that the way our minds work, we both don't seem to have the capacity for just believing on faith. But that doesn't mean we think it's wrong – it's just a different way of approaching life. Furthermore, we think it's the right thing for many people to not look into the arguments and evidence that we looked into. Halacha says it's probably assur to do so, and why cause yourself problems if you don't have to?

(Philo has actually written an entire essay defending emunah peshuta from a philosophical point of view. Philo would be delighted to share the essay with you if you are interested. It does not contain any apikorsus.)

We also very much respect the intelligence and rationality of people who believe that the evidence really does support Judaism, just as the kiruv rabbis say it does. For example, Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb (one of the foremost kiruv experts in the world) is a brilliant man and has a PhD in philosophy. R' Noach Weinberg and his brother R' Yaakov Weinberg were both absolutely brilliant men who sincerely believed that the evidence strongly supports Judaism. We think they were ultimately mistaken, but that doesn't detract from their brilliance or rationality. (In the Appendix we address the question of why we think we can nonetheless argue with these great people, despite recognizing their greatness. We do not think it is at all arrogant to do so, for reasons we explain there. We understand if you choose not to read the Appendix, but please do not judge us as arrogant without even reading what we have to say about that.)

Is it possible that we are wrong, and the kiruv rabbis are right? Of course! But in the end, we did our research and we tried our best to conduct an honest search for the truth. Maybe it's just that Hashem put some sort of mental block in our brains that prevents us from finding the right evidence or arguments. (We don't think so, obviously, but it's possible.) But in that case, presumably Hashem won't hold us accountable if it was He who prevented us from finding the truth.

A lot of people seem to have a hard time understanding how it is that we can respect other people's rationality and intelligence while still thinking that they are wrong in their conclusions. Perhaps this is something that Philo picked up in his philosophy studies. The norm in philosophy departments is that you are *supposed* to argue with your professors, and they encourage you to think differently than they do. It is

extremely common for philosophy students to think that their professors or fellow students are seriously mistaken about something, but nonetheless look up to and greatly respect the other person's intelligence, rationality, and expertise. To us it does not seem at all strange to say that we very much respect the intelligence of people who disagree with us, even if we think they're ultimately mistaken.

II. Our Story

Philo's story

I've always been the questioning type, but I've also always been the good little boy who sincerely wanted to do whatever Hashem wanted me to do. I wanted to be a big talmid chacham and learn gemara all day. But I also loved science and hashkafa and wouldn't settle for pat answers.

By 11th grade I was skeptical enough that when Rabbi Daniel Mechanic came to my yeshiva to give us his kiruv speech, he asked for a volunteer apikores and I volunteered. It had to do with what's sometimes called the "Kuzari Argument" – how could someone convince a whole nation that millions of their ancestors witnessed the events at Har Sinai? I presented one of the standard responses, which ironically I had found out about because an article in the Jewish Observer was making fun of it. Rabbi Mechanic picked on a few of my words, took them out of context, and then responded to the out of context version. Needless to say I was not happy about that.

By first year beis medrash I was having very serious questions in emunah, and by second year beis medrash I had poked enough holes in the kiruv arguments that I felt I had no good reason to believe.

At that point one of my rebbeim introduced me to the argument known as Pascal's Wager: essentially, believe just in case there is a God and you'll burn in hell for not believing. That argument impressed me. Of course there's the problem that every religion says you'll burn in hell for believing in the other religions, but I reasoned that the kiruv arguments seemed good enough to say that at least Judaism is less unlikely than the other religions.

Pascal's Wager kept me in line for the next ten years. But I kept questioning, and my doubts kept resurfacing. Every year especially around Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur the doubts would come back to haunt me, and I'd do more research and think about it a lot. But I'd always eventually convince myself that Pascal's Wager was good enough so I should still believe.

And then about five years ago, shortly before our youngest son was born, I finally realized something. I had been relying on Pascal's Wager all this time, but that was the one subject I had avoided researching. I realized that I had been avoiding it because I was terrified that if I would look into it then it would fall apart. But I also realized that that was circular logic.

So I worked up the courage and researched Pascal's Wager in depth – and it did indeed fall apart.

But now I was stuck. I felt I had zero reason to believe, but I was afraid that if I stopped believing then my whole life would fall apart. I was still part-time in kollel at the time, and my wife and kids and family and friends were all extremely religious.

I actually spoke to a rav I was friendly with about my quandary immediately before taking my wife to the hospital to have our child, but the rav wasn't very helpful.

For the next few months I tried to force myself to believe through brute force. I tried to bisect my mind – in one corner of my mind I believed that the evidence was against Judaism and God, while in my day-to-day life I tried to act and think as if the God of the Torah really did exist. But it was mental hell, and it started really wearing me down. And then there was Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur again and the hell became unbearable.

Finally, on Hoshana Rabba morning about five years ago, I found myself sitting upstairs in the ezras nashim of shul. I think it was during krias haTorah. I thought to myself, "What if I just experimented in giving up? I could stop trying to brute force believe for a little and see how that works, and if it doesn't work I can always go back to brute forcing it." So I experimented, and the mental relief was immediate and powerful.

But then I had the problem of my wife and family. I hated keeping the secret from my wife, but I felt I had to. But after a few more months of keeping it secret I felt I could no longer keep it to myself.

So I told my wife a little white lie. I said that to the best of my ability and after lots of research and talking to rabbis, I could not find any reason to believe. But, I said, I was still brute forcing my belief. I said it was really hard and mentally torturous but I was doing it for her and the kids, and that was the best I could do. I said maybe it's some mental block of mine, but if that's the case then there's nothing I can do about it and Hashem can't hold me accountable for it.

In other words, I described to her exactly the way I had been doing it a few months earlier.

She took it pretty hard, as I expected, but it wasn't like she had a good reason for divorcing me – after all, I still said I "believed", just I thought the evidence was against. And I was clearly trying hard and I still kept all of halacha.

So that's how it stayed for the next few months. Occasionally my wife would ask me questions like "but what about this proof," and I'd say, "do you really want me to answer that?" Sometimes she said no not really, and I left it at that, but occasionally she did want to know so I told her.

Around this time I also started going to university. Officially I was there to study math and computer science, but I also used it as an excuse to get a minor in philosophy (which eventually turned into a second degree). This helped somewhat as an outlet, because I could be open about my beliefs with my philosophy professors and some of the students whom I trusted, and they were all very friendly and supportive.

At some point I asked my wife if it was ok if I stopped forcing myself so hard to believe. At first she said no, and I let the matter drop. But I asked again a few weeks later and she said ok.

And then one Friday night my wife surprised me by announcing that she'd been thinking about it a lot on her own and doing her own research, and she'd decided that she didn't really believe that the Torah was completely historically true, and that it was probably manmade. But she still wanted us to keep halacha,

mostly for emotional reasons but also because she still believed in some sort of generic God and she thought keeping halacha was one way out of many to connect to the Divine.

After that things remained relatively stable for the next two years or so, until about a year and a half ago, except that my wife eased up a bit on certain aspects of my observance (but not hers). For example, she didn't require that I learn or go to davening during the week. She also eventually started allowing me to use electronics on Shabbos, as long as she didn't see me doing it, since I described to her how electricity shouldn't technically be assur on Shabbos anyway (see R' Shlomo Zalman Aurbach's teshuvos on this subject).

I also joined several of the off the derech (OTD) Facebook groups under the pseudonym Philo Judeaus. This helped as an additional outlet and for support. Eventually I even got asked to moderate a few of these groups.

Then, about a year and a half ago, an OTD friend and his frum wife came by our house on Pesach to say hi and introduce themselves. This was the first time my wife had actually met someone from that part of my life, and somehow the meeting destabilized the carefully constructed viewpoint she had built for herself. My wife thinks it was because she had been functioning partly by living in denial about the implications of her own beliefs, and meeting a real normal OTD person other than her husband somehow made it all seem more real to her. It forced her to really think about what she held and what the implications might be. She started having a very hard time sleeping, and she was in a constant state of stress and confusion. She started seeing a therapist.

The rest of the story is mostly my wife's to tell, so I'll let her do the telling. But basically, it's become increasingly difficult for her to live a "double life" like we've been doing until now. She feels extremely trapped in the Orthodox world, and she's actually been getting physically sick almost every Shabbos. We also talked with my wife's therapist, who actually works a lot with children, about the risks of staying in the frum community vs. leaving in terms of how that might affect the kids. Based on that conversation and several follow-up conversations with other people, we have decided that we do in fact need to come out of the closet. (We will discuss the reasons for this decision in more detail in a later part of this letter.)

Judy's story

Up until our youngest child was born, we were pretty much living the life that I always expected, and that everybody expected from us. I was a part of a wonderful frum community, loved what I did, and always put my husband's avodas Hashem first. Religion was everything to me – it gave us purpose, directed our lives, and provided a way for our souls to achieve perfection. I had a strong connection to Hashem, and I believed it was important to take every aspect of religion seriously (but in a thought-out way, not blindly). I wanted to follow the path of chumra so that we could be as spiritual and Godly as we could. I believed that everything that happened to me was directly ordained by Hashem, and I was reassured knowing that He knew what was best for me. I felt badly for those that couldn't have that connection, security, and guidance, and whose lives were, in my opinion, meaningless and wrong.

I felt a deep sense of shame and failure and confusion when Philo decided to no longer learn in kollel full time – which meant I was no longer a real kollel wife. Looking back, I laugh at my innocence. If only that

was where it had ended, none of the ensuing years of painful drama would have happened. I'm not unhappy that it did – but it was a painful experience.

My real journey began shortly after our youngest child was born. I remember going out to dinner (our baby was a few months old by then), and I was traumatized enough by that dinner that I disliked going out to eat for many years after. Philo told me that, as I knew, he had been researching certain hashkafa questions, and consulting with many colleagues and rabbonim. What I didn't know was that as a result of all his research, he really couldn't find any intellectual proof of God or Judaism, and that he had spent the past number of months trying to find some support for it. He was doing all that he could and forcing himself to believe anyway, and to daven and learn and do everything right – but he just couldn't find a good reason to do it. He pointed out that he felt that if Hashem gave him the kind of brain that was highly logical, but then didn't give him enough evidence to support a particular belief, then He couldn't hold Philo at fault for not being able to really believe. I couldn't disagree with that – but I didn't know what to do with that information. I do remember saying (famous last lines) that my emunah was strong – I did not expect that anything would cause me to lose my faith.

So then I had to figure out what to do with that information. Talking to a rav wasn't really an option, because, after all, Philo was practicing everything, and he had already spoken to a lot of rabbonim. We also knew there was a high chance they'd push us to divorce, and we didn't want that. It meant that my relationship with my husband had to shift to being more of a personal relationship, and less of a religious relationship. As I mentioned before, every single thing I did in my life was calculated with the goal of "how does this fit into my avodas Hashem," and now I had to figure out how to do that with my marriage. But my line of reasoning was that if this was happening to me, then it was because Hashem wanted it to happen. And we had children – it would definitely be much healthier for them to grow up in a strong, loving family unit than if they had to grow up with divorced parents. And since Philo wasn't doing anything different practically, and wasn't giving me heretical information, why should there even be any reason to divorce? I had conversations with myself in my mind as if I were speaking to a therapist, and that helped me make peace with the situation.

As time progressed, I became more comfortable with him doing whatever he wanted (not forcing himself to believe, just pretending to go daven and learn so the kids would get the right chinuch, etc.). Why should I be imposing my views on him?

Now, another part of my personality is that I like to understand how things come to be, what makes things work, and how things develop. I used to teach history, and I found it fascinating to follow the patterns of how societies evolved. When I bake or cook, I love experimenting and figuring out how to get the end product I want. In my work, I like to understand the patterns of how things evolve, the roots of any problems, and the remedies needed to solve them. I have always loved learning halacha and understanding its nuances and basic background, and I was the go-to resource for many people with halacha questions, since I understood it all in depth. I never learned gemara, so there was a gap on the origin side – but that I could trust the rabbonim on.

So as a natural consequence, my brain started doing its own thinking. I won't go into detail here about the thoughts or questions I had, or what resources I used to answer those questions and discover what I now

believe to be the real story about the evolution of the Jewish nation. Suffice it to say that I surprised Philo a number of times with the conclusions I slowly drew, step by step, until I reached the point where I no longer believed in a literal Torah MiSinai. Instead I believed in one central Divine Being / Spirit / God – whatever you want to call it – that all the different religions were tapping into in different ways. I still considered myself frum, since that was the way I tapped into spirituality and service of that God, and that was how I practiced. But had anyone questioned me deeply about it, they may have drawn different conclusions.

In practice, the only things I did differently were to drop the chumros that in my opinion seemed to have more of a social origination than Godly origination, such as chalav yisrael, yoshon, etc. And, in keeping with my world view, I allowed Philo to use electricity on Shabbos as long as I didn't see it.

I was really content with the way that worked, although it was hard at times to remember that I wasn't supposed to say something or answer a question in a way that I believed to be true, since other people would think that heretical. I certainly didn't want to jeopardize any relationships with my wonderful family, or to cause any pain to anyone. And I could live with our life the way it was, although with a few changes from the normal yeshivish way of life. For example, I definitely intended my children to have a financial plan and education before they got married, and to be respectful to other religions. And if they happened to stop believing later on – well, I wouldn't be unhappy about that.

I was always the good girl, the one who was responsible and made the right choices, who took care of everyone, the rebbeztin, the one people looked to, the healer, the adviser, the role model, the leader. Never in my life – even after it happened, and to an extent, even now – did I believe that I could possibly become the person I am today.

It all crashed about a year and a half ago on Pesach. On the first day of Pesach, Philo (on my encouragement) invited one of his OTD friends and his wife (who had recently found out about the shifts in her husband's beliefs) over to visit. I don't know what it was exactly about that visit – we just played with the kids in our backyard – but it shattered me. It's likely because I'm a very experiential person by nature (don't ask me to read directions and follow them – but if I do it with you once, I'll remember how to do it in the future without directions). Plus Pesach has a lot of late nights, and I don't do well with little sleep, and there was a lot of table talk about the truth and origin of our religion, plus all the crazy chumras people put themselves through around Pesach. Whatever the reason, I started having trouble sleeping, and I turned into a mess. I think that Pesach made everything real to me – that in our community, belief wasn't optional. My thoughts, regardless of my actions, would create judgement against me, and definitely with a husband that didn't believe, didn't go to shul, didn't learn etc. we'd experience judgement. I didn't know how I wanted my kids to grow up. I didn't know what we were going to do once our sons were old enough to be learning a lot or going to shul. I didn't know how I felt about going along with all society's demands without really believing in it, and I didn't know what I really did believe. But I did know that I agreed more with Philo than I did with the society we're a part of, and that I could never regain the beliefs I used to have.

Maybe it would have been easier to process and work through this if we hadn't just bought a house and if I didn't have to work so much and if I had managed to make more friends in our new neighborhood. I'm

a social person – maybe the move out of apartment living was really too much, especially since I mostly work from home and community is so important to me. I do know that I was depressed and really burnt out of my work throughout the winter preceding that Pesach. I was hoping that it would pick up once the spring came, and I used a lot of self-help books (which really did help) to take me out of that depression. But that Pesach experience coming after a long, hard, lonely, depressed winter was like the nail in the coffin – it sent me on a downward spiral.

My parents could see I was struggling. I blamed it on burnout, which was true, just not the whole truth. I sought medical attention, found the right anti-anxiety medications to help me sleep, and found a therapist that I was comfortable talking to about my life and my struggles. She helped me isolate the real sources of stress and address them properly. In no way did she shape my beliefs – but she was (and is) a great source of support to me, and in helping me sort my emotions and thoughts. I read a lot, researched a lot, thought a lot – anything to help me figure out my thoughts.

Around Shavuos of last year, my research and thoughts finally totally destroyed my belief system. I won't go into what it was, but it left me very skeptical of any Divine influences in our lives. Well, at least I finally knew what I believed and didn't believe. But then I had to struggle to find meaning in a non-Divine life. So I read, and thought, and spoke to people, and researched. After a couple of months I managed to find sources of meaning that are much less cosmic than worship of a Divine being, but which are (to me) more purposeful and rich for our limited existence on Earth. All the good that we can contribute to the world, the help we provide others, our efforts to do good and be good, and live for more than ourselves – that's what gives meaning to waking up every morning. That's what helps us get through hard times. We can be conduits of happiness and joy and the betterment of our fellow humans.

Still, I was comfortable socially practicing Orthodoxy, though I let some things slip (my hairline was a bit further back, I wore short skirts with no stockings). I was slightly more modern, but certainly quite Orthodox.

The summer was wonderful. Philo had a relaxed schedule, the kids had great camps. Work was pretty well balanced. I was doing things I enjoyed. I spent time outdoors. Who cares what I believed? Life was great!

But we did often talk about what we would do long-term. I didn't want my kids growing up with the pressure of utilizing every second properly, or to feel "lesser" because we kept less. As it was, neighborhood kids had to ask to find out if they could eat certain OU-D items in our house, which led to our youngest asking me things like, "Mommy, is this kosher?" I didn't want to brainwash them or teach them to believe something that I believed to be untrue. I didn't want my sons out of the house all day, early in the morning to late in the evening. I didn't want them to end up with no means to support their family. I didn't want my daughters to suffer emotionally and psychologically as an over-burdened, pressured, and over-achieving kollel wife (as I've seen with way too many friends). And most of all, I didn't want to risk them finding out in unhealthy ways that we don't actually believe in Orthodoxy, which could possibly destroy our relationship or inhibit their growth as emotionally stable individuals. And that's just about them and nothing to do with me ...

At that point there was no decision to leave, because we were ok where we were and we thought it was sustainable. We just thought we'd have to be careful. I do think the plan was good at the time. But just in case, Philo started dropping hints in conversation about his different beliefs, so that if and when the time came, the blow would not come as quite so much of a shock.

All that crashed by the end of the summer. The last few weeks before school were a blur of family trip, one child being sick and breaking out in bad hives, kids starting school, yom tov every other day (it was a Monday/Tuesday schedule, which meant that at least 5 out of 7 days were focused on yom tov, Shabbos, or preparing for it), and work needing to be fit in there somewhere. I started feeling really frustrated and restricted and caged in, especially on Shabbos. And I started getting sick.

For a while I had noticed that whenever we ate at a parent's house, I'd be sick the next day. I blamed it on my sensitive stomach. Now I blame it on the cognitive dissonance I experienced every time we went and the ever-present thought of "what would they do if they knew" and hiding my true beliefs. If you know me at all, you know I'm pretty transparent. It's hard for me to hide anything. I suppose it's a good thing to be so honest, but that honesty has caused me a lot of trouble!

When Yom Kippur came around, I was prepared to eat shiurim – I'm a horrible faster, so I often end up doing that anyway. This time around, I was legitimately sick, so I ate shiurim as planned. Sukkos I got sick. Shabbos I got sick. Lots and lots of thought and discussions about things I totally didn't believe in, couldn't say anything about, and had to pretend to agree with. And the restrictions that just really didn't make sense to me (again, I won't go into detail here)! It was just too much. I knew I couldn't keep up the façade much longer.

I thought I would have relief once yom tov season ended. I was so happy to have that behind me. But every week, Shabbos would come, the feelings of being caged and the stress of the duplicity I was carrying was just too much. Sometimes I'd just be sick that day and it would lift afterwards (those were probably situation-induced depression). More often I'd really get sick with something (probably a weakened immune system due to stress), and it would take me a few days to recover. Then I'd have a few days "off" before the next round of Shabbos came – but with my work so busy, that was pretty stressful as it was! I felt I really couldn't carry the duplicity any longer. Something had to go. Either my sanity or our religious practices. So we chose the latter. We figured the kids needed a functional mother more than a religious mother, and I kind of wanted to stay sane as an added benefit – I hated feeling miserable always.

And that's aside from the risk of our kids finding out that we didn't believe what we told them. To make sure our kids grew up stable, we have to be honest with them. We didn't want to risk our kids' mental stability just because it went against social norms and what was expected of us.

But then the question was what to do next. What would give us the ability and structure to raise the children in the way we felt best, while minimizing any potential trauma? We tossed ideas around for a while. We brainstormed all sorts of paths we could follow, making sure to leave no option out. And every time we did it, whichever way we did it, we always came to the same conclusion: we would have to leave the community we loved. There was simply no scenario we could conceive of that would have the community accept us while still maintaining our (or at least my) personal integrity.

It was the hardest decision of my life.

The hardest day of my life was breaking it to my parents. I, the good, reliable daughter, destroying their world. No parent or child should have to be forced to go through that.

I knew most of my friends and neighbors won't accept me with my beliefs. I did think I'd retain a few, and in fact I do have several friends who have told me they'll still accept me. I am so thankful for their ability to see me for more than my beliefs.

I've been developing my social circle in the greater world, establishing good relationships with good people, and I'm looking forward to living a full life without judgement. I've been in touch with and met many people who have gone through similar transitions, and can appreciate the extent of the experience and depth of transition. It's really nice having that support group.

So I'm biding my time, enduring the remainder of my time in hiding, knowing that, at the moment of this writing, there are only 4 months and 1 week left to freedom, and 18 shabbosos left to go. (Edit: This was obviously written several months ago.) Yes, it's hard being a disappointment to others – but I've finally gained my own self and family in return.

[Update: Since this letter was written, we have moved to a wonderful neighborhood in a wonderful community. The children have transitioned easily and well, and they have lots of friends living close by to play with. Their school is top-notch and very supportive, with a strong emphasis on developing good moral, social, and personal traits. Judy has lots of good friends and is well-integrated in the community. She says she has had more positive social interactions in the past few months than she has had in the past few years. Philo is close to his work and has made several friends as well. We have completely lost track of the number of times people have invited us over for get-togethers, dinner nights, movie nights, game nights, birthday parties, pool parties, or just to hang out and schmooze. Our families are still slowly adjusting to the new reality, but they still talk to us pleasantly and we visit them on a regular basis.]

III. What we actually believe

Short version:

Both of us are very confident in our belief that the Torah is a completely manmade document and that it is not historically accurate. We are also confident in our belief that *if* there is a God, then that God almost certainly does not care if we keep kashrus or drive on Shabbos. Judy thinks that there probably is some sort of subtle supernatural force out there in the world, and some people might call this force "God". Philo doubts that anything supernatural exists, although he's not confident either way. Both of us are unsure about the existence of a God in anything remotely like the traditional religious sense, so we are what's normally called "agnostics" (people who are unsure whether God exists or not). Philo leans a little more

to the atheistic side than Judy does. Philo would probably be labelled “agnostic leaning atheist”, meaning that he thinks God *probably* doesn’t exist, but he’s not really so sure about it.

Slightly longer version:

This is going to need just a few quick introductory bits.

First, it’s important to distinguish between (a) belief in an Intelligent Creator, (b) belief in the interventionist type of God described by Judaism and other religions, (c) belief in the historical accuracy and Divine nature of the Torah, and (d) belief in the particular beliefs associated with Orthodox Judaism. It is perfectly possible for someone to believe in a Creator but to not believe that the Creator answers prayers or interferes regularly in human affairs. It is also perfectly possible to believe that there is a religious type of God but that the Torah is a manmade document that is not historically accurate. And it is possible to believe that the Torah is more or less historically accurate, but to reject some of the beliefs that typically come along with Orthodox Judaism.

Second, we prefer not to think of beliefs as all-or-nothing, yes-or-no affairs. Some things we believe stronger than other things – in other words, beliefs come in degrees. You believe that the sun will rise tomorrow, and you believe that it will rain tomorrow. But you’d be willing to bet a lot more on the sun rising than you’d bet on it raining, because you have a higher “degree of belief” in the sun rising than you do in it raining tomorrow. In philosophy these degrees of belief are often referred to as “credences.” So you might say that your credence that the sun will rise tomorrow is higher than your credence that it will rain tomorrow.

It’s often useful to think about degrees of belief or credences as probabilities. So for example, you might assign a 70% chance to the possibility that it will rain tomorrow, but you’d say there’s a near-100% chance that the sun will rise tomorrow. There is an entire subfield of philosophy which is devoted to working out the details of how to think rationally in terms of credences. If you let him, Philo will be delighted to talk to you for hours about the intricacies of this field. But for our purposes here it should be enough just to have a very basic idea of what we’re referring to when we mention credences.

Now with that little introduction out of the way, here’s a slightly more thorough summary of our current beliefs, and the credences we would assign to each belief:

Belief	Philo	Judy
Supernaturalism: Something or other outside physics, though probably not anything like a super-intelligent creator God	About 50%	90%
Deity: Intelligent being who created and/or controls the world, though probably very different than a traditional religious God	About 15% (not so sure)	25%
Religious conception of God: Most or all of the following: outside of space and time; created and/or sustains the world; super-intelligent; all good (“omnibenevolent”); rewards / punishes people for belief / good deeds / prayer / etc.; some form of soul that survives death; true (“libertarian”) free will	Less than 1%	Basically 0%

Divine inspiration: The Torah was at very least Divinely inspired (this is what Conservative Jews believe)	< 0.01%	Basically 0%
Orthodox Judaism: The Torah was dictated word-for-word by Hashem to Moshe. Hashem wants us to keep halacha as we have it nowadays (more or less). Does not necessarily include trust in or belief in all רמב"ם עיקרים as per the מסורה. (This is the position of many if not most Modern Orthodox intellectuals.)	< 0.001%, probably less than 1 in a million chance	Basically 0%
Ultra-Orthodoxy: Belief in all רמב"ם עיקרים as per the מסורה, belief in the authority of אגדות הדורות, Kabbalah, etc. usually literal until proven otherwise, literal מבול etc.)	A lot less than 1 in a million chance	Basically 0%

Much, much longer version:

This is not the correct place to discuss this, because that would get into a lot of philosophy and apikorsus. Suffice it to say that there is a *lot* to talk about here, and we have thought about this in great detail and for a very long time. For example, the numbers in the above chart were not pulled out of thin air, but were rather the result of a lot of careful thought (especially the figures listed for Philo's credences). Philo in particular would be delighted to talk to you about all this for many hours if you are interested, but this is not the place.

IV. Why we feel we need to leave

There are two primary concerns that are driving our conclusion that we need to leave our community, however much we might hate having to do so.

First, we think you will agree that it is absolutely critical for children to be able to trust their parents, to feel that they have open lines of communication with their parents, and to feel that their parents are being honest with them. Now suppose we decided to keep all of halacha and stay in the closet, and just keep our beliefs to ourselves. What might happen if our kids found out that we've been hiding such an enormous secret from them? (And remember that children manage to find out lots of things that their parents thought were well-kept secrets.) We discussed this issue with Judy's therapist, who also happens to work extensively with children, and her response was that in that scenario the results could be pretty awful. The children would likely lose trust in their parents, and it could destroy the lines of communication between children and parents. For a child this can be absolutely devastating.

And what if the child finds out in a way that they know it's supposed to be a deep dark secret and they weren't supposed to find out about it? In that case they might not tell their parents at all, and the terrible secret might eat them up from the inside psychologically. Then not only would they lose trust in their parents, but they'd also likely suffer from lifelong trauma on top of that.

Think of all those self-destructive behaviors that we were always told are huge problems in secular public schools. (We'll discuss public schools later.) We were told that public schools are full of drugs, addictions, teenage pregnancies, and other risky behaviors. These kinds of behaviors should rightly concern you, and they concern us as well. But children who lose all trust in their parents are probably even more at risk of those behaviors than kids in public schools. Think of all the frum teenagers who are "at risk" or who go off the derech because they are rebelling against their parents. They don't know anything else besides the frum world, and the frum world no longer accepts them, so they often fall in with the wrong crowd and get involved in drugs or other self-destructive behaviors. We don't have exact statistics, but we are pretty certain that the rate of drug abuse, teenage pregnancies, and even suicide is much higher among at-risk frum teens than it is among public school students who attend good schools.

So just for the sake of our children, we feel there is no other choice but to be open with them about our beliefs. Yes, that itself might be traumatic in its own right, but the therapist we talked to said that children are resilient and will almost certainly be fine, and the risks of keeping it hidden far outstrip the risks involved in being open. We are also in contact with several other families who have successfully made the same transition, and who say that their children handled it just fine. We are getting lots of guidance and tips from them and that will hopefully help.

Unfortunately, if we are open with our children about our nonbelief, then that all by itself would have huge consequences. Our neighbors would certainly find out, as would schoolmates and teachers. Neighbors would stop letting their kids play with our kids. People would shun us in the street. It would almost certainly create huge tensions between us and the school, and probably between our children and their teachers. That is a terrible environment to be in.

So just by being open with our children, we would almost certainly need to move out of the community, and we would almost certainly need to switch the kids out of regular frum schools.

Again, moving out is not something we want! We like our community, we like our neighbors, we like the schools (for the most part), and we like the lifestyle. We don't want to move, and there are a lot worse things than sending to a frum school. *But we don't see any other practical choice.*

There is also a second equally critical concern, and that is Judy's psychology and sanity. Judy is a very straightforward, honest person for whom personal integrity is extremely important and for whom duplicity and double standards wreak a terrible psychological toll. For the past year she has been suffering increasingly intense psychological stress from keeping this all secret and from living what she feels is a double life. She has had to take anti-anxiety pills almost every night just to be able to fall asleep. For months she has been getting physically sick every Shabbos, because she felt trapped. (This has let up a little bit as we have started being a bit more open with certain family members, and as we have started setting our transition in motion.) She has found it hard to keep calm with the kids or to handle the other stresses of life or work, because there is always this huge issue bubbling just beneath the surface. She is going to therapy, which has helped, but there is a limit to what therapy can reasonably do.

In psychology there is a term for the stress that Judy is experiencing. It's called cognitive dissonance, and it's known to be very powerful. Cognitive dissonance arises when a person's internal beliefs do not match

their external actions. Some people (such as Philo, in fact) don't seem to suffer so much from cognitive dissonance. Other people, such as Judy, suffer from it intensely. It's very hard for people who have not experienced powerful cognitive dissonance to understand just how traumatic it can be. Psychologists usually recommend that the only real way to resolve cognitive dissonance is to bring your actions more in line with your beliefs.

Shabbos has been especially hard for her, to the point where Shabbos often causes her to get physically sick. Many weeks have been so bad that she's been confined to bed for a large part of Shabbos. A lot of people like the idea of Shabbos, but for someone who doesn't believe, and especially for someone with Judy's straightforward, open personality, Shabbos can feel extremely restrictive. Think again of that Mormon family. We think you can understand how they might feel very restricted if they force themselves to just stay home and read every Sunday, solely for the sake of a religion that they no longer believe in.

So what are our options?

Could we just be open with our children about our beliefs, but still keep most or all halacha? Perhaps. We keep a kosher kitchen as it is, so maintaining that won't be particularly difficult. One local rabbi (who knows our situation) has told Judy's parents that they can eat at our house if they trust us when we say that our kitchen is kosher. He based this psak on a teshuva from R' Moshe Feinstein, and we know of other people who have gotten a similar heter. Because of this, as of this writing we are indeed planning to maintain a kosher kitchen, or at least to maintain our kitchen in such a way that family and friends can eat there if they wish. *[Update: A different rabbi they consulted said that they cannot eat anything made in our house, so they don't. Since none of our family members will eat in our house anyway, we have gradually dropped most kashrus in the kitchen. We still do not eat pork or shellfish though, because we like keeping some traditions for reasons of maintaining a strong connection to our heritage.]*

But in the end, keeping all of halacha despite not believing is a very large part of what causes Judy so much stress and cognitive dissonance. And again, Shabbos is particularly difficult, and has been a huge source of cognitive dissonance for Judy.

Could we be open with our kids but at least send to Modern Orthodox schools? As we said earlier, sending to frum schools is almost certainly not going to work. But maybe a left-wing Modern Orthodox school might work. Many left-wing Modern Orthodox schools have plenty of parents who don't keep Shabbos but still send to the school.

We actually strongly considered this option, again assuming that it would significantly help us in terms of family relationships. But we couldn't find a way to make it work out practically. Here are the conditions we felt we needed in order to seriously consider this option:

- We need to be able to afford it. Housing prices in many Modern Orthodox communities are astronomical, and Modern Orthodox tuition is much higher than in more frum schools. This is especially true given Philo's new job, which will probably mean that we will not get many tuition discounts.
- It can't be more than an hour from Philo's work.

- It needs to be a community that won't judge us or resent us for who we are.
- It also needs to be a community that isn't overly focused on materialism. This is unfortunately very common in many Modern Orthodox communities.
- For that matter, it would probably be too risky to move to a frum neighborhood at all. There is a high probability that Judy would feel way too trapped in a frum neighborhood, which would mean that we'd need to move *again*, this time to a secular neighborhood. That would mean we would need to move and transition twice, one after the other. However difficult one move might be for our children, two moves would be much more difficult. Plus, it would be more confusing for the kids – why are we staying around frum people if that's not our way of life? It's certainly not an easy way to transition them, and it would be more confusing than otherwise. At their age, kids listen to what their parents tell them. They're not old enough to make their own decisions, and staying in a frum neighborhood would just be confusing and subject them to rejection by their peers. Kids can be mean and we don't want our kids to be constantly facing judgement for their parents' decision to live life differently.
- We do not want to live near our current community – there are way too many people who know us and who would see us on a regular basis. It would be too painful to have to constantly see old friends deliberately avoid us, and it's painful for us to constantly have to deal with judgement.
- We cannot afford to drive half an hour or more twice a day in order to drop the children off at a Jewish school. We'd either need to live very close to the school (where the housing prices are likely even higher, and where we'd almost certainly feel very uncomfortable because of all the frum neighbors), or else we need to have some other way of getting the children to school.
- If we move too far away, then we are going to weaken family relationships just because we are far. That would defeat the entire purpose (for us) of trying to send to a Jewish school.

We looked into several communities that we thought might work. But we have not been able to find a community that satisfies all of these requirements.

We spent many months looking at all the different options, and in fact we discussed all of the above options with both sets of our parents. They have told us that their best guess is that sending to a left-wing Modern Orthodox school would actually *not* help significantly in terms of maintaining family relationships. They have grudgingly agreed with us that, assuming we are not going to go back to being believers, it does in fact look like there is *only one other practical option*: send to a public school and live a mostly secular life. We still very much value maintaining a strong sense of Jewish identity and tradition, so for example we will almost certainly try to keep some special things on Shabbos and Yom Tov – light candles, have a special Friday night seudah, teach them the parsha, build a sukkah, have a Pesach seder, light Chanukah candles, that sort of thing. And we would very much like it if our children know how to learn some chumash and mishnayos, and maybe even some gemara. We have discussed with both sets of parents the possibility that our children could continue to learn with their grandparents over the phone or in person after we leave the community. But other than that, yes, we will be living a relatively normal secular life.

FAQ

1. You're making a huge mistake!

Yes, we know you think that we are making a mistake. But just telling us we've made a mistake doesn't help us fix it. You're more than welcome to look over our explanations and contribute any helpful thoughts or suggestions. We listed our reasons for physically leaving the community in a different part of this letter. We aren't going to list our reasons for not believing here, but if you want we are happy to discuss those with you as well.

2. Nobody really goes off the derech for intellectual reasons. How come I've never heard of anybody else leaving for intellectual reasons?

Actually, lots of people go off the derech (OTD) for intellectual reasons, just perhaps not in your circles. And if it did happen in your circles then it was likely covered up, or else other people told you (and probably themselves as well) that *really* the person went OTD for other reasons, and the intellectual reasons were just an excuse.

Philo helps run a large Facebook group called Frum / OTD Dialogue. There are quite a number of people there who have left for intellectual reasons. Some of the people on that group are actually former rabbis or kiruv professionals who were "go to" people for those who were questioning their faith. But eventually they started questioning the answers that they themselves were giving, and eventually they stopped believing themselves. (Note that the dialogue group does not allow debate and is for respectful discussion only. They kick out people on both sides if they aren't being respectful. Philo was asked to help run it because people know that he's super respectful of all sides.)

[In the Appendix we have included a very small sampling of some of the introductions people have written on that group. We moved the stories to the appendix because we suspect that some people might find stories like this to be too provocative. No actual arguments against Judaism are mentioned in any of the stories.]

There are also lots of people who secretly lose their faith while remaining fully in the frum community – which is in fact exactly what we ourselves have been doing for the past several years. Many of these people love Yiddishkeit, keep much or even all of halacha, and have no interest in leaving. Yet others have described how for a long time they desperately *wanted* to believe, and they tried all sorts of things to get themselves to believe – talking to rabbis, reading kiruv books, trying to force the thoughts out of their minds, delving deep into Torah and avodas Hashem, davening to Hashem to save them from these evil thoughts – but ultimately it didn't work and they eventually lost their faith. (Incidentally, Philo did all of those things as well. He worked on trying to believe for nearly 15 years, but ultimately he lost the battle. He desperately *wanted* to believe, but in the end he couldn't make it work. Judy similarly lived a completely frum life for more than two years despite all of her doubts, and she tried very hard to just not think about her beliefs too much. In the end this was not enough, but it worked for about two years.)

We've been in close contact with many of these people as we've made our transition, and we've met with families who have gone through the same process as we are doing for similar reasons. We are most definitely not alone in this.

3. You haven't talked to enough rabbis, or the right rabbis. You need to talk to this rabbi I know.

Philo has spoken to several prominent rabbis who are experts on these arguments. For the most part these rabbis have not even tried to address the arguments that Philo has presented. Instead they've mainly focused on explaining why they themselves believe despite the arguments to the contrary, rather than trying to show Philo why he's wrong.

Philo has also read many if not most of the kiruv books available on the market, and he has spent countless hours discussing the arguments with his rebbeim and chaverim from yeshiva. It is extremely unlikely that the kiruv experts have any additional arguments that they've for some reason not written down in their books.

Furthermore, Philo actually runs a debate group online called Respectfully Debating Judaism. There are a lot of very smart, very knowledgeable frum people on that group, and Philo discusses these issues with them on a regular basis. (Note: Philo gives a very long warning to any frum people who ask to join, where he basically tell them that it's dangerous and probably an issur d'oraissa to join the group. He will only debate someone if they know exactly what they're getting into and they decide to join anyway.)

We've also heard lots of reports from friends of ours about their meetings and discussions with all sorts of rabbis, scholars, and kiruv experts. The reports have convinced us that there's little point in us talking to those particular rabbis. For example, there is one particular kiruv rabbi who is considered to be one of the top experts in the world. But we have heard from several people who we trust that the discussions with this rabbi can become extraordinarily frustrating, and that the rabbi can occasionally get very angry if you push him on certain points.

Judy has not spoken to many rabbis on her own, but that's largely because she knows Philo's process for conducting logical arguments, has heard all the kiruv arguments herself, and has learned enough to counter what any rabbi is likely to say. She's just not good at debates and really doesn't like criticism, so she doesn't want to put herself into what she knows will be a difficult conversation. And if she were to talk to a rabbi who would present an argument she hasn't thought of, she'll promptly discuss it with Philo anyway, so there's little point going to the rabbi on her own.

Recently Judy did speak to one rav on her own at the request of her parents, but the rav didn't even bother trying to convince her of anything on an intellectual level, and he didn't have much useful input at all. Judy also agreed to email a well-known kiruv rabbi, but he never responded.

But sure, if you think that you know someone who we should talk to, then send them over to Philo and he'll be happy to talk to them.

4. You must have suffered some emotional trauma that's causing you to do this. Or you're just running after your taivos and an easier lifestyle.

See the Part I of this letter, point #4.

5. You've been eating treif, haven't you? The tintum halev from the treif is what's causing this.

Neither of us ate any treif until long after we had lost our emunah. In Philo's case, it was several years after he stopped believing before he ate anything clearly treif. We still do not eat any non-kosher animals (shellfish, bacon, etc.).

6. Your mind is clouded, and you have been biased somehow.

Everybody is biased in subtle ways, as the Nobel prize winning psychologist Daniel Kahnemann has amply demonstrated (see his excellent book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*). Religious people are no less biased than others. We have tried hard to identify our own biases and account for those in our reasoning. Philo in particular has spent a lot of time researching possible biases and how to overcome or account for them. In fact, one of the triggers for Philo to finally reject religion was when he realized that he was being very biased to *believe* in Judaism, because he loved Yiddishkeit and he was terrified what would happen if he stopped believing. But he also decided that this was irrational, and his attempt to work past his biases ultimately led him down the road towards nonbelief.

7. I knew that Philo going to college and studying philosophy was an awful idea! See what philosophy leads to?

Actually, Philo only went to college after he had well and truly lost his faith. Part of the reason for going to college, and especially for studying philosophy, was simply to have people he could talk to who could accept him for who he is and who could understand where he was coming from.

8. Judy has been brainwashed by Philo! Judy just needs some time away from Philo's influence and then she'll come to her senses. Judy needs to talk to some rabbis on her own without Philo influencing her.

Believe it or not, Judy can think for herself. She is actually extremely bright, and she has done her own research. In fact, Philo barely told her any of the arguments himself – she researched those on her own. Whenever Judy would ask Philo something like, “but what about this proof,” Philo would respond with, “do you *really* want to hear the answer to that?” Sometimes Judy would say no, she didn’t want to hear it, in which case that would be the end of the conversation. Other times Judy would say yes, she did want to hear the answer, in which case Philo would answer her briefly. If there’s anything that Philo can claim to have indirectly taught Judy, it’s some critical thinking skills plus the value of *not* being brainwashed but rather thinking for yourself. If that’s considered brainwashing, then there’s almost nobody in the world who is not brainwashed – including religious people.

In terms of Judy talking to rabbis without Philo, see the response to question #3.

9. It's assur to research apikorsus! Who gave you permission to look into these things?

It might make sense to tell someone who is still a full believer that they shouldn't read certain materials because it might lead to doubts or to apikorsus. But if someone already doubts, how does it make any sense to tell them they can't think about it further? That's just completely circular.

Think about someone who grew up as a Scientologist or as part of a cult. One of the most common methods that such religions or cults use in order to keep people in the religion is to tell them that they are not allowed to read or research heretical ideas without first getting explicit permission from a qualified religious teacher or from the cult leader. That might work for someone who is still a faithful believer, but for someone who has doubts it makes no sense at all to listen to it.

[The Ramban in Sefer HaMitzvos discusses a similar issue. He asks how there can possibly be a mitzvah to believe in Hashem, if belief in Hashem is itself a prerequisite for someone to want to keep any of the mitzvos? If you already have belief, then there's no use for a commandment, and if you don't have belief then there's no reason to listen to the commandment. The Ramban therefore argues on the Rambam and says that there is no special mitzva of emunah. Other meforshim explain the Rambam's shittah by saying that even though there's no real use in a commandment to believe, one can still get a mitzva for thinking about your already-held emunah. This is the basis for the idea that focusing on emunah counts as one of the mitzvos temidiyos. Something similar to the Ramban's reasoning applies to telling someone who has doubts that they're not allowed to research their religion.]

So no, Philo didn't ask permission to research these things. Or if he did, he doesn't remember who it was he asked. Certainly Judy didn't ask. But as we said, the whole thing doesn't make any sense for someone who has already started to have doubts. If you want to blame someone, probably your best bet is to blame the rebbeim and frum authors who introduced Philo in the first place to the idea of trying to prove that Judaism is correct. They're the ones who started him on this path, and they are the ones who introduced the first doubts into his mind.

In any case, all this is sort of besides the point. What's done is done. We've tasted the forbidden fruit of knowledge, and now we cannot go back to our previous state of ignorant bliss.

10. You are so arrogant to rely on your own reasoning against all of the gedolim and all the gedolim of previous generations! Do you think you're smarter than R' Chaim Kanievsky or R' Moshe Feinstein? Do you think you know better than the Vilna Gaon and the Rambam?

[Our response to this section goes into a bit of detail about why we think these authorities are not the relevant experts in this manner. It also mentions what secular experts hold. This might be slightly too provocative, so we have moved the response to the Appendix, which you should feel free to skip. We understand if you do not want to read the Appendix, but at least realize that we are very aware of this objection, and we do have a response to it.]

11. Lots of people have questions! You shouldn't stop believing just because of a few questions.

This objection is going to be really, really hard to respond to without going into the particular questions and arguments that have led us to our current beliefs. Let's just say that it's an *awful* lot more than "just a few questions."

12. Just because you have some questions about Judaism, why do you reject the existence of the Ribono shel Olam?

You're right, arguments against Judaism are not arguments against the existence of God. Those are two very different discussions. And in fact, both of us are more or less agnostic about the existence of God (although we both lean a bit to the atheist side – Philo more so than Judy). But we are both very convinced that the Torah is manmade and is not historically accurate. We have nothing against Judaism per se, it's just that we don't think it's factually correct. If you want to discuss the details then we can do that in private.

13. Scientific "evidence" or philosophical arguments are irrelevant. Our mesorah is much stronger than evidence. Our mesorah is based on the testimony of millions of our ancestors at Har Sinai and has been transmitted to us through countless generations!

[Response has been moved to the Appendix.]

14. Just because you haven't found scientific evidence or ironclad proofs doesn't mean it's not true. Science is limited and fallible, and looking for ironclad proofs is too high a bar.

This is a long and detailed discussion, and this is not the place for it. Yet again, if you want to discuss the details then we can do so in private.

15. How can you be so convinced that you're right, when there are really smart people who have looked at all the same arguments and evidence that you have, but they still believe?

[Response has been moved to the Appendix.]

16. You need to have emunah peshuta. You need to take a leap of faith.

This works well for some people, but not for others. For us, "emunah peshuta" or "leaps of faith" just sound like wishful thinking. Believe without evidence because it makes you feel better. Of course, that's not exactly how many frum people would phrase it (although some do phrase it like that), but to us that's what it feels like. We've actually tried to go the emunah peshuta route, but we can't seem to maintain it.

17. Really deep down you do believe. There are no real apikorsim nowadays.

Ok ... not sure what to say to this. And since we're guessing that you're probably not interested in discussing the details of the evidence or arguments, there's not much to discuss on this topic.

18. Jews have been committed to our faith for thousands of years. Thousands of Jews have sacrificed and died for their beliefs. Your own grandparents survived the Holocaust and stayed religious. How can you throw that all away?

Christians and Muslims and Hindus and polytheists have also been committed to their faiths for thousands of years, and thousands of people have died for nearly every religion. And yet we probably all agree that it is reasonable for people of other faiths to investigate and ultimately reject the beliefs they were raised with. Why should Judaism be so different in this regard?

As for the Holocaust: The Nazis killed irreligious Jews just as much as religious Jews. They weren't targeting religion per se but rather the Jewish race. As we've said elsewhere, we are not in fact rejecting our ethnicity but rather the claims of the religion. And in any case, as we just mentioned above, just because Jews died for the religion or remained religious despite persecution does not mean that their descendants must believe in that religion. We wouldn't use that standard for people of other faiths, so why should we use that standard for ourselves?

19. Aren't you scared that you're going to go to Gehennom for not believing? Shouldn't you try to believe just in case?

This is known as Pascal's Wager, and in fact a version of this argument kept Philo frum for about 10 years. Philo has an entire essay on this if you are interested.

20. Life is meaningless and depressing without religion.

This is something that a lot of people struggle with after they lose their belief. Judy especially struggled with this for a while.

First of all, even if it were true that life is meaningless without religion, that wouldn't make religion true. It might be a good argument for why someone should make a "leap of faith," but as we said elsewhere that doesn't seem to work for us.

Second, there is a distinction between "meaning" in the sense of being part of some grand cosmic plan that involves the entire universe, and "meaning" in the sense of the feeling that we all seem to have that we want our lives to be meaningful. It is true that if one does not believe in religion then one probably does not believe they are part of some grand cosmic plan for the whole universe. But that definitely does not mean that we cannot find a deep sense of meaning in other ways. Psychologists have studied what things give people a deep sense of meaning, and they are very emphatic that one does not have to be religious in order to find a deep and powerful sense of meaning in life.

It is a bit hard to explain this to someone who is religious, so you'll have to just take our word for it that we both think we have plenty of meaning in our lives even without religion. Here are some of the things that we feel lend plenty of meaning to our lives – even if we don't think we're part of some grand cosmic plan:

- All the good that we can contribute to the world, the help we provide others, our efforts to do good and be good, and live for more than ourselves.
- Family and being part of a community, especially being active members of the community
- For Philo, contemplating and delving into the mysteries and grandeur of the universe. Believe it or not, for Philo this often comes close to the sort of intense religious experiences you might have on Rosh Hashana or Yom Kippur. This is partly why Philo loves studying physics and philosophy so much.

21. Without religion there is nothing stopping you from being totally immoral.

This is virtually the entire field of metaethics in philosophy. Do you want us to summarize the entire field? There are very few philosophers who think that God is necessary for morality, and the argument from morality is not seen as very compelling even by many religious philosophers. Furthermore, this goes straight into the Euthyphro Dilemma (see [here](#)). Many people think this dilemma, at least in its modern form, indicates that God cannot possibly be the ultimate source of morality.

There are even Jewish sources that indicate this. For example, the Chovos Halevavos (section 2, introduction) discusses the question of why we should listen to God. His answer is that we should listen out of hakaras hatov. R' Saadiah Gaon says similar (Emunos V'Deios 3:1). But that presupposes that there's a value in hakaras hatov. If God is the only source of morality, then there is no independent reason to be makir tov. Similarly, the Ramchal writes at the beginning of Daas Tevunos that the most basic thing we know about God is that He is a maitiv. But if "hatavah" is defined by God, then this is an empty, virtually meaningless statement. Furthermore, the Rambam explicitly looked up to Aristotle as a source of ethics – Shemoneh Prakim and Hilchos De'os are largely taken from Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*. But Aristotle did not base his ethics on the gods. As Aristotle's mentor Plato pointed out, the Greek gods were actual a horrible source for judging morality. So it is highly doubtful that the Rambam thought religion is necessary for morality.

Philo has been interacting with secular college students for about four years now. On average they actually strike him as having *better* middos than many frum people of their age, and they are certainly more accepting of others. Many of them are deeply committed to doing a lot of good in the world. They volunteer, they donate a lot of money to charity, they voluntarily return lost wallets to strangers, they help old ladies cross the street. Just overall a lot of really nice, good people. Our children can do an awful lot worse than to end up like the students at Philo's university.

Judy too has noticed this with the professionals that she interacts with on a daily basis for her work, and with the friends she's made over the past few years. On average, the secular people strike her as considerably *more* ethical and value-oriented than many of her frum business contacts.

22. But what about [some argument]?

Do you really want us to respond to that? We probably have an answer to that, but it probably involves kefirah. If you really do want to discuss it, then we'll be happy to respond.

23. Do you look down on us because you think we're fools for believing?

Absolutely not. See Part I of this letter, point #5.

24. Philo has been saying controversial things for a long time. Has he been feeding us kefirah? Will he keep doing this?

First of all, Philo has never said anything to you that was straight-out kefirah, and he has never expressed any viewpoint in your presence that is not also expressed by frum talmidei chachomim whom you would respect. Furthermore, whenever Philo has said something about which there is a machlokes whether it is kefirah, he has been careful to mention that this is the case.

Secondly, Philo has been intentionally mentioning these controversial shittos as part of a deliberate strategy to get certain family members to start suspecting things. The idea was that if people started suspecting things then they would have time to adjust to the idea at least somewhat, and then when we came out of the closet it wouldn't be quite as huge a traumatic shock. We think that this strategy has in fact worked to some extent, at least for some family members. In any case, now that this is no longer completely secret, we have no reason to keep dropping hints and Philo will stop saying anything particularly controversial. Believe it or not, Philo does know how to keep his mouth shut.

25. Are you sad about your lack of belief? If you could take a pill that would magically make you go back to being believers, would you take it?

This is a hard one. On the one hand, it would make our lives so much easier and straightforward if we could just go back to being believers. And there were periods when each of us suffered a lot because we didn't believe, and we expressed multiple times the desire to just go back to the simple belief we used to have.

On the other hand, at this point in time we are both pretty happy with our current beliefs (or lack thereof). Yes, right now we're going through a difficult transition period. But from what tons of people who have done this before have told us, this is almost certainly just a bump in the road and in the not so distant future we will likely be in a much better place. [*Update: This was correct, and we are in fact in a much better place now.*]

We sort of look at it a bit like growing up. When you're a child the world is black and white, and in many ways it's a very cheerful place. And then you grow up and you learn that the world is not as straightforward as it once seemed. The world is complicated and there are lots of shades of gray, and maybe not everything is quite as cheerful as you used to think. But now that you are an adult and you are seeing the world more realistically, would you choose to go back to a child's-eye view if you had the chance? Probably not. You'd prefer to trade some naïve happiness for a more truthful, realistic, mature viewpoint on reality. That's the way we feel about religion. Not that we think religion is childish, just that we think it's a more straightforward, black-and-white viewpoint that is in some ways more cheerful but which (in our view) is also wrong. Now that we've come to the conclusion that we think it's wrong, would we choose to go back if we could? No, probably not.

This particular question comes up occasionally on the OTD groups online. Usually most OTD people say they would not go back, but some say they would and others say it depends on the day and how they're feeling that day. There was one point early in Philo's college career when he was sitting in the philosophy department together with a few other students. There was Philo, a former Christian, a former Muslim, and a former Hindu. This question came up – "if you could go back to believing, would you?" Two out of the four students said no they wouldn't. Philo and one of the others said yes they would. But that was back when Philo was suffering a lot from his recent loss of faith. Now he's in a much better place and his answer today would be different.

26. Why can't you just fake it for the sake of your children and family?

See the discussion in Part IV of this letter.

27. You say you talked to a child therapist who advised not hiding your beliefs from your children. I think you should get a second opinion.

The usual point of getting a second opinion is when you are concerned that there might be risks that the first opinion is not making you fully aware of. You then want to get a second opinion so that you can err on the side of caution if you deem that appropriate. In this case, the first opinion was the one that already told us about the huge risks involved in hiding something so major from our children. Even if we got a second opinion that said we shouldn't worry so much about hiding things from the children, erring on the side of caution would still say to go with the first opinion that we already have.

Furthermore, the advice from Judy's therapist meshes well with what we ourselves have been suspecting for a while, and with the advice that we've been getting from numerous people – including several religious people. Some of those people are people who have transitioned as a family, others are people who hid things for a long time from their children. Others are people who have experienced such a transition when they were children, or who have experienced the negative effects of finding out that their parents hid something major from them. The basic advice that we keep getting from all these people is: Kids find out a lot of things their parents try to hide; it's very risky to hide major things from your children; transitions with children (especially younger ones) are almost always fine; and if you wait too long then you'll find the transition much harder for everyone.

In any case, the risk to our children was only one of the factors involved in our decision to come out of the closet. The other major factor was Judy's sanity, as we described in Part IV of this letter, and this factor is independent from all of the above advice.

28. You are going to traumatize your children for life!

We've talked this over with numerous people who have made this transition together with their children. Some of those children were older, some were younger. All of them said that their children were fine, although they said it's a lot easier when the children are younger like ours are rather than waiting until they're older. And as we mentioned, we discussed this extensively with a child therapist who confirmed what everybody else had told us. Children, especially young children, are very resilient and they'll be fine.

And as we discussed in Part IV of this letter, the risks involved in *not* transitioning seem much higher and more severe.

In any case, as of this writing we have already almost entirely completed transitioning the children towards accepting our new lifestyle. Based on how they've handled the past few months of gradual transitioning, we are very confident that they will be able to complete the transition just fine. [*Update: The children transitioned beautifully and without any serious issues.*]

29. *Can't you just become Modern Orthodox instead of going all the way off the derech? Can't you at least keep some halachos in order to ease some of the pain to your parents?*

See the discussion in Part IV of this letter.

30. *Secular culture is totally debauched and corrupt and immoral.*

See Part I of this letter, point #2.

31. *Religious people have been shown to be happier, healthier, and better off in so many ways than secular people.*

Sociologists debate this, although the data does seem to show that *on average* religious people in religious countries like the US score higher on measures of wellbeing than nonreligious people. There is however some data that might show the opposite. For example, many of the most atheistic countries in the world consistently score the highest on measures of wellbeing. But most sociologists seem to agree that in America, at least, there is some benefit to being religious in terms of being happier.

However, some of this benefit comes from actual belief – which we don't have. An even larger part of the benefit seems to come from being part of a community. For example, an atheist who goes to church with their family will on average be happier than a devout believer who prays alone in their room. Believe it or not there do exist strong communities out there in the secular world, although they are harder to find than the ready-made community we were born into. The community we are moving to is known to have strong community structures that are easy to get involved in. There is also a very active Jewish (but not frum) community in our area that we are definitely planning to be involved with. Judy is also a natural-born community builder, as everybody who knows her can attest, and she will certainly continue this in the secular world.

One more point: Imagine that you found out that by far the best way of making yourself happy and healthy was to believe in ancient Greek polytheism. You know – Zeus, Athena, and all the rest of the Greek gods. Imagine also that for some reason you knew that Hashem has given you a free pass on this, and you won't get any consequences in olam hazeh or in olam haba for believing in Greek polytheism. Would you become a Greek polytheist? Would you teach it to your children as the truth? Of course not. Now, we're not saying that Judaism is at all comparable to ancient Greek polytheism. But this thought experiment at least shows that you yourself probably agree that in many cases you wouldn't lie to your children just because it would make them a bit happier.

32. You don't know what you're getting yourself into. You are completely underestimating how hard this transition is going to be for your children, or even for yourselves. You will find that you're no happier in the secular world than you are now.

We've heard this from some religious people. But we've also heard the opposite from plenty of people – including religious people. Almost all of the people we've talked to who have actually experienced both worlds think we'll be totally fine, and the people who are most similar to us – those who come from similar backgrounds and who transitioned as a family – tell us emphatically that they are *much* happier now that they've transitioned than they were before. Judy's therapist is also very confident that we'll be much happier on the other side of this transition than we are now.

We've also been gradually transitioning ourselves and our children into a more secular lifestyle for the past several months. We are pretty confident that we'll be fine.

But ultimately, yes, there is a bit of a risk involved here. But as far as we can tell there is a much greater risk in staying. We need to pick the choice that seems like the lesser of the evils, and as far as we can tell, that means transitioning.

[Update: The transition went fine and we are indeed quite happy in our new life.]

33. Public schools are full of drugs, violence, and immorality. How can you possibly send your children there?

We too are very concerned about this. We were always under the impression that public schools are cesspools of violence, drugs, unrestrained promiscuity, wild partying, and teenage pregnancies. Understandably, that's made us extremely hesitant about the idea of sending to a public school. But it actually turns out that a lot of families have the *same exact concerns* as this and pick public school districts based on their "health" of not having these activities. The area where we are moving to is one of those places – much of the area consists of families who move there *just* for the purpose of allowing their children to grow up in a healthy, stable environment and school.

We've talked to a lot of people about this. The basic answer we got, from many sources, was that it depends on the school. Some public schools, mostly in lower class neighborhoods, really are like this. And even some schools in middle or upper class neighborhoods have a lot of this going on as well. But it is definitely not universal or even the rule. For example, a friend of mine told me that he went to a public high school in an area near where we are moving. He said he never heard of any of these problems at all during the four years he was there. He said that one time there was a rumor that there was a fight somewhere on campus, and everybody rushed out to see. But by the time they got there it was all over – the fight had been broken up before they got there.

Basically, the idea is that this is exactly what we should be researching in terms of where to live. We should be looking carefully at the schools to see whether they have problems at the school (not just in terms of ratings of course – we should go to the school, talk to other parents, etc.), and we should actually pick the neighborhoods we want to live in based on which schools they send to.

This is in fact what we did. We first looked carefully for a great neighborhood with top-notched schools of the type we were looking for, and we talked to numerous people about this. We finally settled on the one particular neighborhood as our #1 choice, and only then did we start seriously looking for houses.

And if upon further research or experience we decide that public school really is too risky, then we can always send to a private school or perhaps homeschool.

[Update: The school is wonderful and is just as good as everybody told us it is.]

In terms of specific problem behaviors:

Drugs: Apparently “minor” drugs, such as marijuana and some psychedelics, are not that uncommon even in decent schools (although in a lot of the better schools even these are apparently pretty rare). They’re a bit like smoking in yeshivas, and in fact they’re considerably less addictive and dangerous than smoking is. The “hard” drugs, like cocaine or heroin, are much more rare.

Promiscuity: Yes, some teenagers have sex, though it’s not nearly as common as most frum people seem to think it is. Many people try to instill in their children the value that it should only take place in the context of a serious relationship. But actually, psychologists don’t view this as a risky behavior if done responsibly.

Teenage pregnancies: These are extremely uncommon in upper and middle class schools. For example, in the entire area around where we are moving to, there is only a single school that has a childcare center for teenage mothers. All teenage mothers in the entire county are sent to that one school. Philo has a professor who sent his kids to that school. He said there were only a few teenage mothers in the school at any one time, and overall it was a pretty good school.

Violence: Violence appears to be very uncommon in good schools – otherwise they wouldn’t be considered good schools. Again, this is one of the primary things that parents look for when choosing a school or neighborhood. The reason it might seem more common is because there are tens of thousands of public schools around the country, and obviously the ones you hear about in the news in terms of violence (or any of other problem behaviors) are only the ones that have it.

Bullying: This varies by school – but then, it varies by school for frum schools as well. Our oldest son, for example, has told us that he’s been bullied several times in the frum schools he’s attended. Again, this is something you look for in choosing a school. A lot of people have told us that in their experience public schools are often much better in terms of bullying than the frum schools.

We also talked to a lot of people (both frum and off the derech) who have sent children to both frum and public schools. Most of these people were very, very happy with their public school experiences – even from less highly rated schools.

Many people also pointed out to us that these problem behaviors are unfortunately not that uncommon in frum schools either. In fact, many people we talked to reported that they’ve seen *fewer* problem behaviors

in public schools than they've seen in Jewish schools. It's just that many parents don't hear about the problems in frum schools, because the issues are often not publicized. But there are certainly problem students in all frum schools who are involved in all the risky and self-destructive behaviors that people have warned us about. As a responsible parent, your job is to try to ensure that your children don't fall in with those friends. The same thing is true for a public school. You try to get your children into a good school, you try to pick their friends carefully, and you try to maintain open lines of trust and communication so that if something does start to go wrong then you will know about it and you can try to fix it. That's what good parents do in a frum school, and that's what good parents do in a public school.

This is not to say that we think public schools, or secular society in general, is all peachy fine and perfect. We're well aware that secular society has lots of issues. That's exactly why we might prefer to stay in the frum community if we could! But again, what other option do we really have?

(We do feel that frum society has some pretty big issues as well – we've never actually heard of a perfect society that doesn't have significant problems. The best you can do is pick a society and community with relatively small problems and try to work around the problems that remain. That's the same for secular people as for frum people. But again, if we could we'd much prefer to stay and deal the problems which we're used to instead of these new problems.)

In any case, most of this is a little besides the point. As we said earlier, we would almost certainly not be able to send to regular frum schools, assuming that we are open with our children about our beliefs. So the alternative to public school would probably be left-wing Modern Orthodox schools. But all the first-hand reports that we've heard say that these schools have just as much drugs, sex, and partying as the public schools – if not more so. So it's not like there's a better option here anyway.

There is also one final crucially important point here, which we've mentioned before but we need to mention again. Whatever the risks that might come from sending to a public school, or from sending to a left-wing Modern Orthodox school, those risks would be much, much worse if we instead decided to stay in the closet. If our kids found out our secret on their own, then they could easily lose their trust in their parents, and they could easily experience significant psychological trauma. As we've seen far too often, kids like that are *very* at risk of falling into problem behaviors. If we want to avoid as much risk of problem behaviors as we can, then we definitely should *not* be keeping such huge secrets from our children.

34. Do you see any value in being Jewish? Do you see any good in Torah and mitzvos?

Sure we see some value in being Jewish, and we see good in at least some parts of the Torah and mitzvos. We also appreciate the beauty and depth of Judaism. But not enough that we're going to mentally brainwash ourselves to believe something other than what reason (as we see it) points to, and not enough that we're going to go to enormous lengths to stay in the community or to keep all of the details.

35. Will you keep anything Jewish?

We will almost certainly keep some things, although we haven't decided exactly what or to what extent. We still very much value maintaining a strong sense of Jewish identity and tradition, so for example we

will almost certainly try to keep some special things on Shabbos and Yom Tov – light candles, have a special Friday night seudah, teach the kids the parsha, build a sukkah, have a Pesach seder, light Chanukah candles. As of now we are planning on keeping our kitchen kosher. And we would very much like it if our children know how to learn some chumash and mishnayos, and maybe even some gemara. We have discussed with both sets of parents the possibility that our children could continue to learn with their grandparents over the phone or in person after we leave the community. But other than that, yes, we will probably live a relatively normal secular life.

36. Why bother keeping anything at all if you don't believe?

This is hard for a lot of frum people to understand, because it is so different than the reasons for keeping to Judaism that they've always believed. But we really do see a value in connecting to our traditions and heritage, even if we don't think Judaism is a divinely mandated religion.

37. Will your kitchen be kosher?

As of now, we are planning to keep a kosher kitchen, or at least to maintain our kitchen in such a way that family and friends can eat there if they wish. We know of several people who have gotten a heter to eat at OTD relatives' houses under certain conditions, and we are hopeful that keeping a kosher kitchen will allow some relatives to come visit and eat at our house. One local rabbi (who knows our situation) has told Judy's parents that they can eat at our house if they trust us when we say that our kitchen is kosher. He based this psak on a teshuva from R' Moshe Feinstein, and we know of other people who have gotten a similar heter. Because of this, as of this writing we are indeed planning to maintain a kosher kitchen, or at least to maintain our kitchen in such a way that family and friends can eat there if they wish.

[Update: Judy's parents consulted a different rabbi who said that they cannot eat anything made in our house, so they don't. Since none of our family members will eat in our house anyway, we have gradually dropped most kashrus in the kitchen. We still do not eat pork or shellfish though, because we like keeping some traditions for reasons of maintaining a strong connection to our heritage.]

38. Are you going to brainwash your children into your heretical beliefs?

We are already open with our children about our beliefs, and we encourage them to think for themselves. Beyond that we are not going to "force" our beliefs on our children. But it is the nature of children, especially young children, to follow the belief systems of their parents.

39. What if your children decide they still want to keep Shabbos? Will you let them?

Absolutely.

40. If your children were to gravitate towards religion, would you be neutral or try to persuade them the other way?

As long as they're going into it open-minded, we would try to be fully supportive. We do feel that religion is a net positive for many people, it's just that we feel it's false. We also feel that leaps of faith are defensible in many cases. (Philo in fact has an essay defending leaps of faith from a philosophical point of view, which he'd be happy to share with you if you're interested.) We understand that some people have a much stronger spiritual need to fill than others, and if our child finds that in being religious – that's fine, as long as they're being logical and not coerced.

41. Why can't you send your children to a frum school, or at least a modern orthodox one?

See discussion in Part IV of this letter.

42. At least give your children enough frum education to make their own decision later on.

We would like our boys to at least know how to learn mishnayos and maybe some gemara. We are trying to arrange that they will continue learning with their grandparents after we transition. If they can maintain a strong connection with their grandparents, then they will know a significant amount about Yiddishkeit as they grow up.

43. Will your children marry Jewish?

This one's a biggie, and yes from your perspective you are right to be concerned. We are going to try to instill a deep sense of tradition and especially the importance of family, and perhaps that will help. Plenty of people decide to marry Jewish because their parents or grandparents would be happier if they do. But ultimately, yes we agree this is a valid concern from your perspective. As nonbelievers they will not be as motivated to marry in or to pass on the tradition to their children. In any case, by the time they are ready to marry they will be adults, and there will be little we can do to force them even if we wanted to.

44. This will destroy your relationship with your family!

We are extremely concerned about this as well, and this concern is the primary motivation for writing this letter and FAQ. On the other hand, we think that there is good reason to be hopeful. We have already attended numerous family get-togethers and seudos, even after our parents and some siblings knew that we no longer believe. Those seudos went fine, as far as we could tell. We have also already had several months of relatively normal day-to-day interactions with family members who know about our beliefs. We are hopeful that such seudos and interactions can continue even after we come fully out of the closet.

We think that a good relationship will take a lot of time and hard effort on all sides, but we really think it is doable. In fact, we know it is doable because it is done all the time. Lots of families manage to maintain excellent and meaningful relationships with their children, despite the children living very different lifestyles from the rest of the family. Think of baalei teshuva – many of their parents and siblings strongly disapprove of their choice to become frum, yet many of them manage to maintain good happy relationships

with their families anyway. We also know of many off the derech people who manage to maintain very good relationships with their families. Sometimes it took a while, but they managed to do it anyway.

Lots of families also manage to have very joyous family gatherings, and they just avoid certain topics of conversations. That's the old adage – don't talk religion or politics at the table. Yes, Democrats might feel judged by their strongly Republican siblings, and vice versa. But they focus on other topics and parts of their relationship, and they manage to make it work.

Most families these days are secular, and yet they manage to find ways to have relationships that are not based on religion. Yes, we understand that for you, religion is life itself. But there are definitely ways to find joy and common ground with non-religious family members, as long as there is a will to do so.

Yes, it will take effort. But many, many families have managed to maintain wonderful relationships even when there wasn't nearly as strong a willpower on all sides to maintain that relationship. If they can do it, then so can we.

45. How can you do this to your parents and families? Don't you realize how much you are hurting them? How can you bring such shame and embarrassment to them?

We know this is traumatic and incredibly painful, and that it has repercussions for many of our family members in various ways. But our first duty is to the wellbeing of our children and to our own mental stability. As we discussed in Part IV of this letter, we feel that the risks of keeping things secret are too great, and we have no real choice but to come out of the closet.

46. Why didn't you tell us earlier? We might have been able to help!

Philo did discuss this for years with his rebbeim and friends. And in fact they did help for many years. But eventually it just wasn't enough.

Judy did not go to friends and family partly because she was living in denial about the significance and implications of her own beliefs. For about two years she managed to convince herself that it wasn't a big deal at all, and that she was still completely frum, just with some private heretical beliefs that shouldn't make a difference to anyone. Additionally, Judy was afraid that if she told anybody about Philo's lack of belief then they would try to convince her to get divorced. From what we know from other people's experiences, and from what we've in fact heard from several family members since we've told them our beliefs, Judy's concerns appear to have been very well founded.

47. If I had been more friendly / supportive / available could I have helped prevent this?

Almost certainly not. First of all, our friends and family have always been amazingly supportive and available for us whenever we needed. It would be hard to do better than we already have! Secondly, our situation stems almost entirely from intellectual issues, and being more supportive would almost certainly not have helped anything.

48. Have you been feeding us treif?

Absolutely not. At this point in time our kitchen is still completely kosher, and we intend to continue keeping it kosher, at least to the extent that friends and family can come eat there if they wish.

49. Will you try to tell me or my family apikorsus or try to convince us that you're right?

No.

50. Will you dress and act frum if you are in our house, or at family events?

We will show respect to our family's beliefs. This means that we'll likely come clothed properly, and definitely act properly. We have no problem dressing frum at someone else's house, and there's no reason to discuss our lifestyle if nobody brings up the subject.

There may be some exceptions, like for impromptu events, where we don't have enough warning time to go home and change. And Judy will likely wear a cap instead of sheitel for casual gatherings. The bottom line is that we don't want to make anyone uncomfortable and will do our best to maintain that.

51. How can we possibly have a Shabbos or Yom Tov seudah with apikorsim?

First of all, we've already had several pretty normal Shabbos seudos with our parents, even after they knew we no longer believed.

Second, we don't think there will be nearly as much of a problem joining you for Shabbos and Yom Tov meals as you might think. We've been sitting through and discussing divrei Torah for years with you despite not believing it, and we can continue doing so. Or if that feels too uncomfortable for you, then you can address your divrei Torah to any other guests who are there. What do all those other families who have off the derech children in the house do at their Shabbos table? (Assuming that the child is there and they're trying to maintain a good relationship, of course.) Many families manage to do it. Yes, it might be awkward, especially the first few times. But it can be done, because we see it being done all the time.

(It should go without saying that of course we will be respectful and dress appropriately when in frum family members' houses for Shabbos or Yom Tov.)

Shabbos can be a wonderful time for family to come together and enjoy each other and build relationships. In our opinion, it's not just about food and divrei Torah. Yes, those are a part of it, but creating family moments in that time is just as important.

52. Is it halachically permissible for me to eat in your house?

One local rabbi (who knows our situation) has told Judy's parents that they can eat at our house if they trust us when we say that our kitchen is kosher. He based this psak on a teshuva from R' Moshe Feinstein, and we know of other people who have gotten a similar heter. Because of this, as of this writing we are

indeed planning to maintain a kosher kitchen, or at least to maintain our kitchen in such a way that family and friends can eat there if they wish.

[Update: A different rabbi they consulted said that they cannot eat anything made in our house, so they don't. Since none of our family members will eat in our house anyway, we have gradually dropped most kashrus in the kitchen. We still do not eat pork or shellfish though, because we like keeping some traditions for reasons of maintaining a strong connection to our heritage.]

We would love to have you over if you can come! If nothing else, we could always use paper goods and just buy premade kosher food or order from a kosher restaurant.

53. Do I have to worry about non-mevushal wine around you?

You will need to ask your posek this question. Unless you tell us otherwise, we will be careful about non-mevushal wine around you.

Appendix: A few mildly provocative censored FAQ responses

This appendix is for responses to some of the FAQ questions that we felt might be slightly too provocative for some people. Feel free to skip this appendix if it makes you feel too uncomfortable.

2. Nobody really goes off the derech for intellectual reasons. How come I've never heard of anybody else leaving for intellectual reasons?

[This is a continuation of the response from the regular FAQ. Here we briefly describe the intellectual journeys of other people who have gone off the derech for intellectual reasons. No actual arguments against religion are mentioned.]

The following are some brief introductions that various people have posted on one of the groups that Philo helps run, called Frum / OTD Dialogue. These are only a few of the dozens and dozens of such people on the Frum / OTD Dialogue group, but we think they are enough to get the point across that we are not alone, and there are plenty of others like us out there.

Stew Sheen: So I grew up in an out-of-town yeshivish chinuch family. As a bachur I went even more to the right than my family and was very intense. I was not much of an independent thinker and believed strongly that I had THE true derech. I went to BMG at 23, got married to the third girl I dated – no love, no connection, just similar backgrounds and neither of us said no so after 8 dates we had to get engaged ... Moved to Israel after we got married, went to kollel and started having kids. My wife got a job that needed internet in the house. I was walking back and forth from kollel over an hour each day, so I needed something to listen to as I walked. I found kiruv shiurum online and they were more entertaining and thoughtful than regular frum shuirim so I started listening to them. The more I listened the more it began to dawn on me that the dogmas of Orthodox Judaism are not as obviously true as I had thought. I started reading stuff online and my emuna died a slow death by a thousand cuts. One day around Chanukah time I told my chavrusa I'm an atheist. That was about 5 years ago, so at 28 with 3½ kids I suddenly had to figure out how I'm going to get out of kollel and get a job with no training or marketable skills. (I do web development and programming now.) At some point we moved back from Israel to America. I am still in the closet and almost no one frum knows I'm not frum – my parents included, although everyone around me has noticed my pivot from shtark and excited about yidishkiet to tolerating it.

Sharona Light: Hi, I'm OTD in the closet, yeshivish lite background. My OTD journey began when I first acquired Internet access four years ago. I was curious about frum abuse scandals and frum financial corruption. So I started out looking through some of the blogs that were popular at the time. From there I linked to the old Jewish Skeptic blogs. Then I started watching atheist vs. theist debates and reading Dawkins, Dennett, Hitchens and Harris. Around 18 months after first getting internet access, I realized I no longer believed that Yiddishkeit was true and that the Torah was mandated by a divine being. Six months after that I stopped believing in god altogether. I have made the decision to continue pretending to be frum for the sake of my husband and children, but at this point all of my immediate family knows I'm an agnostic atheist.

Daniel Rosenberg: Grew up traditional conservative, became a Chabad BT in college, now OTD. Left because upon reviewing the beliefs and foundations of Yiddishkeit (while trying to mekarev others) I realized that the underpinnings of my faith were as unsubstantiated and unreasonable as those other faiths I claimed to be irrational. Atheism became a much more reasonable alternative in my eyes. Very much out of the closet, although I was in the closet for a short time early on. Here's my story: <http://www.offthederech.org/daniel-rosenbergs-story/>

Michael Jacobson: Raised MO, frum all the way, finished high school at 16 where I was given the inaugural Talmud award, spent 2 years in Rosh Yeshiva's shiur in Israel learning 12 hours a day. Began to have questions in 2nd year in Israel. Began to doubt divinity of Oral Torah but still believed in Written Torah from God. Then came to conclusion that too was man made so I would describe myself then as theist. Then realized the creator didn't intervene on Earth so I became a deist. There is a creator but he may no longer be alive, or care. Then after reading many books on evolution and then atheism realized I was an atheist. Everyone in my MO shul knows it but I was still voted onto the board for 4 years before I decided it wasn't appropriate. Had to keep it from my kids who I sent to MO yeshiva while they were too young and would be too confused. I sent them there so they could make their own decisions after being taught both sides. Once in high school I slowly made them aware of my atheism and encouraged them to think critically and ask their Rebbeim and morot whatever questions they had and then decide whether they made more sense than mine. As it is, all 3 of my kids are in their early 20s and 2 are atheists and one is MO. I remain a member of my MO shul for communal/social reasons but have been out of the closet for many years. And I LOVE debating frum people and rabbis, especially of the kiruv variety. :)

Yoni Rachok: I came from a yeshivish family. I was always on the curious, intellectual side. I always wanted to hear the other side of any argument. When I was younger it was Misnagdim vs. Chassidim, and other disagreements in the frum world, and when I was older, in my late 20s, it became believers vs. non-believers. I enjoyed being frum and had never had complaints about being frum. But when I was exposed to the other side of the Torah min Hashomayim arguments, and to other ways to understand the world, ethics, meaning, history and so on, I realized myself that to be intellectually honest I would have to accept that there is no rational reason to believe or accept the frum worldview. I understand that there are emotional / societal / cultural reasons which I myself may have, but I felt that the mental acrobatics necessary for such leaps of faith were too dishonest.

Aryeh Levine: Hi, I'm Aryeh Levine. I'm the first face that comes up when you google 'Off the Derech', and I don't deserve to be. I come up first because of Google's algorithms and an article I wrote explaining why and how I went OTD. Here's the link: <http://www.offthederech.org/aryehs-story/>

If I had to summarize I'd say I left for the following reasons: 1) Reason, critical thinking, etc: I found no convincing evidence for Judaism's claims and a lot of info that pointed in the opposite direction. 2) I found a spiritual path that was, for me, more effective, rational, and inspiring than Torah. 3) Moral outrage at behaviors, beliefs, and laws in Jewish texts and humans. I found certain beliefs and practices to be personally emotionally traumatizing, and when I ceased engaging with them, I began to heal.

I am 22, single, atheist, somewhat of a secular Buddhist. While it was very very rough for a while, I enjoy a very good relationship with my family. Background is raised in Aish household, then went to very

yeshivish yeshivah for 6 years. I was also chassidish and kabbala-ish in that I, in some degree of secrecy, read a lot of seforim on the subjects and practiced things like hisbodius and kabalistic meditations on the down low during much of my career as a yeshivah buchur. I am fully out of the closet. I work, travel, and soon, will begin school.

10. You are so arrogant to rely on your own reasoning against all of the gedolim and all the gedolim of previous generations! Do you think you're smarter than R' Chaim Kanievsky or R' Moshe Feinstein? Do you think you know better than the Vilna Gaon and the Rambam?

[Our response to this section goes into a bit of detail about why we think these authorities are not the relevant experts in this manner. It also mentions what secular experts hold.]

- 1) You don't have to be smarter than the Rambam and the Vilna Gaon to know more than them. The Rambam thought the Earth is surrounded by a crystal sphere (see the first few perakim of the Mishna Torah), but now we know better. Not because we're smarter, but because we stand on the shoulders of lots of smart people who have researched a lot of things since the Rambam. Similarly, we don't think we're smarter than the Rambam or the Vilna Gaon, but we do have access to a huge amount of extremely relevant information that they didn't have access to.
- 2) Expertise in Torah learning is at best only a small part of the expertise needed to judge whether Judaism is true. You need to know philosophy, biology, physics, comparative religions, mythology, and especially history and archaeology (among other topics). A lot of the most important arguments from those fields were only discovered pretty recently (after the time of the Vilna Gaon), and the vast majority of chareidi rabbis nowadays know very little if anything about those topics. They are experts in learning gemara, not experts in archaeology. Most of the top experts in the relevant fields actually think that the Torah is not historically accurate, and most top philosophers and scientists believe that God probably does not exist.
- 3) Almost nothing we've studied is our own insights or chiddushim. We are just studying what lots of other people who have studied the relevant subjects much longer than we have hold.
- 4) In fact, we try hard not to rely on our own arguments at all but rather on the arguments of the experts. (This is one of Philo's favorite subjects – he holds that most people do not know enough to be entitled to their own opinions on most subjects, and instead need to rely on the experts. The trick though is to figure out who the right experts are, and that is not an easy matter. Philo has spent a lot of time researching this, and he would be delighted to discuss it at length if you let him.) If you actually look at what most of the experts in the various relevant subjects hold, it turns out that most of those experts think the arguments are against Judaism and probably also against the existence of God. Even many rabbis hold that the arguments are pretty strong. Many of these rabbis hold that at best the arguments for and against God are inconclusive, so that smart knowledgeable people can easily come to not believe in God, and ultimately you need to rely on some form of intuition or faith or religious experience to get you to believe in God. (Atheists say those reasons aren't sufficient.) Many rabbis also hold that the arguments from archaeology and other subjects are quite powerful, and you need to say some pretty radical chiddushim to reconcile the archaeology with the Torah – often in ways that no rishon ever suggested before and that other rabbanim view as apikorsus.

5) If we're pointing to smart people, why not also point to indisputably genius nonbelievers? Isaac Newton believed in some form of Christianity, as did Leonardo da Vinci and many others. Einstein didn't believe in the Torah despite being Jewish, and he didn't believe in a religious type of personal God. (He might have actually been an atheist, although it's not clear.) The majority of top scientists and philosophers are atheists or agnostics. Do you think you're smarter than all of these people? Of course not, but that doesn't mean you are required to think that they were necessarily correct. Same here.

13. Scientific “evidence” or philosophical arguments are irrelevant. Our mesorah is much stronger than evidence. Our mesorah is based on the testimony of millions of our ancestors at Har Sinai and has been transmitted to us through countless generations!

You're actually making an argument there: You are arguing that we should believe in our mesorah because it is based on the testimony of millions of our ancestors at Har Sinai and has been transmitted to us through countless generations. You are also using the alleged testimony of millions as a sort of argument that Maamad Har Sinai must have taken place. In the kiruv world, this is known as the Kuzari Argument. We, along with many kiruv professionals, view this as just another (possibly powerful) argument to take into account, along with all of the other arguments. Clearly, we do not view this particular argument as being persuasive enough. But obviously we cannot go into the details here about why we don't find the argument persuasive. Again, if you want to discuss the details then we can do that in private.

15. How can you be so convinced that you’re right, when there are really smart people who have looked at all the same arguments and evidence that you have, but they still believe?

- 1) Smart, knowledgeable people can agree to disagree about some subjects. This happens all the time in philosophy, science, and even Torah subjects.
- 2) Many of the smart, knowledgeable believers who have really looked into this subject actually think that the evidence is not good enough, and you need a “leap of faith” of some sort in order to believe. That’s fine for people who have the personality type to go with a “leap of faith”, but not for others.
- 3) For every smart, knowledgeable person who believes that the evidence really is in favor of Orthodox Judaism, there are probably at least 10 equally smart people who believe that the evidence demonstrates that Jesus literally rose from the dead. (Yes, many Christians really do think that there are convincing arguments, similar to kiruv arguments, showing that Jesus literally rose from the dead.) And for every smart, knowledgeable person who thinks the evidence is in favor of Jesus or Orthodox Judaism, there are probably 10 equally smart, knowledgeable people who think the evidence is in favor of atheism. Which just goes to show that pointing to smart believers might not be the best argument.
- 4) Smart, knowledgeable people can be subject to all sorts of subtle cognitive biases. That applies both to believers and non-believers, of course.

Also see the response to question #10 (the previous question in this Appendix).