

**Letter to Our
Family and Friends**

by Philo and Judy Judaeus

Does this document contain apikorsus? Am I allowed to read this?

We have tried hard to avoid mentioning any actual arguments or evidence regarding the truth of the Torah. The most we do is state that we think there *is* evidence which we think shows that the Torah isn't historically accurate, but we do not say anything about what that evidence is. We also express our confidence that we are correct in our conclusions, and we mention the fact that lots of other smart people agree with us. But that's about it.

In one section we mention a few Jewish sources to argue that it's at least plausible for people to go off the derech for intellectual reasons, and we're not totally crazy or emotionally abused or running after our taivos. In that section we also bring some Jewish sources to indicate that the truth of Judaism is at least not quite as blatantly obvious as some people make it out to be.

We reiterate several times that while we personally believe that the weight of the evidence is against Yiddishkeit, we know that there are plenty of very smart, knowledgeable frum believers who disagree with us. We think that it can be fully rational for frum people to believe in the truth of the Torah, and we fully respect people who believe. We think that smart, knowledgeable people can agree to disagree on this.

There are three or four questions in the FAQ part of this letter where our responses mention some things that can possibly be construed as a sort of argument, or which we think might be a bit too provocative for some people. For example, we explain in some slight detail why we think that most rabbis are not experts on the truth of Judaism. Again, we don't go into the details of any actual arguments against Yiddishkeit, but just to be on the ultra-safe side we have omitted our responses to those questions from this document, and we have instead moved those responses into a separate appendix which is available upon request.

This is way too long, I can't read it all!

The most important parts to read are the Introduction and Part I. After that if you want you can just look through the list of questions in the FAQ to see if there's anything else you want to read.

Introduction

To our beloved family and friends:

As you have probably heard by now, we have made the 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 terrifying, shocking, drastic decision. (But again, we are not going to mention any actual arguments against Judaism here!) We will explain a little more about what we do and do not believe, what our plans are now, and what our reasoning is in actually 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 process or decision. 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 connections 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.

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

1) 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.

Let’s begin by using a mashal. 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 crazy 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 implausible as Mormonism, and we are not trying to compare the religions in other ways. 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 and friends have 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, 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 months to find ways for those options to work out. In a later section (Part IV) we'll 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.

2) We are still the same people. We are not jumping off a cliff into a life of 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 not even planning to have a regular TV in our house. We are also planning to spend a significant part of our time and income working for charitable causes. We are not suddenly losing our values, and we are not about to suddenly go chasing after all 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.)

3) 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 very important to us. We love you all 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 Part IV), 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 our children be a bad influence on your children? (Hopefully not, and we'll try hard to avoid it.) Will we be respectful at family gatherings or in our families' houses? (Of course!) 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 understand that just like our first priority is the wellbeing of our children, so too your first priority is to maintain the religious lifestyle and wellbeing of your children. But we ask that you at least *try* to find ways of not cutting us off completely. We have a beautiful relationship with many of you, and we do not want to lose that. 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.

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 it is our careful research that 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.

This one is not quite as important as the other points, and maybe it's even too much to ask for. After all, we'd prefer to keep family connections even if that would require that our families thought we left religion because we've been somehow traumatized or something like that. But we'd prefer to get this point across anyway.

We also 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 left 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 (belief without rigorous evidence) 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" (available online at <https://jewishaction.com/religion/faith/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 from 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.

(The problem with the above paragraph, of course, is that in this letter we cannot spell out our reasons for not believing. This ties our hands and makes the conversation pretty frustrating from our perspective. We are very confident that if you’d see the evidence then you’d come to agree that we’re not crazy or irrational. But we cannot tell you what that evidence is, so we can’t really explain ourselves. By the same token, however, you cannot really judge whether or not our reasons for leaving make any sense, since you understandably do not want to hear what those reasons are.)

5) We do not think that you are irrational or foolish for believing, and we do not look down on from 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 even written an entire essay *defending* emunah peshuta from a philosophical point of view. The essay is available upon request – 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 he 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, Hashem can't hold us accountable if He 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.

Part II: Our story

Philo's story

[...]

Judy's story

[...]

Part III: What we 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. We are less confident about the existence of God in general, or about the existence of supernatural forces. 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 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 – 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 known as formal epistemology 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%	1%
Divine inspiration: The Torah was at very least Divinely inspired (this is what Conservative Jews believe, for example).	< 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 מסורה or belief in all עיקרים י"ג as per the רמב"ם. (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 עיקרים י"ג as per the רמב"ם; belief in the authority of מסורה (ירידת הדורות, Kabbalah, אגדות 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 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 hours if you are interested, but this is not the place.

Part IV: Why we feel we need to leave

[...]

Part V: Current Plans

[...]

FAQ

List of questions

[Questions with an asterisk (*) are answered at least partly in the Appendix, which is available upon request.]

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You're not thinking clearly

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 actually leaving the community in Part IV. We obviously can't 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.

[In the Appendix (available upon request) we have included a tiny 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 closet 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 chavirim 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.

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 Part I, point #4.

5. You've been eating treif, haven't you? The timtum 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 Mormon, or who grew up 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 Ramban'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 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.

But what about ...?

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 too provocative for some people, so we have moved the response to the Appendix, which is available upon request. 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 Ribbono 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). See Part III for more on this. 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, which is available upon request.]

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, which is available upon request.]

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 sounds 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 you’re probably not interested in discussing the details of the evidence or arguments, there’s not much to discuss on this topic. If it makes you happier to think that we really believe, then great.

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 <https://www.iep.utm.edu/divine-c/#H3>), which (in its modern form) many people think 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. The Rambam explicitly looked up to Aristotle as a source of ethics – Shemoneh Prakim and Hilchos De'os are largely taken from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean 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 kids 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 return lost wallets to strangers without

taking the money, 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 in 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 former clients and 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. But there's a reason why many gedolim and poskim have warned against discussing these subjects – it's dangerous, and we ourselves are prime examples of why it's so dangerous. According to many poskim it may even be an issur d'oraissa to look into this further.

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

Absolutely not. See Part I, point #5.

24. *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 they 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.

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 relatively frequently 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.

Leaving the Orthodox Community

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

See the discussion in Part IV.

26. 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, and this factor is independent from all of the above advice.

27. 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, the risks involved in *not* transitioning seem much higher and more severe.

28. Can't you just become Modern Orthodox instead of going all the way off the derech?

See the discussion in Part IV.

29. Can't you at least keep some halachos in order to ease some of the pain to your parents?

Possibly. Our main concern in this regard is Judy's sanity and psychological health, as we discussed in Part IV. At the moment, Shabbos and frum modes of dress both make her feel extremely trapped, so we will almost certainly drop those at least to a large degree. Kashrus is much easier for us to keep, and as it stands now we are in fact planning to keep our kitchen kosher in the hope that some family members will be able to visit and eat at our house.

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

See Part I, 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. We are particularly looking for a strong community as we search for a place to live.

Additionally, we are not completely getting rid of Judaism. As we mentioned elsewhere, we are planning to keep a good deal of the traditions at least in some form. We are also trying to get involved in Jewish (but not specifically religious) organizations and community events.

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 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.

But ultimately, yes, there is a risk involved here. But as far as we can tell there is an even 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.

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.

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.

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.

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

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. Psychologists do not actually view this as a risky behavior if done responsibly.

Teenage pregnancies: These are extremely uncommon in upper and middle class schools.

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 son, for example, has told us that he’s been bullied several times in his frum school. 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 you’ve described. 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?

(Although we also 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 are almost certainly not going to 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 will 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.

Tradition

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, that sort of thing. As of now, we're 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. 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. R' [...] (who knows our situation) has in fact told Judy's parents that they can eat at our house as long as they trust us to tell the truth about the fact that we keep a kosher kitchen.

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

We will be open with our children about our beliefs, and we will encourage our children 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, available upon request.) 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.

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. And 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.

Family

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 several 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, 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!

[response removed because of personal details]

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 it! 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. Our kitchen is still completely kosher, and we intend to continue keeping it kosher.

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

No.

50. I can't let you or your children interact with my family, because you will be a terrible influence on them. What if they start having doubts?

We understand that your priorities are to protect your children in the same way that our priority is to protect ours. If you feel that means not letting your kids play with our children, then that will be very sad for us but there's nothing we can do about that. Once again: We do not want this, and if there were any other way then we'd probably do it.

We would however recommend that you talk this over with a rav and especially with people who are familiar with this particular situation before making a decision to cut us off.

51. I'm sorry, but halachically I need to cut you off.

Please ask a rav to make sure of this, make sure it is a rav who has experience dealing with similar situations. We know of plenty of rabbonim who have told families not to cut off family members, and in fact this was the advice that both sets of parents have received from multiple rabbonim who

know of this situation. We would especially recommend that you discuss this with people who are already familiar with this particular situation.

52. 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.

53. 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.

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

R' [...] (who knows our situation) 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. 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.

55. 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.