



Uncovered: How I Left Hasidic Life and Finally Came Home

Leah Lax

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In *Uncovered*, Leah Lax tells her story—beginning as a young teen who left her liberal, secular home for life as a Hasidic Jew, and ending as a forty-something woman who has to abandon the only world she’s known for thirty years in order to achieve personal freedom. In understated, crystalline prose, Lax details her experiences with arranged marriage, cult-like faith, and motherhood during her years with the Hasidim, and explores how her creative, sexual, and spiritual longings simmer beneath the surface throughout her time there.

The first book to tell the story of a gay woman who spent thirty adult years in the Hasidic fold, *Uncovered* is the moving story of Lax’s long journey toward finding a home where she truly belongs.

Uncovered: How I Left Hasidic Life and Finally Came Home Details

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From Reader Review Uncovered: How I Left Hasidic Life and Finally Came Home for online ebook

Marilyn Maya says

I gave "Uncovered" How I left Hasidic life and finally came home- three stars because I read it in 2 days so I must have been immersed. I thought the author, Lax wrote well and that she had a story that I was interested in. But as a Jewish woman who is learning about Chabad Lubivitch, I thought her truth was skewed by her past, her anger and her personality. I respect her truth, but her anger and attitude toward her family was harsh. She speaks about her mother as a hoarder but admits when her father leaves for the hospital, her mother has cleaned up her act; so who was the hoarder and what happened? She paints her mother as cold and perhaps colluding with her father's sexual abuse of her and her sisters yet she doesn't really go into much detail about anyone but herself.

What I liked most and oddly disliked most was the way she describes the spirituality of Judaism and her joy in finding that special love of the Almighty. Yet, what I disliked about her take was that I didn't think she was fair in her assessment of the sect. I know a few of the people who she was speaking about, specifically, "Rabbi Geller" and his wife and children, and the Bas Chana in Minnesota where my daughter got married 2 years ago coincidentally in the same place she describes in her book. I never felt the fanaticism she describes, only great love and understanding for the returning Jew. I could never afford to spend \$1000.00 on food for Passover or even close to that and I was never pushed to do anything I wasn't ready for. True, her experience was many years ago when I was living with my Puerto Rican husband in Brooklyn, far removed from my mother's faith. (My father was also Puerto Rican) but she does admit to being "lax" about using birth control and much of her decisions in life were her decisions, that she tends to make excuses for. I own my bad decisions and don't blame others all the time. I have also been sexually abused and attacked more than once and have an anxiety disorder since childhood. So, I do understand how your past can affect your actions. In addition my daughter, the youngest, is a lesbian who also dated guys in her past. She is not religious but lights the candles and attends the Chabad on High Holidays but is never pressured and wouldn't go if she was forced to be more religious.

I don't think this is the most strict sect of Judaism. In Japan I attended a Sephardic Temple that was way more strict than the Chabad, my Rabbi refers to some sects as a fire and brimstone sects of Judaism. She talks about wanting to be a boy and how the men do not respect their wives and that the wives have no power. I disagree. I find the women to be fiery and talk back to the Rabbi's even during services. My Rabbi's wife corrected her husband's use of a word when he was on the raised platform speaking.

I also didn't believe her silence about her sexual relationship with her husband. I think she must have enjoyed at least some of the sex in 27 years whether she thought about women or not. She talks about erotic dreams about women so she is a passionate woman and so why didn't she communicate with her husband before she was ready to leave instead of holding grudges about his faults. She seems sly about things she doesn't want to reveal, not what I enjoy in a memoir.

I will end that I loved the parts of the book that show her search for spiritual beauty and her writing can be beautiful at times, though sometimes a bit wordy. I wish she could have done what memoirist Mary Karr says in "The Art of Memoir" -write about the people you hate with extreme love" It would have made a far better memoir.

Jennifer says

I truly wanted to like this book. But ultimately I couldn't because as the story evolved, I found that I really don't care for Ms. Lax's attitude. Initially, it seemed as though she had barely been exposed to a Hassidic lifestyle as a woman from Texas who gets swept in by Chabad. Much of her early story is reminiscent of a

sociology study I read years ago about the different paths to Judaism that different types of women take, “Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism: Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism” by Lynn Davidman. In her study, Davidman sites how young women who might have issues were more drawn to Chabad, while women who were well grounded professionals were more attracted to the Orthodox environment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Leah Lax’s family background – a mentally ill father and mother who’s a hoarder would clearly put her on track to Chabad, where she sought to find the missing links in her life. Although the scenario of how she was set up with her eventual husband sound quite a bit too simplistic, she married him and went on to have seven children and run a seemingly Chabad like lifestyle. However, all along her feelings that she was actually a lesbian haunted her. That’s credible, but her descent away from her married life to finally accept who she was sexually is laced with anger, and it’s at that point that I found her difficult to read. It wasn’t Orthodoxy’s fault that she shunted her sexuality aside, it’s her own. If she spent many years trying to fit into a world that wasn’t going to be tolerant that was of her own free will.

Claire says

I received Uncovered as part of a Goodreads giveaway.

Raised in a troubled home with secular Jewish parents, Leah Lax became enamored of the Hasidic lifestyle in her late teens. Married young to a man she barely knew, she gave up her own interests and goals to take on the many demands of a Hasidic woman's life--housekeeping, childbearing and rearing, and constant unquestioning support of her husband--in seeking to find favor with God, but all while fighting her own will and desires.

After nearly 3 decades in the movement, with her children nearly grown and her marriage in shambles, Lax finally left (after years of reflection through writing) and came to terms with her sexuality. Now living with her wife, Uncovered is Lax's story of the insular faith that fascinated but almost destroyed her.

Uncovered is a dark and intriguing story, especially for those of us who are interested in niche religious groups. Lax's journey from a starry-eyed young woman seeking family and community to a disillusioned, overworked, depressed housewife is painful, but her eventual escape and establishment of a new life is powerful. Over the years, Lax has become a polished writer, and if I had to criticize the book at all, it would be in this. It's almost too polished, too poetic--some of the emotions and experiences she describes, I think, would be better served by a rawer narrative. That said, this is a highly satisfying and fantastic memoir.

Rebecca says

This book is such an easy read because of the writing skills of the author. At the same time it takes you on a difficult journey that really made me think about the choices I have made through out my, admittedly very different, and yet as we are both women of faith, very similar life journey. I recommend this book to anyone who is interested in the Hasidic community. I'm not Jewish, but I have always felt drawn to this community and their strong ties to each other and their commitment to the faith journey. Thank you Leah, for sharing your story with us and giving us a peek behind the curtain.

Debi Lantzer says

Let me start out by sharing a little about me: I grew up in a suburb of Akron, Ohio. It was a relatively rural community and we never seemed to have conversations about people's religions. No one family seemed any different than another. Later though, as I grew up and relocated to an eastside suburb of Cleveland, Ohio, I first began to learn about the Hasidic community. On the weekends, if we were in the neighborhood next to ours, you'd see Hasidic jews walking to temple. I didn't know anything more about the community other than how they looked on the outside.

So onto this book review.....

In this book, *Uncovered: How I Left Hasidic Life and Finally Came Home*, however, the author, Leah Lax provides her readers with deep insight into the culture of the Hasidic community while at the same time providing that community with deep respect.

This a beautifully-written and brave book by Leah Lax, which she dedicates to "covered women everywhere". I honestly marvel at her courage and integrity and I appreciate that she is so willing to be transparent in sharing her deep emotions, fears and joys. Ms. Lax details her experiences during her years with the Hasidim, and explores how her longings simmered beneath the surface throughout her time.

Leah Lax was raised in a Jewish immigrant family in Dallas, Texas. Growing up, she learned to crochet and to ride a horse. Ms. Lax reveals how she wanted to escape her parents because she felt her mother was distant and self-centered. She also shares how her father hurt his daughters in an unforgivable way. She was drawn to the Hasidic life by the promises of home, and enters an arranged marriage to man at the age of 19. Ms. Lax describes how she would dress modestly believing to please God, and wore wigs or scarfs on her head with clothing that would cover her legs, arms and body. Through her religion, she believed that her fulfillment would come through marriage and motherhood.

I was shocked to learn that the Hasidic customs and rules required that she be ritually immersed in a bath seven days after her menstrual cycle in order to return to a state of purity so that sexual relations with her husband could resume. It was interesting to learn that Ms. Lax bore and raised seven children in this culture, four of which have since left the Hasidic lifestyle.

It wasn't until Ms. Lax began to question her life that she could ultimately have the courage to change her life and become her true self. For anyone who is considering entering the Hasidic community, this book definitely serves as an eye-opening warning. The author's story is very compelling and reveals how someone such as Ms. Lax, an intelligent, modern day woman, could subject herself to the stringencies of the strict orthodoxy.

By sharing her story in *Uncovered*, Ms. Lax invites us into her heart and allows us to see her own contradictions and longings. She takes the risk of our disapproval as well as the possible disapproval of the Hasidic community that took her in and gave her life meaning when she was searching. This is a story that could be any woman trapped in a loveless marriage who stays because of religious beliefs and the sake of the children.

The book is very well written, straightforward and honest. I would recommend it to anyone struggling with feeling trapped or oppressed and their current situation in that it could provide them with hope in their situation.

I received a complimentary copy of this book from the publishers and BookSparks in exchange for this post, which is my honest review and unbiased opinion.

Maxine says

4.5 stars.

I'm still not entirely sure what I want to write about this memoir, or even how I feel about it - but I do know that I enjoyed it.

This is a somewhat disjointed memoir - it jumps throughout Leah's life, from childhood to today - and at times is written in such a florid manner that it's difficult to figure out what's going on. However, by halfway into her story you have a better idea of what's happening in her life, her history, her struggles, and her choices.

Leah was brought up in a dysfunctional home with (view spoiler), and this caused her to look for meaning and order outside herself, instead of dealing with her home life and her internal struggles. She found a home in Hasidic Judaism, and stayed there for over 30 years.

However, Leah is also a lesbian, and her story, and her struggle, is both a tale of navigating a narrow religious spectrum and dealing with doubt, and also of coming to terms with her own sexuality, and choices. At times it does seem like she jumped into Hasidism without really doing her due diligence - but at other times it seems that she did her homework, and experienced and participated as much as she could. That she truly believed and joined the community with open arms. Her marriage was clearly troubled, and was so from the start. I think a better and more understanding husband would have helped her on her journey immensely. But, of course, this is a memoir and so we don't know what Levi was feeling or thinking through his wife's internal struggles.

I do think some blame should be levelled at the feet of the Hasidic community that Leah was a part of. Whether it is making sure that those who wish to convert or "return home" (baalei teshuva) truly understand their roles within the religion, and making sure that marriages aren't being done in haste, but rather are true life partners. As Leah herself mentions, having a Hasidic family in your corner to make sure your match is as good as can be would have helped, and perhaps that's why the two of them ended up together - neither one had a religious family to help.

A beautifully written, lyrical, memoir - and this is very much a memoir, strictly of Leah's life, ideas, and conflicts - full of heartache and naked truth.

Laura.125Pages says

Original review at www.125pages.com

*I received a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

4 Stars

Leah Lax is the perfect Hasidic woman. Teaching young believers and speaking at conferences while raising her seven children, some would say her life was ideal. But as Leah ages she feels less sure of her place in both her life and her religion. Taking control of her future is scary, heart wrenching and freeing. Learning to

become true to herself is the heart of this journey.

I was initially unsure of a memoir written by an ex-Hasidic Jew, as that is a religion that does not seem oppressive to me, so I feared it would drag. However, I am glad I read it. Leah's life as it unfolds from a young college student in an arranged marriage to a strong women who follows her heart is a great journey. Diving into the intricacies of daily life shaped by religion and the men who interpret it, Unbound offers a unique view of an old religion melded into the modern era. Leah's triumph, merging her life as a woman of faith and a mother, with her coming to terms with herself and eventually coming out made for a powerful story. At times the story was slow but the telling was crisp and the emotions true. I highly recommend Uncovered for a different kind of summer read.

Story Circle Book Reviews says

Uncovered: How I left Hasidic Life and Finally Came Home is a riveting tale of Leah Lax's journey into an ultra-Orthodox Jewish sect, marriage, family, and the acknowledgment after years of soul-searching and angst that she is a lesbian. As a Jewish lesbian myself, I couldn't wait to go along with her story.

What I didn't expect to discover was that she had grown up in Dallas, as I had, and we both attended the same synagogue, although she's a few years older than me and I didn't know her. But the familiarity of the story permeated throughout. This book was a fascinating glimpse into the world of modern-day Hasidism through Leah's eyes. Once I started the book, I couldn't wait to carve out time to get back, as the tale was riveting and the writing masterful. I found myself talking to her as I read, urging her to make different decisions and to come to terms with who she really is. As the story built towards the climax, I found myself wanting to read the sequel, to find out what happens to her, her children, and her husband.

Read this book, you won't be disappointed. I was sorry to reach the end.

by Debra Winegarten
for Story Circle Book Reviews
reviewing books by, for, and about women

Teresa Kander says

I am very glad this book was included in this year's fall reading challenge. I learned so much by reading it, particularly about the Hasidim. It was fascinated to watch Leah grow from a college student looking for home and love to a Hasidic woman in an arranged marriage to a strong woman with an amazing sense of self.

Just reading about the rules and traditions in a Hasidic family, I started to feel claustrophobic. I can't imagine being starved for love, thinking you've found it, and then realizing that the very religion you turned to for love will keep you from having the kind of relationship you always wanted with a husband.

The love that she has for her children (all seven of them!) comes through in the section of the book where she writes of raising them. Her joy in that part of her life was obviously a comfort to her.

After thirty years in the faith, she chose to leave it, and to find herself. She has to learn how to live in the outside world, and to be an independent woman.

Her story is inspiring and heartwarming.

Issi says

This is largely about the Hasidic religion and way of life. It is a powerful book in which Leah Lax tells us about her choices, or lack of them, as a wife and mother. She enters this way of life as a young adult and brings up 7 children before she finally 'sees the light', or comes home, as she puts it. Completely 'brainwashed' into following all sorts of religious laws, including the wearing of a wig, long skirts, tights, and numerous lifestyle restrictions, Leah begins to question her life but ultimately finds the courage to change it and be herself. The most poignant question in the book is when she tries to explain it all to her friend Rosellen, who asks her simply 'How can a thinking person reconcile all that'? How indeed? Excellent book.

Jan Rice says

This is a memoir about a woman's experience as part of a Hasidic (Ultra-Orthodox) Jewish community in Texas. I was reading it for the book club, driving myself to read a certain number of pages per day and get done, so I had a sense of obedience and subjecting my will to that of others that let me feel a little of what the author is describing--although in my case there were just seven days of 50 pages per day before my obedience, this time, would be over.

This book purports to be a voyage of discovery but to a degree falls into a trap that a lot of memoirs do: telling her side of the story. As such it's like hearing one side in a marital conflict. Here are some of the descriptive terms that came to me at first: *voyeuristic, blaming, self-justifying, titillating, minstrel show-like, denigrating, self-serving, ingratiating, angry, self-righteous, shameless, judgmental, childlike, emotional chicanery.*

I realize those are pretty harsh. But I don't like unfairness, and don't think much of trashing another way of life, treating it, in effect, as a cult.

That being said, I wouldn't have done well in that or one of the other traditional ways of life. I can imagine bad things happening to me in the old days, depending on what the culture was, maybe being burned at the stake, at any rate, ostracized, or just getting sick from unhappiness.

It took me until approximately p. 222 to get clear on the author's actual theme, which is that this community saved her. Her family of origin was beyond dysfunctional although sadly not terribly unusual, and to a great extent the community she joined saved her. It gave her a new and much more solid family in which to grow up and, finally, rebel against in the process of finding herself. Although that dynamic, that this way of life was not a cult but a lifeline, is never as clear as the first dynamic. And in many ways she succeeded and functioned well in the life she'd chosen (*not* seduced into), remaining in it for nearly 30 years, growing up, running a family, raising seven children, and behaving lovingly.

So a few other descriptors are: *belonging, in process, tragic, painful, eye-witnessing.* Regarding the last, sometimes Lax loses the judging and denigrating temporarily, and simply describes the scene. But she's still not grateful. I thought the author owed that community a debt of gratitude.

I don't think it's much of a spoiler to say the author defines herself as a lesbian. Beside being one of the many facets of living that she has to come to terms with, it becomes as well a way of saying she *had* to leave, in

our modern biology-as-destiny way. And maybe that's the absolute case here. Maybe she's way out on the extreme where her lesbian sexuality is an absolute. But I wasn't convinced; didn't find the author convincing. Maybe you've known women, as I have, who leave their marriages waving the lesbian flag, even living for a while with a woman in the same house with the former husband (something you couldn't do with another man without somebody getting killed), and, then, perhaps after few years, find another man and remarry. The author didn't luck up in the marriage department. Her husband was uptight and inhibited, mostly unable to be caring and generous (sexually or otherwise)--or, at any rate, he wasn't. Both of them were sexually inexperienced and awkward, and he was no help. The author makes clear there were happy marriages in the community. She thought, to the end, that she was just supposed to feel some way that would cure both of them. He was no help. You don't have to be gay or in a Hasidic community to get this unhappy result; think On Chesil Beach.

Here are a few other points I'd like to make:

She says Jesus's last supper was a ritual Passover seder. That's a common misconception. It wasn't. Assuming the Gospel episode is historical, it *was* a Passover celebration, which included several of the ritual objects that are still in use today. The early rabbinical sages had to figure out what to do after the Temple had been destroyed. They came up with today's seder sometime at the end of the first century and during the second century.

She refers to "*this community where Torah study is recreation.*" Well, hey, I think it is, too, and I know others who do who aren't ultra-Orthodox. Obviously I'm not talking about devotional study, but study like literary, historical, or philosophical study, which I also think is great fun. So, maybe I'm weird, but I'm not alone.... I particularly like intimating what people's mindset was in former times--not just the same as now, you can be sure. I like seeing where things come from. I even like understanding about the sacrifices in Leviticus... Well, now I *know* you think I'm weird.

Speaking of her lesbianism, she says, "*I am exactly what you shield your children from, what the Torah calls an abomination.*" Well, no. Leaving aside whatever it says about men (and how that's been translated and interpreted), the Torah doesn't say anything about women. Nor does the whole Hebrew bible. (Maybe not the Christian Bible either?--I'm not sure about that.) It doesn't forbid sex between women, never even contemplates it. Why (other than that it doesn't result in pregnancy)? I heard an interesting and fun theory: We're talking patriarchal, right? And we're speaking of something men like. So why would we expect it would be forbidden?

Another stray thought: I read that, before emancipation, life was different. There was no "Orthodox" Judaism; there was only Judaism (Orthodoxy being a reaction to the liberalizing movement that occurred in some locales after emancipation). What I read was that in those days much more was conducted according to custom, *minhag*, and not so much according to written rules. I'm speaking of the ultra-Orthodox and their way of life, and no doubt theses can and have been written, but not by me.

Finally, on the point of breaking out of some community into *freedom*: that's how we conceive of it. But we always break out into something else, with its own rules, markers, expectations, and demands.

I saw a movie, *Arranged*, about two young women teachers, an Orthodox Jew and a Muslim, both dealing with finding a husband through arranged marriages, who receive pressure from a segment of the outside community in the person of their principal. The principal is *not* the sympathetic character.

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0848542/?...>

Carol says

Uncovered by Leah Lax is extremely intense and personal telling of Leah Lax's life. In the 1970's she was younger than most in her college classes but also very naïve. She wanted to escape her parents because her mother was distant and self-centered and her father hurt his daughters in an unforgiveable way. She was drawn to the Hasidic life by the promises of home, and rituals and customs that seem to give love. For the first third of the book, I was having trouble understanding her. I wanted to scream at her, you have more than two choices in life, and you can find your own way.

There were lots of changes that she had to make from superficial ones like wearing a wig and obeying the many rules like no electricity on the Sabbath much more challenging was facing the fact that she was not going to receive the kind of love that she had wanted from her husband and also understanding his strict obedience to the rules. He chose everything, she had no decisions left to her. I loved reading about her seven children and the joy that she found taking care of them. She embraced the life totally and later started to question it. Many parts of the story must have been very difficult to write about. She is unusually honest in her writing. She had to ask herself hard questions. Many people might have reacted differently and swept the questions away continuing their lives as before.

I could not stop reading once I got past the part about preparation for her arranged marriage.

I highly recommend this book for all who like books that make them think and feel.

I received this finished copy from the publisher as a win from FirstReads but that in no way influenced my thoughts or feelings in this review.

Betsy Olinger says

I listened to the audio. Compelling and addictive.

Jennifer says

Leah's journey led the reader to understand a woman and what plights she may go through. The reader learns about Hasidic life through Leah's eyes.

Learning about Hasidic life doesn't bog down the reader. Instead, it adds to Leah's journey. and makes her life heavy. As a woman I could relate to the expectations put upon Leah. To me, those expectations became burdens on Leah.

As a reader, I found this book quite readable. I enjoyed reading about Leah's life and was happy for her in the end.

I received a galley of this book on NetGalley for my honest review.

Margaret says

I've always been curious to read the memoirs of people who leave a fundamental religious group to join the larger population. I wonder about what life is like inside those ultra-religious communities. I also wonder how a person can come to leave everything she has known. So when a GR friend listed this book on her "to read" list, I contacted my library and reserved a copy.

This book differs from the others I've read in that the author was not born into a family living in a fundamentalist community. Leah Lax was born in Texas to a family, which was nominally Jewish but primarily secular. She rebelled against her own family, not because of their religious laxness (no pun intended) but because of their severe dysfunction. Lax and both her sisters were both abused and neglected. In addition to her problematic family situation, Lax is also troubled by her own sexual attraction to women. She does not then recognize what she is feeling and decides to follow a more traditional path by joining a Hasidic group. Her decision to join the Lubavitcher Hasidic sect was not one she made quickly. She had investigated the sect for years, attending all sorts of outreach programs for Jews returning to the orthodox faith, before she finally decided to accept membership in the group. Once in, she gets married immediately to a religious man whom she hardly knows. Lax is honest enough to say she could have turned this man down, she could have asked questions about him. But she did not. It might have helped if she had had her own religious family to advise and protect her. But she did not. She was so eager to escape her own family and her sexuality that she dove right in.

Once she has joined the group and married, she does what she can to make this religion work for her and her new family. She is truly attracted to the trance-like and frenzied states that exemplify how this charismatic sect worships God. She tries to become the good person God wants her to be. She still has images of herself loving women, but she sees this as her desire to be a man so as to be a full member of the faith. One who does not want to know a truth will find many ways to interpret experience, thoughts, and dreams. She is afraid to have children right away, and she and her husband get a rabbinical dispensation that allows them to use a diaphragm for a year. And then the children come: seven of them. Her husband leaves all housework and child care to her, a reality Lax insists is not true of all of the Hasidic families she knows. And the years fly by. But Lax never is able to bury her desire for women, nor ignore the call to the arts that had defined her early life and her education—she had studied cello at college. And so she looks for ways to expand her life. She is fortunate in many of the contacts she makes, especially the feminist writer Rosellen Brown and the MFA creative writing program at the University of Houston. And bit-by-bit over a period of years she builds the new life and new nexus of friendships and colleagues she will need to live that new life. She maintains her Jewish faith, joining a gay and lesbian synagogue. She reconnects with her sisters and mother, who says she is glad that her daughter is finally coming home.

Of course, a memoir is the memory of the person writing it. And Lax has shaped this carefully, giving clues all along so that the shifts and turns in her life path are not really that shocking to the reader. What we want to know is why she waited so long. Even as she leaves the Hasidic sect she had belonged to for decades, she is clear to show its attractive side. She discusses the beauty of the rituals and the security of truly belonging to a large group. One who knows little about this orthodox faith can learn much here. At the same time, she sees the need to have rabbis approve every move seemingly outside the Law as an infantilization of its adherents. She deals with her own guilt over abandoning her family. And there is an epilogue, which tells us she has found love and maintained contact with all seven of her children, four of whom have also left Hasidism behind.

