



*Queens' Largest Weekly Community Newspaper Group*

## Orthodox outcast to recall his story

Shulem Deen talks about why those leaving community face troubles

Shulem Deen will talk about becoming an outcast in the ultra-Orthodox community this Monday in Forest Hills.  
by David Schneier, Chronicle Contributor

Faigy Meyer was a 30-year-old ex-Hasid who jumped to her death from a rooftop bar in Manhattan in July.

She asked a bartender which way was east — Jews here pray facing east, toward Jerusalem — climbed over a ledge, and jumped.

Questions remain over whether Meyer's impending eviction, mental illness, being shunned by her family and community, or her inability to cope in the secular world drove her to take her life.

Those issues and more will be discussed at the Central Queens Y on Oct. 26 when Shulem Deen will talk about them and his own experience with the ultra-Orthodox community.

In a recent interview, Deen said there might have been a variety of reasons for Meyer's suicide but that "Her struggling was very familiar to those who leave.

"Being shunned and ostracized by her family and community certainly played a part," Deen added.

He should know.

Deen's love of reading, going to the library, and listening to the radio led to him becoming an Orthodox outcast.

"I was declared a heretic and I was expelled from the community," Deen said.

After Deen's ex-wife returned to the Skever community in New Square, NY, the people there labeled him a "wicked and a bad person" to his ex-wife and children.

The Hasidic community petitioned the court to keep Deen away from his children.

"It was an extremely painful experience," he said.

His ex-wife and five children now have no contact with him.

New Square was created in 1956 by Rabbi Yakov Yosef Twersky, Deen said, to recreate the European Jewish shtetl, or ghetto, and keep away "from the urban, cosmopolitan influences of New York City."

Judy Braun had to move out of her Borough Park Hasidic community after the publication of her first book, "Hush."

Written as fiction, it was based on three victims of sexual abuse Braun knew, one who committed suicide at 11.

"It was a surreal nightmare." Braun said. "In 2010, we weren't up to that conversation. The community didn't want to admit it existed."

The community didn't have the words or knowledge to talk about sexual abuse so the troubled victims were labeled as "mentally unstable" and "treated like lepers," Braun said.

Change has come "from the bottom up because younger parents don't want their children to go through this."

"In the past two years, it's been different. Now, a woman gives workshops twice a month in Borough Park to large crowds," Braun said.

Deen is on the board of directors of Footsteps, an organization created in 2003 for Jews leaving their ultra-Orthodox world.

Footsteps provides educational scholarships, GED tutoring, a computer lab, one-on-one counseling, group discussions and legal assistance for parents trying to have custody or visitation rights to their children.

Braun said, "It's hard to describe the loneliness. Footsteps fills that void where there are people like you. It's like an organization of survivors or refugees."

Footsteps address is held secret so as not to be harassed, but its phone number is (212) 253-0890. The website Failedmessiah and other social media sites are also used as ways the ex-Orthodox community connects.

Yossi Mendelson, a Lubavitch rabbi at Congregation Machane Chodosh in Forest Hills, said in an e-mail interview:

"People who are honest, intelligent, and healthy at every degree of the religious spectrum, including atheists, live with some degree of doubt and uncertainty about some aspects of their ideology.

"I counsel individuals on both sides of the issue to maintain respectful relationships with their family and friends."

Deen will be the speaker at the Central Queens Y, 67-09 108 St. in Forest Hills on Oct. 26 at 1:30 p.m. For more information, you can call (718) 268-5011.