

FORWARD

Guilt and Anxiety Stalk Lives of Secret Sabbath-Breakers

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By AMY KLEIN

Simon Ganz has been lying to his family for years. Well, he hasn't lied exactly, but he hasn't exactly been telling them the truth, either. His family suspects, but they don't really know for sure, because they never asked outright. The 26-year-old artist is so afraid to come out, that he, like most individuals interviewed for this article, refused to give his real name.

Simon is a secret Sabbath-breaker.

Raised Orthodox in a family that strictly observes the Sabbath -- that will not use electricity, ride in cars or even rip toilet paper -- Simon began his unorthodox flirtation four years ago when he moved to Manhattan from his parents' Queens home. "I went camping one weekend and by accident ended up driving on Shabbos," he said. "And I lived." That camping trip was the first weekend of many during which he went out, watched television or traveled on his Saturdays, which were becoming less and less Sabbath-like. Although by now Simon has come to terms with his way of life, and even has told his friends, he hasn't been able to bring himself to tell his family.

"It's too much of a headache," he said. "I'll get lectured by everyone in my family, from my grandmother to my sister and my mother."

Simon is not the only secret Sabbath-breaker in the Orthodox community. While it is never easy for grown children to carve out different paths from their families', when it comes to Sabbath observance expectations and tensions run so high that many people don't bother to tell their families about their new lifestyles. Obviously, no statistics exist on the numbers of individuals departing from what in Orthodox communities is a strenuously observed norm. Rabbis find it hard to generalize on the subject but do not think that Sabbath-breaking is a mass phenomenon in the Orthodox world.

"Like human relationships, every individual has a unique relationship to God," said Rabbi Moshe Krupka, the national director of synagogue services at the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America. "There will always be people that stop and question why they're doing it and should they be doing it," Rabbi Krupka said. The fact that some Sabbath-breakers hide their lack of observance "speaks about their own confusion," he added. "If they don't believe, it doesn't mean they have to move out of the house."

Even so, the perceived loss of face is such that many Sabbath-breakers go to great lengths to hide their behavior.

A Lubavitcher chasid who lived for a time in Crown Heights in Brooklyn, Isaiah, said that for years he

pretended to observe the Sabbath out of respect for his community. It was a double life: He attended Sabbath meals in Crown Heights and then took the subway to night clubs in Manhattan. Isaiah suspects that many people in Crown Heights and other Orthodox Brooklyn neighborhoods, such as Boro Park, do the same thing.

“The community is a huge presence in people's lives,” he said. “Outside the community they feel that they are nothing. As a result of that, to publicly desecrate the Shabbos, they'd be losing it. So if one desecrates Shabbos hiddenly [sic], one still gets to be part of that community.”

Lisa, an aspiring actress living in New York, feared that if her parents found out about her Sabbath-breaking it would cause a major blowout with her family. Raised in Los Angeles by newly observant parents, Lisa started experimenting when she moved to New York seven years ago at age 22. “In my early 20s it started with turning on the light,” she said. Two years ago, for the first time, she went out on a Friday night. “I was terrified someone would see me as I entered the subway. I had a purse with me, but I hid it in my coat. I made it like I was really going to shul, but I was going down to the village,” she said. At first, Lisa didn't tell her friends. “I was not completely comfortable with it, and I didn't want them to judge me,” she said. “I only told people who I knew would be supportive...and I have found out that they were struggling with the same thing.” Some Friday nights Lisa has a “more casual” Sabbath with her friends, “where we have dinner but we don't leave the bathroom light on,” she said.

The blowout never came. When she recently told her parents that she was no longer Orthodox, they were upset, but they did not confront her or ask her to clarify what she meant. “They don't really want to bring it up. They think maybe I am or I'm not. They don't want to ask me directly,” she said. Still, she would like them to understand her choice.

“Eventually, I hope that my family and I can be more honest about it, that I don't have the same religious observance level as they do...that we are still a family,” she said.

Alan, a 32-year-old lawyer, is “out” about his nonobservance to most of the people in his life: The only people who don't know that he doesn't observe the Sabbath are his parents. In this, Alan is following a family tradition:

His older sister, married with children, doesn't tell their parents either. She used to park the car around the corner from her house so that she could secretly drive on the weekend without her neighbors, who knew the parents, being able to see her. Alan says that people hide because of their “fear of rejection.” He added, “If they hurt or upset people, they won't be as accepted by them and by their communities. They'll cause grief, which can be very guilt-rendering,” he said.

Some people would rather live with the guilt than have the truth come out.

Take Anna, a 46-year-old physical therapist from New Jersey. For almost 15 years her parents did not know that she no longer was observant. The youngest of four daughters, Anne could not bear to tell her parents, especially because her older sister, Esther, 53, had “disappointed” them by marrying a non-religious man. To keep up what she calls a “charade,” Anna would stay over at her parents' for holidays such as Rosh Hashana and Passover. But about seven years ago, her cover was blown. Esther accidentally told their mother that Anna had come over for a meal on Rosh Hashana.

“Horror is the only way to describe it. The argument that ensued was the most horrible, worst argument ever. It was so terrible that I blocked a lot of the words out -- she said she could never come over to my house (and I didn't have her for many years after that)...that she could never trust me, religiously,” Anna said. “She wasn't mad that I lied to her, but that I wasn't religious. She was upset that I wasn't following her way.”

Esther is a therapist in upstate New York who often deals with religious family issues. Although she has never discussed her lack of observance with her parents, she said she has felt guilty about it. “It's really about the parent-child relationships. It's about children not wanting to disappoint their parents and lose their love.”

“Both [parent and child] are feeling rejection. The parent is feeling you rejected what I gave you, and the child is afraid the parent will reject them. Notice it's never about God,” she said.

In an ironic reversal of fortune, Esther found herself facing a similar dilemma with one of her own sons: He started observing the Sabbath. “I was so upset when he became shomer Shabbos,” she said, using the Hebrew term for Sabbath observant. “He was rejecting what I gave him, therefore I felt I wasn't good enough, I didn't give him enough.”

In the end, though, some secret Sabbath-breakers have found that their deviant habit provides a way to connect with others in their families. Chana, a 39-year-old film-maker from Montreal who gave up observance while serving in the Israeli army, once visited her grandmother in Montreal, prepared to observe the Sabbath out of respect. Chana said she was surprised when, on one Sabbath evening, her grandmother came into her room and said, “I think I know what you'd like. You want to watch TV, don't you?”

“I really connected to her,” Chana said. “She did the same things I did. She answered the phone and listened to the radio. I don't think that my parents really ever knew.”

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