

'I LOVE TO FEEL LIKE I'M PART OF THINGS ON MY OWN TERMS'

Ex-Hasidic woman gives tours of her former NYC stomping grounds from the outside in

Frieda Vizel takes participants on an intimate journey into the insular Williamsburg enclave. But far from a critique, she offers a detailed and objective look at life there

By [DANIELLE ZIRI](#) 23 May 2022



Frieda Vizel leading a tour of Williamsburg, New York, April 2022. (Danielle Ziri)

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NEW YORK — Walking the streets of the Hasidic neighborhood of South Williamsburg in Brooklyn, New York, Frieda Vizel knows her way around. She leads a small group of tourists through the bustling Division Ave. on a Friday morning, stopping by bakeries and clothing shops while narrating all about life in the neighborhood. Yet, Vizel is an outsider here.

“I love to come back, I love to feel like I’m part of things on my own terms and you guys are a part of that,” she tells the group of six people.

Vizel has been giving tours of Hasidic Williamsburg for nine years. She is the only licensed New York City tour guide doing so to date. Born and raised in the Satmar Hasidic community of Kiryas Joel in upstate New York, Vizel is the fifth of 15 children. Some 11 years ago, after getting married and having a son, she decided to leave her community.

But those hoping to hear any judgment of the Hasidic community will leave Vizel’s tour very disappointed. Her goal is simply to educate outsiders about the Hasidic lifestyle and the reasons behind the community’s insular nature.

“I’m not angry at this community,” she makes clear. “I find it to be very unique but it wasn’t for me.”

Speaking with The Times of Israel, Vizel says she believes in the importance of respecting different ways of life.



Frieda Vizel speaks to participants of her tour of Williamsburg, New York, in front of a school bus with Yiddish lettering, April 2022. (Danielle Ziri)

“There are people who have lifestyles that are so completely different from us, and we can look at it without passing judgment and understand that they live differently because otherwise, we’d have a very boring and homogeneous world,” she says.

Vizel begins her two-hour walk with a history lesson explaining the origins of Hassidic Judaism in Eastern Europe and how the experience of the Holocaust is one reason for the community’s insular lifestyle. She displays a colorful map of Williamsburg divided into the north “Hipster side” and the south “Hasidic side,” and touches on the issue of gentrification in Brooklyn.

Throughout the tour, she leads participants into the mom-and-pop shops which make up much of the Hasidic economy. They include a toy store where one can find what looks like a Playmobil Shabbat set, a bakery selling a variety of traditional pastries from classic babka to the cheese-filled

delkelach, and a clothing store selling modest women's apparel.



Illustrative: An ultra-Orthodox Jewish man walks with his daughters in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, Tuesday, April 7, 2020 (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan)

One of her go-to stops is also Chocolicious, a candy store on Division Ave. where the smell of chocolate in the air — and a hint of halva — is unmistakable. She picks up little blue bags filled with packaged treats tied at the top with a blue gift ribbon.

“These are *peckelech*,” she tells her tourists with a smile, handing them a bag each, explaining that they are distributed at various lifecycle celebrations.



Frieda Vizel gives peckelach to participants on her tour of Williamsburg, New York, April 2022. (Danielle Ziri)

One of Vizel’s tour participants on this sunny Friday morning in April is Tracy, who lives in Washington State but is on a trip to New York City.

“Everybody asked me what I was most looking forward to doing in New York,” Tracy says while walking with the group. “This tour. This is the thing I absolutely had to do.”

Tracy became interested in Orthodox Judaism after stumbling upon the show “Unorthodox” on Netflix. She is not Jewish — or religious at all, for that matter. The series was her first exposure to the Hasidic community. “I actually watched it three times in a row,” she says.

The show only served to pique her curiosity. Tracy started reading books and watching, as she puts it, “everything I could,” about Hasidic Judaism.

“What ended up happening is that through all of the reading and the research, I’ve actually developed a respect for this community, because now I have more information,” she says. “At first it was just shocking. I couldn’t even wrap my head around it, but now I feel like I definitely have a better understanding.”



Illustrative image: Members of the Orthodox Jewish community walk past shipping containers in the South Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, March 30, 2021. (AP Photo/Wong Maye-E)

Tracy adds that she still has “issues with a lot of the things,” but “the fact that [Hassidic Jews] are able to have this commitment to this lifestyle in this world is commendable.”

After the Netflix hit “Unorthodox” was released in the spring of 2020, Vizel saw traffic to her website and blog soar. But as the COVID-19 pandemic began and lockdowns went into effect, she wasn’t able to give any tours. Still hoping to take advantage of the momentum, Vizel filmed a video tour and posted it on her YouTube channel. It provides a small taste of the experience she offers for those who can’t travel.

Although she is visibly comfortable in the Hasidic neighborhood, Vizel is also open about choosing a different life for herself.

“There were a number of things that made it not click for me,” she says. “I definitely had a very hard time with the expectations of women. The female space was very suffocating to me.”

Vizel says she struggled with her community’s expectation that she shave her head, a custom for married women in some of the more stringent Hasidic sects.

“It became a very strong touchpoint of personal autonomy,” she says. “I felt like there were people telling me what to do.”

Leaving the community and getting a divorce, she recalls, was “one of the hardest things.”

“Something you see in this neighborhood is how intertwined you are in this community and how embedded you are in this world. You’re embedded in its schools, you’re embedded in its shops, its lifecycle — and leaving is really the process of disentangling yourself from it and it’s one of the most traumatic experiences,” she says.



Frieda Vizel leading a tour of Williamsburg, New York, April 2022. (Danielle Ziri)

At 25 with a five-year-old boy and very little knowledge of secular life, Vizel moved away. She now lives in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn and her son is 16. She is still in contact with her close family members but feels like “an outsider.”

“There is a guardedness. It changes the nature of your relationships,” she says. “In general, people will never let their guard down around me especially because I write a blog and they think I might write about what they are saying.”

Overall, it seems the community in Williamsburg has not taken much issue with Vizel giving her tour. She makes friendly conversation with shopkeepers and the reception, she says, has been “more positive than expected.”

“Most people have a very New York attitude of either, ‘Get out of the way,’ or ‘What is she doing here?’ or ‘Whatever,’” she says. “And then there are people who are intrigued.”

Participants in Vizel’s tour may get a few stares from passers-by, or occasionally, people coming up to the group with suggestions about what they should visit, but Vizel says she has rarely had any negative encounters in almost a decade.

One member of the Hasidic community in Williamsburg who asked to remain anonymous told The Times of Israel that people “definitely don’t have an issue with it.”

“In general people don’t like tourists here because they feel like monkeys in the zoo when people come and take pictures, but definitely when it’s being done by her it’s done in a way more positive way,” the man said. “She has smaller groups, she is respectful, she can tell the people also more about our real customs and way of life.”



Frieda Vizel speaks to tour-takers in the Chocolicious shop in Williamsburg, New York, April 2022. (Danielle Ziri)

In contrast, the resident pointed out, other non-Jewish tour guides like to “dramatize” life in the neighborhood.

“There are other groups, busier than hers, who portray the community as extreme and abusive and all kinds of things. She does it in a more professional way,” he said.

Thousands of people have taken Vizel’s tour since its inception. They come from all over the world, including just across the bridge in Manhattan. Surprisingly, however, very few are Jewish.

“I found that a lot of Jews have a very loaded perspective on the Hasidic community,” Vizel says. I have heard things like, ‘They make us look bad,’ or ‘They are causing antisemitism.’”

“I have even heard from a woman that they are going to cause another Holocaust,” she continues. “That’s an awful thing to say.”

The few Israeli tourists to whom she has shown Williamsburg, Vizel says, often have very little firsthand knowledge of Hasidic life.

“You live in Israel, but most of what you know comes from TV,” she says. “That’s shocking to me.”



Frieda Vizel speaks to tour-takers in a Hasidic toy store in Williamsburg, New York, April 2022. (Danielle Ziri)

At the end of the visit, Vizel takes her participants for lunch at Gottlieb’s Deli, which she calls the “Katz’s Deli of Williamsburg,” comparing it to the famous Lower East Side institution. The casual restaurant serves a variety of Eastern European Jewish specialties. But when the tourists leave, Vizel hopes they also take away some food for thought.

“I hope they say, ‘That is a really really fascinating community, and its ability to have created this is something that blew my mind.’ That’s what I want

them to take away,” she says. “If someone goes away saying, ‘I’m shocked by what I saw, this is a horrible repressive world and no one should live this way,’ then I think I haven’t been successful.”

“It’s not that you can’t have this opinion, but we’re walking through the neighborhood, we’re shopping in the shops, it feels really wrong,” she says.



Illustrative image: School buses lined up in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn on April 24, 2019. (Johannes Eisele/AFP via Getty Images/JTA)

Besides the tour, Vizel keeps a blog about different aspects of Hassidic life. On her YouTube channel, for which she still struggles to get exposure, she posts short videos unboxing Hasidic toys, tasting traditional pastries or speaking about concepts such as kosher technology.

While she is trying to explain the Hassidic lifestyle to community outsiders, Vizel doesn’t like to think of herself as trying to bridge a cultural gap — much less fight antisemitism.

“It’s too corny, too activist,” she says. “That’s not why I show up in a neighborhood that isn’t exactly friendly to tourism. I show up because I feel like celebrating the diversity of New York City and my passion for culture.”