



Nishma Research Publishes Study on Modern Orthodoxy

By: SARAH BEN-NUN (HTTPS://YUCOMMENTATOR.ORG/AUTHOR-POSTS/?
AUTHOR_ID=U2FYYWGGQMVULU51BG==) | November 14, 2019

Nishma Research conducts sociological studies analyzing various topics in the Modern Orthodox (MO) community in the United States. On November 4, 2019, they published two new studies: “The Successes, Challenges, and Future of American Modern Orthodoxy” and “The Journeys and Experiences of Baalei Teshuva.”

The impetus for this survey is a survey that was previously conducted in 2017. The issues that are explored here were indicated as being significant back then, warranting further research. To do that, Nishma contacted *shul* rabbis through the RCA, who passed the survey on to their community members.

The findings are based on 2,629 responses, 1,817 (a little over half) self-identifying as Modern Orthodox. The religious identities of the other respondents were *charedi*, Conservative, or non-Modern Orthodox. 888 respondents identified as *baalei Teshuva* (*Nishma*'s classification is that they became Orthodox at or after their *bar/bat mitzvah* age, or older); 744 of those self-identify as Modern Orthodox. The in-depth analysis that the study provides shows that a majority of responders (85%) consider Orthodox observance an important presence in their lives.

In the first study, 51% of respondents were male, 49% female, with a median age of 49; in the second, 49% were male, 51% female, with a median age of 53.

Off the *Derech*

63% of respondents admitted concern about people leaving Orthodoxy and becoming not *frum*; 21% didn't share this worry. An even greater number of people (67%) were extremely concerned that this issue is *not* being properly addressed by MO communal leaders.

As a footnote, the compilers of the study state that they've experienced "quite a bit of leeriness among shuls and communal organizations about discussing the topic," and that while it can be a challenging and sensitive subject, "people want it to be much better addressed."

Women & LGBTQ

12% of respondents felt that the Modern Orthodox community is too focused on change to the detriment of tradition. 35% responded that drawing fragmentation lines prevents much-needed changes from coming to fruition. 53% felt that there is an appropriate balance.

That 35% listed the changes that they'd wish to see. The top two are, respectively: the role of women (52%), and LGBTQ (17%).

“Our current (male) leaders are (more) obsessed with figuring out what titles female leaders should have ... than in serving the needs of Orthodox women and girls,” said one respondent during an interview.

On the LGBTQ issue, one respondent called for “compassion and welcoming toward LGBT members of our community.” Another claimed, “It’s not our place to judge them. We need to support these members of our community.”

Shmirat Halakha

“In probing the responses, it became clear that secular society is having an impact on Modern Orthodoxy,” says the Introduction. The study proceeds to probe how much of that impact affects the visible acts of observance.

Regarding general day-to-day practices, 77% say they’re “comfortable.” 77% of men are reportedly comfortable with *davening*, followed by women, at 66%. The survey also states that “young people,” at ages 18-24, are the least comfortable with *davening*, at 54%.

Half (51%) say they remain consistent and rooted in their *halakhic* practice, but a significant minority — 37% — “compromise at some level,” the most popular compromises being *Shabbat* and *kashrut*.

Baalei Teshuva

The second study focused its investigation on *Baalei Teshuva*. Close to half (42%) of today’s MO communities are made up of *Baalei Teshuva*. Half (49%) of them come from Conservative or Orthoprax backgrounds. (Orthoprax is the state of not maintaining any belief, but practicing some rituals.) Various reasons are given for their attraction to Orthodoxy. Respondents were asked to select up to five factors that they felt influenced their decision. Top among them were intellectual curiosity (53%) and Orthodoxy being viewed as a more authentic form of Judaism (52%), among others.

A great number (37%) admitted the greatest challenge they face in their Orthodox life is their relationships with their families; this challenge manifests itself in things like *Shabbat*, *kashrut*, and family activities. One respondent said, “I had to work really hard to maintain a good relationship with [my mom]. That's not covered in *kiruv*.”

Compared with FFB (*frum* from birth) respondents, *Baalei Teshuva* reportedly felt less comfortable with different aspects of Orthodoxy (such as *davening*, “Jewish learning,” and “day-to-day Orthodox living”) by margins ranging from 12-18%.

As Nishma’s Method Statement states, “We hope this research will further communal dialogue.”

Editor’s Note: The complete studies can be found [HERE](http://NISHMARESEARCH.COM/SOCIAL-RESEARCH.HTML) (HTTP://NISHMARESEARCH.COM/SOCIAL-RESEARCH.HTML). The issues discussed in this article are only a fraction of those investigated in the survey.

Photo Caption: The Breed Street Shul in Los Angeles, California, which has deteriorated over time.

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