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ROSNER'S DOMAIN

The formerly Orthodox American Jews: The stricter they were, the farther away they run

by Shmuel Rosner

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Orthodox Jewish men in East Rutherford, N.J., on Aug. 1, 2012. Photo by Reuters/Eric Thayer

885 formerly Orthodox Jews responded to a survey published today by [Nishma Research](#). It is not a scientific sample of the formerly Orthodox. But it is still the best available [survey](#) of such people, one from which we can learn a little bit about their lives and decisions. It is still a somewhat melancholic read – not because it is better to be Orthodox and hence sad that people choose to leave Orthodoxy, but rather because leaving something is often a sign of crisis and a generator of more crisis. Thus, the people who participated in this survey are ones who had to face a crisis, or are still in a state of crisis.

Take, for example, the relationships between the formerly Orthodox and their still Orthodox families. The study highlights the fact that “respondents’ relationships with their family were more positive than negative, especially with children and younger siblings.” Yet the reality for many of these formerly Orthodox men and women is still complex. 57% of respondents say that their relationships with their fathers are very positive or somewhat positive, but 19% say “mixed,” 11% “somewhat negative,” and 13% “very negative.” Relationships with their mothers are slightly better. 62% define them as “very” or “somewhat” positive.

But these definitions are the average of many types of Orthodox people. It's the average of the combined group of the formerly modern-Orthodox, the formerly Yeshivish-Orthodox, and the formerly Chasidic-Orthodox. This average doesn't reveal the fact that for a formerly-Chasidic Orthodox it is apparently much less likely to have good relations with her father (49% "very" or "somewhat" positive). It doesn't reveal the much easier path of the formerly modern-Orthodox, whose relations with their families seem to be less complicated – 69% have positive relations with their fathers, 74% with their mothers.

The easier path means a lesser crisis for the formerly Modern-Orthodox. 65% of them feel that their families "accept them as they are," compared to 53% of former-Yeshivish, 55% of former-Chabad, and 41% of former-Chasidic. A lesser crisis means less alienation and hence, the survey reveals an irony: the stricter the group from which the "former" Jew emerges, the less the "former" is inclined to keep some Orthodoxy in his or her life.

Only 29% of former-Chasidic keep Kosher after they choose to leave. Of the former Modern-Orthodox, 36% keep Kosher. Asked whether "it would upset them if a child of theirs intermarried," 46% of former Modern-Orthodox said yes, compared to 32% of former Yeshivish and 26% of former Chasidic. The more insular you were, the farther away you wish to travel. 17% of former modern-Orthodox still say they are "traditional," compared to just 6% and 7% of former Chasidic and Yeshivish. 78% of former Modern Orthodox say that being Jewish is important for them, compared to 56% of former-Yeshivish and 49% of former-Chasidic.

The Pew study of American Jews from three years ago [showed](#) that there is "a high rate of attrition from Orthodox Judaism, especially among older cohorts." In other words: many Orthodox Jews become formerly Orthodox along the way, which makes studying their ways important. According to Pew, "among those 65 and older who were raised as Orthodox Jews, just 22% are still Orthodox Jews by religion. And among those ages 50-64 who were raised Orthodox, just 41% are still Orthodox Jews by religion. In stark contrast, 83% of Jewish adults under 30 who were raised Orthodox are still Orthodox."

Why do so many Orthodox Jews choose to leave Orthodoxy? The new study gives us more detailed clues than previous, more general studies of American Jews. For the former-Chasidic and former-Yeshivish, the top reason for leaving was "influence of outside knowledge, such as reading or learning things that contradicted what had been believed." 15% of the former-Chasidic had "doubts" and "lose faith." Former-Chabad complain about the lack of secular education as a reason for leaving (10%), about doubts (10%) and about "wanting more control in life" (12%). The former Modern-Orthodox are different: their top reason is "the role and status of women" in Orthodoxy. Theirs – and this is also generally the reason given by women who choose to quit Orthodoxy.

Men say they left because of new knowledge they acquired and

because of intellectual doubts (37% combined). Their motivations – or the motivations they share with the researchers – were grounded in thought. Women say they left because of societal reservations: because of the role of women, because of judgmentalism, and because of community hypocrisy (20%, 9%, 12%).

The research argues that “more people feel they have been “pushed off” rather than “pulled off.” Namely, they cite internal conditions – such as the status of women, perceptions of hypocrisy – that pushed them out, rather than cite reasons related to the lure of the outside world. I wonder what this means: it could mean that Orthodoxy is not attuned enough to the needs of its members, or that those who left feel more comfortable saying that it was Orthodoxy’s “fault” and not their “fault” that they ended up leaving.

As they leave Orthodoxy, they tend to also leave the community (70%), and they need support (the Haredis more than the Modern Orthodox). They wish for additional support (67%). They are – as we have said – transitioning and going through a crisis. That is, except for those who choose to live a double life: “Those who are no longer ‘believers’ but still live in the community are an interesting group.” the study says. An interesting group indeed – and to some degree one that evokes even more sympathy than the other groups. 33% of respondents to the survey, who no longer feel a part of Orthodoxy, have yet to completely sever their ties with the Orthodox community. Most of them think that they will never leave (61%).

They have higher levels of participation in visible practices – for obvious reasons. More of them, compared to other groups, still say they “believe in God” (37%). Their “relationships with their family are virtually the same as those of all others.” This probably means that their families know who they really are. Not just the group is interesting – the decision to give them a voice in a study about the formerly Orthodox is interesting too. It raises the possibility that the researchers – much like formerly Orthodox men do, but not like formerly Orthodox women – see Orthodoxy as an intellectual state of mind more than as a social situation. A perception worthy of debate.

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