

CLEVELAND Jewish News

Survey points to diversity, divisions within Modern Orthodoxy

AMANDA KOEHN | STAFF REPORTER akoehn@cjn.org Oct 12, 2017



Blau



Truboff

A new survey of Modern Orthodox American Jews shows diverse beliefs about women's roles in the synagogue, politics and observance among people at different ends of the Modern Orthodox spectrum, while the high cost of living and Jewish schooling were concerns shared by a majority of respondents.

The Nishma Research Profile of American Modern Orthodox Jews, released Sept. 28, surveyed 3,903 people who identify as Modern Orthodox. They self-identified, from the left-to-right end of the spectrum, as open Orthodox, liberal Modern Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, centrist Orthodox and right centrist. The survey covered a range of personal, religious and political topics, and results showed positions on such issues varied between those groups.

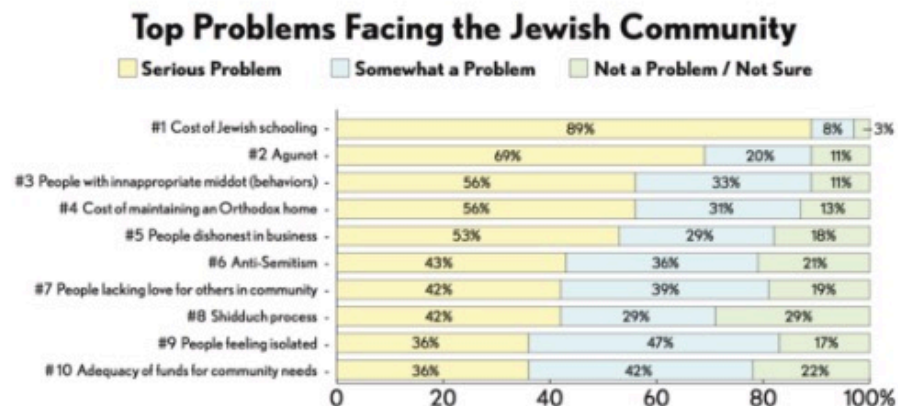


Participants for the web-based survey were sourced via an email to synagogues and rabbis affiliated with the Rabbinical Council of America, the U.S.'s largest Orthodox rabbinic organization.

The Cleveland Jewish News explored some key findings and asked Rabbi Zachary Truboff of Oheb Zedek-Cedar Sinai in Lyndhurst and Rabbi Binyamin Blau of Green Road Synagogue in Beachwood, both Modern Orthodox, to compare the survey's results with local trends they see.

High cost of living

When asked about problems facing Modern Orthodoxy, the top concern participants indicated was the cost of Jewish schooling. Eighty-nine percent of respondents felt this was a serious problem and 8 percent felt it was somewhat a problem. Agunot, or divorce, and “people with inappropriate behaviors” ranked second and third, respectively. The cost of maintaining an Orthodox home was fourth.



Survey respondents indicated what they thought were the top problems facing the Jewish community.

Source: Nishma Research Profile of American Modern Orthodox Jews, September 2017

Truboff said he’s seen how expensive Modern Orthodoxy can be in Cleveland’s Jewish community.

“A large part of that challenge comes from Modern Orthodoxy trying to be the best of both worlds,” he said, explaining that the high costs of education and lifestyle can sometimes “push people away on both ends,” either toward more ultra-Orthodox or non-Orthodox lifestyles.

In the Greater Cleveland, Modern Orthodox families tend to live in and around Beachwood – an affluent suburb – as it’s close to the two major Modern Orthodox synagogues and Fuchs Mizrahi School, the Jewish day school most in line with the Modern Orthodoxy. Fuchs Mizrahi’s costs increase by grade: first through fifth grade are \$14,496 yearly and 12th grade is \$22,164, according to the school’s website.

Blau also said as a rabbi, parent of college students and an educator at Fuchs Mizrachi, the expense of schooling is universal among Modern Orthodox families, whereas other issues ranked on the survey are more or less important to various subgroups along the religious spectrum. Also, he said some Modern Orthodox schools in New York and New Jersey can cost upward of \$30,000 yearly, contributing to concern on the national survey.

“We send our kids to private day school, then we are going to send our kids to private colleges,” he said. “So, you are really adding an expense that people a little more to the right, perhaps the haredi community, their schools are not quite as expensive and they are not always going to the same types of colleges.”

Among those surveyed, the median household income was \$158,000. However, almost 30 percent of participants did not answer that question. The median number of children was three, and 79 percent of those who took the survey were married.

Women in the synagogue

While 75 percent of participants indicated women should be eligible to be shul presidents, only 46 percent said the Torah should pass through the women’s section before and after reading. Fifty-three percent either fully or somewhat agreed women should have expanded roles in the clergy.

Both Green Road and Cedar Sinai have female presidents, with Cedar Sinai being the first Orthodox synagogue in the U.S. to elect an all-female board of officers, according to the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance.

Truboff said changing women’s roles must be approached carefully, especially since strong divisions exist between those on the right and left of the movement, as indicated by the survey.

“That also says to me that incrementalism and carefully navigating the question is important. ... We have to build consensus,” he said.

Blau also said balance between creating opportunities for both genders and upholding traditions is essential. He describes it as a “healthy, wonderful” area to address and says it’s something with which many Modern Orthodox synagogues are grappling.

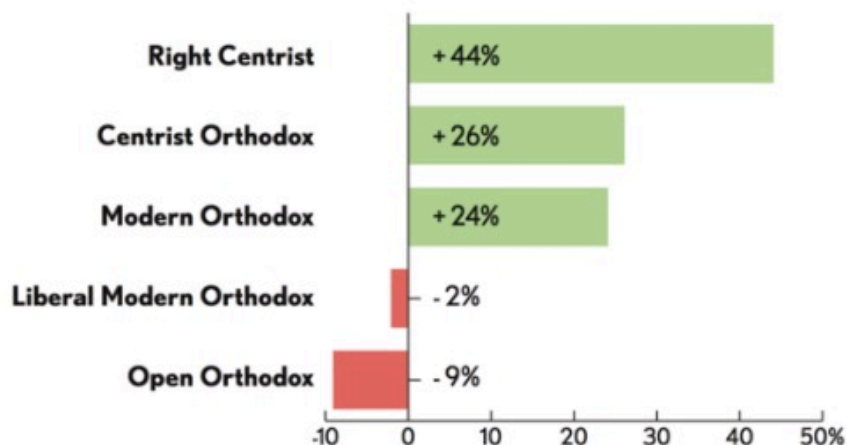
“We are all trying to do it well,” he said.

Jewish observance

Of those surveyed, more than 90 percent said they were strictly or mostly observant of Shabbat and kosher laws. Among men surveyed, 73 percent said they were strictly or mostly observant of putting on tefillin, and among married couples, 80 percent either strictly or mostly observe Jewish laws around family purity and sexual relations.

Overall, 39 percent of participants said they became more observant in the last decade, with men doing so at a higher rate than women, 21 percent to 12 percent, respectively. Those on the far-left end of the spectrum tended to shift toward less observance than their right-centrist counterparts.

Shift in Religious Observance Over the Past Decade



Respondents to a survey of Modern Orthodox American Jews self-reported where they fall on the spectrum of Modern Orthodoxy and to what extent they’ve become more or less religiously observant.

Source: Nishma Research Profile of American Modern Orthodox Jews, September 2017

“As a Modern Orthodox rabbi on the more liberal end of the spectrum, it is deeply important to me that my members will grow in their religious observance,” Truboff said. “If this is not happening, then I need to ask myself why this is the case. “

Moreover, for those identifying as liberal Modern Orthodox or open Orthodox, 38 and 49 percent, respectively, indicated their children are less observant. The survey warns of a “danger of schism” related to such differences in observance, suggesting a divide in the community.

Political divides

Diversity among respondents on their political affiliation also was notable – 43 percent identified as Republican, 36 percent as Democrat and 14 percent as independent.

“I feel like one of the things that makes our shul unique is there really is a diversity of political opinion within our community,” said Truboff, adding that diversity in the shul allows conversations to take place between people who hold vastly different beliefs – conversations that might not occur otherwise.

Blau said that while he tends not to address politics in the synagogue, he’s aware of the political diversity within his synagogue compared to other Jewish denominations.

“We really are far more in between than anybody else,” he said of Modern Orthodox congregations.

Bringing it together

Although Truboff said the survey will be useful to him for understanding important questions in Modern Orthodoxy, it could have done a better job of clearly defining issues of observance and religious beliefs. He said more specific follow-up questions could have helped, especially where survey takers indicated shifting observance.

Blau didn't share that criticism. Rather, he said he feels the survey's exploration of differences within Modern Orthodox is one of the most important aspects for him in considering how to better engage congregants.

"I think that it is really important for us to notice which of our assumptions were reaffirmed and which ones might have been challenged," he said.

You can view the full survey at bit.ly/2yDL7x6.



Amanda Koehn

CJN Staff Reporter
akoehn@cjn.org