

## Despite What Some Want to Believe, Modern Orthodoxy Is Indeed Politically Split

By Mark Trencher



Rabbi Dov Fischer recently published some interesting questions and conjectures about the Nishma Research Political Survey of some 2,500-plus American Orthodox Jews. As director of Nishma and this study, I respond and offer some hypotheses.

Among the key findings were that Modern Orthodox Jews are split between Democratic and Republican leanings, while charedi Jewry is overwhelmingly Republican. Fischer questions the former finding.

To first dispense with a spurious allegation, the fact that one of the study collaborators is more liberal did not in any way affect the research. Nishma has been criticized at various times as too liberal ... but other times as being too critical of liberal Jews. We've done 14 communal studies with over 500 questions, and while we get compliments and criticisms across the religious landscape, one thing we have never received is any criticism of any question we asked or analysis as being biased. In fact, in addition to the publicly released communal studies, Nishma has done 21 smaller, proprietary studies in the community, for shuls, schools, other non-profits, and businesses, including several in charedi segments. These groups have demonstrated their confidence in Nishma's neutrality and reliability by asking us to survey their own communities.

Additionally, we reach out to people across the Orthodox spectrum (left, center, and right) to assist us in formulating and executing our surveys. Bottom line: we have worked hard and have earned a reputation for neutrality. This doesn't mean we are not open to suggestions or criticisms. In keeping with our organization's name, we lis-

ten to all criticisms and use them, as suitable, to improve our future work.

Fischer notes that the survey was online and questions its validity. But this approach is currently being used by the vast majority of surveys. Even the Pew Survey, the "golden standard," shifted from a phone survey in 2013 to an online survey in 2020. This is a challenge facing the research community as a whole.

Now let's address Fischer's real complaint. In preparing the survey, we asked about a dozen Modern Orthodox and about a dozen charedi Jews, "How would you guess Orthodox Jewry splits these days between Republicans and Democrats?" On average, the Modern Orthodox were estimated at about 50% to 55% Republican, and the charedi were estimated at about 80% to 85% Republican. The survey showed the Modern Orthodox a bit more Democratic-leaning (about 60/40) and showed the charedi a bit more Republican-leaning (90/10). But the sense of the community that charedi are very strongly Republican and Modern Orthodox are much more evenly split was borne out. Fischer finds this hard to believe. Why?

After a 2020 political survey, I received an email from a Modern Orthodox gentleman who said our results were wrong, noting that 90%+ of his shul was Republican. "So," I asked him, "is there an Orthodox shul in your neighborhood that is very much the opposite ... liberal?" It turns out there is, and like the old joke, it's the one he wouldn't set foot into.

Sadly, too many of us live in "silos" with people like themselves, lack much exposure to or appreciation of different views, and don't accept people who are different.

In this survey, every respondent included in our "Modern or Centrist Orthodox" data identified themselves as Orthodox and as a member of this sector. Sure, some are more liberal leaning religiously, while others identify as being in the Yeshivish end of the spectrum. This is the nature of the Modern Orthodox community, which we have found to be far more heterogeneous than the charedi sectors. Our goal is to explore the community as it is.

I want to suggest a hypothesis that might explain some of the difference between the Modern Orthodox and the charedi, particularly the Yeshivish sector. Several studies have shown a religious shifting "to the right" among Orthodox Jews. I've spoken to people who in a 2017 survey identified as Modern Orthodox, yet in 2023 identified as Yeshivish. They pretty much all lean Republican, and it may be that they feel more comfortable in the Yeshivish sector for political as well as religious reasons. Statistically, this shifting – and the correlation between religious and political ideology, on a left-to-right scale – may explain a few percentage points of the difference between the groups.

The goal in establishing Nishma (translation: "we listen") Research was to give people an opportunity to listen to others whom they may not otherwise hear from. In these days of social media, algorithms, cancellation, information silos, etc. that is even more important. We are a diverse people, and we can be contentious at times. But let's be more respectful and accepting of others' views, even if we disagree. After all, we are all part of the same group!

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