



# Some Predictable and Surprising Findings About the Orthodox Community

By Michael Feldstein | March 16, 2023

Many folks in the Orthodox world are quick to offer their opinions about the state of affairs in our community, outlining what's wrong with Orthodoxy and what needs to be fixed ... while trying to predict where things are headed.

However, there is one person who has been conducting top quality quantitative and qualitative research on the Orthodox community for almost a decade, drawing upon the best practices in the market research field.

His name is Mark Trencher, the founder of Nishma Research ([nishmaresearch.com](http://nishmaresearch.com)). And he has just released an exhaustive study of the Orthodox community — with some very revealing results about the beliefs, practices, attitudes, and priorities of the various segments of the Orthodox world.

Unlike the studies he did in 2017 and 2019, which focused strictly on the Modern Orthodox community, this new study includes a sampling of Orthodox individuals who identify as Haredi (Yeshivish and Chasidish). Much of the survey's results were predictable, but there were a few surprises, too. And even for the statistics that were predictable, it's important that we quantify the results, as Trencher has done.

I have been privileged to serve on the advisory committee of Nishma Research, along with several other notable members of the Orthodox Jewish community. Under Trencher's able leadership, we worked closely together to make sure the survey was asking the right questions. And after the survey was completed and the results were tabulated, we discussed the findings together in order to try to draw some conclusions about what these results meant.

Here are a few of the highlights of this important survey:

Dealing with those who commit abuse is now a top priority. A whopping 82 percent cited this as an issue that the community must address in the next decade. It was tied with the cost of Jewish education as the very top priority among many concerns. Perhaps it's because of the Chaim Walder case, which received national attention, or the fact that more and more individuals now know someone personally who has suffered abuse, but it's clear that this issue is resonating with folks in the Orthodox world in a much larger way than in prior years.

38 percent who identified as Modern Orthodox support women serving in shul positions that entail "clergy-type" activities (providing religious guidance, teaching Torah, offering pastoral care, answering family purity questions as a yoetzet halacha, etc.). Women in leadership roles at our synagogues is no longer looked upon as unusual in the Modern Orthodox community.

Israeli politics generated highly divergent views. While Modern Orthodoxy's more stringent wing is more often pleased than concerned with the new government, by more than a 2-to-1 margin, it's more liberal wing is more often concerned, by a 6-to-1 margin. In contrast, the Haredi sector as a whole is more often pleased with the new



government, by a 12-to-1 margin.

All segments of Orthodoxy feel “Jewishly fulfilled.” Orthodox Jews across all sectors, and equally for both men and women, find their lives Jewishly fulfilling. Sixty-five percent agree with this strongly, and 93 percent agree strongly or somewhat. While we often talk about our differences, it’s nice to know that so many of us across so many different groups overall feel positively about our religious lives.

For me, the most surprising observation — and the one that generated the most discussion among the advisory board members — was related to davening and prayer. Nineteen percent of Haredi men and 34 percent of Modern Orthodox men say that they do not always daven Shacharit. The Haredi figure is particularly shocking, as the thought that so many Haredi men would be lax about davening in the morning is almost hard to believe.

It should be pointed out that since the survey was conducted via the internet, and many Haredi families do not use the internet at home, the results are likely skewed somewhat. Trencher explained, “If there actually was a way to reach the entire community, the percentages that don’t daven Shacharit might have been a few percentage points lower. But given our methodology and sample size, it would still be well into the double digits — so the results should not be dismissed so quickly.”

What the 19 percent figure seems to show is that the Haredi community, similar to the Modern Orthodox community, also has a significant number of its members who wish to identify socially with the group they grew up with, even though they might not be as faithful in observing all of its laws.

Rabbi Michael Broyde, a law professor at Emory University and a member of our advisory group, stated it well as we all tried to understand this surprising result:

“I suspect that there are people in every nice Chesed-driven family-centered community who are just sociologically part of whatever community they are in — we can call them the ‘socially Orthodox’ and this is about 20 percent of the community anywhere (and in any faith group). They like the social norms of the world that they grew up in and have lots of family that they love and enjoy and which helps them raise and support themselves and their family. They like the public rituals and the cycles of life, and they enjoy it all. They do not believe in much of it, but they do not have deep ideological opposition to any of it, either. The costs — social, economic and cultural — of leaving is high, and this group is not adventurous in that way. So they stay. However, they only observe the rituals when the community is watching them.”

Finally, I found it extremely interesting that the Haredi community is more concerned than the Modern Orthodox community about those in their particular group who leave frumkeit (or who go “off the derech,” a term I don’t particularly like but which has become popular in describing this phenomenon). Popular wisdom seems to suggest that more individuals leave Modern Orthodoxy than leave the Haredi world, so the lower concern among those identifying as Modern Orthodox is somewhat surprising. Perhaps this should be a wake-up call to the leaders in the Modern Orthodox world that we need to address this issue with more resources and more attention, before it becomes too late.

You can access the full report at [www.nishmaresearch.com](https://www.nishmaresearch.com) (<https://www.nishmaresearch.com>).

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