



Rabbi Jeffrey Fox, rosh yeshiva of Yeshivat Maharat, teaching a class in Jewish law (Photo: Uriel Heilman/JTA)

Modern Orthodoxy's triumph? Take another look at the numbers

By Shmuel Rosner – October 2, 2017 – Rosner's Domain – The Los Angeles Jewish Journal

On Sept. 28, a detailed study on the state of Jewish modern Orthodoxy in America was published by Nishma Research. It is an interesting study, beginning with its struggle to define who is “modern Orthodox” — not an easy question — and ending with the many numbers it provides.

What did we learn from it? We learned things that we already know — for example, that most of them keep Shabbat and eat Kosher food. We learned that this is materially a very successful community. The income of modern Orthodox families is high: the study found that their median household income is \$158,000 a year, nearly three times the average American median income.

We learned that this community is split over the role of women. This is not news, but now we have the numbers to support previous assumptions: 53 percent of respondents believe that women in their Orthodox community should have the opportunity for expanded roles in the clergy; 37 percent agree fully and 16 percent somewhat agree. And as the study informs us, “This is the issue with greatest divide between left and right, no matter where the ‘dividing line’ is placed.”

On gays, the study avoided the tougher questions and asked the easier one: should they be accepted as members of Shuls? The answer: Overall, 58 percent support Orthodox shuls in general accepting gays as members with 12 percent opposed and 29 percent “not sure.” But that’s the easy question, since the real questions are about gay marriage, gay ordination, gay active participation in public Jewish practice. Had the study asked the questions about these issues, we’d know more about another potentially dividing line.

The modern Orthodox American community is a highly successful group beyond income. So much so, that some advocates and scholars see it as the exemplary Jewish group among American Jews. Prof. Sylvia Barack Fishman of Brandeis University has virtually said as much in several publications and interviews. "Modern Orthodoxy," she says/writes, "is the new model of the American Jewish dream... American Modern Orthodox are statistically the country's highest educated, most financially successful Jewish population, with the greatest occurrence of homogamous relationships."

The study from Nishma supports such conclusions in many ways. But it also highlights their great deficiency: the modern Orthodox are too few to become a model.

When studies like this one come out, the tendency of readers and reporters is to focus on the trees: the weaker emotional connection of younger Orthodox Jews to Israel; the low levels of support for a two-state solution; the concerns the Orthodox have about the cost of Jewish life (89 percent see it as a serious problem); the time they invest in regular study of Jewish topics; the high attendance of shul. And of course, these are all important and meaningful items — important trees. That is, important trees in a relatively small forest. This community "represents only about 4 percent of all American Jewry, with about 220,000 Modern Orthodox adults in the US." That's it. A number almost as small as a margin of error in a large survey.

This is something to remember as we divide the community, as the study did, to sub-groups of "open Orthodox", "liberal MO," "MO," "centrist" and "right centrist." Twelve percent are "open Orthodox." This means that the brouhaha over the rift between open Orthodoxy and Orthodoxy — a battle that is often presented as a defining moment for Orthodoxy and for Judaism — is about a group of 20,000 to 30,000 Jews? And on the other side of the spectrum there is the group of 11 percent "right-centrist." Namely, about the size of "Open Orthodoxy." Not many people.

Surely, not everything in life is about numbers. Groups that come with new ideas, a high intensity of involvement and pioneers can make a huge difference with small numbers. But the modern Orthodox have small numbers not because of their radicalism, or because of their cutting-edge innovation. They have small numbers because their model is difficult to sustain for many generations. It is a model with a high rate of attrition (improving, but still quite high). It is a model that our times — times of polarization and the weakening of all centrist groups — do not necessarily encourage.

The modern Orthodox have many children, but many of their grandchildren will not be modern Orthodox. In some cases, they will move rightward, to become ultra-Orthodox; in more cases, they will move leftward to become less observant, more relaxed types of Jews.

This is true for the modern Orthodox in the US, as it is for their Zionist-Orthodox brothers and sisters in Israel, a movement with great energy and vigor but with a high rate of attrition (The American modern Orthodox and the Israeli Zionist-Orthodox are not exactly the same, but they share many similarities.)

Now, imagine this small group of Jews splitting over female ordination, or gay acceptance, or connection to Israel or any other issue that comes to mind. Imagine this small group of Jews splitting to become even smaller subgroups of 1 percent of Jews or 2 percent. Can a group so small be a model for anyone? Can a group that can barely sustain its own place within the larger community be an example of Jewish survivability?

In many ways, I wish it could. But ignoring the lovely trees and looking at the forest, I doubt it.