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Survey Highlights Staggering Price of Jewish Education

By Elizabeth Kratz | October 02, 2017

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Young students in a modern Orthodox day school classroom.

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Nishma, a one-year-old sociological and market research firm which previously published a study about Orthodox Jews who became non-religious, published a new study on September 28th, titled “The Nishma Profile of American Modern Orthodox Jews.” While the survey attempts to present an objective view of the Modern Orthodox community’s thoughts on religious life, the results provide direct instructive, and perhaps unintended, information about the respondents’ financial, rather than social or religious, concerns.

Some observers have sought to focus on the answers the survey gives to potentially divisive questions about women in Orthodoxy, referring specifically to the “schism” about women serving as rabbis. However, the starker results of the survey reach a conclusion that, by far, unites all factions of the Modern Orthodox community. That concern is, in fact, how to support children and pay tuition for them to attend Jewish

schools, how to keep kosher in a world with increasingly rising costs, and how to survive in increasingly expensive neighborhoods.

Eighty-three percent of the survey’s respondents send their children to K-12 Jewish day schools. Eighty-nine percent of the survey’s respondents refer to the costs of Jewish schooling as “a serious problem” of greatest concern to the community, while another 8 percent consider it “somewhat a problem,” a group that taken together comprise 97 percent of the survey respondents.

“These results were a little bit surprising. We all know Jewish day school education is valued very much in the community. Eighty-three percent go to an Orthodox Jewish day school, and another 8 percent sends to another community day school or Jewish school, so it bumps that figure up to 91 percent,” said Mark Trencher, the Nishma founder and principal organizer of the study.

“To me there has always been a huge commitment to Jewish day school, and a lot of their funding goes to Jewish day school. It’s a commitment but also a concern,” he said. “People are working hard, with dual incomes, but [the cost is] also a problem.”

Women serving in clerical roles are not mentioned as one of the top ten concerns faced by the Modern Orthodox community, which after schooling, addresses, (in this order), agunot, people with inappropriate middot, costs of maintaining an Orthodox home, people who are dishonest in business, anti-Semitism, people lacking in ahavat Yisrael, the shidduch process, people feeling isolated, and the [lack of] funds required to meet community needs.

The study, according to Trencher, received 6,112 responses, but only used 3,903 in its official tallies. This means that organizers threw out one third of the responses, responses which likely would have heavily skewed the results toward the center-right. The unused 2,093 responses, Trencher said, were thrown out for one of three reasons: because 1) the respondents lived overseas, 2) the respondents identified as “haredi” or “chasidic,” or 3) the respondents identified as not Orthodox, though were still a member of an Orthodox shul. According to the survey, responses were received from 27 countries and 41 states, with the majority of responses were from New York City (32 percent), New York state (40 percent including NYC), New Jersey (13 percent), Florida (10 percent), California (5 percent), Massachusetts (4 percent) and Connecticut (4 percent).

Trencher told The Jewish Link that the web-based survey was publicized primarily by emails sent out by Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) member rabbis, who had been approached by Nishma and whose rabbis agreed to participate. It was unknown how many RCA rabbis distributed the survey to their memberships. Prominent shuls whose rabbis agreed to send out emails for the study were Congregation B’nai Yeshurun (Teaneck), Congregation Kehilath Yeshurun (Manhattan), Congregation Rinat Yisrael (Teaneck) and The Jewish Center (Manhattan), said Trencher.

In the press, most early reports focused most, if not all, attention on the answer to questions about whether women should have an expanded clergy role in synagogues. According to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, one of the survey’s five key points was, “Most want an expanded role for women in the clergy.” This description appears to coincide with the statistic that 53 percent which agreed strongly and somewhat strongly to one or two questions, which is a majority but doesn’t tell the whole story. The survey asked two questions in tandem: Does the respondent support expanded roles for women in clerical roles, and does the respondent support expanded roles for women in clergy with a title? “Sixty percent of Open Orthodox respondents strongly supported women clergy *with a title*, while only 14 percent of the rest of the Modern Orthodox supported it,” the report states.

“The one item the press picks out are on the issue of clergy, when by far the issue being raised is Jewish schooling and how to pay for it. Everyone is suffering from this issue,” said Allen Fagin, executive vice president of the Orthodox Union, who was not involved with the study’s preparation. Regarding the answers about women in clergy roles, he found much of the survey data less than instructive. “The terms were not defined as meaning rabbinic authority when asked broadly. It’s not at all clear what people were agreeing to,” he told The Jewish Link.

“Are they speaking about clergy in the rabbinic sense, or clergy with a small ‘c,’ so as to distinguish female staff from the administrative staff of the shul?” Fagin asked.

Rabbi Steven Pruzansky, rabbi of Congregation B’nai Yeshurun, told The Jewish Link that the results of the survey should be taken with the proverbial grain of salt. “The facts are this is a wholly unscientific survey and should be looked at a bit warily, because it doesn’t take from a random sampling of the community. A thousand of the responses could have come from the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale and we wouldn’t know it,” he said.

The study states in its summary of key findings that it represents the “largest broad survey of the Modern Orthodox community.” However much of the summary focuses on fragmentation and the division that could result from broadening differences in beliefs and attitudes. While the study admits that much of the community has shifted to the right of center in terms of belief, and includes a number of 39 percent as having become “more observant” over the past decade, the survey highlights the result that women (+12 percent) have shifted to the right less than men (+21 percent), and notes that “elsewhere in this report we shall see areas of dissatisfaction among women.”

The study was sponsored by the Micah Foundation, an organization founded in 2009 in West Springfield, Massachusetts, which has previously only provided localized donations, primarily geared toward the day school system in Connecticut. The Micah Foundation’s managing trustee is Jeremy Pava. According to public records, the only three past funding recipients have been the Hebrew High School of New England, the Hebrew Academy of Greater Hartford and the Anti-Defamation League. Pava, as well as his wife Ann Pava, who serves on the board of Yeshivat Maharat, served on the study’s advisory group. Other members of the study’s advisory group who are associated with Open Orthodox or non-Orthodox-associated institutions, are Rabbi Nissan Antine, president of the International Rabbinic Fellowship and a 2006 graduate of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah and Professor Steven M. Cohen, research professor of Jewish Social Policy at Hebrew Union College. Dr. Steven Bayme, director of Contemporary Jewish Life at the American Jewish Committee, serves as adjunct faculty at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. Two of the survey’s 13 advisory group members are rabbis who hold semicha from Yeshiva University/RIETS: Rabbi Tuvia Brander of the Young Israel of West Hartford and Rabbi Elie Weinstock of Manhattan’s Kehilath Jeshurun. Other well-known advisory group members included Rivka Kahan, principal of Ma’ayanot High School for Girls in Teaneck, Yoetzet Halacha and Stern College Professor Nechama Price, Rivka Press Schwartz, associate principal at SAR High School, and Rebbetzin Yael Weil, a teacher at Ma’ayanot.

The 96-page survey can be viewed at <http://nishmaresearch.com/> (<http://nishmaresearch.com/>).

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