

INTERVIEW WITH THE CONNECTICUT JEWISH LEDGER – JULY 19, 2016

Who initiated your recent study of those who have left Orthodoxy, and why?

The study title is “Starting a Conversation: A Pioneering Survey of Those Who Have Left the Orthodox Community,” and I initiated it in the fall of 2015 at the time I started my firm. Our firm’s name is Nishma Research – “nishma” means “we listen” in Hebrew – and it reflects our mission of providing quality research to the Jewish community.

Beyond that, part of our mission is to fund and conduct at least one study a year on a topic that will benefit the Jewish community and will enhance our ability to listen to each other and to hear the different views within our community. This study is our first such foray, and the report is available at our website (nishmaresearch.com).

How and why did you become involved?

I had read a number of the memoirs written by those who have “gone OTD” (off the derech, or off the path, as they are sometimes referred to), the individuals who have left the Orthodox community.

Perhaps the best of these was “All Who Leave Do Not Return,” by Shulem Deen (who recently spoke at the Hartford Jewish Book Festival). There are some similar themes across these memoirs, but there has never been a quantitative study of these people and I thought that might be something of value. Specifically, I was curious about their religious journeys, practices, beliefs, sense of Jewish identity and community, and family relationships.

I met Shulem for lunch at a nice café in Brooklyn, and he liked the idea. I then broadened my outreach and discussed it with people like Prof. Steven M. Cohen, probably the pre-eminent survey researcher in the Jewish world, and he liked the idea as well and offered to be an advisor to the study. Other academics and people

involved in providing services to the Jewish community also asked to be involved.

So, while I took the lead in designing and conducting the study, and in analyzing the findings, we had an excellent advisory group of academics, researchers and community leaders supporting this.

How was the study conducted and how were the participants located?

The study was challenging because there is no census or “list” of these people that we could draw from, and we don’t even know its size. We used a multi-prong approach to find these people. First, several organizations that provide services to them offered to send our survey to their entire memberships of about 1,500 people. Additionally, many of these people are very active in social media. We identified a half dozen Facebook groups, where people who have transitioned in their religion tend to congregate, as well as people who are comfortable with their Jewish religious community and practice, but have questions or issues to explore.

The survey generated a lot of interest and we ended up with about 1,500 people logging in to take the survey. Of these, 885 met our respondent criteria, and they came from 31 states and 11 foreign countries. It was not a short survey (approximately 25 minutes), so we were very pleased with the enthusiastic response.

What were the most enlightening findings for you?

People leave their religious communities of origin for many different reasons. We did not provide a “why did you leave” checklist, but allowed people take as much space as they needed to tell us their stories. The stories were eloquent and poignant; we read through all of them and identified well

over 50 different factors that could cause someone to shift their religious orientation, and these varied among the sub-groups (e.g., Ultra-Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, etc.).

Among all segments, an important factor was the intellectual thinking they had done about religion in trying to resolve secular knowledge with religious teachings. Those leaving the Ultra-Orthodox world often wanted more control over their lives, while those leaving the Modern Orthodox world often cited a desire for a more prominent role for women.

In terms of their beliefs and practices after leaving Orthodoxy, almost all view themselves as Jewish, as they define it, with the majority labeling themselves as culturally Jewish, traditional, secular/humanist Jewish or “just Jewish.” Relatively few labeled themselves as belonging to any of the typical Jewish world denominations.

The percentages that do things like keep kosher, light Sabbath candles, have a sense of belonging to the Jewish people or an attachment to Israel are comparable to the percentages among all U.S. Jews, as found by the 2013 Pew Survey of American Jewry. Interestingly, the formerly Modern Orthodox retain more of their traditional practices and beliefs after leaving than do the formerly Ultra-Orthodox, perhaps because their leaving was less traumatic.

We also found that one-third of respondents said they had left their community in terms of their beliefs and private behaviors but have done so covertly. They still reside in their community and are not ready to emerge publicly, although a bit less than half said it is likely they will leave the community in the future.

Is OTD a growing trend? Did you find that anyone goes back on the derech?

There has never been a census to track this, but we suspect it is a growing trend, mainly because of the increasingly open society. While the Ultra-

Orthodox world strives to limit exposure to secular society, this will continue to be a difficult battle.

In terms of people going “back on the derech,” it does happen but not very often. I know of one person who left his Orthodox beliefs as a young adult, but returned to his beliefs several years later and today is a rabbi who provides guidance to people struggling with religious issues.

In terms of numbers, the “baal teshuva” movement of people moving into Orthodoxy from the Conservative, Reform or other (often secular) branches of Judaism continues, so there is indeed movement back and forth across the various Jewish denominations. The Pew Survey also showed this: where people are today in their Jewish beliefs and practices is often different from where they were in the past.

How will the findings be used?

Our goal is to increase listening and understanding. In our increasingly fractured society, this is true in many different areas. We have chosen to focus on our Jewish world.

Our report is publicly available, and all of these materials are downloadable at our website, along with a number of articles that have appeared in the media. There has already been a vibrant discussion online, and we are starting to schedule some public forums and webinars to share our findings. One of the nice things about this survey is the large quantity of verbatim comments we received. I think these could affect peoples’ views more than the dry statistics. So we plan to share a lot of the comments with people, and give them time to appreciate where the OTDers are coming from.

Ultimately, our hope is that the findings will be used to open peoples’ hearts and minds to the challenges facing these people, with the goal of binding us all together.