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Orthodox ‘Dropouts’ Still Tethered To Faith

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The Orthodox fascinate and defy the number crunchers. No group is growing so prodigiously: Seventy-four percent of Jewish children in New York are Orthodox and Satmar’s school system is now larger than all but three public school systems in New York State. And yet, of American Orthodoxy’s 530,000 Jews, perhaps more than 10,000 Orthodox Jews have dropped out to varying degrees, according to Nishma Research. Modest numbers, perhaps, but each of those 10,000 likely could tell a story of sadness and disappointment.

Demographer Steven M. Cohen of Hebrew Union College, an adviser to Nishma’s project – “Starting a Conversation: A Pioneering Survey of Those Who Have Left the Orthodox Community” – said in a statement about the study: “We live in an age of enormous religious fluidity ... but there is little quantitative research on Jews who have left Orthodoxy.” This study by Nishma, a new research firm that financed the independent but non-scientific study, is “particularly significant if we are to understand the future of Orthodoxy and American Jewry,” he said.

What becomes of these lapsed Orthodox, referred to in the report and in the vernacular as “off the derech” (road), presuming that there ever was a single derech in the first place? Several OTD memoirs and even suicides speak of severed relationships and estrangement from their communities. Or is that simply the experience of those authors and a tragic few?

As Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach used to say, people left Orthodoxy not because it was too much but because it wasn’t enough. His maxim was verified by Nishma’s study, which reports that most OTDs felt “pushed” off the derech, disappointed by the Orthodox community, rather than “pulled” or seduced by the “outside” world.

Dropouts have always been part of the Orthodox story, but the Pew Research Center's most definitive 2013 study found dropouts have fluctuated with the generations, the older generation dropping out with far greater frequency than the younger one. Pew states that there was "a surge [78 percent] switching [out of] Orthodox Judaism from the 1950s to the 1970s, followed by a higher retention within Orthodox Judaism in recent decades." The retention rate is now soaring among young Orthodox adults (aged 18-30); 83 percent of those who were raised Orthodox still are. That means, however, that 17 percent have left.

Well, not all actually left, a finding that casts a fog over any numbers or conclusions. Unlike Christianity, where belief in Jesus provides a fairly definitive line of religious demarcation, Judaism defines religious fidelity not by belief but by action. Religious Christians don't "somewhat" believe in Jesus, but Nishma found that 45 percent of the dropouts remained "somewhat" Orthodox. It is interesting that 33 percent of OTDs still believed in God, but it is more pertinent to Orthodoxy that 31 percent still kept kosher, 53 percent still lit Shabbos candles, 68 percent still participated in Shabbos meals and 66 percent still felt an attachment to Israel (and the people of Israel). If one keeps Shabbos (to whatever extent) and kosher, when most Jews don't, how is that person "off the derech"? And yet, in a highly judgmental community, "with Orthodoxy's exacting standards," the study noted, "a respondent could consider himself or herself lapsed and still be more religious than most."

The respondents still wanted Orthodox-literate children; 70 percent send their children to yeshiva or day school, with only 9 percent sending children to non-Orthodox Jewish schools.

And yet, the more liberal Orthodoxy became, the more it disappointed. Modern Orthodoxy, which has done considerably more than any other Orthodox groups on behalf of women's Torah study, agunot reform, women's prayer groups, and women's lay leadership in synagogues and organizations, nevertheless had more Modern Orthodox women dropouts (22 percent) citing the "status of women" as the No. 1 reason they left. Across the quadrants of the survey (chasidic, Chabad, yeshivish and Modern Orthodox), 20 percent of all female dropouts agreed, the status of women was a problem, but only 3 percent of the male OTDs thought so.

In another counterintuitive finding, although Modern Orthodox schools and rabbis are the most liberal in allowing and even encouraging an open exchange of ideas, Modern Orthodoxy had the most dropouts (9 percent) complaining about the "closed atmosphere" of "no questions, unanswered questions, [or] lack of openness." That was a higher percentage than among the formerly yeshivish (6 percent), who

theoretically were living in a more cloistered, ideologically uniform environment. Indeed, none of the divergent educational methods in Orthodoxy proved to be more successful than any other as a bulwark against “general doubts, [or] loss of faith,” a problem shared by dropouts from the chasidic (15 percent), yeshivish (14 percent), Modern Orthodox (11 percent) and Chabad (10 percent) communities.

The goal of surveying those “off the derech” was to “give this group a voice,” said Mark Trencher, Nishma’s founder and lead researcher (and former president of his local Young Israel). He told *The Jewish Week* that the survey was not scientific, as there was “no hard data” and “no master list” to gauge the OTD population. The survey, therefore, was crafted, said Trencher, as an “opt-in” conversation, with 885 respondents. Most of the respondents were solicited through nonprofits such as Footsteps and Makom (which helped coordinate the survey), agencies dedicated to assisting OTDs.

Although OTD memoirs often discuss family rejection, the survey found that time heals: familial understanding rose from 15 percent, at the time of leaving Orthodoxy, to more than 40 percent after 10 years. Women reported having a harder time with their families than did men. After leaving, a majority (54 percent) of the lapsed Orthodox felt a void in their non-Orthodox communities, with one of the biggest problems being dating and relationships (24 percent). “I haven’t found a community of likeminded individuals,” wrote one respondent, “and don’t feel as connected as I would like in terms of socializing.” Forty-three percent of respondents agreed. Despite the attention given to the difficulty of being Orthodox and single, the so-called “shidduch crisis,” only 5 percent of women and less than 1 percent of men cited it as a significant factor in their decision to leave. Dating on the “outside” could be harder, not easier.

Men were more likely to say that they left because of intellectual issues, with complaints about the “learning and thought processes,” or religion’s absence of “proof.” Women shared those intellectual issues but were more bothered (9 percent) than men (3 percent) by communal “rumors, judging, and gossip.”

LGBTQ Jews left after coming to the conclusion that they would never be accepted within their communities. “My identity as a transgender person was ignored and denied by all the rabbis I reached out to,” said one. “I had many LGBTQ friends and struggled with reconciling that part of my life with my yeshiva life.”

Some OTDs lived a double life, questioning internally, acting Orthodox externally. These “double-lifers,” Nishma concluded, “are not ready to emerge publicly and may never do so,” although 39 percent say they likely will go public, someday.

The survey didn't indicate that some "double-lifers" happily embrace their ambivalence. Jay Lefkowitz, an attorney, writing in Commentary, explained that he is a practicing Modern Orthodox Jew, though not a believing one, because "I'm a Jet," like the gang in West Side Story. When you're Orthodox, you're "never alone ... never disconnected." Between shul, schools, interests, Shabbos meals, he felt "home with your own" and surely "company's expected."

Lefkowitz defined his group as "social Orthodox." Religious practice, he explained, "is an essential component of Jewish continuity," so "social Orthodox" Jews "are observant – and not because they are trembling before God." He puts on tefillin, eats vegetarian in non-kosher restaurants, and yet theological questions "weren't particularly germane to my life as an observant Jew."

He's not alone. The Jewish Week has reported that a substantial number of Modern Orthodox teens might go to shul on Shabbos, but also text on their phones, part of a phenomenon known as "half-Shabbos." Nevertheless, they consider themselves Orthodox. Others do the same and think of themselves as lapsed.

Lefkowitz attends an Orthodox shul, sends his children to an Orthodox school and sent his daughter to the Israeli army. "I would appear to be the very model of an Orthodox Jew, albeit a modern one," he writes. In the end, "We behave as Jews so we can belong as Jews ... so we will not be disconnected, and we will never be alone."

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