

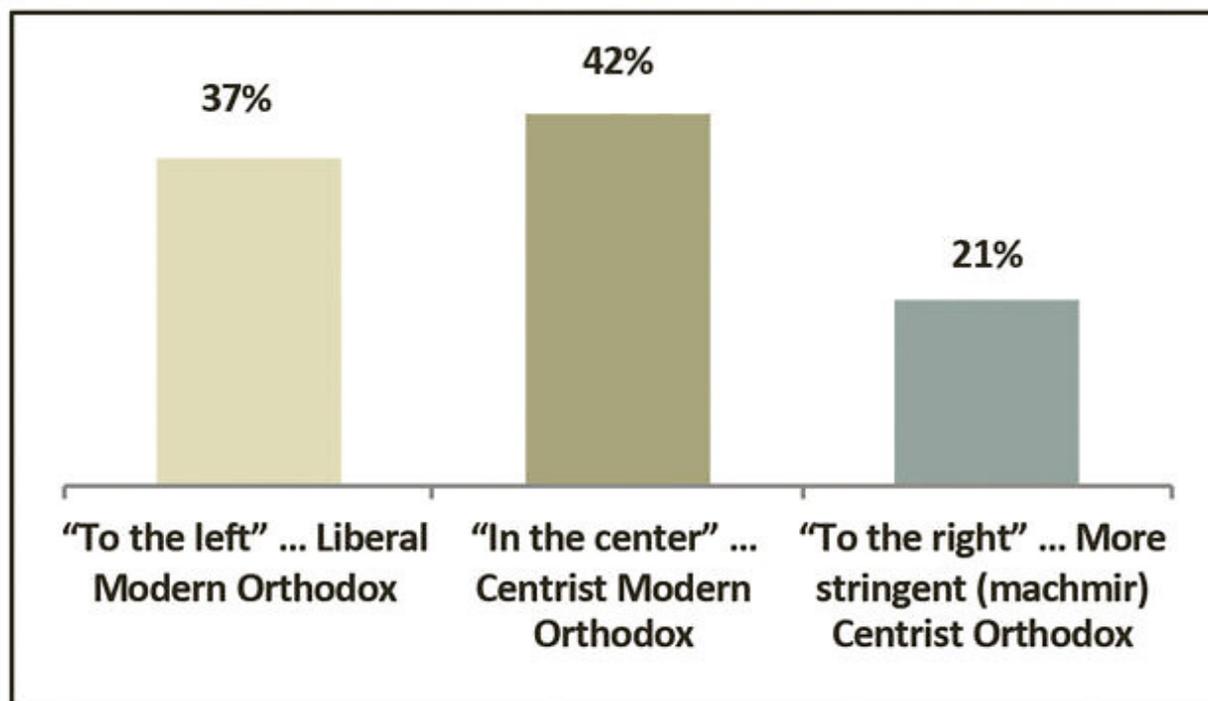
Modern Orthodox Survey Reveals Internal Doubts

And a growing interest in public schools over day schools.

By [JONATHAN MARK](#)

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Where Modern Orthodox Jews See Themselves



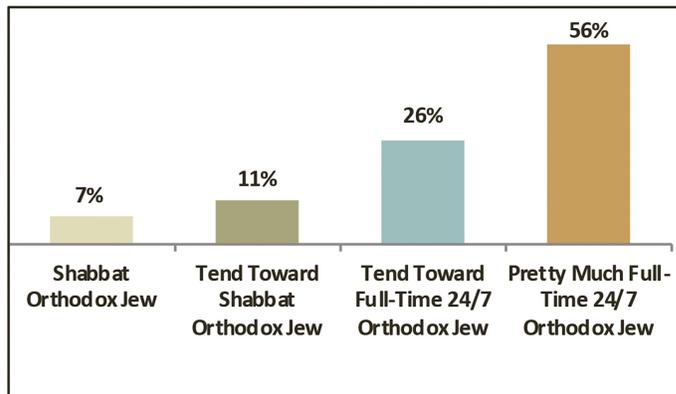
A new survey of Modern Orthodox Jews indicates a dissatisfaction and diminishing commitment to day schools, as well as uncertainty about halachic commitment within the Modern Orthodox community.

Nishma Research's "[The Success, Challenges and Future of American Modern Orthodoxy](#)," conducted with the cooperation of the Rabbinical Council of America (most of whom were ordained by Yeshiva University), found that 85 percent of Modern Orthodox Jews say observance is an important part of their lives, but only 56 percent said they were a "pretty much full-time 24/7 Orthodox Jew," and only 43 percent agreed that "religious observance within the Modern Orthodox community is where it should be." Another 18 percent said they were 24/1 Orthodox — primarily on Shabbat, or tending that way.

Although 68 percent asserted that Modern Orthodoxy is as "Jewishly authentic" as yeshivish or chasidic Judaism, that pride dissipated under further examination: Only 24 percent fully agreed that "Modern Orthodoxy is spiritually inspiring," and that "Modern Orthodox Jews are quite knowledgeable about the fundamental underpinnings of faith." Respondents (58 percent) were optimistic about Modern Orthodoxy's future religious strength, but when it came to Modern Orthodoxy's cohesiveness and togetherness, only 6 percent were very optimistic, and 26 percent somewhat.

The opt-in survey garnered 2,629 respondents; it was facilitated through RCA rabbis and their synagogues.

“Full-Time Orthodox” vs. “Shabbat Jew”



Nearly 8-in-10 Modern Orthodox Jews see themselves as centrist or left-leaning, and nearly the same percentage see themselves as “full-time” Orthodox Jews. Source: Nishma Survey

Without a consensus of halachic leadership, such as the charedi Agudath Israel’s Moetzes Gedole HaTorah (the Council of Torah Sages, comprised of “rosh yeshiva” leaders and various chasidic rebbes), or the Conservative movement’s Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, Modern Orthodoxy lacked a consensus “north star” by which to define themselves; a minority (42 percent of the more than 2,000 respondents) defined themselves as “centrist,” but a clear majority think they’re outside the Modern Orthodox mainstream, on the “left” (37 percent) or “more machmir,” halachically strict (21 percent). Not only is the center not holding, more than 1 in 3 (34 percent) think Modern Orthodoxy has outlived itself as “there is no longer a single, cohesive Modern Orthodox community. Modern Orthodoxy should acknowledge this and would perhaps be better off splitting into separate camps.”

The size of Open Orthodoxy, on the left, associated with women clergy and halachic flexibility, was estimated at 12 percent, Mark Trencher, director of the survey, told The Jewish Week. Trencher based that percentage on Nishma’s 2017 survey, as Open Orthodoxy wasn’t specifically cited on the latest survey.

Perhaps one reason for communal uncertainty is that many Modern Orthodox Jews don’t have a Modern Orthodox background; 58 percent are “frum from birth,” or identifying as Orthodox pre-bar/bat mitzvah,” meaning 42 percent grew up with a different orientation.

The movement’s split is not critical but significant: 35 percent (the left) say the community is too focused on “drawing lines,” not focused enough on making changes. At the same time, the right (12 percent) say the community is “too focused on making changes and does not preserve tradition enough.”

Trencher found it interesting that the left and right share the same battle lines over women and LGBTQ people. There is more discontent on the left: 52 percent want to expand the role of women, including women clergy. Meanwhile, 72 percent felt “some negative views and values of broader secular society are making their way into my Orthodox community,” and those on the right went further, stating that Orthodoxy was being too influenced by a secular liberal agenda not completely in sync with Orthodoxy, and the introduction of women clergy is “going a bit far.”

The LGBTQ issue is less of a Modern Orthodox flash point; the left consensus wants increased acceptance of LGBTQ Jews; the right is fine with personal acceptance but not the “celebration” of LGBTQ activities that are contrary to classical Orthodoxy. Less than 5 percent would attend a gay wedding, but the survey didn’t inquire about gay commitment ceremonies that don’t have a wedding’s halachic imprimatur.



Nishma Research’s Mark Trencher, who directed the survey.

Nishma, a sociological and marketing research firm for the Jewish community, found that most Modern Orthodox parents want their children to be halachically observant, with “centrist” Orthodoxy being the ideal for 58 percent, 18 percent wanting their children to be religiously “right,” and 13 percent saying their child’s religious preferences are not so critical or relevant.

Ambivalence is proliferating, and dissatisfaction with day schools is a big part of that. Nishma found that “the historic near-universal attendance at Orthodox Jewish day schools seems to be slipping,” with nearly one-third of Modern Orthodox parents (31 percent) saying “they might consider public school as an option.” The erosion is rooted in the question of whether Modern Orthodox schools are fulfilling their core mandate, “creating committed Orthodox Jews,” with 55 percent saying the schools do, but 34 percent saying they don’t.

While “learning” was a public and private priority, there were those who felt Jewish education could be more expansive; Gemara study should be more inclusive of Aggadah; Tanach study could better include the Later Prophets; and there should be room for teaching mysticism and mussar (Jewish ethical instruction and discipline).

While 70 percent basically agreed that the “cost [of] my children’s Jewish education” was “money well spent” (corresponding to the remaining 31 percent considering public school), respondents also said the “cost of day school needs to be dealt with,” as does “the cost of living in a [Modern Orthodox] neighborhood.”

There was concern (63 percent) about people leaving Orthodoxy, but Nishma found the reasons, data and testimony too diverse to arrive at a definitive conclusion why. Nishma’s report stated, “We have experienced leeriness among shuls and communal organizations about discussing the topic. However, while it is a difficult and often uncomfortable topic, people want to see it addressed.”

Unlike other denominations, Modern Orthodox Jews are uncertain about their rabbis or communal organizations taking political or social stands; 18 percent fully agreed they should, while 33 somewhat agreed.

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