

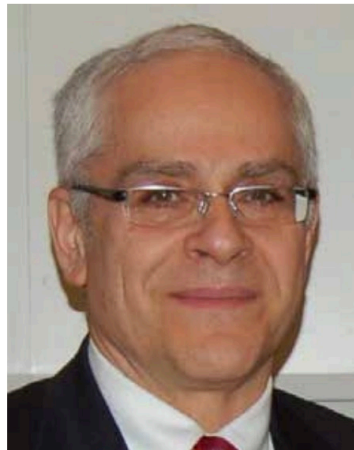
New Survey Examines Divorce In The Jewish World

BY BARUCH LYTLE

A newly released survey examines the attitudes and behaviors that most often play a role in divorce amongst orthodox Jews. With more than 1700 participants—809 identifying as Modern Orthodox and 660 as Haredi, and with 350 participants identified as divorcees—the study was the largest of its kind ever conducted on this demographic. The survey revealed that the average modern orthodox couple stayed married for 16 years, while the average Haredi couple stayed married for 11. Also, of the divorced, 80 percent of those surveyed had children under the age of 18.

Nishma Research has been conducting surveys focused on Orthodox Jewry since 2016, diving into the beliefs and experiences of Jews on various aspects of modern day life, including finances, antisemitism and prevalent political views. Their 23rd survey, titled “A Survey of Orthodox Jewish Family Life, Marriage & Divorce” was released in early July.

The survey questionnaire was distributed by email to a large panel made up of previously surveyed respondents, religious organizations, social media groups, and shul congregants. While mainly focusing on the experiences of previously married individuals, it also asked never-married singles to share how known divorces in their community has affected their approach to dating. “I put up a very short online pre-survey and over 300 people



Mark Trencher

gave me ideas of questions to ask,” shared Mark Trencher, founder of Nishma Research. “So this is really of the people by the people and for the people.”

The study found that only 9% of Modern Orthodox and 16% of Haredi divorce take place within the first four years of marriage. It also concluded the average age of divorcees among Modern Orthodox was 43 and 34 years of age for Haredi. Divorce in the Haredi world was more likely within the first 9 years of marriage, while divorce in modern orthodoxy happened more often after 9 years of marriage. Trencher suggested this may be due to the Haredi phenomenon of marrying at a younger age. “The Haredi may be a little

less mature, less ready, while the modern might have finished college and gotten a [career, leading to more financial stability and life experience]..”

Overall for the two groups, the top five reasons cited for divorce were bad habits (49%), unaddressed mental health challenges and/or personality disorders (47%), abuse (emotional or verbal) (42%), dishonesty (39%), and a spouse having “become a different person” after marriage (36%).

The study also found correlations between childhood trauma and divorce. 24% of divorcees reported experiencing childhood physical or emotional abuse, compared to 9% of marrieds who had never been divorced. The study hopes that “raising awareness of how childhood trauma affects marriage will encourage parents, rabbis, shadchanim, as well as those who are dating to promote and seek individual therapy proactively, and to help people address and resolve trauma and attachment injuries before marriage.”

There were some notable surprises in the survey. Contrary to popular belief, the study did not find that the 2020 Covid epidemic and quarantine played a significant role in inflaming the divorce rate. “I think Covid obviously affected family life but it didn’t top off as a major factor for divorce,” Trencher noted. Also disproven was the common belief that Jewish families’ experiences are not as prominent as those of non-Jewish families. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

conducted surveys that found that 47% of all women and 47% of all men (married or divorced) experienced psychological aggression by an intimate partner during their lifetime. Nishma found this number among the orthodox to be at 42%. Also, a 2015 American Sociological Association study found that 68% of divorces were initiated by women, compared to 58% in the orthodox study.

Participants noted key deterrents to divorce being social pressure and stigma, especially for women and single mothers. A common quote cited in the ‘sample verbatim responses’ portion of the survey, was “Divorce is so stigmatized... scary and lonely to be a single mom.” Encouragingly, Trencher notes that orthodoxy seems to be becoming more tolerant, educated and sophisticated in its sensitivity and approach to the subject.

“There are two things that I found to be very interesting, the impact of mental health on the divorce rate, and also the amount of trauma,” Trencher expressed. “In the case of the Modern Orthodox, who tend to date for a longer period of time, why would they not detect any mental health concerns in their spouse till after marriage?” Later in the survey, an attempt to address this phenomenon is in the ‘sample verbatim responses’ where many participants agree with the sentiment “I believe the divorce could have been prevented if only the therapists, rabbis, etc. *believed* me when I described my

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spouse's mental illness/abusiveness. Then they would have been able to intervene sooner, and in an appropriate way." Nishma hopes that the findings in its surveys will lead to better understanding throughout the Jewish community and serve as a blueprint for shuls and Jewish organizations to provide the most effective service possible.

On a sobering note, divorces in general were often viewed as more hostile (47%) than amicable (28%) with Modern Orthodox women viewing their divorces as much more hostile than do men. But the majority said there is strong agreement that getting the divorce was good (76%), and people were happier (69%); with mixed feelings on whether their children were better off.

Nishma also asked participants what they most attributed to a Successful Marriage: Good behavior (71%), followed by willingness to work through challenges (63%), and the couple being

on similar religious levels (62%). A refreshing highlight in the survey was found in the sample verbatim responses, where participants that had previously been divorced, then successfully remarried, gave their advice. Thoughts shared included: "While being single is lonely, don't get sucked into the single life. Stay determined to remarry. When getting remarried, if kids are involved, do a lot of planning, kids / step kids will impact your life," and "Don't badmouth your ex spouse. Describe how their behavior affected you and what can be triggering as a way to learn about best ways to build relationships. Find a trustworthy person who can provide potential mates with what they need to know about the divorce without resorting to lashon hara."

Baruch Lytle is an African American Orthodox Jew. He has written over 200 published articles, and received a Simon Rockower Award for Excellence In Jewish Journalism in 2023.