

PORAT Report: Responding to the Realities of Single Modern Orthodox Jews

Sylvia Barack Fishman

Single Modern Orthodox Jews of all ages comment that they feel invisible. The unique challenges facing Orthodox single individuals are seldom mentioned in overviews or analyses of American Jewry, which emphasize the fact that Orthodox Jews as a group marry earlier and in greater numbers than the non-Orthodox. But non-married Modern Orthodox Jews comprise a significant minority throughout adulthood. Pew data (2013) reveal that about 30% of Modern Orthodox Jews are single at age 29. While many singles marry in their thirties and forties, the proportion of single Modern Orthodox Jews expands via divorce and widowhood in later decades of life.¹ This PORAT report considers the thoughts and experiences of this broad spectrum of unmarried Modern Orthodox Jews, building upon the testimonies of single Jews of all ages in recent studies as they comment on their own realities and concerns.

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¹ Pew Research Center, *A Portrait of American Orthodox Jews*, Washington, D.C., 2015. The Pew 2020 study of American Jews did not divide Orthodox Jews into Haredi and Modern Orthodox populations.

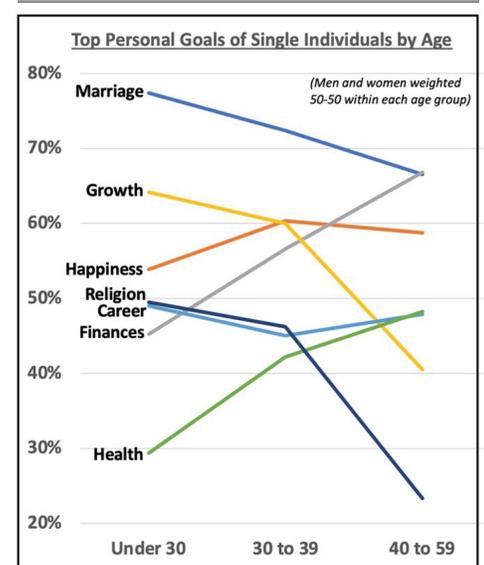
PORAT consultations,² Nishma research,³ and other recent seminars and studies⁴ show that single people often feel they have little visibility or respect in synagogue life, and they have specific suggestions and requests to help their synagogues and Jewish educational and communal organizations address this problem. Singles shared the challenges they face in their attempts to meet potential life partners and spouses. They also talked about their general social isolation within Orthodox congregational life. Almost universally, Modern Orthodox singles seek community, sensitivity, friendliness, respect, and to be treated as “complete people.” While the majority wish to meet appropriate significant others, they do not want their single lives to be pathologized: “We are not broken and waiting to be fixed. We want to be included and appreciated as the full

² *When Things Don’t Work Out as Planned: Single Heads of Household in the Orthodox Jewish Community*, PORAT (Dec. 12, 2021), available at www.poratonline.org/events; and *17 Ideas to Help Create More Welcoming Settings for Single Individuals*, Facebook Post (Dec. 24, 2021), available at www.facebook.com/poratonline.

³ Nishma Research, *Orthodox Jewry: Community, Connection, Understanding & Orthodox Jewish Singles*, West Hartford, CT (May 2022), available at nishmaresearch.com/social-research.html.

⁴ Dr. Sylvia Barack Fishman is grateful to the Orthodox Union’s Center for Communal Research for sharing data gathered from singles in the Orthodox community.

individuals we are. What we need is more socialization opportunities.”



Single, divorced, and widowed individuals—like married individuals—aspire to a broad range of goals. While “Marriage” is ranked highest by three-quarters of those under thirty, other goals are also significant, especially “Happiness,” secure “Finances,” a “Career,” and personal “Growth.” Some goals—like “Health”—become more important with the passage of time.

This PORAT Report presents ten policy recommendations, dealing with: (a) the general situation and treatment of singles; (b) enhancing singles’ dating opportunities; and (c) Jewish educational programs designed to improve interactions between singles, and between single individuals and the rest of the community. Most of these recommendations require minimal resources, and if Jewish institutions implement them, the lives of thousands of members of our Orthodox community will be improved significantly. We hope that our recommendations will be discussed and adopted; in each

community, this process should include consultation with that community's own halachic authorities.

1. Offer meaningful roles for single men and women, put them in leadership positions, and integrate them into synagogue life.

Passionate requests for meaningful synagogue roles for singles came from respondents of all ages, from those in their twenties to those in their seventies. Both women and men said that single congregants should be asked to take on leadership roles, serve on committees, and receive honors⁵ with comparable frequency to married people, so that they can demonstrate their capabilities, contribute, and boost awareness of singles as competent and valuable congregants.

Single men in their twenties and thirties reported that they were passed over for *aliyot* and for leading the congregation as *ba'alei tefillah*. Women in their thirties commented that single women are completely ignored in the synagogue, whereas at least the men "counted" for a minyan and could be called to the Torah. One man in his thirties commented that many single women stop coming to the synagogue when they get to a certain age since congregations often make no conscious and conscientious effort to incorporate them into congregational life: "The best way for Jewish singles to meet is regular synagogue activities such as Shabbat and holidays. However I always see a much larger number of single men than single women....the community should encourage single women to be there."

than married people." These respondents hoped that seeing singles spotlighted and respected in this way would create awareness and help to normalize their position by incorporating them into the community as equals.

2. Treat single Jews respectfully as adults, with friendship in social interactions.

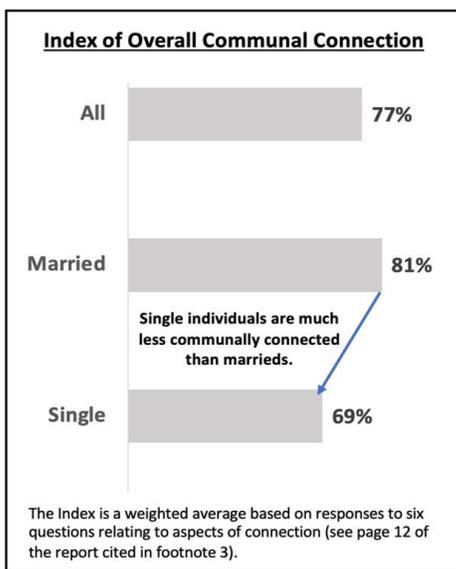
Respondents were grateful to congregants who spoke to them in a friendly manner, sat next to them, and introduced them to others at kiddush: "At the end of davening, she said, 'Next time you come to shul come sit next to me.' That was really nice." However, many noted such welcoming behavior was uncommon. Moreover, a tendency to "infantilize single members of the community," was reported by many. One woman in her thirties summarized the issue: "Being married should not confer status. A married 18-year-old is not more adult than a single 30-year old." Indeed, a frequent complaint was that "[a]n unmarried woman of 35 is called a 'girl' but a married 19-year-old is called a woman!" Singles agree: "We are full adults!" "We are not children!" "We are not losers!"

"See us as equal—not more or less than married people."

Comments by several respondents struck common themes: "There is a tendency to infantilize single members of the community. They should receive invitations to participate in leadership, such as board membership." "Being single isn't a bad thing. What's actually important is having a strong grasp of who you are as a person and a Jew, and where you want to go in your life. If someone is single it doesn't mean there is something wrong with them." "See us as equal—not more or less

"We are not losers!"

Unfortunately, many singles related experiences of profound disrespect: "As a twenty-something medical student I and a thirty-year-old widow were seated at a children's table at a wedding." This lack of sensitivity was



⁵ One commentator noted that synagogues frequently name awards for women the "Aishes Chayil" award, but since this term is frequently associated with married women, its usage can cause hurt feelings to single women.

especially egregious in conversations about delicate issues such as whether or not a single is interested in being set up on dates, or how a newly divorced person feels about the divorce. Many respondents advised allowing the single, divorced, or widowed person space to set the tone by asking them open-ended questions, rather than blurting out foregone assumptions, in an effort to express interest and willingness to help.

Singles seek “friendship rather than pity.”

While singles enjoy Shabbat meal invitations, many said these invitations should be preceded by some conversation so that the invitation feels like the result of “friendship rather than pity.” Several commented that rather than being called in advance, they received spontaneous, on-the-spot invitations for Shabbat and holiday meals. Some called this being “Shabbosed”—to be invited on Shabbat without prior conversation, which made them feel that as singles they are interchangeable subjects of charity with no plans, unlike real, adult (i.e., married) guests.

Older singles—in their sixties, seventies, and older—without families in the synagogue also often reported feeling “invisible,” and they urged communal attention to their demographic. Both women and men asked that they be acknowledged and introduced to each other, that there be

more programs with refreshments at the end so that there is a chance to socialize and meet people, and that singles of all ages should be welcomed to a full range of programming.

Many warned that unless singles are incorporated into congregational life, they drift away from Orthodoxy.

Some worried that singles stigmatization was deliberate, like the woman in her thirties who charged that some rabbis don’t want singles to become too comfortable in their singleness: “A rabbi said that he wouldn’t give a shiur about enjoying singlehood because he would get a lot of flak for encouraging complacency.” Many warned that unless singles are incorporated into congregational life, they drift away from Orthodoxy. “The Orthodox community has to accept that single people are part of the community, or we push single people away and they will leave. This is both a social issue and a religious issue.”

- 3. Eliminate the “singles tax” by giving singles the same financial breaks offered to families (i.e., singles should pay half of what couples pay for events). Don’t charge separately for every singles event. Instead, fund events for diverse single groups in the same way that family activities are funded.***

Financial anxieties were expressed among both younger and older respondents. Several men in their forties felt that shidduch-related dating services should be subsidized.

A woman in her thirties felt that “elective egg freezing should be made more affordable.” More generally, numerous respondents in every age group complained that synagogues give a financial break to married congregants only – charging couples less per person than what singles are charged, with family caps exacerbating the disparity – while events specifically targeted at singles were more likely to have significant fees compared to activities created for families.

Many singles feel that “family-friendly” financial arrangements penalize them for their singlehood.

A woman in her fifties wrote: “The shul as an organization does not care about singles, and won’t fund any activities appropriate for them. I have been asking for years. But children’s activities, expensive imported scholars-in-residence, guest chazzonim, mother-daughter events, carnivals—no problem there.” While we lack sufficient information to judge the accuracy of these complaints, synagogue congregations should recognize that many singles feel that they are being financially penalized for their singlehood.

- 4. Create reliable arrangements for befriending children of single, widowed, or divorced persons sitting alone.***

Single parents in their thirties and forties (whether “by choice” or

through divorce or widowhood) commented how they appreciated when individual congregants befriended their sons or daughters on the other side of the mekhitzta. “It’s especially good when the same person sits next to him for a few weeks, and he feels like he is really part of things.”

Synagogues should create a “shul buddy” system for children of divorced or single parents to help make services a friendlier place for them.

However, many complained about gaps: either their children were not befriended, or the persons sitting next to them were rotated from week to week so they never knew who would be sitting next to them, or it only happened haphazardly so that the child never knew if he or she would be sitting alone. Some children in these situations stop coming to synagogue to avoid the pain of sitting alone. Synagogues should create a “shul buddy” or “big-brother/big-sister” system for children of divorced or single parents sitting alone, to help make services a friendlier place for them.

5. Don’t make all activities exclusive to one age, gender, or lifestyle status. Some programs aimed at specific segments are fine, but the default should be that programs are open to congregants/members of all ages and marital status.

Singles are not only interested in meeting potential romantic partners. Singles in every age group lamented

that Kiddush after services was the only open activity in their synagogue. Instead of restricting access, congregations were urged to offer “open access” to all classes, discussion groups, clubs, community service efforts, and social activities, and that “events should be about interests, not age group.” Making services or other activities exclusive to only one lifestyle group often means that single congregants don’t interact with married congregants, creating feelings of isolation.

Create events “about interests, not age group” or marriage status.

Several single men in their thirties and forties complained that since they are not physicians or lawyers they felt ineligible for services or activity groups called the “Young Professionals.” Identifying the group as “Young Adults” would address this concern. LGBTQ+ Orthodox singles, including those calling themselves “Queer frum Jews,” wrote that they want to be acknowledged and befriended, and they appreciate opportunities to share conversations with diverse congregants. More generally, singles do not want to be limited to socializing with only other singles. Singles said they would enjoy “retreats, trips, Shabbatons, not specifically for the sake of making shidduchim, just having fun programs,” and people will find their

way to what interests them and make friends.

“We need to provide opportunities for single people to grow in their religious lives.”

Respondents said that too many congregations also give classes for only men, or only women, or only “Moms and Daughters” or “Fathers and Sons,” or divide people up into categories like the “Young Couples Club,” “Men’s Club,” “Women’s Auxiliary.” A woman in her thirties suggested: “Why can’t we just refer to us as Jews? Why segregate us according to marriage status, age, if you have children or not? Why not just have an event open to the community?” Some recommended more synagogue programming and classes dealing with issues outside family orientation: “We need to provide opportunities for single people to grow in their religious lives.”

6. Create activities with content appropriate for single, divorced, or widowed persons in differing age groups.

Although many respondents urged that all activities be open to all adult congregants (see #5 above), some younger respondents urged that separate activities be created appropriate for differing age groups and life cycle stages, asserting that single persons in their twenties and thirties had very different interests than those in older age groups.

Creating both age-specific programming and programming open to everyone will help institutions address both these needs.

7. Create and seek to participate in city-wide or regional gatherings and events for singles, so that singles from different geographical areas have opportunities to meet each other.

Commenters deeply involved in—and often frustrated by—efforts to find potential spouses and life partners complained that appropriate singles are often separated from each other geographically and don't have the opportunity to meet. Singles ranging from their forties through their seventies suggested the creation of social structures and activities enabling interactions between singles living in diverse locations, such as regional shabbaton programs.

8. Discourage singles from writing job-qualification-style lists of requirements and resumé, and encourage them instead to get to know the whole person.

Numerous responses, from people of all ages and backgrounds, commented on the negative impact of the resumé culture that encourages singles to look at specific “qualifications” and to ignore the whole human being. Some faulted religious schools that putatively contribute to a culture in which “girls only look for guys who learn full-time, and boys only look for skinny, beautiful girls.” There were calls to “seriously dismantle focus on superficialities, labels, and ridiculous lists of requirements and credentials.” While this societal behavior extends

beyond any individual shul or organization, change can start at the local level. Interactive programs with rabbis and social workers or psychologists may be helpful in changing attitudes and behaviors.

9. Create “natural,” “organic” opportunities for men and women to interact with each other.

One way to assist singles with looking at the totality of potential mates is by creating natural opportunities for single men and women to get to know one another. Numerous comments by single respondents, in both younger and older age groups, asserted that the religious shift away from co-ed social events due to what sociologist Samuel Heilman termed the “slide to the right” has had negative effects on the opportunities for Modern Orthodox men and women to meet each other in “organic” ways. Single, widowed, and divorced respondents in their fifties, sixties, and seventies cited their own experiences when they were 20-something singles, noting that men and women used to meet each other “naturally” at social weekends in the Catskill Mountains and at family and community life-cycle situations such as at mixed seating dinner tables at weddings and bar mitzvah celebrations. We need to create more of these situations today. For example, if the bride and groom and their families do not feel comfortable offering mixed seating for their single guests, they should consider setting up dedicated tables where men and women can meet each other during the lengthy photography break.

“Please stop making everything separate seating, stop making it awkward for singles to mingle.”

A widowed woman in her sixties suggested: “In my day there were many events/weekends/organizations that offered opportunities to meet potential spouses. It seems like there is hardly anything going on these days and singles have to play the awful game of cruising after shul or relying on JSwipe or matchmakers.” Many comments about the disappearance of “natural,” “organic” opportunities for men and women to meet each other in past decades came from singles in their twenties and thirties, who grew up hearing how much more relaxed and open Orthodox life was when their parents were young.

We need curricula throughout the educational system to deal with the biggest issues: “intimacy, sexual health, and communication.”

Younger and older respondents alike urged a return to “more normal,” co-ed rather than sex-segregated interactions. They blamed much of the current problem on tightly controlled methods of bringing men and women together, arguing: “Please stop making everything separate seating, stop making it awkward for singles to mingle. All of our parents said they met naturally, in college,

through friends, socializing, at weddings, etc. It is now completely discouraged, and it increases the shidduch crisis tremendously.”

10. Educational programming is needed at several levels: school-age girls and boys on how to understand and feel comfortable with each other; teens on healthy interactions—and how to recognize and react to inappropriate behavior; and adults on realistic expectations and a sense of their own responsibilities in social situations. This is an opportunity for shuls, high schools, Jewish colleges, Orthodox organizations at secular colleges, and other organizations to work together.

Numerous comments faulted religious educational systems which separated males and females “from five years old” onward, keeping them “so completely separate that when the time comes to date they barely know how to say hello to each other.” Many charged that this separation contributes to extremely unrealistic expectations, which interfere with the ability to develop healthy relationships. One woman in her twenties explained: “They have it so separate and then all of a sudden men have to get married and have no idea on how to act around a woman.”

Numerous comments by both male and female singles in their twenties testified to what they experienced as “clueless” or “inappropriate” behavior. For example, sometimes single men are only interested in women who are much younger than them. Many suggested curricula throughout the educational system dealing with “Intimacy, sexual health, and

communication—the biggest issues—and education about consent and communication, even for those who plan to uphold the laws of negiah and other halachot. Especially for young women, it is a foolish and dangerous thing that frum schools and parents are not educating in regards to their rights, or appropriate versus inappropriate behavior. Please warn people of the dangers and better educate the future generations.”

The discomfort that singles feel around intimacy issues contributes to both men and women leaving Orthodoxy.

Some connected the situation of Orthodox singles today to the emotional fragility observed in the broader American society. “There is less resiliency in the overall population. People really don’t handle stress well, and don’t know how to support others who are stressed. They are not realistic about life and dealing with people. Every single has a specific reason things are not working out, but it isn’t addressed properly. There is no infrastructure for that.”

Looking at the young adult age group, a woman in her thirties suggested that education needs to continue into the dating years: “There need to be workshops for men and women when it comes to dating, to help them understand what is healthy and not healthy.” Several respondents in their thirties and forties commented that the discomfort that singles in their age

group feel around intimacy issues paradoxically contributes to both men and women leaving Orthodoxy: “The all or nothing approach guides older singles ‘off-the-derech.’ So the ‘good’ girl, who has followed the rules, now sees no marriage in her future, and finds herself searching for something in the non-Jewish world that will meet her needs without being shunned by the community. And then she is swept into that world.”

Conclusion

These recommendations are just a first step. We offer them—and the voices of the singles that inspired them—for consideration and implementation. We hope that they will also prompt further discussion and the development of additional ideas. This PORAT Report’s call for inclusion has important policy implications. While “married with family” has been the normative marital status in many current Orthodox communities, inadvertently that communal norm has created environments and situations in which singles and divorced and widowed persons experience marginalization and even alienation. Many singles shared stories about unmarried friends and acquaintances who drifted away from Orthodoxy because they didn’t see a healthy place for themselves in synagogue services and activities. By listening to the needs of the single members of our community, we can create a Modern Orthodox community where every member feels valued irrespective of marital or family status.