

The Finances of Orthodox Jewish Life – A Nishma Research Study

DECEMBER 21, 2021 – FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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SURVEY ON THE “COST OF ORTHODOXY” EXPLORES HOW MUCH PEOPLE EARN, SPEND, AND SAVE ACROSS MODERN ORTHODOX AND HAREDI SEGMENTS; THE DRIVERS OF SPENDING; AMOUNTS ATTRIBUTABLE TO BEING ORTHODOX; THOSE THRIVING VS. STRUGGLING; COST-CUTTING OPTIONS

A new survey – sponsored and conducted in November by Nishma Research, an independent research firm – broadly explores the finances and the cost of Orthodoxy. The online survey reached 1,334 Modern Orthodox and 972 Haredi individuals and explored their household incomes, savings, investments, and attitudes, with particular focus on what might be viewed as “Orthodox spending.”

The full survey report and a summary report are available at <http://nishmaresearch.com/social-research.html>.

The study found that, even with high median household incomes of \$188,000 for Modern Orthodox and \$136,000 for Haredi, fewer than half see their household as financially strong and fewer than half are comfortable that they will have enough money to retire.

The study found median household spending of \$31,000 for the education of children in K-12 Jewish schools (even after getting assistance, which close to half the families receive), and between \$4,000 and \$6,000 for synagogue dues, other Jewish organization memberships and donations, Jewish camps and trips (probably understated due to the pandemic), and a wide array of religious purchases. Additionally, there is the significant additional cost of living in an Orthodox community, where housing is almost always more expensive, the expenses that result from Orthodoxy’s generally larger families and kosher food costs (including Shabbat and holiday meals). One in six respondents cited the higher cost of kosher food as having a significant negative impact on their household budget and, while this study did not quantify food costs, we believe Orthodox families may be spending in the range of \$5,000 more a year than households in general.

“However,” Nishma Research president Mark Trencher noted, “it appears that cost does not present an ‘existential threat’ to many in their religious lives, as people – while struggling – are drawing strength from their beliefs, practices, families and communities. For example, when we asked what I would characterize as a ‘bottom line’ question of ‘Orthodoxy costs more; is it worth it?’ fewer than 10% ‘voted no.’ The vast majority saw great benefit in their Orthodoxy, although we recognize that many had mixed feelings about costs, many were very upset, and anger did come through. So, while they are mostly coping, the extent of the pain shouldn’t be ignored. To that end, the report does offer some suggestions.”

Rabbi Dovid Bashevkin, Director of Education at NCSY, host of the 18Forty podcast exploring key issues in the Orthodox community, and one of the advisors to the study, added: “this new research really sheds light – both data-driven and from the verbatim responses – on one of the most crucial issues facing our community. The struggles are real and often daunting.”

Trencher concluded: “This has been an emotionally difficult topic – but one long overdue. The community is economically fragmented – many are doing fine but many are struggling. One goal of this study was to give the latter a voice, with the hope that this can spur communal consideration of the issue and possible ways to improve the situation.”