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For contact or interview:

- Mark Trencher – Email: mark@nishmaresearch.com – Phone: 860-922-8335
- Professor Samuel C. Heilman – Distinguished Professor of Sociology Emeritus, Queens College, CUNY – Email: Samuel.Heilman@qc.cuny.edu

SURVEY OF AMERICAN ORTHODOX JEWS FINDS HIGH BUT VARYING LEVELS OF CONCERN ABOUT ANTISEMITISM, WITH MODERN ORTHODOX HAVING HIGH AWARENESS BUT THE FEWEST PERSONAL EXPERIENCES, AND YIDDISH-SPEAKING CHASIDIM BEING THE LEAST WORRIED

A new survey from Nishma Research explores the perceptions and experiences of antisemitism among American Orthodox Jews. As Mark Trencher, head of Nishma Research, which conducted and sponsored the study in collaboration with the noted sociologist Prof. Samuel C. Heilman, noted: "The Orthodox community is very small and so its views often get blurred – subsumed into the overall Jewish community. Our goal was to focus on the Orthodox population, covering its sectors that range from more to less modern in appearance and attitudes. And to explore the full spectrum of Orthodoxy, we fielded the survey in both English-language and Yiddish versions."

The survey found generally high but varying levels of awareness and concern over antisemitism across the entire Orthodox population. Among all Orthodox, 35% believe there is a lot of antisemitism in the U.S. and 55% believe it has worsened in the past three years. More than one in four (28%) has been called offensive names in the past year, and one in six (16%) has been physically threatened or attacked because they are Jewish.

Fear of antisemitism is also affecting behaviors. About one in ten (12%) has often hidden their identity as a Jew, avoided going to shul (9%), or avoided attending public events with other Jews (11%). An even higher one in four (25%) has armed themselves in the past three years, due to concerns about antisemitism.

The report breaks out the findings by Orthodox sector as well as gender and reveals some striking differences, as well as uncovering some "disconnects" between perceptions of antisemitism as a problem, personal experiences, and actions that people have taken. For example: Modern Orthodox least often have personally experienced antisemitism but have the highest level of awareness of antisemitism and its recent increases. Interestingly, the most obviously Jewish (in appearance) but also most insulated group, Yiddish-speaking Chasidic, has least often taken actions in reaction to antisemitism.

While there are few differences between Democrats and Republicans in perceptions, personal experiences and actions taken relating to antisemitism, there are differences in which groups they view as antisemitic. Republicans see BDS supporters (74%), White Nationalists (59%), Muslims (51%), the media (48%), and left-wing progressives (44%) as having many antisemites; Democrats see fewer groups this way, with only White Nationalists (65%) and BDS supporters (53%) cracking the 30% level. Additionally, 36% of Republicans see Democratic politicians and voters as largely antisemitic, while 21% of Democrats see Republican politicians and voters this way.

Prof. Heilman noted that, "given the extraordinary number of genocidal attacks on Jews during the twentieth century – reaching unprecedented proportions in the Holocaust, where one third of the Jewish people were exterminated – one might suppose that Jews see antisemitism as an existential threat as well as a personal danger. After all, the number of Jews in the world is very small, and there is today only one country where Jews are sovereign and a majority: Israel. In America, they are a tiny minority, currently only about 2.5 percent of the population, depending on how one defines and counts them. So powerful a

collective experience was the genocide that the Jewish people experienced that, according to Pew Research, ‘most Jewish adults say that remembering the Holocaust’ is among the elements they consider ‘essential’ to what it means to them to be Jewish – indeed, far fewer thought observing Jewish law (halacha) was an essential element of their Jewishness.

“Given this conviction, we can imagine that any uptick in antisemitism would trouble American Jews. But are Jews who are among the more religiously observant as sensitive to the experience of antisemitism as others? When it comes to perceptions and experience of antisemitism, are the religiously observant like the rest of American Jewry or do they diverge? We ask these questions because the religiously observant are more easily identifiable in public, making them often targets of opportunity for antisemites. Yet, paradoxically, those who are most obviously Orthodox often live insular lives, embedded in their ghettos, which limit their contact with outsiders, including antisemites. All this emerges from our survey.”

Trencher added, “We Jews have a lot of things to worry about. But perhaps there is a limited ‘mental bandwidth’ available for worry. Does the high and persistent Orthodox concern about such things as ritual observance and the cost of Jewish life relegate fear of antisemitism to being just one more worry – an admittedly not unimportant one – in day-to-day Jewish lives?”

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