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THE NISHMA RESEARCH PROFILE OF AMERICAN MODERN ORTHODOX JEWS
First broad survey of its kind ever conducted among the Modern Orthodox Community

Explores successes and challenges, including fragmentation of left vs. right, views on role of women – including as clergy – shul life, Jewish study and children’s education, Israel connection, sexuality issues, and much more

West Hartford, CT, September 28, 2017 – Many surveys have been conducted among Jewish populations, but very few in-depth studies have been done among the Modern Orthodox. What can we learn from the experiences of the Jewish denomination that seeks to meld full religious observance with active participation in American secular society?

The survey received 3,903 respondents from 41 states and DC. These were obtained via outreach by hundreds of community rabbis throughout the U.S., who asked their congregants to participate. Interviews among Modern Orthodox men and women were conducted in advance of the survey, along with guidance from an advisory group of community experts, to ensure that the study covered the issues, attitudes and concerns that are particularly – and often uniquely – relevant to Modern Orthodoxy. The sample size enables the exploration of differences among sub-groups, such as between men and women, older vs. younger, and among the religious/ideological spectrum from left to right.

Mark Trencher, Nishma president and the study’s lead researcher, noted: “We will be broadly sharing the findings, including both successes and challenges. We hope this will promote understanding and discussion of the issues raised.”

Steven Bayme, Director of Contemporary Jewish Life of the American Jewish Committee, added: “The Modern Orthodox contain strong Jewish families, committed to Jewish education and study, and attached intensely to Israel. At a time of increased polarization in Jewish life, the Modern Orthodox, living in both the world of tradition and that of modern culture, may serve as a bridge between Jews across the denominational divides.”

Among the study findings:

- **Modern Orthodoxy has many successes to point to.** Levels of belief and observance are relatively high, and the sense of community provides much joy and meaning to people’s lives. Shabbat observance, active shuls, connections to Israel and continuing Jewish study all transmit Jewish values and practices to future generations.
- **The biggest concern by a wide margin is the cost of Jewish schooling (89% rate this a serious problem).** Other areas of concern are *agunot* – “chained women” (69%) and the overall cost of maintaining an Orthodox (56%). Concerns were also expressed relating to improving interpersonal relations and combating anti-Semitism.
- **Debates about the role of women are highly divisive.** Opportunities for women have grown in communal leadership (75% favor women as shul presidents), Torah teaching, study and scholarship. In terms of clergy positions, 53% agree that women should have the opportunity for expanded roles. 19% strongly support women having clergy roles accompanied by some type of title signifying their “rabbinic authority.” This is a source of the divisiveness, as 60% of Open Orthodox support this, compared to 4% among the Centrist Orthodox and right-leaning Centrists.
- **Younger women, in particular, are looking for progress on the issue of women in clergy positions.** Among women ages 18-34, two-thirds (66%) agree that women should have the opportunity for expanded roles in the clergy, and one-third (32%) strongly support women having such expanded roles accompanied by a title signifying “rabbinic authority.”
- **Modern Orthodoxy overall is “moving to the right” but significant numbers are becoming less observant.** Over the past decade, 39% became more observant and 23% became less observant. But polarization is increasing: while “the right” has moved very strongly further to the right, “the left” has moved slightly further left.
- **Improving the meaningfulness of *tefillah* remains an opportunity.** People feel welcomed in shul and more than two-thirds say going to shul is an important of their life, but fewer than half (42%) agree fully that *tefillah* is meaningful to them.
- **More liberal Modern Orthodox see more of their children becoming less observant.** Across all of Modern Orthodoxy, children are pursuing their religious identities. One-third are more observant than their parents and one-third less observant (although at the liberal end, higher percentages say their children have become less observant).

- **Secular society attitudes can permeate Modern Orthodoxy.** One area where this has occurred is the 58% support for Orthodox shuls in general accepting gays as members, with only 12% opposed.
- **People feel connected to Israel, but some are more connected than others.** Feelings of connection and advocacy are strongest among those age 55+ in the center of Modern Orthodoxy. Moving toward the left or right, or toward younger respondents, those feeling get weaker.

Rabbi Elie Weinstock, rabbi of Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun on the Upper East Side of Manhattan and a member of the survey's advisory panel, commented: "Staying committed to Judaism, its beliefs and practices, can be challenging in the modern world. This study shows that, while it can be difficult, many are succeeding and finding joy in their Judaism. At the same time, there will always be areas that need attention, and this survey does a great service survey by highlighting some areas our community will need to address.

The full study report is available at <http://nishmaresearch.com>, including all of the findings, discussion of the methodology, sample, etc.

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ABOUT NISHMA RESEARCH – Nishma is a sociological and market research firm serving the Jewish community. If you'd like more information about this study, or to schedule an interview with Mark Trencher, please call 860-922-8335 or email to mark@nishmaresearch.com.

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