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NISHMA RESEARCH – THE JOURNEYS AND EXPERIENCES OF BAALEI TESHUVAH
First-Ever Survey of Modern Orthodox Baalei Teshuvah Shows Strong Levels of Communal Acceptance but Some Personal Discomforts as They Retain Liberal Values

West Hartford, CT, November 24, 2019 – Nishma Research has released a new study – **The Journeys and Experiences of Baalei Teshuvah** – which examines the factors leading non-Orthodox Jews to become observant, their challenges and the nature of their continuing journey. The study is based on a survey of 744 American Modern Orthodox Jews who became Orthodox at or after their bar/bat mitzvah (at an average age of 24) and is the first quantitative survey done among this group.

Mark Trencher, Nishma president and the study's lead researcher, noted that "42% of Modern Orthodox (MO) Jews say they are baalei teshuvah (BT). They are a large and influential group within Modern Orthodoxy. However, while **BTs feel accepted** (75% say the MO community is very accepting of them), **they don't feel as comfortable as those born and raised Orthodox** (the 'from birth' - or 'FFB'). For example, 61% of BTs say on average that they are fully or mostly comfortable with davening (prayer), Jewish learning and day-to-day Orthodox living, a significantly lower level than the 77% comfort level among the FFB."

Trencher added that, "The top reasons baalei teshuvah give for why they became Orthodox are intellectual attraction (53%), seeing Orthodoxy as more authentically Jewish (52%) and seeing it as a more truthful version of Judaism (35%). **Their top challenge in becoming Orthodox was not theological, but was in their relationships with their parents and family** (37%), and these relationships were far more challenging than learning and knowing what to do as a members of the Orthodox community (16%).

"Modern Orthodox baalei teshuvah tend to skew significantly liberal, both ideologically and in their political views. Nearly half (46%) labeled themselves as 'To the left ... Liberal Modern Orthodox,' compared to fewer than one-third (31%) of FFBs, and 83% said they had 'held onto things that are not commonly found in the Orthodox world,' most often citing liberal ideology and political views. As two respondents noted: 'predominantly liberal social views (that) are also sometimes unpopular in my orthodox community,' and being 'more accepting of liberal views concerning equality of women; LGBTQ people; minorities and immigrants.'

"While Modern Orthodoxy's 'big tent' is very welcoming of baalei teshuvah, their views may differ from those of FFBs and the acceptance of those views (which are also held by some FFBs) is a story that is still playing out in an increasingly fragmented community. On the other hand, many baalei teshuvah whose views are more 'to the right' have been gravitating toward haredi Judaism, and the data highlight stark differences between Modern Orthodox BTs and haredi BTs."

Dr. Steven Bayme, Director of Contemporary Jewish Life of the American Jewish Committee and an advisor to the study, noted that "some level of continuity of practice and hashkafa (religious worldview) of Orthodox baalei teshuvah between their pre-Orthodox and current lives constitutes a healthy sign going forward. Experience has demonstrated that the more radical the change from

former non-Orthodox lives, the greater the instability of the change, to say nothing of the personal challenges of relating to family and close friends. Simply put, the baal teshuvah phenomenon is far healthier for all concerned when the change for the individuals is less extreme.”

Rabbi Ezra Schwartz, Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshiva University’s Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary and also an advisor to the study, noted that, “the distinction between baalei teshuvah feeling acceptance by the community and their personal level of comfort is important. Thus, they do feel welcomed but, at the same time, they experience some feelings of dissonance with parts of Modern Orthodox life, and this comes across in social and political views as well as certain aspects of Orthodox practice.”

Rabbi Avrohom Gordimer, an attorney, Chairman of the Rabbinic Circle at Coalition for Jewish Values, widely-read writer on Jewish communal topics and also an advisor to the study, added: “Although common perception is that baalei teshuvah are typically more enthusiastic about their Orthodoxy and Jewish education, and are less welcome in the Orthodox community than 'frum-from-birth' Orthodox Jews, this study throws in some real surprises, in particular as regards Modern Orthodox baalei teshuva – while documenting some significant differences between this group and Haredi baalei teshuva. The factors behind this all, including the character of communal support and individual commitment on the part of baalei teshuva themselves, should compel serious analysis.”

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 Research focuses on studies in the Orthodox Jewish community. Nishma’s mission includes conducting more than 50% of its research on a pro bono basis, on topics that will promote greater listening among the diverse strands of the Jewish people.

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