

# Rooting out abuse is a rapidly growing Orthodox communal concern, survey finds

“Children and education are top priority. Anything that puts that priority at risk is taken very seriously,” Rabbi Yehuda Sarna, executive director at the Bronfman Center for Jewish Student Life at New York University, told JNS.

BY **MIKE WAGENHEIM**



A haredi Jewish man waits for a traffic light on Jaffa Street in Mekor Baruch neighborhood in Jerusalem. Credit: defotoberg/Shutterstock.

**(March 20, 2023 / JNS)** A new Nishma Research [profile](#) of U.S. Orthodox Jewish communities shows growing acceptance of women leaders and growing concern about child abuse.

Nishma, which deals exclusively with Orthodox communities, polled nearly 1,900 people, who self-identified as Orthodox—whether Modern Orthodox, Chassidic or yeshivish.

Dealing with those who commit physical, mental or sexual abuse is an issue that the “community must address in the next decade,” said 82% of respondents. That issue was one of the least concerning to respondents in Nishma’s 2017 poll, which mainly focused on Modern Orthodoxy. In the 2023 data, released on March 1, addressing abuse was almost tied with the No. 1 concern, the cost of Jewish education.

“There are more breaking stories of abuse, and once there is an awareness of it, there is a reaction against it,” Chaim Waxman, professor emeritus of sociology and Jewish studies at Rutgers University told JNS. “The Orthodox community, including the Modern Orthodox community, has had their fair share of scandals dealing with abuse. Everybody’s aware. There’s no hiding anything today.”

Rabbi Yehuda Sarna, executive director at the Bronfman Center for Jewish Student Life at New York University, told JNS that for the Orthodox community, “children and education are top priority. Therefore, anything that puts that priority at risk is taken very seriously.”

Sarna agreed with Waxman that Orthodox parents are more aware of the problem of abuse and “really want to make sure the educational structures are dealing with the issues properly.”

### **‘Increased expectation of women in congregational life’**

One of the most dramatic areas of differences between Nishma’s 2017 and 2023 surveys was in the area of women serving in the clergy.

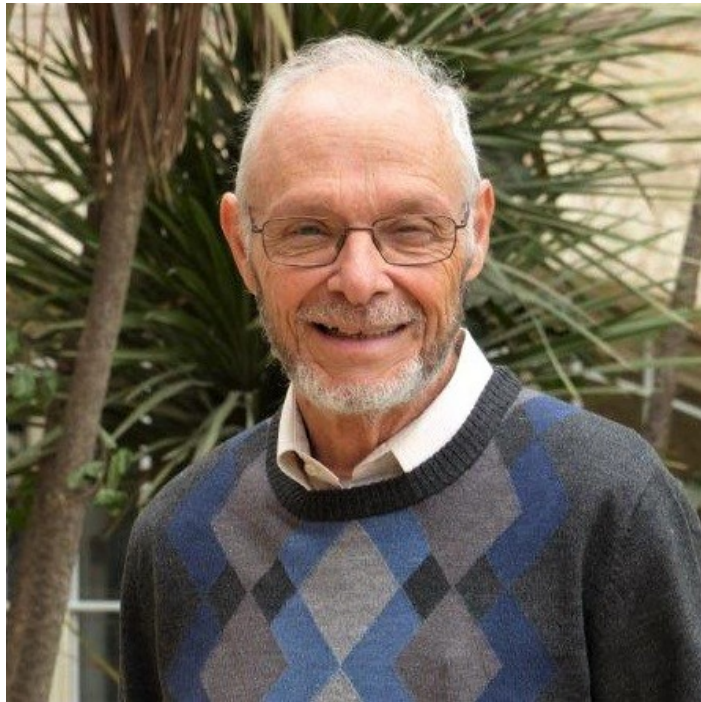
Some 38% of Modern Orthodox respondents strongly agreed that women should have the chance to serve in “clergy-related” positions, while 31% somewhat agreed. In 2017, 34% strongly agreed and 22% somewhat agreed, so those who agreed at least somewhat that women should have clergy-related positions increased by more than 23% in the six years.

Three-quarters of Modern Orthodox respondents said women already hold lay leadership positions in their synagogues. Only 16% of Chassidic and 21% of yeshivish respondents said the same. Women cannot serve in the clergy in *haredi* (yeshivish and Chassidic) communities. They cannot be rabbis in almost all Modern Orthodox communities, although some have positions of *rabbanit* or *yoetzet halachah*, which are clergy-related.

“The increased expectation of the role of women in congregational life, even in leadership life, is not something I’m surprised by,” said Waxman, who noted that he pointed out the pattern at an online conference a few years ago.

Waxman attributes the uptick in part to increasing numbers of Modern Orthodox women taking part in higher Jewish education, which commands respect. “It’s easier to talk to women on certain issues. I think there will be a greater acceptance of it,” he said. “It’s not a revolution, but it is increasing.”

The trend has “taken different manifestations in different sub-communities within Orthodoxy,” added Sarna.



Professor Chaim Waxman. Credit: Hadassah Academic College

Whether an Orthodox woman is called *maharat* (an acronym denoting a female leader of Jewish law, spirituality and Torah), *rabbanit* or *rebbetzin* (Hebrew and Yiddish, respectively, for the wife of a rabbi), women are taking on more significant roles.

Rabba Sara Hurwitz, co-founder and president at Yeshivat Maharat in New York City, told JNS that the work of organizations like hers has been “normalizing Orthodox women in positions of leadership.”



Rabba Sara Hurwitz. Credit: Yeshivat Maharat.

The facts on the ground are changing, and “as more women assume those leadership roles in the community and become more visible, I think the community is recognizing the added value that they bring to the table, to the Torah, to the tradition,” she said.

Even in the more stringent *haredi* world, there has come to be a recognition that “women are not looking to throw out *halachah*,” bringing greater acceptance, according to Hurwitz.

Hurwitz described a ripple effect taking place among Orthodox women, who are coming to recognize “their internal ability, and potential and power. And

within the confines and context of a community, they’re figuring out how to serve in their own way and in a way that’s appropriate for their community.”

### **Immigration to Israel**

Emotional attachment to Israel remained strong across all points of Orthodoxy in Nishma’s survey, but only between 5% and 9% of the sectors surveyed said it is very likely it will make *aliyah* in the next five years. Respondents cited spiritual; religious; and communal and family connections most as explanations for making *aliyah*.

Antisemitism, which has been steadily rising in the United States, garnering increasing headlines, does not appear to drive religious Jews to consider immigration to Israel. That doesn’t surprise Sarna.

“When you talk about physical safety, I don’t know if people perceive living in Israel as being safer than living in America. Yes, they’re surviving antisemitism, but there are also increasing attacks in Israel,” he said.

The cost of education is a determining factor, he said. “When people do the math on their family expenses and see they’re spending \$100,000 to \$200,000, which I will not need to spend when I go to Israel, that makes a big difference.”

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Rabbi Yehuda Sarna. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

### **‘Turning the lights on in a room’**

Waxman was taken aback by the relative lack of concern among Modern Orthodox respondents about what he calls the “dropout rate” or what the survey calls “off the *derech*,” Hebrew for “path” or “road.” This is the rate of formerly-observant Jews moving to a non-observant life.

“I was very surprised that the Modern Orthodox seem to be less concerned about it,” said Waxman. “They’re quite optimistic given that the dropout rate among the Modern Orthodox is high relative to the *haredi* Orthodox.”

Communal priorities were somewhat similar across the sectors surveyed, but “off the *derech*” was a top four concern for *haredim*, but just No. 12 for Modern Orthodox respondents.

Other topics that all strains of Orthodoxy saw as important were the cost of maintaining an Orthodox home, intermarriage and assimilation.

All sectors find their lifestyle fulfilling, with increasing levels of Orthodoxy common across the board.

Sarna said he would like to see further exploration of economic matters and of the migration of Orthodox Jews to low-tax states.

Most importantly, these types of studies need to be conducted, he said.

“So many studies, for one reason or another, purposely neglect the Orthodox community. So this is like turning the lights on in a room,” he said. “That’s essential as that community is growing in numbers and in influence.”

“Unless we understand ourselves—and unless we enable other people to understand our own priorities—then we are not going to get the resources that we need in an efficient way,” added Sarna. “We’re not going to have the impact that we’d like to have.”