

Orthodox Jewry: Community, Connection, Understanding Orthodox Jewish Singles (May 2, 2022)

Full Report available at <http://nishmaresearch.com/social-research.html>

Why was this study conducted?

It was done for two reasons. First, previous research has shown that sense of community is at the top of the list of things that Modern Orthodox Jews value; and we suspect it's high up on the list among Haredi as well. We wanted to get a sense of how that might have changed during the pandemic – do people still feel strongly connected to the community? – and whether their definition of “their Orthodox community” has changed.

Additionally, after some of our past surveys we've gotten emails from people who are single, asking “what about us?” They have always been included in our surveys and we can break out their responses, but we have never really addressed the issues that are specific to being single in the Orthodox community. We felt the time had come to do that.

Before we get into people's sense of connectedness, how are we doing overall? Aspects of this issue have been asked in the past, but have things shifted during the pandemic?

86% say that their “Orthodox Jewishness” is a very important part of their lives. Additionally, most people are upbeat: two-thirds feel financially comfortable, and three-fourths are happy with their family life. But, while two-thirds are happy with their social life, a majority only somewhat feel that way. So that might be the result of the pandemic.

You refer to the “Orthodox community.” Has the way people view or define their community changed?

One's community used to be largely local, consisting of the shul, the school if one had children there, local rabbis or other individuals, a community center or other local organizations. That has changed in recent years. Now, while the local shul is still at the top of the list of what people include in their Jewish community, half the people mention shuls elsewhere as being part of their community and more than 40% mention online Jewish groups,

programs or social media. Right behind the local shul, many people mention individuals such as Jewish friends, teachers, religious or community leaders. Individuals' relationships are clearly a very important component of what people view as their Jewish community.

Have people's connections to the community remained strong through the pandemic?

84% agree that they feel connected to their overall Jewish community, with 45% fully agreeing; it's clear that people feel strongly connected to their overall Jewish community. While we don't have trend data, a survey that we did before Shavuot 2021 showed a slightly lower level of connection, so it may have rebounded since then, as we emerge from the pandemic.

Has shul attendance changed?

Shul attendance has sharply declined from pre-pandemic levels. Now, 53% say they go to shul every Shabbat morning or almost every Shabbat, compared to 84% when we asked this question in 2017. Other research and observation make it clear that shuls are aware that getting people back in is a challenge.

In terms of connection, people have strong positive relationships with their shul: 94% feel welcome, 81% say their shul cares about them, and 66% say their shul has programs for people like them.

Do some groups feel more connected while others feel less connected?

We suspected, and our results confirmed, that Orthodox Jews overall feel strongly connected to their community. But what we really wanted to find out in this study is whether there are groups that feel more connected and whether there are groups that feel less connected, and who they are.

We developed a single metric – an Index of Overall Communal Connection (from 0% to 100%) – based on the responses to a number of questions (described

in the footnote on page 12). For the community overall, the index was 77%, which indicates that the average communal connection level is pretty good.

In addition to looking at the community, we looked at 17 sub-groups and we found some interesting variations. The range was from high levels of 80%+ for Haredi Jews, marrieds and those age 50+, to a low of 69% among single individuals.

While 69% is moderate and not indicative of a high level of disconnection, the gap between singles' and marrieds' sense of connection (12%) was the largest among all of the demographic sub-segments examined. Further, among the single individuals, communal connection drops over time. Males have less connection at age 40+, while females have less connection at age 30+.

These findings provided a segue into the second part of the study, which is a deeper exploration of the lives of Orthodox Jewish single individuals.¹

Turning to the findings on Orthodox single individuals, let's start with their personal goals. Is marriage high up on the list?

Yes, marriage is in fact the top goal, although far fewer than 100% say this is a goal of theirs. Overall, 63% of the single individuals say that marriage is one of their top goals, but this was followed very closely by achieving overall happiness (59%), personal growth (58%), and finances (52%).

We also found differences between men and women. For example, men more often cite marriage as a goal, as well as religious growth, while women more often cite overall happiness, personal growth, and helping others as goals.

Goals shift over time. While marriage is a top goal, it drops a bit for females age 40+, while remaining the top goal for males. Finances are more important for both genders at ages 40+, rising to #1 for females. Religion is quite important to males under age 30 but declines thereafter.

We would expect dating to have been more difficult during the pandemic. How much dating is

going on these days, and what approaches are people taking to get dates?

While we don't have trend data, the pandemic may well have had a significant impact, as about half the respondents say they have been doing no dating at all or close to none. Only one-fourth say they have been dating an average of once a month or more. But a majority expect to be more active over the next few years.

In terms of the approaches people take, they draw on a variety of resources. At the top of the list over the past three years are online Jewish dating sites or apps, which is more prevalent among Modern Orthodox than among the Haredi. This is consistent with an overall societal trend of people interacting more virtually.

Looking to the future, respondents expect to rely much more on Jewish community events and gatherings, and they expect that to be their top dating resource over the next year or two.

What are people looking for in a dating partner or a potential spouse?

We asked respondents to assess a list of 27 characteristics and tell us which were the most important ones to them in a dating partner or potential spouse. At the top of the list were being respectful of others, honesty, compassion and kindness.

The only characteristic rated as significantly more important by males is physical appearance. Females rate several characteristics as more important than do males, including financial situation and income, profession, and ambition.

Females are a bit more selective; on average, females rated 8.4 of the 27 listed attributes as "must have," compared to 6.5 by males.

With respect to the dating process, there is a fair amount of discussion about the use of and value of *shadchanim*, matchmakers.

While there are some strong pro and con views (as illustrated by the sample verbatim comments on

¹ Among 335 Orthodox single individuals who responded to the survey, 80% were Modern Orthodox and 20% were Haredi. The survey report findings are primarily representative of the Modern Orthodox. While the number of

Haredi respondents is smaller, a supplementary report on the Haredi segment will be available in June 2022.

page 23 of the full report), about two-thirds say they would “somewhat recommend” the use of *shadchanim*.

Other issues that we hear about relate to the amount of investigation that some people undertake before going on a date (respondents lean toward the view that there is a bit too much of it), as well as the role of parents (single individuals are split on whether parents should be more or less involved, while marrieds, presumably comprise more of parents, want to be more involved).

Bottom line, do people think the Orthodox world’s dating system is working well?

Extremely few respondents rate the overall dating system as working well. **With a low average rating of 4.7 out of 10, it inarguable that the dating system is rated quite poorly.** Singles (4.2) feel more negative than marrieds (5.0); females feel even more negative (4.0) than males, and negative views increase with age (3.6 for those age 40+). Every stakeholder group in this system agrees that it is not working!

Are there any other aspects of the lives of single individuals, or their dating, that the study explored?

There are many complaints about the observation that there are more single females than males. While this study did not explore this issue, it is important and noteworthy (see page 26 of the full report). There is much speculation about the reasons (male/female couple age differences affected by community growth rates, those leaving Orthodoxy, and others). This remains an issue to be explored.

In our research, we believe strongly in asking open-ended questions, to get a better understanding of what is on respondents’ minds. In this survey we asked a few key questions:

- **What is holding you back from finding a spouse?**
– People often mention difficulties in meeting people (including their location), as well as in finding the “right” person, personal traits or circumstances that they see as making them less desirable and having other priorities.
- **What advice would you give to those who are dating?** – The advice most often given is to not give up on the search, to keep an open mind (i.e.,

to not rule people out too quickly) and be patient, and to stay honest but reasonable (and flexible) as to who you are and what you are looking for.

- **How can shuls and organizations better address the needs of single individuals?** – Ideas include more interaction and listening, better inclusion as members and in the variety of shul activities, creating Shabbat and other social events and meeting opportunities. In addition to the verbatim responses, this report contains an analysis of this issue done by Professor Sylvia Barack Fishman, Brandeis University with support from PORAT (People for Orthodox Renaissance and Torah); see pages 31-32 of the full report.

Are there other issues for future study?

It had been our intention to include in the survey some questions dealing with topics of sexuality and intimacy. However, most respondents were unwilling to get into that topic in much detail, so that remains something we might do in the future.

Will there be next steps?

See the summary of “Responding to the Realities of Single Modern Orthodox Jews” (pages 31-32 of the full report), which provides recommendations to shuls and other Orthodox institutions relating to the realities of unmarried Modern Orthodox Jews. Information about the full PORAT report and a June 2022 online webinar discussing this topic will be available at <http://poratonline.org>. PORAT and Nishma Research plan to actively disseminate this information.

Any concluding thoughts?

We are often asked what changes as a result of communal research. In the case of this study, the research provides guidance to shuls and organizations on how to better address the needs of single individuals. We believe this will have positive benefits, and we look forward to that.

Finally, our research is community driven. If there is an aspect of the Orthodox world you would like to see better researched, go to our website (<http://nishmaresearch.com>), navigate to the contact screen, and drop us a line. We love hearing from people in the community.