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## American Orthodox Jewry: A 'State of the Kehilla' Address

By Mark (Moish) Trencher

Just as the President gives an annual State of the Union Address, I think we as a community owe it to give ourselves a periodic State of the *Kehilla* address. This is not a "top down" *Shabbos Shuva derasha* but is actually a "bottom up" message, based on what you – hundreds of people in our frum community – have said about how we're doing these days.

In summary, we have significant successes – "good news" – but we also face significant challenges – "bad news." So, what do you want to hear first? A recent study stated that most people prefer *giving* good news first, but that about 80% of people prefer to *hear* the bad

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## Ring Around the Lights of Lag BaOmer



Jewish children dance around a bonfire in advance of Lag BaOmer in the Meah Shearim neighborhood of Jerusalem, on Sunday. Photo by Chaim Goldberg/Flash90

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# Trencher

(Continued from Front Page)

news first. So here goes...

Our recent (April 26-29) Nishma Research survey of 500 Orthodox Jews asked what they see as major challenges we are facing. The top ones are:

1. Affordability, Materialism, Status Pressure. This includes school tuitions, housing, *kashrut*, camps, *simchas*, weddings, costs in general. But many also mention widespread *gashmiyus*, conspicuous consumption, competitiveness, and external markers of success that eclipse inner *avodah*. So I'm combining true spending needs with those that derive from communal competitive pressures.

Sample comments:

"Cost of education/living. Sending 4 kids to yeshiva at \$20,000-40,000 a pop is not sustainable."

"Sustainability – the next generation will not be able to afford the lifestyle in which they were raised."

"The 'keeping up with the Cohens' is totally out of control. We need to learn to live within our means. I am very happy driving a Honda hybrid and staying home during 'Yeshiva Week.'"

2. Antisemitism, Safety, America's Future. Rising antisemitism from both the left and right (we can argue which is worse, but there is widespread understanding that it emanates from both), fear of danger, and uncertainty about long-term safety in the U.S.

Sample comments:

"Responding to both the massive and overt increase in antisemitism in this country while openly maintaining our lifestyle."

"The future. Will America stay safe?"

3. Internal Division, Lack of *Achdus*. Splits within Orthodoxy, political polarization, and the difficulty of maintaining unity.

Sample comments:

"Finding a way to be unified despite the differences in outlook – we also need to be more inclusive outside of our own range of belief."

"There is a total cleavage between the 'Modern' and 'Yeshivish' communities."

4. Technology, Internet, Media. Smartphones, social media, the internet, and now AI, all presenting spiritual and social threats, especially for youth.

social media, I see it affecting the teens of Orthodox families."

5. *Chinuch*, Youth. Concerns about whether our schools and home life are effectively transmitting *emunah*, values, and commitment to the next generation. The threats of technology (as noted above) are part of the problem here.

Sample comments:

"Children not knowing why they are religious."

"We are producing a generation of young people who are very observant but not very religious."

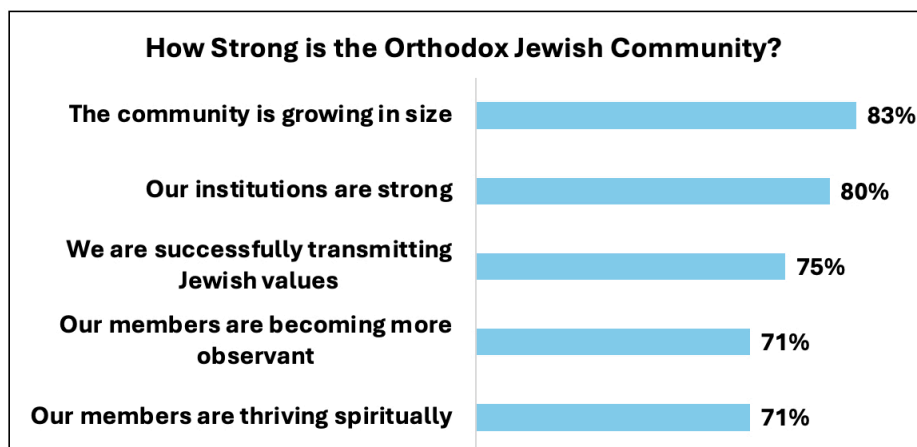
But there is also a lot of good news in areas of community strength. Very strong majorities agree that the community is growing, its institutions (shuls, schools, organizations) are strong, we are successfully transmitting Jewish values to the next generation, members of the community are becoming more religiously observant and are thriving spiritually.

"This is replacing Torah values and a Torah life with something else that is just weird and spiritually harmful."

Across Nishma Research surveys (such as of family finances and *middos bein adam l'chavero*), respondents have frequently pointed to materialistic and competitive behaviors as pervasive and harmful, and have rated our community poorly in the areas of interpersonal behaviors, such as *anivus* – humility – and being *same'ach be-chelko* – happy with what we have, and thankful for it.

I would suggest that we have a decisive societal opportunity to address the materialism issue, by shifting from an emphasis on *gashmius* to identifying and exalting the *ruchnius* (spirituality and connection to Hashem) to which we aspire.

Who we honor, hold up as role models, seek to emulate... these all shape our values, attitudes, and behaviors. I'm not saying we should



However, it is the very success of Orthodox life, across economic and moral domains – its growth, affluence, and institutional strength – that has produced new social pressures that risk displacing its spiritual core. So, I would like this to be more than just a data report, but also to include some thoughts for the future.

As a complicated and diverse people, we will always face challenges and issues to address. May I pick one? I would like to suggest that we face and need to confront a decisive opportuni-

discourage big donations to our organizations, but maybe we need to moderate the personal ostentatious spending? I would further suggest that we re-examine what we choose to celebrate. Why not equally honor not only our major donors but also those who exemplify what we most value?

Why not have a shul *kiddush*, sponsored with \$18 donations by many, honoring the woman who looks after and accompanies her 93-year-old widow neighbor to all of her doctor appointments (and no one even knows about this)? Or one for those who staff the *Chevra Kadisha*? The young father who gets up two hours early every Friday to check his community's *eruv*? There are so many opportunities to recognize those who exemplify the *ruchnius* we aspire to.

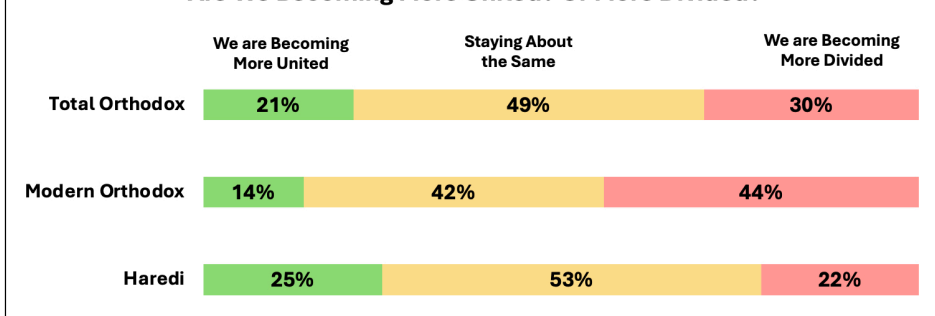
These may seem like small steps, but we need to start to create a shift in what people see as important.

The future of Orthodox flourishing will depend not only on what we build, but on what we choose to value.

The surveys cited above may be found at <http://nishmaresearch.com/social-research.html>.

*Mark Trencher is the founder and director of Nishma Research, the most prominent independent non-profit market research and polling practice in the Orthodox Jewish world, and host of the Orthonomics podcast. He can be reached at mark@nishmaresearch.com.*

## Are We Becoming More United? Or More Divided?



Sample comments:

"The smartphone and its intrusion into all walks of life degrades from communities. They seem unable to control its influence."

"With the morals of the general society becoming more debased, and younger generations being more exposed to it through technology and

ty of this moment in our history, in the area of moving away from the all-too-pervasive materialism and competitive consumption. As some commented:

"Certain communities are too focused on *gashmius* and keeping up with others. Fancy cars, fancy watches, etc."