

Starting a Conversation: A Pioneering Survey of Those Who Have Left the Orthodox Community

Journeys, practices, beliefs, identity, community and relationships within the Modern Orthodox Segment

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**NISHMA
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Marketing Research for the Jewish Community

Preface

Many studies have been done among Jewish and Orthodox populations, but there has not been any valid quantitative research among those who have left the Orthodox world. And while there have been quite a few excellent memoirs written by people who have left the Chasidish and other Orthodox groups, the old saying “the plural of anecdote is not data” still rings true.

The goal of this survey was to give this group – a fledgling segment of the Jewish community that has not been quantitatively studied – a voice. We wanted to better understand the experiences of those who have transitioned away from their Orthodox community of origin, or who are grappling with the related issues.

To that end, the overall study included the broad swath of segments in the Orthodox world: Chasidic, Yeshivish and Modern Orthodox. This report focuses on the survey respondents from the Modern Orthodox Segment, i.e., those who have left their Modern orthodox community.

The survey was funded by Nishma Research, a Connecticut-based market research firm serving the Jewish world. In addition to providing customized research services to clients, Nishma’s

mission includes conducting one pro bono study annually on a topic of interest and value to the Jewish people – specifically, research that will promote more listening, appreciation and cooperation among the diverse strands of the Jewish world. Nishma means “listen” ... and we hope to promote more listening to each other.

This survey was guided and assisted by knowledgeable subject matter and research experts:

- Professor Steven M. Cohen of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion;
- Rabbi Pesach Sommer and Mindy Schaper of Jew in the City / Project Makom;
- Prof. Mark Rosen of Brandeis University and Zalman Newfield, Ph.D., New York University;
- Tsivia Finman, Rachel Berger and Executive Director Lani Santo of Footsteps, and author and Footsteps board member Shulem Deen.

It has been a pleasure working with you all and I can’t thank you enough.

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Summary of Key Findings – The experiences, beliefs, practices, community and challenges facing those who have left Modern Orthodoxy

Introduction

Many of us have heard of the phenomenon of people venturing forth from the Orthodox world and trying to find a place in the broader American society. Often scorned by their families and communities for having gone OTD* (“off the derech” - off the path), their stories, as told in a number of recent memoirs, have been gripping.

What has been missing until now is quantitative data on this trend. Nishma Research, a Connecticut-based research firm that focuses on the Jewish community, has just completed the first-ever large-scale survey of this demographic.

With 885 responses from across the Orthodox spectrum, this survey gives voice to a growing segment of the Jewish community. Respondents provided deeply personal and poignant responses about the journey they have taken, their identity, practices, beliefs and relationships. They told us what they went through, what they might have done differently, and gave advice to others who are considering leaving their Orthodox community for a different lifestyle.

Survey Sample

Included in this survey were people who had an Orthodox upbringing, but who no longer consider themselves to fully be a member of the Orthodox community in which they were raised. Analysis was done for all 855 responses and separately for four segments (1) the formerly Chasidic excluding Chabad, (2) the formerly Chabad, (3) the formerly Yeshivish and (4) the formerly Modern Orthodox.

This report presents the results for the 230 Modern Orthodox respondents. Not unexpectedly, the Modern Orthodox responses differed for many questions from those of the Chareidi segments (Chasidic, Chabad and Yeshivish). Those wishing to explore these differences should download the full survey report (which includes all segments), which is available at <http://nishmaresearch.com/social-research.html>. The survey questionnaire and all study-related documents are available at that site.

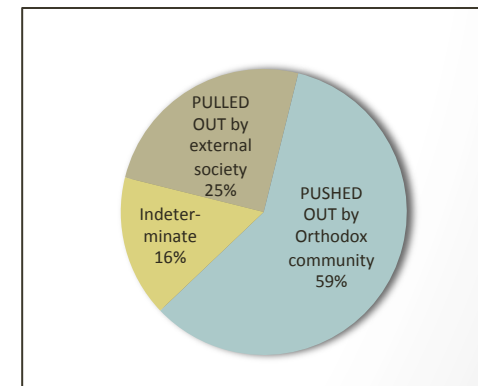
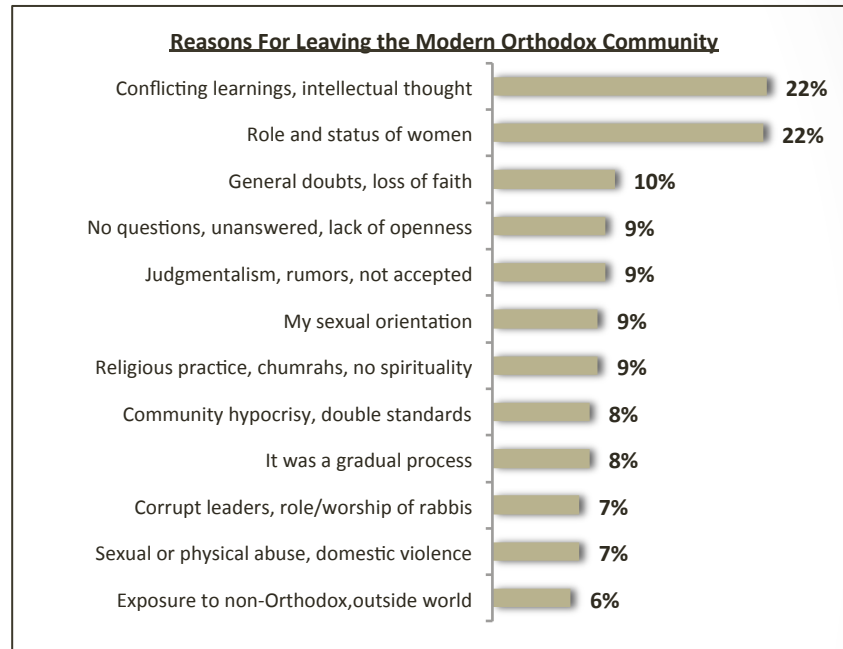
Community of Origin	Responses
Chasidic (excl. Chabad)	216
Chabad	97
Yeshivish	221
Modern Orthodox	230
Other	118
Total	885

* Those who have left Orthodoxy are often referred to as “OTD” and they sometimes refer to themselves that way. Some people like the term and some do not like it so much; but it’s become widely used and so we adopt it in this report as appropriate, as a shorthand appellation.

Summary of Key Findings *(Continued)*

Why People Left Their Modern Orthodox Community

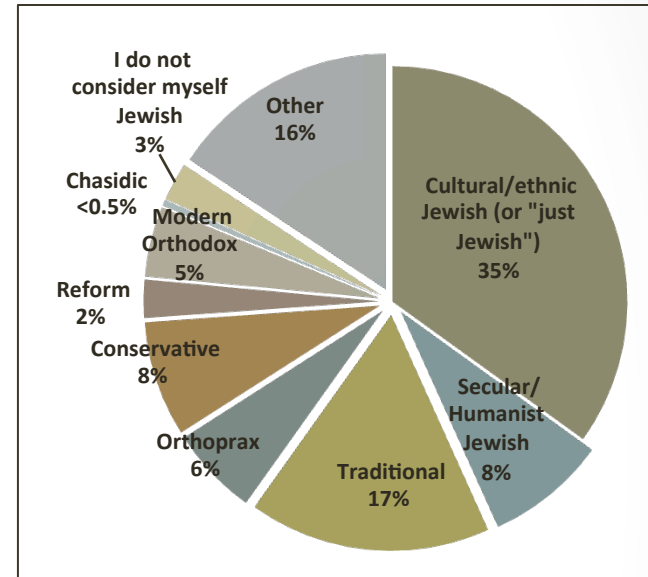
- Rather than having respondents fill out a “checklist,” the questionnaire included an open-ended question asking why people left their community, and giving them as much space as they wanted to tell their stories. The responses (which were often quite lengthy) were analyzed and coded against a list of 50+ reasons that people gave, with many giving multiple reasons.
- Some people were alienated by flaws they saw in the community or its leaders, and it turned out that by significantly more than a 2-to-1 margin in terms of reasons why people left, “community internal factors” were more influential in *pushing* people out than “societal outside factors” were in *pulling* people from the community. For many people, push and pull factors were both at work.
- The two most often given reasons why people left their community were intellectual thinking they had done about religion and the role and status of women, each cited by 22% of respondents. Personal curiosity and openness to the world often created a gradual process of grappling with modernity and knowledge in conflict with previously held beliefs.
- However, women mentioned the role and status of women as causing their beliefs and practices to change much more often than did men (37% vs. 7%).
- Other key factors were communal attitudes toward questioning, judgmentalism, respondents’ sexual orientation, communal “hypocrisy” (an often-used term), and the scope and stringent nature of Judaism as practiced in their community



Summary of Key Findings *(Continued)*

How Do They Now Identify Jewishly?

- The formerly Modern Orthodox (M.O.) are “post-denominational,” by which we mean that their Jewish affiliations were more self-defined than conforming to the common denominations: 60% labeled themselves as traditional, secular/humanist, cultural/ethnic or “just Jewish,” and only 15% identified themselves as members of a denomination. In contrast, the 2013 Pew Survey found that 70% of U.S. Jews identified with a denomination.
- A strong majority (78%) stated that being Jewish was very or somewhat important to them. However, women more often said that being Jewish was very important to them, 53% vs. 42%.
- Similarly, a strong majority (77%) stated they had a very or somewhat strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people. Again, women more often said this than men, 56% vs. 47%.
- Interestingly, across numerous survey questions, the formerly Modern Orthodox have retained more positive feelings toward Jewishness than the formerly Chareidi (the Chasidic and Yeshivish branches of Orthodoxy, often collectively referred to as “Ultra-Orthodox”), perhaps because their departure was less traumatic (because they already lived somewhat in secular society, spoke the language, dressed more modernly, etc.). For example, 36% of the Modern Orthodox keep kosher vs. 30% of Chareidi; and 78% of the Modern Orthodox say being Jewish is important to them vs. 59% of Chareidi.



Importance of Being Jewish	All M.O. Respondents	Men	Women	Pew Survey – M.O. Jews
Very Important	47%	42%	53%	N.A.
Somewhat Important	31%	35%	25%	N.A.
Total	78%	77%	78%	89%

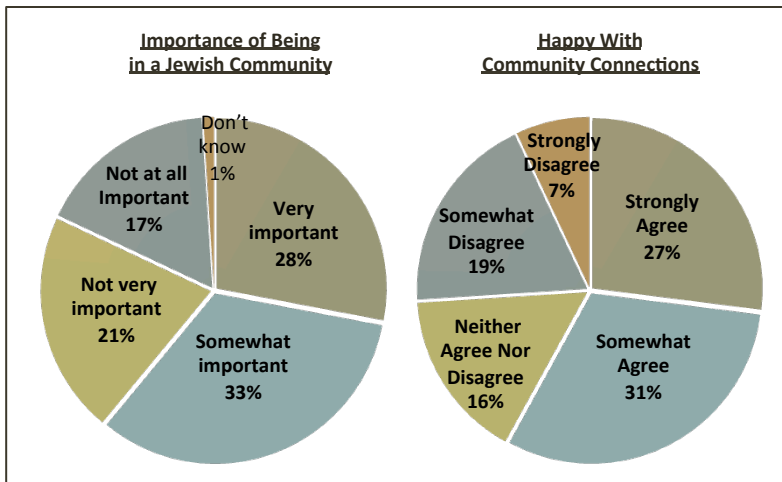
Sense of Belonging to the Jewish People	All M.O. Respondents	Men	Women	Pew Survey – M.O. Jews
Very Strong	51%	47%	56%	N.A.
Somewhat Strong	26%	24%	25%	N.A.
Total	77%	71%	81%	100%

Summary of Key Findings *(Continued)*

Jewish Beliefs, Practices and Connections

- Our survey respondents are not strong believers in God. But they like to keep connections to Jewishness and they maintain some practices at levels not very dissimilar from those of other groups of U.S. Jews.
- For example, 36% keep kosher, a level that is much lower than that of all Modern Orthodox Jews (83%), although in line with that of Conservative Jews (31%).

	All M.O. Respondents	Men	Women	Pew – Modern Orthodox / Conservative / Reform
Believe in God (% strongly)	21%	17%	24%	77% / 41% / 29%
Light Sabbath candles (% regularly/sometimes)	52%	51%	53%	78% / 34% / 10%
Keep kosher (% strictly/mostly)	36%	34%	33%	83% / 31% / 7%

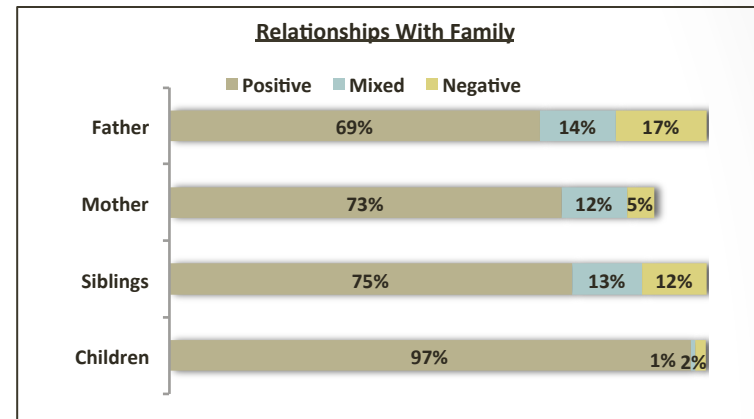
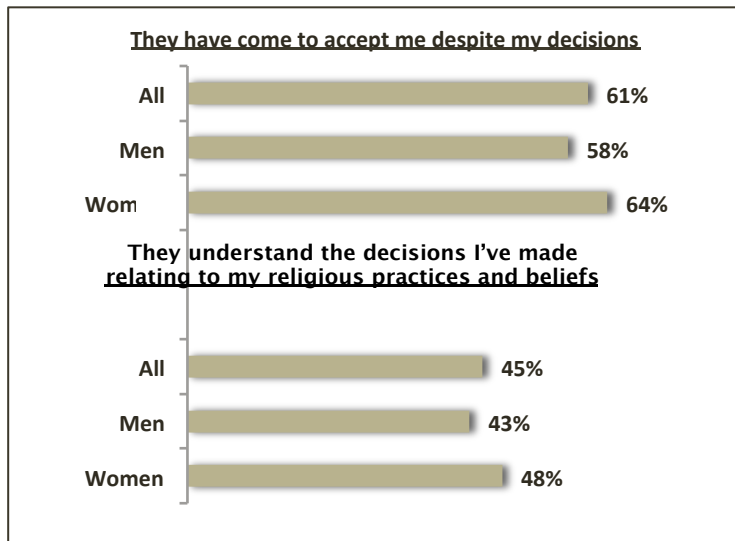


- In terms of their feeling of connection to various types of communities, more than half (61%) feel it is important to be part of a Jewish community, and more than half (58%) are happy with their community connections overall.
- Only 33% still feel connected to the Orthodox community where they grew up, while 53% feel connected to a different Jewish community and 47% feel connected to a non-Jewish community.
- Women are happier with their community connections than are men, 64% vs. 51%.

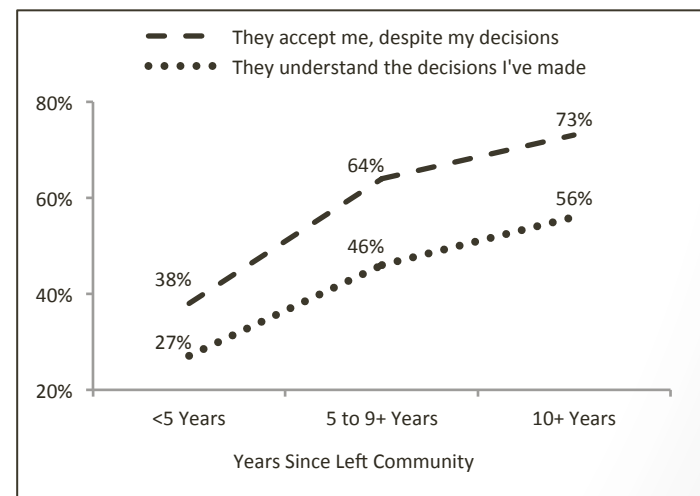
Summary of Key Findings *(Continued)*

Family Relationships and Acceptance

- Family relationships are challenging, but a majority have a positive relationship with their families (69% with their fathers, 73% with their mothers and 75% with siblings).
- Men have better family relationships with parents than do women: better with their father (73% vs. 63%); and with their mother (78% vs. 68%). Relationships with siblings and children are about the same for men and women.
- A significant majority (61%) say their families have come to accept them, but fewer than half (45%) say their families understand the decisions they have made relating to their religious practices and beliefs. Men's and women's responses to these statements did not vary significantly.



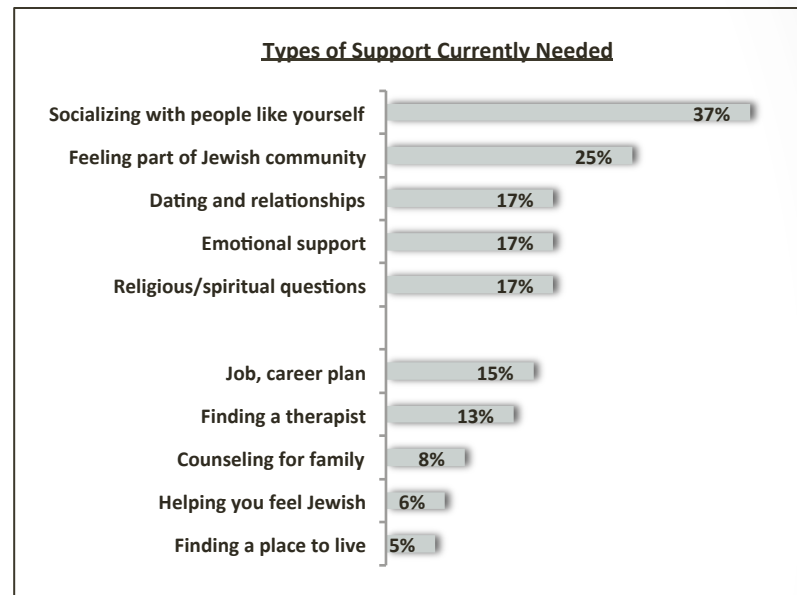
- Both families' understanding and acceptance do grow substantially over time.



Summary of Key Findings *(Continued)*

Support Needs

- Those who have left the Modern Orthodox community continue to face challenges. The most often expressed needs were in areas of socializing with people like themselves (37%), feeling themselves a part of the Jewish community (25%), dating and relationships (17%), emotional support (17%) and religious questions (17%).
- One area where there was a significant difference between men and women was in their seeking help to feel part of the Jewish community. 30% of women cited this as a need vs. 18% of men.
- The most frequent sources of past support have been friends (53%), Facebook groups or other social media (24%), relatives (22%) and community leaders and rabbis (16%).





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