

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

*An exploration of journeys, practices, beliefs, identity, community and relationships – across Chasidic, Yeshivish and Modern Orthodox Segments*

**Summary Report – June 19, 2016**



**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 Chasidic and other Orthodox groups, the old saying “the plural of anecdote is not data” still rings true.

After reading several of the memoirs, I took a shot at Facebook messaging Shulem Deen, author of his amazing memoir and 2015 National Jewish Book Award Winner “All Who Go Do Not Return.” I want to thank Shulem for taking the time to meet with my wife and me for lunch, for his appreciation of the research concept, and especially for his help in promoting this research via his contacts and insights.

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, we have included the broad swath of segments in the Orthodox world: Chasidic, Yeshivish and Modern Orthodox.

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:

- Tsivia Finman, Rachel Berger and Executive Director Lani Santo of Footsteps;
- Professor Steven M. Cohen of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion;
- Author and Footsteps board member Shulem Deen;
- 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.

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

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June 19, 2016

Survey of  
Those Who  
Have Left the  
Orthodox  
Community

 NISHMA  
RESEARCH  
Marketing Research for the Jewish Community

# Summary of Key Findings – An exploration of the experiences, beliefs, practices, community and challenges facing those who have left the Chasidic, Yeshivish or Modern Orthodox segments of Orthodox Jewry

## Introduction

Many of us have heard of the phenomenon of people venturing forth from the Orthodox world and trying to find a place in American society. Scorned by their communities for having gone OTD (“off the derech” - off the path), they become strangers in a strange land – and their stories, as told in a number of recent memoirs, have been gripping. What has been missing until now is solid, 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 respondents combined, and separately for four segments:

- the formerly Chasidic excluding Chabad,
- the formerly Chabad,
- the formerly Yeshivish and
- the formerly Modern Orthodox.

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

### Notes Regarding Nomenclature (see page 16 of the full report for a more detailed descriptions of our segments):

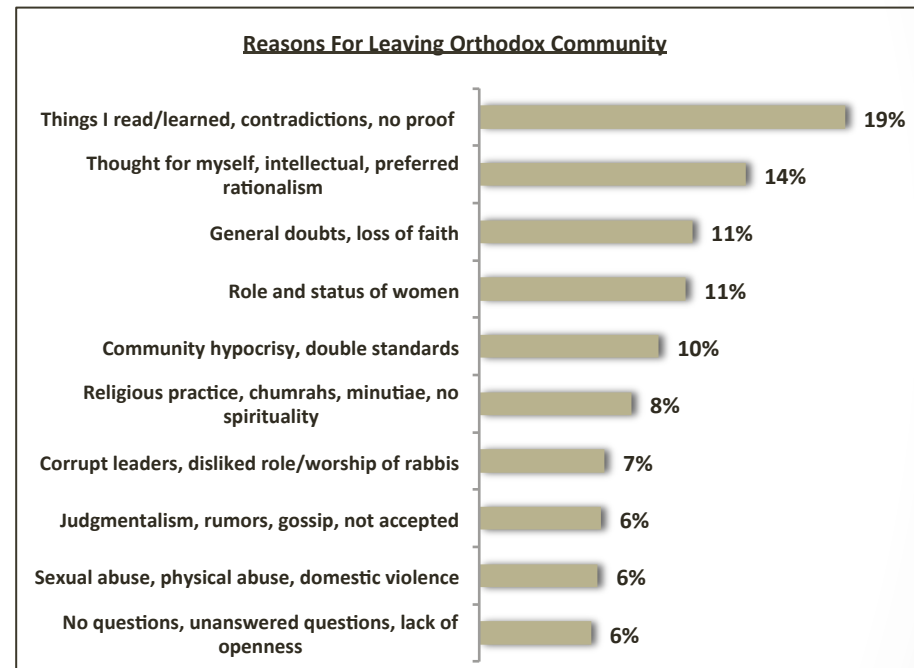
- Those who have left Orthodoxy are often referred to as “OTD” and they sometimes refer to themselves that way. Some people like the term and some do not like it so much; but it’s become widely used and so we adopt it in this report as appropriate, as a shorthand appellation.
- The survey questionnaire spelled Chasidic as Chasidish, which is the spelling more familiar to those who have been part of that community. We will use the spelling *Chasidic*.
- The survey identified those who were members of the Lubavitch Chasidic sect. They are also known widely as *Chabad*, and we will use that more generally familiar term. See pages 15-16 of the full report for explanation of why Chasidic excluding Chabad and Chabad were analyzed separately.
- The *Yeshivish* group is also known as Litvish (a term used in the questionnaire), Litvak or Lithuanian.

## Summary of Key Findings (Continued)

### Why People Left Their Orthodox Community

The questionnaire included an open-ended question asking why people left their community, and the responses were analyzed and coded against a list of 50+ reasons that were identified in the responses. Many reasons were given. Some people were alienated by flaws they saw in the community or its leaders, and these “community internal factors” were more influential in *pushing* people out than “societal outside factors” were in *pulling* people from the community.

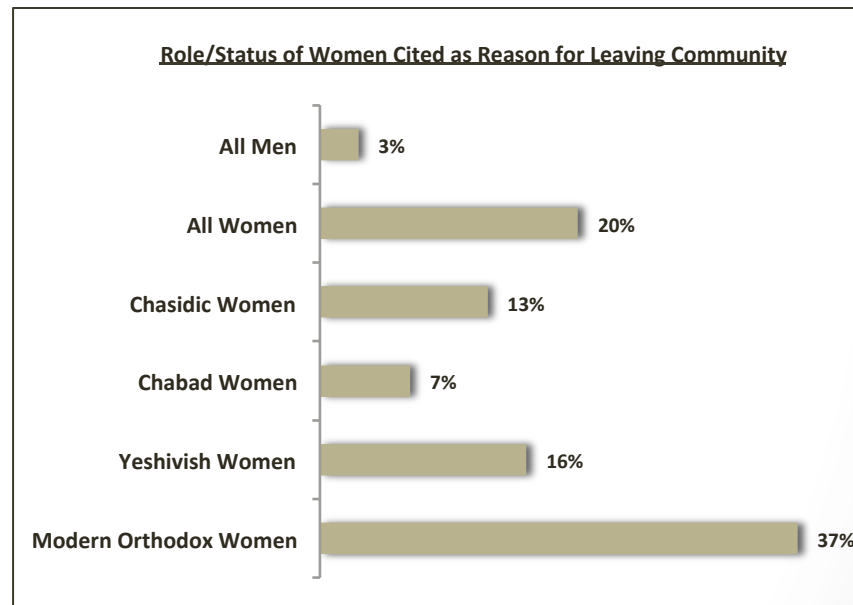
- By a 3-to-2 margin in terms of reasons why people left, it appears that they are not so much going off the derech as they are being pushed off the derech, with many different communal and religious factors being named as having an impact.
- For many people, the push and pull factors were both at work. Personal curiosity and openness to the world often created a gradual process of grappling with modernity and knowledge that was in conflict with their previously held beliefs.
- Respondents in all segments ranked very highly the influence of outside knowledge, obtained by reading or otherwise learning things that contradicted their beliefs.



- Surprisingly, only 2% mentioned the Internet, which has been the focus of much fear within these communities. Many more mentioned science, books or people outside their community with whom they had spoken. So it may well be that general interactions with outside society are more impactful than the Internet.
- Other key factors were the status and role of women, communal “hypocrisy” (an often-used term) and double standards, and the scope and stringent nature of the religion as practiced in their community.

## Summary of Key Findings *(Continued)*

- The status and role of women was the #4 reason overall (11%), but it was the #1 reason among Modern Orthodox (22%) and it was the #1 reason among all women (20%), although cited by only 3% of men. Further, 37% of Modern Orthodox women cited it as a reason why they left the community.
- Surprisingly (because it has been the focus of much vocal criticism and publicity), only 2% mentioned weak secular education as a reason for leaving the community, although 9% of the formerly Chabad did so.
- Abuse and domestic violence are mentioned by 6% overall, but by a notably higher 13% of Chasidic women.
- The respondent's sexual orientation ranked as the #13 factor overall (5%), but it was much higher among the Modern Orthodox (ranking #4 at 11%).
- Men and women are different in their motivations for leaving their community, with the biggest difference being the status and role of women, as noted above. Additionally:
  - Men tended to somewhat more often give reasons relating to "learning" (e.g., things they read or learned, contradictions with what they had been taught, lack of proof, etc.), which was cited by 21% of men vs. 15% of women.
  - Women tended to somewhat more often give reasons relating to social or personal conditions; e.g., judgmentalism, rumors, not being accepted was cited by 9% of women vs. 3% of men; community hypocrisy, double standards was cited by 12% of women vs. 7% of men.



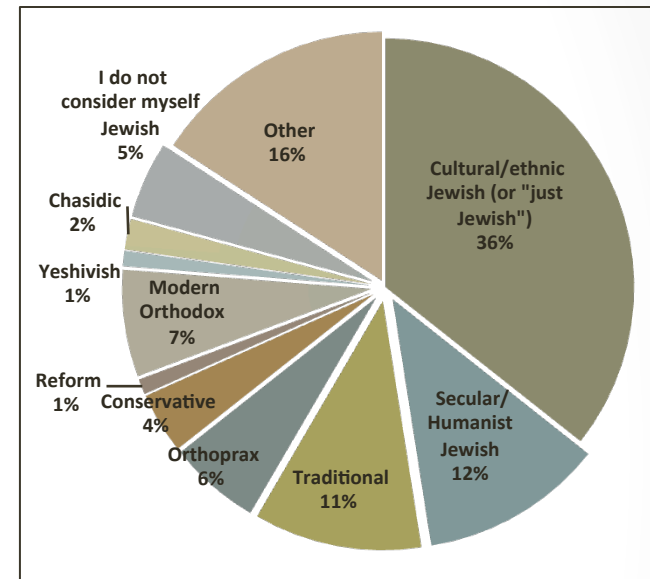
## Summary of Key Findings *(Continued)*

### How Do They Now Identify Jewishly?

OTDerers are “post-denominational,” by which we mean that they do not label themselves with the typical Jewish world denominations. Nearly 60% view themselves as culturally Jewish, traditional, secular/humanist Jewish or “just Jewish.” In contrast, the 2013 Pew Survey found that 70% of U.S. Jews identified with a denomination.

- A majority (62%) stated that being Jewish was very or somewhat important to them.
- Across numerous survey questions, the formerly Modern Orthodox have retained more positive feelings toward Jewishness than other groups, perhaps because their departure may have been less traumatic (as they already lived somewhat in secular society, spoke the language and dressed more modernly). For example, 36% of Modern Orthodox keep kosher vs. 30% of all other respondents; and 78% of Modern Orthodox say being Jewish is important to them vs. 59% of all other respondents.

	Survey Respondents	U.S. Orthodox Jews (Pew)	All U.S. Jews (Pew)
Believe in God	21% (strongly agree)	89% (believe with absolute certainty)	34% (believe with absolute certainty)
Light Sabbath candles	53% (regularly or sometimes)	90% (always or usually)	23% (always or usually)
Keep kosher	31% (mostly or somewhat)	92% (kosher at home)	22% (kosher at home)
Sense of belonging to the Jewish people	61% (very or somewhat strong)	99% (strong sense of belonging)	75% (strong sense of belonging)



### Jewish Beliefs, Practices and Connections

- Our survey respondents are not strong believers in God. Interestingly, belief in God is inversely related to the prior rigor of their practice, and is slightly higher among the formerly Modern Orthodox (36%) than among Yeshivish (32%) or Chasidic (30%).
- They do, however, like to keep a connection to Jewishness, and maintain some practices at

## Summary of Key Findings *(Continued)*

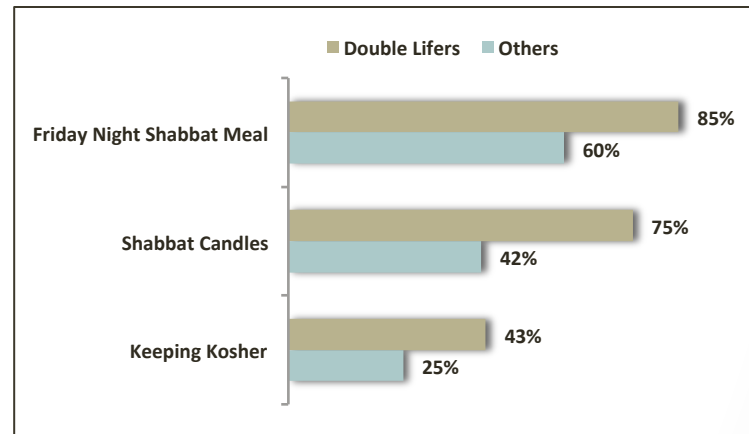
levels not substantially different from those of all U.S. Jews.

- For example, 31% keep kosher, a level that is comparable to that of all U.S. Conservative Jews.
- 61% had a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people (46% among Chasidic and 76% among Modern Orthodox), and 51% said that being in a Jewish community was important to them. On the other hand, 40% would not be upset if their child intermarried.
  - Being part of a Jewish community was more important to women (56%) than it was to men (46%).
- In terms of community connections, fewer than half feel connected to any type of Jewish community, and more than half (54%) say they feel something is missing from their community connections.

### Double-Lifers

Those who are no longer “believers” but still live in the community are an interesting group.

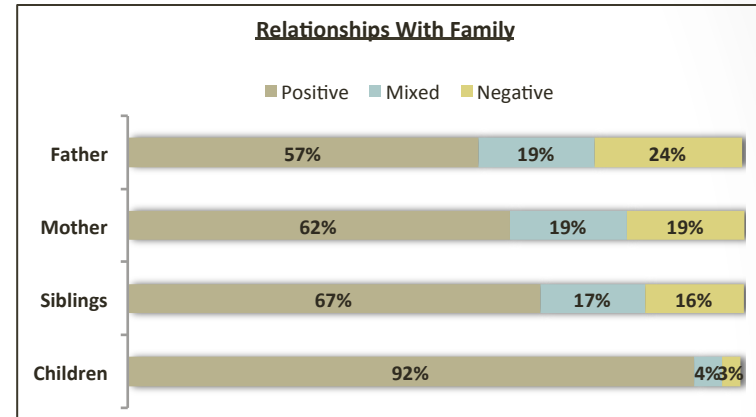
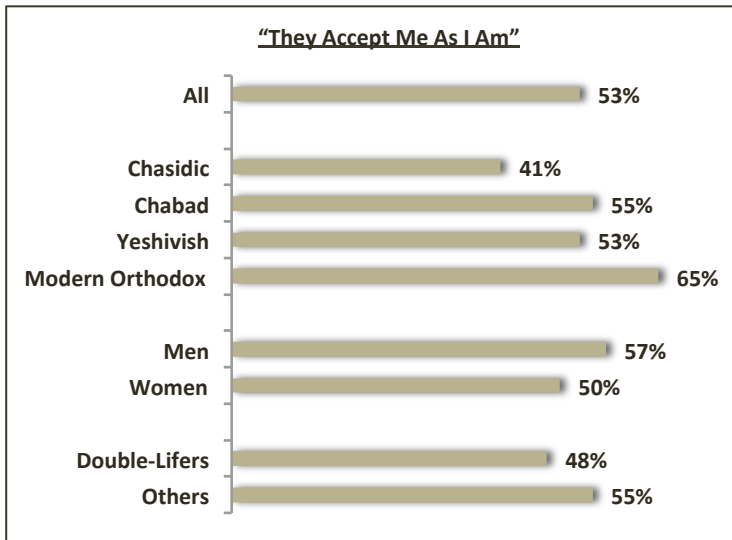
- Dubbed “double-lifers,” many are resigned to that polarized state, but others are drifting slowly toward departure; 39% say it is likely they will leave their community at some time in the future.
- Not surprisingly, double-lifers have higher levels of participation in practices that are externally more visible, e.g., Friday night Shabbat meal (85% for double-lifers vs. 60% for all others), Shabbat candles (75% for double-lifers vs. 42% for all others), keeping kosher (43% for double-lifers vs. 25% for all others). However, for practices that are not externally visible, there is little difference between double-lifers and others who have left Orthodox belief.



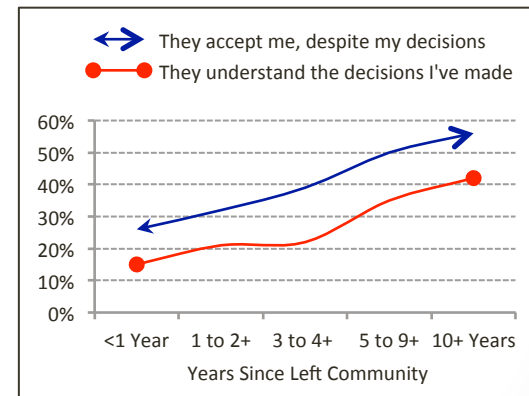
## Summary of Key Findings *(Continued)*

### Family Relationships and Acceptance

- Family relationships are challenging, but a majority have a positive relationship with their families (57% with their fathers, 62% with their mothers and 67% with siblings).
- Men have better family relationships than women: better with their father (65% vs. 49%); their mother (70% vs. 55%) and their siblings (76% vs. 64%). Relationships with their children are about the same (93% vs. 91%).
- Just over half (52%) say their families have come to accept them. Acceptance is lower among the Chasidic (41%) and higher among Modern Orthodox (65%). It is also higher among men (57%) than women (50%).



- Fewer than half (40%) say their families understand the decisions they have made relating to their religious practices and beliefs. Understanding is much lower among Chasidic (19%). Both understanding and acceptance do grow substantially over time.

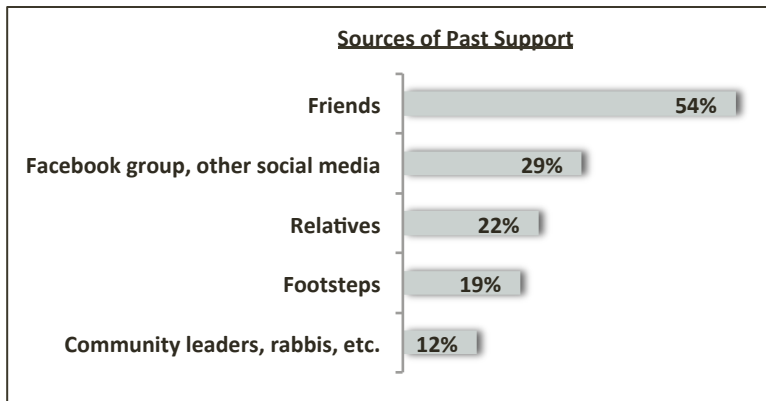
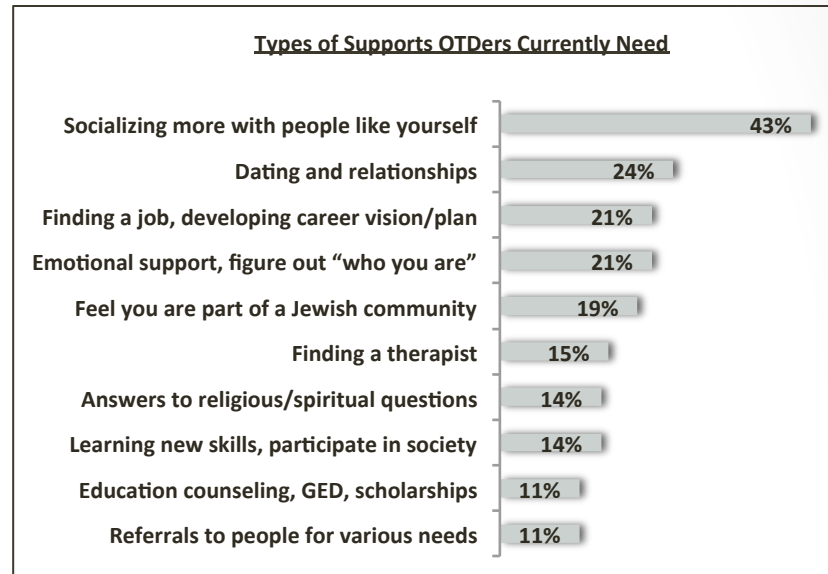




## Summary of Key Findings *(Continued)*

### Support Needs

- Those who have left their Orthodox community continue to face challenges. Their most often expressed needs were in areas of overall socializing (43%), dating and relationships (24%), and employment (21%).
- The need to socialize more with people like themselves ranked #1 across every segment.
- The most frequent sources of past support have been friends (54%), Facebook groups or other social media (29%), relatives (22%) and Footsteps (19%).



- 67% of respondents indicated they would have wished for additional support. The desired support sources most often mentioned were:
  - Footsteps 16%
  - Friends 5%
  - Therapists 3%
- 72% of Chareidi\* would have wanted additional support, vs. 55% of Modern Orthodox.

\* **Chareidi** – Chareidi (also spelled Haredi) encompass the Chasidic, Chabad and Yeshivish segments combined. While Chareidi originated as an Israeli term, it is also used to refer to American Jewish groups known collectively as “Ultra-Orthodox.” We use the term in this report to refer to the three groups combined: Chasidic, Chabad and Yeshivish.



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