

The New Nishma Surveys – Wow and Whoa! (Plus an Endnote on Israeli Modern Orthodoxy)

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Although the Orthodox community is the quickest growing and most Jewishly engaged segment of our people, the volume of data on Orthodox communal norms is probably the sparsest. Thanks to [Nishma Research](#), this is becoming far less the case.



Moving further down the path of the [2017 Nishma Research Profile of American Modern Orthodox Jews](#), Nishma has just concluded two new research projects: [The Successes, Challenges, and Future of American Modern Orthodoxy](#) and [The Journeys and Experiences of Baalei Teshuvah](#). Fresh off the press, these important research projects, which employed anonymous, extremely detailed online surveys of thousands of Orthodox Jews, most of whom self-identify as Modern Orthodox, provide some expected and some hugely unexpected insights into the religious practices and mindsets of the respondents.

The research, both in terms of its content and aim, has been conducted and presented in an extremely comprehensive and objective fashion, with no agenda or “spin”. While there was some animated discussion and debate among the Study Advisory Group – of which I was a member, along with a very diverse representation from across the spectrum – the data and final reports are purely factual and nonpartisan. This, with the genuinely professional and kind manner of Rabbi Mark (“Moish”) Trencher, who spearheaded and ran the project, made it an extremely worthwhile, enjoyable and substantive endeavor for all involved.

Enough for the appetizers – let’s get to the main course.

Rather than rehash the studies’ findings in my own words, I directly quote some salient portions of the [Nishma press release](#) and the reports’ summaries (with certain sections bolded by me):

□ *Modern Orthodoxy’s worldview involves melding Jewish observance with secular knowledge and participation, and 88% experience positive interactions between their Orthodoxy and secular society – most often simply by taking advantage of opportunities to create a positive impression with non-Orthodox or non-Jews. However, interaction with secular society can create conflict, with 88% of respondents having experienced such a conflict. **While half (51%) stand firm in their religious practice, a substantial minority (37%) compromise at some level – most often in areas of kashrut and Shabbat.***

*While more than two-thirds (68%) fully agree that MO is as Jewishly authentic as Charedi Judaism, but **only one in four (24%) agree fully that MO is spiritually inspiring, and that MO Jews are quite knowledgeable about the fundamental underpinnings of their faith.***

Few (15%) agree fully that religious observance in the Modern Orthodox community is where it should be, but closer to half (43%) agree fully or somewhat.

The historic near-universal attendance at Orthodox Jewish day schools seems to be slipping, as 31% say they might consider public school as an option. 55% agree that their Orthodox community school systems are successful in creating committed Orthodox Jews, while 34% disagree.

People want change, and the top issues raised by those who advocate for change are increased roles for women and acceptance of LGBTQ. But many people are opposed to change, and the areas where they do not want change are the exact same issues. Modern Orthodoxy is being stretched by what are seen as both positive and negative views and values of secular society.

There is widespread concern about people leaving Orthodoxy (63%), and even more concern that communal leaders are not adequately addressing the issue (67%).

More than one-third (34%) believe “there is no longer a single, cohesive Modern Orthodox community. Modern Orthodoxy should acknowledge this and would perhaps be better off splitting into separate camps.”

42% of Modern Orthodox identify as baalei teshuvah (becoming Orthodox at or after bar/bat mitzvah age), a number consistent with what the 2013 Pew Study had found.

The top reasons baalei teshuvah give for why they became Orthodox are intellectual attraction or curiosity (53%), seeing Orthodoxy as more authentically Jewish (52%) and more truthful (35%), and connection to Jewish roots and heritage (36%).

Half of baalei teshuvah have continued to become more observant over time, but one in four says they have become less observant and gradually more lenient. Additionally, the vast majority (83%) say that they have “held onto” things from their pre-Orthodox life, which are not commonly found in the Orthodox world, most often citing left-of-center political views (20%) and socially liberal views (12%).

About three-fourths of all Orthodox Jews see their community as very accepting of baalei teshuvah. However, baalei teshuvah’s comfort levels with davening (prayer), Jewish learning and day-to-day Orthodox living are significantly lower than those of people raised Orthodox, even after many years.

Charedi Baalei Teshuvah differs from Modern Orthodox BTs in a number of ways. They more often became Orthodox because they sought authentic Judaism and saw the Torah as truthful, and were influenced more by kiruv. They are more religiously observant and more comfortable with Orthodoxy, but they more often still view themselves as BTs.

Readers are encouraged to go through the studies and see the detailed data for themselves. What interests me are the reasons behind the results, as well as what the results mean for the future.

Cutting to the chase, it all seems to boil down to what Modern Orthodoxy is and what it is not. Is Modern Orthodoxy essentially a passionate commitment to Torah tradition, with an emphasis on navigating the modern world, along with appreciating and partaking of general society’s positive offerings, so long as they comply with and perhaps enhance one’s Torah experience? Or is Modern Orthodoxy a diluted and compromised form of Orthodoxy – the “MO Lite” brand – practiced by those who are not really interested in scrupulous adherence to the Shulchan Aruch and engagement in Torah study? Or is Modern Orthodoxy a new theology of sorts, which synthesizes Torah and secular values, and perhaps should accommodate changing societal attitudes?

The truth, I believe, is all of the above – for the simple reason that Modern Orthodoxy was never an actual denomination or movement in the first place. Rather, American Jews in the Orthodox orbit informally and pretty much coincidentally identify as Modern Orthodox for a variety of reasons, which are not really related. For example, I know people who send their children to Modern Orthodox day schools because these schools: a) harbor a serious commitment to secular studies/degree preparation (in addition to Torah studies), or b) “do not force students to be strictly religious” and often have many non-Orthodox students, or c) are Religious Zionist (e.g. they recite Hallel on Yom Ha’atzmaut and march in the Celebrate Israel parade, etc.), or d) provide a synthesis of Torah and secular ideology. Often, starkly different families send their children to the same exact Modern Orthodox school, each family for any of the above, disparate reasons. These parents, who identify as Modern Orthodox, range from not fully observant, to almost yeshivish/Charedi, to diehard hesder yeshiva types (many of whom are not fans of Western/“modern” values), to those who are not so interested in ideology but adhere to Halacha on a basic level, to Jews who proudly and devoutly espouse a “synthesis” hashkafa (and are fully observant). Modern Orthodoxy is thus more of a de facto, general descriptor than anything else; it is almost whatever one

wants it to be and was never launched as an official movement (notwithstanding Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm's 1986 [formulation of Centrist Orthodoxy](#); I was in the audience when Rabbi Lamm orally unveiled it at YU.)

It is clear to me that the Nishma data reflects a blend of unrelated levels of observance and commitment that happen to fall under the loose Modern Orthodox classification. I know people who take great liberties with the observance of Shabbos, kashrus and most other areas of Halacha, and they have told me that they conduct themselves that way because they are Modern Orthodox. I also know some incredibly frum people – frummer than most yeshivish people – who refer to themselves as Modern Orthodox, simply due to their desire to engage and gain from the outside world (educationally and professionally). The Nishma research project includes these dramatically different types and more, and its data was hence all over the place. I am confident that the Nishma data which depicts seriously compromised halachic observance and openness to sending children to public school reflects input from “MO Lite” types who participated in the study.

Quite surprisingly, almost half of those surveyed by Nishma are unenthusiastic about the Modern Orthodox day school system, and fewer than one in four respondents finds Modern Orthodoxy inspiring (!). This should send shockwaves throughout the Modern Orthodox establishment, as without a robust chinuch system and very strong commitment, retention and perpetuation, disaster will be on the horizon.

Equally alarming is a phenomenon I have observed, in which Modern Orthodox shuls contribute immense sums of money to Israeli causes, while neglecting to provide adequate day school scholarships for the children of that shul/local community itself. I am aware of one such situation, in which an extremely wealthy Modern Orthodox congregation donates millions upon millions of dollars each year to Israeli charities, while large numbers of the shul's youth attend the local public school, due to lack of scholarship funding for the shul's affiliated day school.

[The Journeys and Experiences of Baalei Teshuvah](#) is a fascinating read, and its data about the broad acceptance of baalei teshuva into the Orthodox community is heartwarming. I have two general observations to make about this Nishma study, even though the topic deserves its own full treatment, as there is so much to discuss.

Firstly, every baal teshuva and his circumstances are different, baalei teshuva must be viewed with utmost admiration and esteem, and no generalizations should ever be made – yet I suggest that the data regarding the “success rates” of baalei teshuva must be considered in light of the effort and determination of baalei teshuva to fulfill their religious calling. Many (and probably most) baalei teshuva are very driven, working their hardest to “catch up”, make great strides and become meticulously observant, frum Jews. On the other hand, I have also met baalei teshuva who lack this impulse and motivation, and despite being quite intelligent and capable, never quite “make it”, failing to invest the energy to learn, know and fully acclimate. These people have made a noble and bold life choice to become baalei teshuva, but they are not the BT movement's true success stories, and the “FFB” Orthodox community cannot really be blamed for it. I think this factor is of great weight and must be considered.

Secondly, the disparity between Modern Orthodox and Charedi baalei teshuva is immense. Among those surveyed by Nishma, *84% of Charedi baalei teshuva identify as “full-time (24/7) Orthodox Jews”, whereas only 45% of Modern Orthodox baalei teshuva identify this way. 6% of Charedi baalei teshuva are open to possibly sending their children to public school, whereas a whopping 37% of Modern Orthodox baalei teshuva are open to considering public school for their children – truly startling. This might very well indicate that although the motivation for becoming baalei teshuva among both Modern Orthodox and Charedi respondents is sincere, as carefully documented in the research, the percentage of baal teshuva success stories is dominated by the Charedi segment.*

These Nishma research projects provide more than just food for thought – they MUST lead to action, before more of our brothers and sisters tragically leave the fold. It is compellingly clear that there exist major systemic problems; leadership has to act now. When we read that “*There is widespread concern about (Modern Orthodox) people leaving Orthodoxy (63%), and even more concern that communal leaders are not adequately addressing the issue (67%)*”, that 76% of Modern Orthodox Jews do not find their religious experience inspiring, that over a third of Modern Orthodox Jews compromise in Shabbos and kashrus observance and nearly a third might consider sending their children to public school, and that almost half of Modern Orthodox Jews feel that their schools are not succeeding to produce committed Orthodox Jews, we face an inferno.

Some Modern Orthodox rabbis and educators, aware of the sterile religious environment that is often pervasive in their institutions (albeit with many great exceptions!), have introduced Neo-Chassidus and of course rely heavily upon the “gap year in Israel” as antidotes. That is not enough and is more of a bandage after the injury; serious and substantive in-house repair and recalibration are sorely needed. (Please see [this important discussion](#) about the trajectory of Modern Orthodox education.) Schools, shuls and homes must all be part of the solution.

There is plenty of anecdotal evidence manifesting considerable attrition in the Modern Orthodox community; this issue was addressed in the 2017 Nishma research study. The mere fact that new Modern Orthodox schools rarely open, unless they are in communities which attract many newcomers or “RWMO/right-wing Modern Orthodox” types (e.g. Bergen County), is a sufficient indicator, when placed in the context of Modern Orthodox birthrates. (Please also see [here](#).)

We pray that the dire situation depicted in much of the Nishma data improves – but nothing will happen unless leadership takes decisive action.

ENDNOTE

Although Israeli Modern Orthodoxy is arguably in a far better position (notwithstanding a reportedly high attrition rate which must be robustly addressed on many levels), there is another phenomenon in Israeli Modern Orthodoxy which has not really caught the eye of many, but which threatens to overturn so much.

Dr. Adam S. Ferziger’s new article, [Fluidity and Bifurcation: Critical Biblical Scholarship and Orthodox Judaism in Israel and North America](#), introduces a world heretofore unknown to many of us, in which numerous leading Israeli Religious Zionist rabbis are engaged in what is essentially Higher Biblical Criticism, and are in some cases challenging the historicity of the Torah, questioning the nature of the Sinaitic revelation as traditionally understood, and suggesting multiple Torah authorship theories. Other Israeli Religious Zionist rabbis featured in Dr. Ferziger’s article do not go that far, yet are involved in nontraditional Bible study methodologies that can quite possibly lead to heresy. These rabbis are not affiliated with the Merkaz Ha-Rav/”Kav” Religious Zionist camp – quite the opposite.

Before proceeding further, I must emphatically note that Dr. Ferziger’s article addresses the role of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt”l in allegedly enabling this phenomenon to take root. I have nothing but deep respect for Rav Lichtenstein, who was a tzaddik and a defender of tradition. In no way do I invoke this article in order to imply criticism of this great and towering man, who was obviously very complex and probably understood by extremely few.

Many, if not all, of the contemporary Israeli rabbis cited in Dr. Ferziger’s article have affiliations with America’s Open Orthodox movement – the only group self-identifying as Orthodox whose leaders have at times tolerated and/or endorsed the promotion of theories challenging the Torah’s historicity, its singular divine authorship, and the traditional understanding of the Revelation at Sinai. The difference is that whereas Open Orthodoxy is not really part of the American Modern Orthodox establishment, many of the rabbis cited by Dr. Ferziger and the institutions they lead are quite prominent and influential in some segments of Israeli Modern Orthodox society. The phenomenon documented by Dr. Ferziger can result in immense damage to Torah belief and observance in the Israeli Modern Orthodox community – perhaps far more than realized at this point.

We have all heard stories about Israeli Dati Leumi youth who finish school, complete their army service, travel to the Far East to “chill and clear their minds”, and return essentially nonobservant to their homeland. (I fear that a [recent Orthodox attempt](#) to pursue spirituality in the East might do more harm than good, by encouraging more extensive exploration of Eastern religions on the part of young Jews.) Now, there is a new force threatening Dati Leumi commitment to traditional Torah belief, but this time, it is coming from leading rabbis in parts of the Dati Leumi community rather than from irreligious or non-Jewish sources. It is alarming.

Action is needed, and now. But more than action, we need tefilla and siyata di-shmaya, for the tasks before us are immense, and we cannot be absolved or in denial.