

# Emes Ve-Emunah

A Forum for Orthodox Jewish thought on Halacha, Hashkafa, and the social issues of our time.

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## The Survival of Modern Orthodoxy in America



Hebrew Academy of Five Towns and Rockaway. A good school. Can we afford it?

Modern Orthodoxy is at risk. This is a lamentable phenomenon, but not all that unexpected. This has been the case even before Rabbi Avi Weiss started ordaining women. But that was surely a turning point. The left wing of modern Orthodoxy had always been pushing the envelope of what is and isn't permissible within the parameters of Halacha and Hashkafa. It was Rabbi Weiss that took it to the next level. Which generated a quick rejection by the right. Including the right wing of Modern Orthodoxy.

Nonetheless things got worse from there. That innovation was followed by the establishment of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. Which - despite the complete rejection by mainstream Orthodoxy - supports ordaining women. That was followed by the establishment of Yeshivat Maharat, a seminary that trains and ordains women.

Most recently was the acceptance if not outright welcoming openly gay Jews. Even celebrating their lifestyle! Without getting into the minutia of what is and isn't an acceptable approach to LGBTQ people, there is an unprecedented break from what has been the traditional approach to this subject.

Furthermore, the left wing of Modern Orthodoxy is now even exploring the acceptance of academic study of the Torah. Which suggests that the Torah might have had multiple authors during different periods in history.

There are a number of other innovations by the left that are rejected by the mainstream.

Rabbi Weiss's innovations have snowballed into a form of 'Orthodoxy' that is unrecognizable.

What does this mean for the future of Modern Orthodoxy as a whole? I have in the past expressed where I think it is heading. There will be (if there isn't already) a unbridgeable split between the left wing and right wing of Modern Orthodoxy. The left seems to be going in the direction of creating yet another denomination. Much like the way the Conservative Movement did. They will still respect Halacha as they understand it. Same as the Conservative movement - understanding it the way they do. But just as was the case with the Conservative Movement, traditionalists will eventually see the left as illegitimate as they do the Conservative Movement.

The right wing of Modern Orthodoxy will be (and already is) part of the increasingly large segment of mainstream Orthodoxy I call the 'new centrists'. Which will consist of moderate Charedim and Right Wing Modern Orthodox. Their lifestyles will be virtually identical even while their worldviews will be somewhat different.

I note all of this in light of a [survey](#) undertaken by the Nishma Research Organization. I was sent the results of that survey by Mark Trencher, president of Nishma and its lead researcher. He came up with the following observations:

1. Modern Orthodoxy's worldview involves melding Jewish observance with secular knowledge and participation. While nearly all (88%) experience positive interactions with secular society, nearly all (88%) also have experienced conflict, and more than one-third (37%) compromise to some extent, most often in areas of kashrut and Shabbat.
2. 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 their two top 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.
3. Fragmentation is growing, and 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."
4. 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.

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

With respect to point one, it is not surprising that there is both positive and negative experiences when engaging with secular society. The 'trick' is to know how to deal with it. It is also not surprising that nearly a 3<sup>rd</sup> of Modern Orthodox Jews compromise in areas of Shabbos and Kashrus. This is the portion of Modern Orthodox Jews I have always called MO-Lite. And has nothing to do with the split I referred to. Which is an ideological split.

Point two is exactly what I referred to above. That in my view is the primary reason for the split. It is the result the left seeing secular values more reasonable than traditional religious values and therefore overriding them.

Point three is the obvious result of point two.

Point four is a factor that is mostly independent of the first three points. It is based on a problem facing all of Orthodoxy in America; The cost of educating our children in a meaningfully Jewish way. Which requires the kind of immersive educational experience that only a religious day school and high school experience can provide.

The expense of doing that has become so exorbitant, that even a family with a six figure income can no longer afford tuition if they have more than one or two children. That has led an astonishing 31% of Modern Orthodox families to seriously consider public school as an option!

If there is a danger to Orthodoxy in America, this is it. That so many MO parents believe their children can survive the influences of a public school and remain committed observant Jews is both shocking and sad. And completely unrealistic.

It isn't even so much about the lack of being educated Jewishly that is the problem. (Although that is definitely the case). The bigger danger is the unchecked cultural influences Jewish public school students will experience on an ongoing daily basis. Influences that at best see religion as irrelevant to modern sensibilities. They may assert the right of Jews to practice Judaism. But to the extent that they value any religious culture at all - it will not be Judaism. It will be a secularized version of Christianity. The kind that saturates western culture this time of year. There will be little if any inspiration towards Jewish observance in that kind of environment.

I suspect that it is mostly (but not exclusively) MO-Lite Jews that are considering public school for their children. Which also means that their children do not get much religious re-enforcement at home where observance is 'lite'.

The truth is that anyone that values a decent dual curriculum is going to have to pay for it. Certainly Right Wing MO Jews do. And I believe that most moderate Charedim do as well. The tuition crisis therefore puts pressure on all of mainstream Orthodoxy.

That said, I do not see the 'new centrists' going the public school route. The \$64,000 question is, how can any but the wealthiest among us afford to pay for a religious education?

Yes, there are financial aid considerations (of varying degree depending on need) which are given to most parents. But that does not solve the ultimate problem of how to pay for good teachers in both religious and secular studies. And even with that aid, most parents find themselves squeezed for every dollar they can spare.

Bearing all this in mind, I believe we are on an irreversible course towards a split. Partly because of increasingly divergent values and partly because of the cost of education.

This leaves the most right wing Orthodox among us. Satmar type Chasidim. They have a level of cohesiveness that is beyond compare. Their education expenses are a fraction of what Modern Orthodox education expenses are since they have only a religious studies curriculum. Their isolationist approach to society assures that secular influences are minimal. They are willing to live very modest lifestyles. And their reproduction rate is the highest among all of Orthodoxy, often consisting of 10 or more children per family.

Multiply that generationally and you can see why they (and to a lesser extent an increasing number of non Chasidic Yeshiva type Jews who are choosing schools with no secular education) may be the most successful at perpetuating themselves into the future.

But that is not a guarantee. Because as I've said many times without being prepared for a 21<sup>st</sup> century world plus the almost certain exposure to secular culture for which they are also unprepared - the likelihood of dropouts will surely increase.

Where will all this end? Who knows.

Posted by [Harry Maryles](#) at [12:05 PM](#)

