



Beyond Teshuva

Jewish Spiritual Growth

Home

Modern Orthodox and Modern Orthodox Baalei Teshuva Research Reports

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Nishma Research recently (November 2019) published the results of an Online Survey of 1,817 Modern Orthodox American Jews of which 744 are “Baalei Teshuvah”. They released two reports which you can download at <http://nishmaresearch.com/social-research.html>.

Here are some of the key findings from <https://www.jewishdatabank.org/databank/search-results/study/1078>:

Sponsors: The Micah Foundation

Principal Investigators: Mark Trencher, Nishma Research

Study Date: 2019

Key Findings:

In 2017, Nishma Research reported the results of an online survey of over 3,900 Modern Orthodox Jewish respondents in America. Reports, slide shows, the questionnaire, qualitative verbatim comments to open-ended questions and the quantitative data file from the study are available at the DataBank’s 2017 study page.

Prior to that, in 2016, Nishma had issued a ground-breaking report on “those who left Orthodoxy,” including a substantial number who had left Modern Orthodoxy.

2019 Surveys of U.S. Modern Orthodox Jews

In November 2019, Mark Trencher (Founder and President of Nishma Research) published two extraordinarily informative and accessible reports which continued the research firm’s studies of Modern Orthodox Jews in America.

(1) The first report – “The Successes, Challenges and Future of American Modern Orthodoxy” – focused primarily on all 1,817 survey respondents who were Modern Orthodox Jews living in the United States, although appendix materials also compared the U.S. Modern Orthodox with another 130 Israeli-living Modern Orthodox and 174 U.S. charedi (often called the “ultra-Orthodox” in newspaper discussions, etc.).

(2) The second report – “The Journeys and Experiences of Baalei Teshuvah” focused only on the 744 US baalei teshuvah respondents (Jews who were not “frum from birth,” but who began to identify as Orthodox at or about bar/bat mitzvah age, or later in life); the baalei teshuvah respondents were also included in the 1,817 Modern Orthodox U.S. Jews who were discussed in the comprehensive Modern Orthodox report.

Both reports (individually and in tandem) provide fascinating portraits of Modern Orthodox Judaism in the United States; each includes a Summary of Key Findings, expanded text and tabular/graphic analyses of quantitative survey results, extensive verbatim comments to open-ended questions which are as important as the quantitative data to an understanding of Modern Orthodoxy, and the survey questionnaire (also available as a stand-alone PDF on this study page).

The comprehensive report on Modern Orthodoxy also includes summaries of the results of the 2017 survey and an earlier Nishma “pioneering study of those who have left the Orthodox community,” as well as copies of several articles on Modern Orthodoxy inspired by the earlier surveys.

Key Findings

The combination of quantitative and qualitative data in the two reports makes it important for DataBank users to review both reports, including the verbatim quotes. Only a few study findings are noted below:

- The “...vast majority (85%) of Modern Orthodox respondents say their Orthodox observance is an important part of their lives...”

- “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.”

- “...Modern Orthodox Jews are far from uniform in their beliefs, attitudes and practices. While 42% say they are ‘centrist,’ a majority say they are either to the left or to the right, and almost one in five (18%) says they are primarily ‘Shabbat Orthodox.’”

“...A majority of respondents are concerned that too many Modern Orthodox communal leaders come from right-leaning segments.”

- “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.”

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

Baalei Teshuvah

- 42% of all Modern Orthodox American Jews are baalei teshuvah.

- The median age at which they started to identify as Orthodox is 23.5

- Nearly half (49%) of baalei teshuvah had previously been “...Conservative or Orthoprax, followed by the non-denominational – traditional, cultural, ethnic Jewish, or ‘just Jewish’ (23%).”

- “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%).”
- “Among those who cited kiruv (outreach) as an influence, Chabad Lubavitch (42%) and “a rabbi or other mentor/personality” (38%) are most often cited. However, while kiruv is effective in influencing people to become Orthodox, only 22% rate their “follow-up” as excellent.”
- “Men are more often drawn by kiruv and intellectual attraction; women by spirituality and the community.”
- Compared to those “frum from birth,” “Baalei teshuvah tend to be more liberal, have more ‘observance diversity’ in their households, and their Orthodoxy is a slightly less important part of who they are overall.”
- “By a very wide margin, the top challenge baalei teshuvah faced in becoming Orthodox was in their relationships with their parents and family (37%). These relationships were far more challenging than learning and knowing what to do as an Orthodox observant person (cited by 16%), social aspects and friends (13%), and kashrut (12%).”
- “The vast majority of baalei teshuvah (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%).”
- “Between half and two-thirds of baalei teshuvah are fully or mostly comfortable with davening (65%), Jewish learning (53%), and day-to-day Orthodox living (65%). However, their comfort levels are significantly lower than those of FFBs for all of these aspects of Orthodox life.”
- “Baalei teshuvah’s levels of religiosity continue to change. Half say they continued to become more observant over time, as they have learned more and as they gradually moved toward greater observance. But one in four says they have become less observant and gradually more lenient.”

Sample:

“Seeking to reach the broad community of Modern Orthodox (MO) Jews, the study contacted synagogues, reaching their rabbis and members via communication through the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA). As shul affiliation is virtually universal among the Orthodox, we see this as an effective way to reach the community.”

“We received 2,629 responses, of whom 1,817 self-identified ... as Modern Orthodox residing in the US, and the findings presented in this report are primarily based on these respondents. Some had self-identified as charedi, Conservative and other non-Modern Orthodox, even though they are members of shuls whose rabbis are RCA members, and appendices include data for 174 US-based charedi Jews and 130 Israel-based Modern Orthodox Jews.”

“Among the respondents were 888 whom we classified as baalei teshuvah (having become Orthodox at bar/bat mitzvah age or later...744 are Modern Orthodox in the U.S.”

Sample Notes:

“...The extent to which these samples are representative of the overall populations from which they derive is not knowable, as no demographic profile of the community exists. Such profiles exist for larger denominations of American Jewry (via community, Federation, and Pew studies), but Orthodoxy – and particularly the Modern Orthodox and baalei teshuvah – are quite small segments...”

The online survey was seen as the only feasible strategy for large-scale data collection among the Orthodox; other methods would have been prohibitively expensive. For example, “Pew conducted 71,000 phone calls and completed their survey with only 134 synagogue-attending Modern Orthodox Jews.”

Compared with the Pew sample, “...our respondents appear roughly equivalent with respect to regional distribution, median age, liberal/conservative political balance, and the percentage that are baalei teshuvah. Our sample appears to report somewhat higher levels of education and income.”

However, the report noted that: “As is true for all surveys, sample respondents should be viewed with appropriate understanding and caution.”

Sample Size: 1,817 Modern Orthodox American Jews; 744 are “Baalei Teshuvah”