

# The Challenges of Singlehood among American Orthodox Jews

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The Center for Communal Research, founded in 2018, advances the Orthodox Union's obligation to better understand and serve the Jewish community. The Center is dedicated to the pursuit of a rigorous, responsive, and responsible research and evaluation agenda.

*This report is dedicated to the single men and women who let us into their lives—those who completed our survey and participated in interviews. We were humbled by their openness and insights, and we hope this report does justice to their trust in us.*

## Acknowledgement of Authorship

The OU's Center for Communal Research would like to acknowledge the following individuals for their authorship on this report:

**Matt Williams**  
**Michelle Shain**  
**Guila Benchimol**  
**Channah Cohen**  
**Elisha Penn**

These individuals were responsible for the conception of the study, the research design, the collection and analysis of the data, and the drafting and revision of initial publication materials. Their expertise and efforts remain the backbone of this research study, and serve as a seminal example of rigor, responsiveness, and responsibility as it relates to a research endeavor.

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## Foreword by Rabbi Moshe Hauer, Executive Vice President of the Orthodox Union

In 2018, the Orthodox Union established the Center for Communal Research to help both the OU and the Orthodox community harness the power of data to drive evaluation of existing programs and inform strategies on communal issues. This is a new undertaking for the OU, and it has been a learning experience on both the research and implementation sides that reinforces our belief in the great promise it holds both internally and communally. We are grateful to be able to release the current report presenting detailed and meaningful findings regarding the experience of single male and female members of our Orthodox community.

There will *b'ezrat Hashem* be more to come. While this report focuses on the singlehood experience, our original study also generated data regarding the challenges posed by both the shidduch process and demographics. That data is partial, in that it does not capture the voices of those who have successfully navigated the shidduch system. The CCR is currently conducting a more complete study on the shidduch landscape in partnership with the newly formed Shidduch Institute that focuses on a large segment of the Orthodox community and that we expect to yield complementary data. After that report is published and we have the ability to observe and share in the effective application of that data, we hope to proceed to review and publish our other findings in an actionable framework.

It is therefore with gratitude and humility that we publish this report. Many exceptionally talented professionals at the OU's Center for Communal Research invested countless hours in this effort to bring to light the depth of the experience of the single men and women in our Orthodox communities. We are especially indebted to all those who collaborated with us on this project, especially the many men and women who gave of themselves by responding to the survey and participating in interviews. We hope they feel rewarded by the insights that will surface for the national Orthodox community herein, and that those insights will heighten communal awareness and spark the change needed to create a more respectful, inclusive, and welcoming home for single men and women within our communities.

## Executive summary

This is a report on the lives of single men and women actively dating throughout the Orthodox Jewish community in the United States. It is about their inclusion in, and exclusion from, Jewish communal life. It is about important elements of the so-called “shidduch crisis.”

Our team used a variety of methods to collect and analyze data. In doing so, we aimed to amplify the voices of single men and women as participants in, not subjects of, the research enterprise. The overall conclusion of our research endeavor was that there are different components to the shidduch crisis that include and go beyond the fact that many single men and women have difficulty finding a spouse in the Orthodox community.

The research points to a crisis of process, reflecting the fact that the systems and procedures for finding a spouse in the Orthodox community fall short for some single men and women. This report, however, will focus on the crisis of experience among single men and women, which reflects the fact that single people reported feeling blamed or judged by their Orthodox communities and struggle to participate in Orthodox life. Many also expressed feeling that they do not have a place to belong, nor a way to contribute meaningfully to their communities while single.

### Overall findings

#### What single Orthodox men and women feel:

- Single men and women reported experiences of loneliness during their search for a spouse.
- Many single men and women reported negative experiences with their Orthodox communities. They felt invisible, infantilized, blamed, and judged.
- Single men and women deeply desired a place to belong and contribute to their communities.
- Single people felt hurt by matchmakers and overlooked by community leaders. Women, in particular, reported experiences of being criticized, degraded, or dismissed.

#### What single Orthodox men and women want from their Orthodox communities:

- Single men and women want help finding a spouse. Some want a different dating process or system altogether, while others want the current system to be improved.
- They want to be welcomed as a part of their Orthodox communities and seek opportunities to belong, such as invitations to Shabbat meals.
- Many single men and women feel they would benefit from communal resources for relationship education.
- Single men and women want community leaders, community members, and matchmakers to show more respect and appreciation for their inherent value and dignity, and they want to be more included in communal spaces.

will lead to communal conversations and action-oriented change strategies, we ask:

- 1 How can we recognize single men and women as full, adult members of our community, rather than treating them like “boys” and “girls”? What changes to language and behaviors, on both an individual and communal level, would convey this recognition?
- 2 How can we create a place for belonging within the Orthodox Jewish community for those who are searching for a spouse, and for those who may never find one? How can we expand communal structures and roles to include single people?
- 3 How can our Orthodox communities offer single men and women opportunities to learn more about relationships, as they so desire?

In response, and in the hope that these questions



## Introduction

This study portrays the experiences of single people currently in the Orthodox Jewish dating and marriage system in the United States. Our goal in the collection and dissemination of this research is to help the larger community move beyond the anecdotes, opinions, and limited experiences that inhibit our ability to fully understand the experience of being a single, Orthodox Jewish man or woman. This report provides a foundation of facts about Orthodox Jewish singlehood that we hope can help single people, stakeholders, and communal leaders move towards effective solutions.

Importantly, at the heart of this report are the voices of the single men and women that we surveyed and interviewed. These men and women shared how they feel about being single in the community as well as how they have been treated by the community. This helped us identify some of the dynamics that exist between single people and their wider Orthodox communities, and it uncovered feelings of pain and unmet needs.

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### Questions this report answers — and questions it does not

**This report addresses the following questions:**

- How do single men and women feel about themselves, each other, and their communities?
- What do single men and women want from the community at large?

**Note that this report does not address the following issues:**

- It does not address issues related to the process, systems, and procedures for finding a spouse in the Orthodox community.
- It does not address the potential causes of the “shidduch crisis” (the most common claims being that there are demographically not enough men [what researchers call a “sex ratio imbalance”]; that there are not enough “good” men; that single people do not have the “right” values; that single people are “too picky”; and more.)
- It also does not describe the contours of the “shidduch crisis” in the Orthodox population, for example, the percentage of people who marry, divorce, or remain single, and the qualities that might predict such things.

### What to expect from this report

In presenting our findings, this report describes how single men and women recount feeling as members of their Orthodox communities. It also details how they report being treated by their communities—which includes feelings of invisibility, dynamics of silence, the distribution of blame, and, most importantly, the experience of a lack of belonging within the existing Orthodox infrastructure. The following section discusses what single men and women say they want from their communities; this includes help finding a spouse, preparation for relationships, and being welcomed into communal spaces with understanding and respect. The report concludes with recommendations for further action, which we offer to communities and individuals who are interested in taking the findings from this report and applying them practically. It is our sincere hope that these will make a positive contribution towards the resolution of the crisis of experience for many single men and women in our Jewish communities.



## What did we do?

We took a mixed methods approach to this study, whereby our research team collected and analyzed both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data, a detailed survey of single Orthodox Jews, allows us to describe broad contours of the Orthodox single community as well as the associations between individual characteristics and experiences. The qualitative data, which included interviews with single Orthodox Jews as well as with matchmakers, rabbis, rebbetzins, and community leaders, provides depth and detail, enhancing and, in some cases, complicating the survey's findings. The two types of data also serve to validate each other, strengthening the study's overall conclusions.

Full details of our study's methodology can be found in the [Methodological Appendix](#), available on the OU Center for Communal Research's website. What follows here is a brief summary.

More than 2,300 single Orthodox Jewish men and women who were users of eight Jewish dating applications or singles' groups responded to our survey (Table 1). The survey covered a range of topics including dating, religion, socioeconomic status, and health. Data was collected between February 5, 2020 and March 6, 2020, just before the outbreak of COVID-19 in the United States. The overall response rate was 12% (which is double a typical telephone survey response rate obtained by the Pew Research Center).

We also conducted semi-structured interviews with 41 unmarried Orthodox Jews (Table 1). While interviewers asked questions about singlehood and dating experiences, conversation was allowed to develop organically. In this report, 'respondents' refers to the single men and women we surveyed while 'participants' refers to the single men and women we interviewed. All names that appear below are pseudonyms to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality.

**Table 1. Number of survey respondents and interviews, by sex**

Method	Women (Pct.)	Men (Pct.)	Total (Pct.)
Survey respondents	1,524 (64%)	845 (36%)	2,369 (100%)
Interviews with unmarried participants	23 (56%)	18 (44%)	41 (100%)
Interviews with matchmakers	22 (88%)	3 (12%)	25 (100%)
Interviews with communal leaders	5 (24%)	16 (76%)	21 (100%)

We also interviewed 25 professional or volunteer shadchanim, and 21 community leaders including rabbis, rebbetzins, and others (Table 1). We did this to compare the perceptions of the single men and women to the perceptions of the matchmakers and community leaders. However, this report does not attempt to tell the complete story of matchmakers and community leaders alongside that of single Orthodox Jews; rather, it centers the experiences of single men and women. The voices of community leaders and matchmakers are included where they add to, or complicate, our understanding of the single population.

## Snapshot of survey respondents

In analyzing the survey data, we were highly cognizant of four structural characteristics that, based on research conducted in similar communities,<sup>1</sup> play a large role in shaping experiences in the marriage market: sex, age, geographic location, and Orthodox subculture.<sup>2</sup>

### Sex and age

More women responded to our survey than men (Table 2). This is not in itself indicative of an underlying single population with more women than men, because a higher response rate among women is common in survey research.<sup>3</sup> However, seven of the eight dating communities did report having more women than men, which may reflect a more heavily female single population. Overall, a plurality of our survey respondents (44%) was between 25 to 34 years old.

### Geographic location

The majority of our survey respondents lived in Greater New York (Table 3). Women were slightly more likely to live in New York: 67%, compared to 61% for men.

### Orthodox subculture

American Orthodoxy is variegated, with multiple subgroups forming a complex web of overlapping communities. We used a technique called Latent Class Analysis<sup>5</sup> to classify respondents into four Orthodox subgroups based on respondents' degree of engagement with broader American culture and norms, particularly around information and entertainment, and the intensity of their Orthodox identities and social embeddedness. For ease of reference, we are calling the groups Conservative Orthodox, Moderate Orthodox, Liberal Orthodox, and Eclectic Orthodox.<sup>6</sup> A full description of the analysis can be found in our [Methodological Appendix](#). The distribution of survey respondents into these categories can be seen in Table 4.

**Table 2. Sex of Survey Respondents by Age**

Age	Female	Male	Total
18-24	16%	5%	21%
25-34	29%	16%	45%
35-44	11%	8%	19%
45+	8%	7%	15%
Total	64%	36%	100%

**Table 3. Geographic location**

Location	Respondents
New York-Northern New Jersey-Long Island, NY-NJ-PA <sup>4</sup>	65%
Baltimore-Towson, MD	7%
Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana, CA	6%
Miami-Fort Lauderdale-Miami Beach, FL	4%
Chicago-Naperville-Joliet, IL-IN-WI	3%
Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV	2%
Other	13%
Total	100%

**Table 4. Orthodox subgroup, by sex**

Group	Women	Men	Total
Conservative Orthodox	41%	44%	42%
Moderate Orthodox	20%	18%	19%
Liberal Orthodox	33%	27%	31%
Eclectic Orthodox	7%	11%	8%
Total	100%	100%	100%

## How do single Orthodox men and women feel?

Beyond the difficulty of finding a suitable partner, a critical factor of the “shidduch crisis” is the way that single men and women *feel*. There is a burden of loneliness and lack of fulfillment that lies on their shoulders, some of which stems from how they have been treated. Navigating the Orthodox Jewish community as a single adult—a community where marriage is a mitzvah and a goal—is not simple. Respondents and participants reported on their experiences with their broader Orthodox communities, with those they try to date, with matchmakers, and with community members. Often the experiences of the men and women who participated in our study differed in significant ways.

### Loneliness

Research suggests that loneliness—that is, feeling a lack of strong, intimate bonds with others—exerts a strong, negative influence on health outcomes.<sup>7</sup> Our survey asked respondents how often they felt left out, isolated from others, or lacked companionship, and we combined the results into a “loneliness scale.”<sup>8</sup> Feelings of loneliness varied by age, with the 35-44 age group reporting the highest levels of loneliness. Men reported higher levels of loneliness than women. While in other studies living alone has been associated with loneliness,<sup>9</sup> living arrangement was not significantly related to loneliness in our study.

However, to temper this experience of loneliness, many single men and women reported deep positive networks of friendships that lent them significant support during this stage of life. The overwhelming majority of interviewees said that friends were the most supportive resource available to them and had the most positive impact on their dating life. The emotional support that single men and women reported receiving from friends outstripped that from family, shadchanim, and community leaders. Many single men and women also credited their friends with providing the most on-point dating suggestions.

In addition to loneliness, the survey asked respondents a questionnaire related to anxiety and depression.<sup>10</sup> We found that mental health was an important predictor of single men and women’s confidence that they would find a spouse. Those with moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety and depression were much less confident in their chances of finding a spouse than those with mild or no symptoms. These people, in particular those with severe symptoms, also spent fewer hours dating in the week before taking the survey.<sup>11</sup>

#### ***De-stigmatizing mental health***

*Matchmakers made it clear that mental health conditions are stigmatized in the Orthodox community. Some matchmakers tried to fight this stigma, saying that if a family would “shut down” a match with someone with a mental health condition, they might advocate for the couple to keep dating. Matchmakers tended to downplay concerns surrounding mental health, which they felt families of single people often exaggerated.*

## 04

Research participants explained that poor emotional, psychological, and spiritual wellbeing was a barrier to finding a partner. Additionally, the experience of feeling “lost” or out of place in their communities was addressed by several interview participants.

This is one of the most trying and embarrassing times in our life. We lose a sense of purpose and don't really know why we are on this planet. There is no way to explain the thousands of times we are discounted, rejected, overlooked while we try to find our own purpose and meaning in life. The combination is terrible and really can destroy anyone. We need to find a place in the frum world for single people and stop treating us like we are damaged goods that need help.

— *Female survey respondent, early 30s, Greater New York*

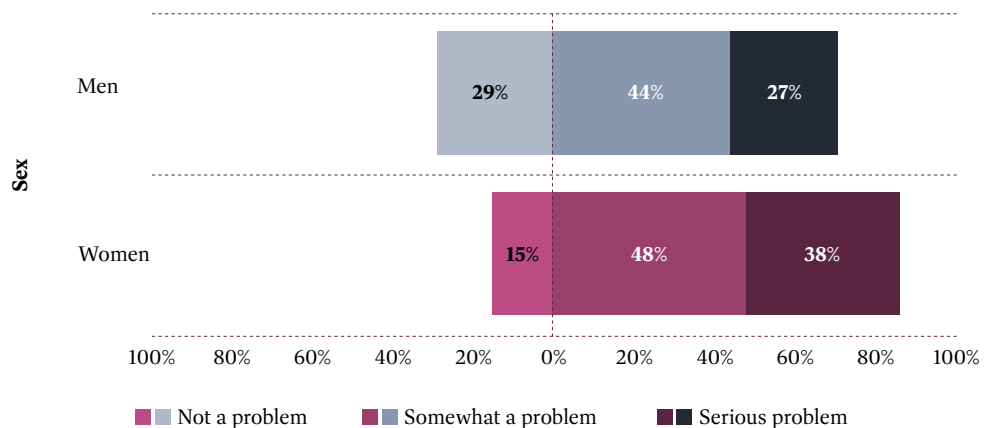
Somehow or another, the community has managed to convince the singles community that if you're not married by X-number, you're a failure. I think a lot more people would be getting married if they felt better about themselves.

— *Jack, mid-30s, Greater Los Angeles*

### Treated poorly by the Jewish community

As illustrated in the quotes above, interview participants and survey respondents often linked feelings of loneliness and depression to their treatment by their broader Orthodox communities. When asked on the survey about a series of problems facing their Jewish communities, although not ranked as the most pressing concern, 79% of respondents indicated that the treatment of single men and women was either somewhat of a problem or a serious problem. Women were more likely than men to perceive their treatment as a problem (Figure 1).<sup>12</sup>

Figure 1. Treatment of singles in Jewish community, by sex



## 04

Themes from those we interviewed included feelings of invisibility, infantilization, blame, judgment, hurt, and a lack of belonging in the Jewish community and religious institutions and structures. The following sections draw primarily on the qualitative data from those interviews.

### **Invisibility and infantilization**

In describing the experience of being single in the community, some participants spoke about feeling invisible. This often focused on how they felt treated by matchmakers.

I am kind of a dime a dozen to matchmakers. To them, I am just another single woman, and they're trying to get these guys married. I just feel like sometimes I'd be a prop.

— *Shira, mid-30s, Greater New York*

I just felt like my description of what I wanted disappeared into the ether. No one is reading my profile. No one is reading the notes that I write to them... It makes me feel like I'm talking to the wall.

— *Nattan, early 30s, Greater Philadelphia*

Several survey respondents also described experiences of infantilization in the broader community:

There is a tendency to infantilize single members of the community. This manifests in various ways, including invitations to participate in leadership (board membership, receiving honors) and socially (as a 20-something medical student, I and a 30-year-old widow were seated at the children's table at a wedding; our similarly-aged coupled friends were seated together).

— *Female survey respondent, early 30s, location unknown*

You really don't mean anything unless you're married. I think it's even truer for women. I think it's even harder for women. But I can certainly say that as a man, I feel like I'm not a full-fledged member of the community. And that really is challenging.

— *Male survey respondent, early 30s, Greater New York*

For many female participants, the linguistic convention in the Orthodox community to refer to single women as "girls" epitomized the feelings of being discounted. Overall, male participants did not complain about being referred to as "boys."

A few interview participants did share stories of being supported by personal Rabbis and mentors and, at times, by matchmakers as well. The men we interviewed shared more of these stories of support than the women did.

Something that changed my whole way of dating was this Rebbe of mine. He [suggested many dates] to me, and his first idea was two years older than me. And he was like, 'call her up.' And I was like, 'What?' and he was like, 'You're afraid to call a girl? Man up and call her.' And it seems like such a little thing, but it had such a domino effect in terms of how authentic I felt I could be, and how I could just be myself. I go to him now for a lot. He's a big soundboard in my life. But he never tells me what to do, which is the reason I started speaking to him instead of other Rabbis I've had in the past.

— *Yaakov, late 20s, Greater Baltimore-Washington*

## 04

There was a shadchan I was talking to and she said, 'It's always important to get out and meet people'. And she said, 'If you ever want to come to my house for Shabbat, come'. I think she understood that people get older, and it could be that people feel isolated. I feel that way. And she was just saying, 'If you ever want to come, change things up, be with a family, come for Shabbat.' And I appreciated that.

— *Yisroel, late 30s, Greater New York*

However, most of the men and women we interviewed felt that communal rabbis and community leaders did not empathize with their challenges and should be doing more to help them find partners. As one female interviewee put it, while communities have developed greater sensitivity towards infertility, addiction, and other challenges, "there's none of that when it comes to singles."

Community leaders are going to have a lot to answer for. I don't know of any community leader in a place like Brooklyn that has ever taken a leadership role in saying, "Hey, look, we have a big issue here. Someone needs to talk about this. Someone needs to discuss this."

— *Yaakov, late 20s, Greater Baltimore-Washington*

I would say to community leaders and community members: We do not want your unsolicited advice. We're not interested in it. You don't know what it's like. You're not in the trenches with us.

— *Chevi, mid-20s, Greater New York*

### **Dynamics of silence**

Women also expressed the need to remain silent in the face of community members' hurtful comments. For some, this occurred when congregants at shul or guests at a wedding addressed them in a demeaning or insulting manner. Women felt it would be counterproductive to defend themselves or answer back, fearing that they would be blamed, labeled as bitter, seen as unmarriageable, or not be set up again in the future. Additionally, as opposed to men who related ending dates early if they felt it was not going well, women said they also felt responsible to remain silent while on a poor date. One woman recounted being on a bad date and going into the bathroom and crying, and then returning until the man she was dating decided it was time to leave.

Interview participants spoke about silence not only in relation to the general community. Some of the women we interviewed relayed that matchmakers' control over their ability to meet potential partners often led to silence in the face of mistreatment. While some men recounted that if a matchmaker said something insulting, they would stop using that matchmaker, women's responses to hurtful comments by matchmakers differed greatly, and usually resulted in a pained silence.

I feel like I can't say anything: The problem is that I have to constantly be respectful while they are being disrespectful to me. Because if I'm disrespectful back, that means that there's something wrong with me, I'm bitter, I'm angry, whatever it is.

— *Libi, late 20s, Greater Baltimore-Washington*

When I have asserted myself with shadchanim, they just completely write me off and will never set me up again.

— *Leora, mid-30s, Greater New York*

04

**Matchmaker feedback**

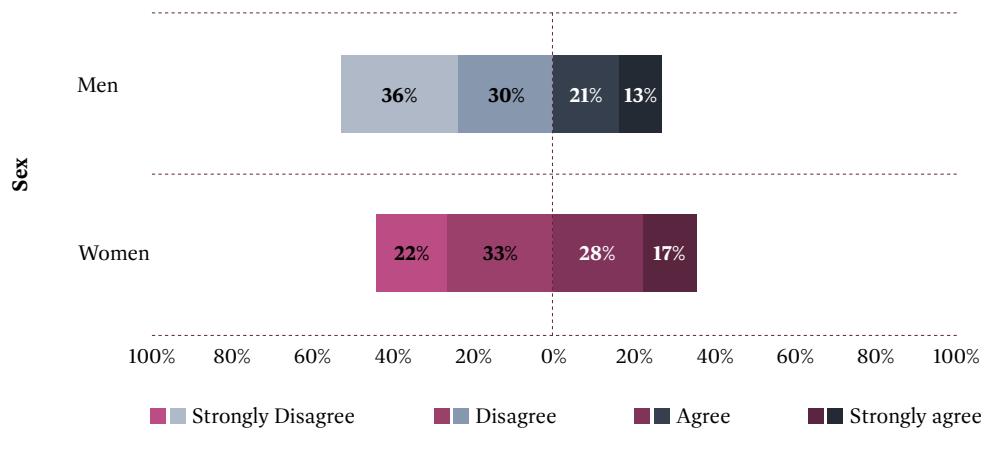
The matchmakers that we interviewed conveyed a common narrative that ran counter to the perspective that many single men and women shared about them. Many matchmakers saw it as part of their role to help single individuals “be more self-aware” in their search for a partner. The matchmakers therefore sometimes “try to change the mindset” of the people they set up, offering “a little bit of tweaking” or “pointing certain things out” to single men and women about their dating choices. As a result, the matchmakers described being avoided in public, being blamed for relationships that did not work out, and grudges held against them for what was well-intentioned advice. One matchmaker explained that “most shadchanim are not looking for kavod [honor], but we don’t deserve hatred and animosity.”

Individual silence and communal silence were linked. Some women intentionally did not share the inner experiences and challenges of being single with anyone other than a tight circle of friends since “we have to be socially acceptable.” Trusting close friends with these personal experiences again highlights the significant value a supportive network of friends holds during this stage of life and was something that female participants spoke more about than male participants. While they thought it was important for the community to have open conversations about singlehood in the Orthodox community, some of these women doubted whether their family or community was “ready to hear it.”

**Blamed and judged by the community**

While the majority of survey respondents did not feel blamed or judged by their communities for being single, a substantial minority of respondents (34% of men and 45% of women) did feel blamed (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Feeling blamed, by sex.**





## 04

Throughout the interviews, many female participants also spoke about feeling blamed for being single. They explained how these feelings were especially hurtful, and often impacted their sense of self. One woman said, “There’s very much in the frum community a sense that if you are single after a certain point, it is your fault and there’s something wrong with you.” Another participant shared:

I just think that this whole thing is looked on like a parsha, like a chapter. And sometimes we’re treated with very patronizing tones. Not challenging our identity and not being made to feel shameful about how we’re handling it or that we’re being judged... That is a huge struggle for me and probably for other people.

— Rachel, late 20s, Greater New York

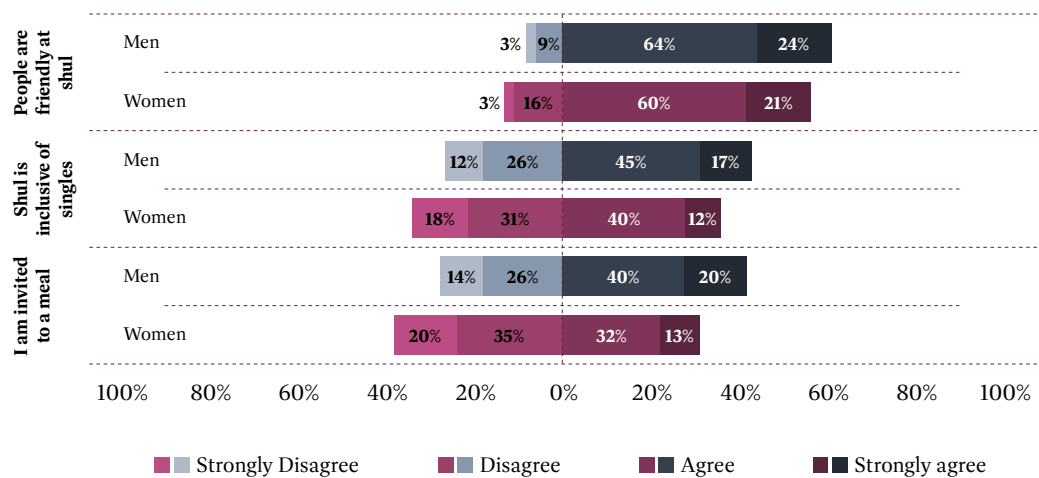
### Matchmaker empathy

In sympathy with single men and women, one matchmaker who works with older single people noted: “Thank God, we Jews are amazing in our empathy, in our supportiveness both on a financial level and an emotional level. But when it comes to older singles, there is something that, in many people who do not directly have an older single in their family, in their friendship, that they, on some level, feel like, ‘well, it’s their fault’. That it is not necessarily a God-given test or challenge, but that they could have been married long ago. And that being said, the older singles feel very, very isolated from the community in many ways.”

### Lack of belonging

In terms of religious belonging, the majority of survey respondents said that people at synagogue are friendly and over half felt that the synagogue is inclusive of single people.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, men were more likely than women to report being invited to a Shabbat or holiday meal and are more likely to have positive experiences with the people in synagogue (Figure 3). The proportion of single men and women who are dues-paying synagogue members in our sample does, however, lag behind the overall Orthodox rate of synagogue membership.<sup>14</sup>

Figure 3. Experience at synagogue, by sex



Many interview participants described the varied ways in which they experienced belonging. The ‘belonging’ theme encompassed both communal and religious aspects, such as feeling a lack of belonging at shul. One woman wrote in the survey about a lack of invitations to single people to participate in leadership positions. She thought that these examples “highlight some misplaced values in our communities: being married is not an accomplishment and should not confer status.”

## 04

One participant referred to the period of adulthood while not married as an “in-between state” where single people “lack a place in Jewish society.” Many single men and women echoed this sentiment.

The greatest problem with the shidduch crisis, other than the fact that some people are single, is that we lack a true identity. We lack a place in Jewish society. Our society is so much about, it's so family-oriented and that's beautiful. But where do we fit?

— *Rochel, late 20s, Greater New York*

I think the crisis isn't necessarily that singles aren't getting married, the crisis is that most singles after 25 feel lost to the Orthodox world.

— *Jack, mid-30s, Greater Los Angeles*

A man interviewed said that it is “incredibly frustrating” to feel that without being married, “this essential part of our life as a member of the community is beyond our reach.” For one woman, not having a place in the community was “a lot more of a lonely experience than searching for a spouse.”

Women were especially vocal about the lack of a place to belong within the Orthodox infrastructure and said that this is a significant element of their struggle with singlehood.

I think that the much lower glass ceiling in Jewish communal life just encourages women to try to fulfill themselves elsewhere. In another generation, it will be a huge loss to the Jewish community because women will just leave. If I'm being treated like garbage in my own community, I'm just going to leave. And it will have nothing to do with my observance of mitzvot or my relationship with Hakadosh Baruch Hu [God]. It's just going to be because I don't have a home.

— *Leora, mid-30s, Greater New York*

A man similarly noted that being unable to integrate into his Orthodox community because he is single affects his relationship with God, saying, “There is a certain amount of hopelessness that develops as a result of being single and what that says about the relationship with Hakadosh Baruch Hu [God].”

### ***Advocating for inclusive communities***

*One community rabbi spoke of what he called the “great debate” regarding the inclusion of single people as full-fledged members of shuls. He worried about whether being an “enabler, making such a comfortable, cushy environment” was ultimately a disservice to single people. Yet most communal leaders pushed back hard against the assumption that single men and women need rabbinic chastisement regarding the importance of family and believed instead that “no one wants to be single.” These leaders advocated instead for being welcoming, supporting, and “drawing them into the community,” since single men and women “have a lot to offer.”*

In sum, feeling a lack of support and belonging impacts how single people view themselves and their communities, and impacts their relationships to communal leaders, to matchmakers, and to Judaism itself. It also impacts their ability and desire to date and to be involved in the dating system. Single men and women seek meaningful belonging in the Orthodox Jewish community regardless of their marital status.

Next, we turn from how single, Orthodox men and women feel to what they want from the broader Jewish community.

## What do single Orthodox men and women want from the Orthodox community?

In addition to understanding how they felt, we sought to understand what single men and women wanted from the Orthodox community. Men and women raised several calls to action. Much of what they said they want relates to how they feel they are treated by the wider community, specifically feeling like “second-class citizens” and that they do not have a place to belong. They also reported on the kinds of education they wish the community offered to better prepare them for dating and marriage, as well as the help they would like in finding a spouse.

Respondents were asked an open-ended question at the end of the survey: “What do you want Jewish communal policymakers to know about your experiences as a single Orthodox Jewish adult?” The most common responses are shown in Figure 4. They can be summarized neatly by one participant who said she wanted the community “to care more.”

Many single men and women offered suggestions for how their broader Orthodox communities can help them. The most common requests were: help finding a spouse; invitations to shabbat and holiday meals; and help preparing to be in a relationship.

### “Support finding a spouse”

The most common request from respondents was for more help finding a spouse—some also specified wanting the community to create more “natural” or “organic” places for single men and women to meet one another. Many participants expressed the belief that the potential of the current “shidduch system” to find them a partner is limited. Instead, they sought “real innovation.”

Instead of saying, what we need to do to make everything work better is to have more shadchanim, or to have shadchanim do their job more effectively, you’re sort of like, not really. Maybe what’s more effective is you just create more circumstances where singles can do everything themselves, and that would, of course, empower them and they could take care of themselves.

— Aryeh, late 20s, Greater New York

**Table 5. What single Orthodox Jews want Jewish communal policymakers to know about their experiences**

Open Ended Responses: What do you want the community to know?	Number of Respondents
Help is needed to find a spouse	279
Singles are not valued	222
Welcome invitations are wanted	166
Singles are blamed	94
“Natural” meeting places are needed	93
Healthy relationship education is needed	66
Men need to be “fixed” (Among female respondents)	56
Women need to be “fixed” (Among male respondents)	26

'Let's come up with more shadchanim', 'let's try to tackle it this way', 'let's pretend that this matters', 'let's tell the girls to wear more heels'. This is what the interventions have been. 'Let's get more shadchans involved'. Instead of: 'let's facilitate relationships, let's focus on true values'.

— *Libi, late 20s, Greater Baltimore-Washington*

When people have suggestions, why exactly do you need all these intermediaries?

— *Yisroel, late 30s, Greater New York*

### **Separation of the Sexes**

*Very few matchmakers and community leaders felt that the current separation of sexes was beneficial to dating; some spoke supportively about the creation of natural, organic places for single men and women to meet on their own, or the normalization of relaxed interactions between the sexes. However, they acknowledged that this is not the cultural norm, saying that it is currently "not so popular, obviously, in the frum world." The rabbis, rebbetzins, and community leaders we interviewed also noted problems with the matchmaking system. A few advocated for professionalization, such as some type of training and certification for matchmakers. Others agreed with the single men and women who felt that the matchmaking system as a whole has little potential.*

### **"Invitations for Shabbos and Yom Tov meals"**

Single men and women wanted to be welcomed into the community and invited for Shabbat and holiday meals. This may be particularly important for women, who reported being invited for meals less often than men.

People need to stop and think about singles. I am a youth director of a shul that is growing. The parents love me and I am very successful and valued there. However, in 4 years not one person from the shul has set me up or invited me to a Shabbos meal. This is not ok, and they are very nice people. If they knew how I felt, they would be embarrassed, and I know for a fact I would be invited for shabbos meals and I would get more dates. They just don't realize what they are doing.

— *Female survey respondent, mid-20s, location unknown*

### **"Preparation for relationships"**

Finally, single men and women want more education about relationships, including topics ranging from healthy communication to sexuality. Several of those interviewed lamented the lack of caring mentors available to them during dating, and wished the community provided more resources for coaching and mentorship for young adults.

There is a serious, urgent issue regarding lack of formal education involving relationship-building and marriages, ranging from lack of an understanding of what to look for, warning signs, how to resolve conflict, financial management, compromise, emotional boundaries, etc. I wish there were formal workshops on these topics.

— *Female survey respondent, late 20s, Greater New York*

I wasn't necessarily really prepared for what it takes and what a healthy relationship really looks like, and I learned through doing it and through showing up and through really learning on the fly. And I felt like almost sad that there's no educational experiences for these kinds of things in the community.

— *Jon, late 20s, Greater New York*

***Relationship Education***

*Several communal leaders also spoke about the need for some sort of relationship education, such as what is most important in a marriage and how to form a relationship. One rabbi remarked that “to get married, our kids have no guidance. And it is not good for parenting, and it is not good for dating.” The rabbis we interviewed described some of the efforts being made to educate single men in yeshivot for dating and relationships, but none mentioned efforts being made for women.*

**Understanding and respect**

Participants sought understanding, respect, and better treatment from those involved in the dating system—from matchmakers, community leaders, and the wider community. This included a change to the expected “communal norms” that insisted on a specific timeline for marriage, as well as improvements to the dating process that would lead to “a more respectful and dignified” dating experience. They wanted the process of finding a partner to be less “discouraging,” “isolating,” and “tough.”

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In sum, the single, Orthodox men and women in our study suggested three major ways that the broader Orthodox Jewish community could support them. First, many want help finding a spouse—and many want a dating system that is more empowering for single people. Second, single men and women desire to be welcomed and included in their Orthodox communities, which includes invitations for Shabbat and Yom Tov meals. Third, some want help understanding how to build a healthy relationship, and support while they do so. In all, they want the community to demonstrate more respect and appreciation for the value they bring to the table.

## What is next?

This report aimed to set the stage for a fresh conversation, one informed by current evidence, to generate new policies and practices that better serve and empower single men and women in our Jewish communities.

As described, single men and women report feeling marginalized in their Orthodox Jewish communities. They feel invisible, infantilized, blamed for being single, and without a place to belong or to contribute meaningfully to their communities. For both sexes, this marginalization and pain have consequences not only on their relationships with their communities, but also on their relationships with Judaism.

Yet overall, perhaps our most significant finding is what single Orthodox men and women want from their Orthodox communities:

- **They want community members, leaders, and matchmakers to show more respect and appreciation for their inherent value and dignity.**
- **They want to be more included in communal spaces.**
- **They want to be given opportunities to contribute meaningfully to their communities.**
- **They want communal help in finding a spouse. Some want a different dating process or system altogether, while others want the current system to be improved.**
- **Some also report that they would benefit from relationship education.**

Therefore, to conclude this report, we would like to suggest several guidelines for positive action. These flow from our belief that Orthodox communities and their leaders can be, and desire to be, responsive to the needs of their members.

### Guidelines for community members

- 1 Change the way you speak about single men and women to change the way you think about single men and women.**

**Call adults of any ages “men and women,” and not “boys and girls.”**

Commit to change the common communal convention of referring to single men and women as “boys and girls.” However seemingly small or simple, being careful to call individuals who are dating “men and women,” or “young men and young women” will change the way you think about and relate to them, and therefore how you treat them. This in turn will shift how single men and women feel viewed and treated by their communities.

**Say “single men and women” not “singles.”**

Being single should be an adjective, a way to describe a partial quality of a person. It should not be how the community is accustomed to defining the totality of a person or group of people. Instead of “a single” or “singles,” say “a single man or woman.”

**2 Invite single men and women for meals frequently and sensitively**

**Invite single men and women for Shabbat and Yom Tov meals as often as you can.**

This simple gesture can have an enormous positive impact and create feelings of belonging and connection. Any Shabbat or holiday that you can invite a single man or woman to your home—not as a chessed project, but as a friend—will lift an emotional and logistic burden off their shoulders.

**Invite single men and women at the same time, and in the same way, that you invite other guests.**

Reach out respectfully to single men and women with an individual invitation at a respectful time. No one wants to feel like a burden or an afterthought. For example, an invitation on a Monday or Tuesday will feel more respectful than an invitation on Thursday night, and a personal invitation is preferable to offering a general, “I am happy to have you, call if you ever need a meal.”

**3 Engage welcomingly with the single men and women whom you meet, as you would with any adult.**

Ask the single men and women you meet the same questions you might ask anyone else; what the person does for a living, how long they have been living in the community, etc. Be conscientious not to relate to people with whom you meet or speak only on the basis of whether or not they are married.

**4 Only offer advice if you are asked for it.**

If you suggest a match to a single person and they decline it, take their “no” respectfully. Do not offer unsolicited advice or give an opinion about their dating choices or dating lives. Try to veer away from assumed communal standards, such as the expectation that everyone “should” be married by a certain age. If appropriate, express genuine concerns in a respectful, personal way, and only if you already have an existing positive relationship with the single man or woman.

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## Guidelines for communal leaders

**1 Offer ways in which single men and women can meaningfully be involved and contribute to your community.**

Single men and women are often skilled professionals, and many are desirous of contributing their proficiency to their communities. This might take the form of asking for their participation in events, on planning committees, on boards, etc.



**2 Offer relationship classes or more open dialogue about relationships and marriage.**

Make resources available to the single men and women in your community that can engage them in productive dialogue and learning initiatives around dating and marriage. Do this a designated number of times per season, in collaboration with single community members.

**3 Offer mentorship to single men and women.**

Offer relational support, mentorship, and coaching to young adults through dedicated communal networks; for example, designated communal professionals who serve as educator-mentors, who collaborate with one another and with single men and women to build engaging and relevant educational experiences.

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## Evaluation

We strongly believe that the success of any change, initiative, or suggested solution, including the ones we listed above, should be evaluated based on the following four criteria, which recognize what single men and women say they are lacking, and what they attest that they desire:

- 1 Whether the initiative creates more communal *respect and belonging* for single men and women.
- 2 Whether the initiative *connects* single people with one another and with other members of their communities.
- 3 Whether the initiative gives single men and women more *ownership* over their dating lives, and whether it provides more natural or better ways to meet or access compatible matches.
- 4 Whether the initiative *decreases power dynamics*, allowing for single people to say what they think and feel without negative ramifications.

## In conclusion

In developing the research that this report has presented in detail, we gave primary weight to the voices of the single men and women who participated in our interviews and completed our survey. We did our best to offer here not only the results of the study, but also what seemed to us to be its implications for communal action regarding the crisis of experience.

However, we critically assume that *broader communal conversation* about the data available on this important issue will surface more, and better, ideas for constructive innovation. The expanded conversation and fresh creativity, we hope and pray, will have a positive and practical impact on single men and women's experience of pain and resentment, their sense of belonging, and the way in which they *feel* and *feel treated* as members of their Orthodox communities.

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## Notes

- 1 For examples, see: Monica Anderson, Emily A. Vogels, and Erica Turner, “The Virtues and Downsides of Online Dating” (Pew Research Center, February 6, 2020); Nishma Research, “The Nishma Research Profile of American Modern Orthodox Jews,” September 28, 2017; Charles Kadushin, Benjamin T. Phillips, and Leonard Saxe, “National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01: A Guide for the Perplexed,” *Contemporary Jewry* 25, no. 1 (October 2005): 1–32, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02965418>.
- 2 For each survey question (“dependent variable”) examined in this report, we used a statistical technique called regression modelling to examine how it was related to four characteristics (“independent variables”)—namely, sex, age, geographic location, and Orthodox subgroup— independent of the other three. We only report results by any one of these four characteristics if they were significantly related to the dependent variable in the regression model, controlling for the other three characteristics. Thus, we avoid reporting spurious relationships between variables.
- 3 See Richard Curtin, Stanley Presser, and Eleanor Singer, “The Effects of Response Rate Changes on the Index of Consumer Sentiment,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (2000): 413–28, <https://doi.org/10.1086/318638>.
- 4 The U.S. Office of Management and Budget defines the New York-Northern New Jersey-Long Island, NY-NJ-PA core-based statistical area as including the following counties: Kings County, NY (Brooklyn), Queens County, NY (Queens), New York County, NY (Manhattan), Bronx County, NY (The Bronx), Richmond County, NY (Staten Island), Westchester County, NY, Bergen County, NJ, Hudson County, NJ, Passaic County, NJ, Putnam County, NY, Rockland County, NY, Suffolk County, NY, Nassau County, NY, Middlesex County, NJ, Monmouth County, NJ, Ocean County, NJ, Somerset County, NJ, Essex County, NJ, Union County, NJ, Morris County, NJ, Sussex County, NJ, Hunterdon County, NJ, and Pike County, PA.
- 5 See Geoffrey J. McLachlan and David Peel, *Finite Mixture Models* (New York: Wiley, 2000).
- 6 The terms we used to categorize the Orthodox subgroups of our respondents are about their religious observance combined with their cultural preferences rather than their political leanings.
- 7 William A Dafoe and Tracey JF Colella, “Loneliness, Marriage and Cardiovascular Health,” *European Journal of Preventive Cardiology* 23, no. 12 (August 2016): 1242–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2047487316643441>.
- 8 From Mary Elizabeth Hughes et al., “A Short Scale for Measuring Loneliness in Large Surveys: Results From Two Population-Based Studies,” *Research on Aging* 26, no. 6 (November 2004): 655–72, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0164027504268574>. The scale asks: “How often do you feel... (1) That you lack companionship; (2) Left out; (3) Isolated from others.”
- 9 Jennifer Yeh Shu-Chuan and Kai Lo Sing, “Living Alone, Social Support, and Feeling Lonely among the Elderly,” *Social Behavior and Personality* 32, no. 2 (2004): 129–38, <https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.2004.32.2.129>; A. Zebhauser et al., “What Prevents Old People Living Alone from Feeling Lonely? Findings from the KORA-Age-Study,” *Aging & Mental Health* 19, no. 9 (September 2015): 773–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13607863.2014.977769>.

## Notes

- 10 This was the Patient Health Questionnaire-4 (PHQ-4), which screens for core symptoms of anxiety and depression.  
  
The average number of hours spent dating in the 7 days before the survey was 1.7 for those with
- 11 normal PHQ-4 scores, 1.8 for those with mild symptoms of anxiety and depression, 1.5 for those with moderate symptoms, and 1.2 for those with severe symptoms.
- 12 Other issues, including religious people behaving unethically, the cost of observant Jewish life, and antisemitism, were considered serious problems by more respondents.
- 13 There were significant differences between the experiences of synagogue-goers within Greater New York and those outside it. Synagogues in the New York area were described as less friendly and less inclusive of single men and women than synagogues elsewhere, and single men and women in the New York area were less likely to be invited for meals than those living elsewhere.
- 14 Synagogue membership rate from the Pew Research Center's (2013) survey of U.S. Jews.