

HONEY, ARE WE HAPPY YET?

UNDERSTANDING THE MARITAL SATISFACTION SURVEY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

The Marital Satisfaction Survey generated a very significant yield of data, which is in itself a wonderful surprise: nearly one and a half thousand men and women from across the country, all identifying themselves as Orthodox Jews, responded with information about the state of their marital relationships.

"Significant" in lay terms means that something holds interest. In scientific or statistical terms, a survey is "significant" if the data yielded can be regarded as valid and therefore can be interpreted in a way which is useful and accurate. The Marital Satisfaction Survey (**MSS** from this point on) was scored and its data analyzed by a nationally acclaimed research institute. The institute, OTX, stated that the number of surveys submitted, the structure of the **MSS** content, the patterns which emerged among respondents and other statistical signs rendered it a significant and valid measure. It is with this exciting finding that we can now present and interpret the data in a way which is meaningful and relevant to our selves. In this article, I will distill some of the statistics into digestible information.

Let's begin with the stats relative to the people who responded. Close to 1500 people submitted completed **MSS** surveys. About a third of them were from Los Angeles. The rest were from points east. Approximately the same number of men and women responded in each of those two groups or samples. Ninety five respondents were divorced.

All factions of Orthodox Jewry were represented, both in terms of style of self-perceived religious practice (such as "Yeshivish" and "Modern Orthodox"), in terms of subcultural origin (such as "Sefardic" and "Persian") and other descriptive identifiers (such as "Ba'al Teshuva" and "Chassidic".) A large number of the overall sample both from Los Angeles and from New York and eastern communities, identified themselves as within the Yeshivish and Orthodox factions.

The media at times has stereotyped the Orthodox Jewish marriage in uncomplimentary ways, suggesting that there is significant discord in our ranks. One very encouraging finding of the **MSS** was that close to three fourths of respondents consider their marriage "excellent" or "very good". Nearly the same assert that they personally are satisfied with their marriage, and would marry their spouse again if they "could do it all over." I encourage readers to keep in mind that the survey was completed confidentially and was submitted in anonymous fashion so nothing was to be gained by falsification of answers. Moreover, the OTX analysis confirmed that the numbers and trends analyzed

hold up to scientific scrutiny with regards to our being able to rely on these findings. Apparently, the state of Orthodox Jewish marriage is an enviable one when contrasted with other groups who report less contentment and high numbers of divorce.

Another interesting finding may reflect a healthy level of sensitivity implicit among married persons: both men and women felt that whereas their personal level of marital satisfaction is high, and that they are happy with their spouse, about a third are concerned that their spouses may not be as satisfied within the marriage. This might point to a level of sensitivity in the form of awareness that even though one might feel that their mate fulfills their needs, they still may need to try harder in finding ways to please their spouse. That attitude about working harder to meet the needs of the spouse may be a factor in promoting a positive attitude about the marriage and with regard for one's feeling appreciative about their partner.

In contrast with media-based contentions that religious Jews have suboptimal marriages and there are severe problems therein, the **MSS** presents a very different view of these relationships. Whereas a range of problems are present with Orthodox marriage, as reported by the many respondents, relatively few of them experience the more severe concerns. The issues which most happily married couples contend with center around **Communication** (nearly half of the group rate Communication as their greatest marital problem); **Lack of Time Together** (close to half consider this their second most difficult problem); and **Financial Stress** (this was the third most frequently rated concern among happily married spouses.)

The encouraging facet of those last findings, that **Communication, Lack of Time Together**, and **Financial Stress**, are the most common problems among happily married couples, is that these issues may be more benign than, say, problems with intimacy, differences in levels of religious commitment, or problems with addiction. These three relatively benign problems can be addressed. They can be remedied. After all, couples can readily get help in learning to communicate. They can be guided in making more time for their relationship. They can be encouraged to keep money worries in perspective. One might even conclude, at first glance, that since these three issues occur within happy marriages and among mutually satisfied spouses, the issues can be downplayed and relegated into the "unimportant" category, and viewed as routine "non-problems" which every happy marriage can deal with. We might even go so far, at first, to consider them "three little problems."

However, a surprising and more sobering statistic surfaced on the **MSS**, one which may lead us to step back and rethink that encouraging conclusion. As mentioned, the survey was also answered by ninety five divorced persons. These were men and women in the Orthodox communities whose marriages ended. They too were asked to identify the problems which were present in their failed marriages. They too were asked to rate and to assess the severity and frequency of the issues which led to divorce.

Strikingly, the concerns most frequently cited by the divorced group as the problems which led to divorce were not addictions, or abuse or severe disturbances within the failed relationship. Marriages which ended were not generally troubled by pathological conditions. The divorced sample tended, rather, to cite the identical problems which were cited by the happily married sample: marriages which ended in divorced also struggled with **Communication** problems, with **Lack of Time Together** and with **Financial Stress**. The “little three” seem to have been, for those who divorced, the “big three.” One way of interpreting this parallel between the happily married and the divorced respondents is that the selfsame conditions which may contribute to marriage termination are those which happily married persons also contend with. It is possible that married persons in the Orthodox community, and their rabbis, need to be more alert and aware when any of those three conditions become a concern within a marriage. As benign and common as those issues might be, they can apparently contribute to more pronounced discontent and unhappiness. Some primary prevention, in the form of education, early intervention and promoting better skills in coping with these problems, and remedying them, may be of importance. Rather than downplaying the gravity of “simple communication gaps” or “worrying about money”, it may be necessary to guide Orthodox couples towards resources, professional and pastoral, when these issues arise.

The **MSS**, and the counterpart survey which was submitted by rabbis who addressed the issues which they deal with in their congregations, provides us with useful information about the positive interactions Orthodox persons have with their rabbis in addressing concerns within the marriage. Let’s examine some of those findings.

Overall, the state of the Orthodox marriage in America, based on a carefully developed survey which has been analyzed for validity and for generalization of its findings by a nationally acclaimed research institute, shows that we have a lot to feel good about. Whereas the media has at times taken more cynical jabs at the institution of Orthodox Jewish marriage, our own sample rates its satisfaction level much more positively. The rumors of the pathological relationship are, fortunately, greatly exaggerated, to paraphrase Mark Twain.

Orthodox Jewish marriage, while deserving further study and evaluation, seems to be enduring well within the demanding, stressful and tradition-wary mainstream of modern society. We still have a lot to learn. We have a lot to improve. But we have a lot to offer.