

# Ultra-Orthodox and Prolonged Singlehood: Finding a Partner, Negotiating with God

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**Abstract:** The ultra-Orthodox community in Israel is witnessing a phenomenon of prolonged singlehood. Based on semi-structured interviews with 20 ultra-Orthodox prolonged male and female singles of diverse affiliations, the study suggests that prolonged singlehood has impacted participants' faith and practiced religiosity. Interviewees described their disappointment in God and their sense that He is testing their faith. They also testified to a decrease in their observance, especially concerning praying, abiding by kosher rules, and maintaining modesty. The decline in religious practice and belief was attributed to a crisis of faith, the loosening of imposing social ties, and the need to satisfy physical and emotional needs.

**Key Words:** Ultra-Orthodox, Singlehood, Crisis of Faith

## Introduction

The ultra-Orthodox Jewish community is a minority group in Israel, albeit a growing one. Israel is home to about 1.25 million ultra-Orthodox Jews, comprising 13% of the Jewish population.<sup>①</sup> The community is diverse, with streams and subgroups differing in dress, community lifestyles, leadership, educational systems, and attitudes toward secular society and the modern

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<sup>①</sup> Lee Cahaner and Gilad Malach, *Statistical Report on Orthodox Society in Israel 2020* (Jerusalem: The Israeli Democracy Institute, 2021), 11. [Hebrew]

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world.

Still, all ultra-Orthodox Jews share several core attributes. These include observing a strict version of Jewish law, obedience to the decrees of rabbinical leaders on everyday life issues, including politics, and the commitment of men to the study of religious texts.<sup>①</sup> They differ from Religious Zionists, another large religious minority, in their notional rejection of Zionist ideology.

Ultra-Orthodox society dictates an almost absolute separation between the sexes and emphasizes women's modesty, with strict rules governing female attire. It also dictates that marriage should occur at an early age (18-23, varying according to the stream and subgroup) to maintain the community's pureness and encourage the constitution of large families (birth rates in Haredi families are over six children per family).<sup>②</sup>

“Traditional” or “arranged” marriages are the norm in Haredi society, similar to arranged marriages that historically existed in traditional Jewish society.<sup>③</sup> Couples meet and agree to marry in line with the expectations and preferences of the prospective couple's parents and without a pre-marriage period of shared life, in contrast to the “modern marriage” in the West, which is based on the personal relationship of the couple and often takes place only after a significant period of non-marital sexual relations.<sup>④</sup>

Since the mid-1990s, the ultra-Orthodox community in Israel has undergone significant changes due to its increasing, even if still limited, interactions with the majority of society. These interactions have led to greater openness toward non-Haredi practices in different aspects of life, including education, occupation, communication, health, leisure culture, and

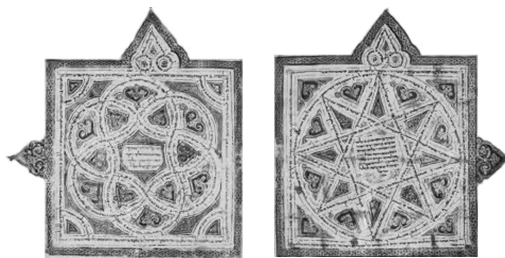
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① Benjamin Brown, *The Haredim: A Guide to Their Beliefs and Sectors* (Jerusalem: Am Oved/The Israeli Democracy Institute, 2017), 13-14, 24-33 [Hebrew]; Menachem Friedman, *Ultra-Orthodox Society: Sources, Trends and Processes* (Jerusalem: Institute for Israel Studies, 1991), 7-9. [Hebrew]

② Sima Zalberg Block, “Gender Differences in the Involvement of Young People in the Matchmaking Process in an Extreme Ultra-Orthodox Community,” *Journal of Jewish Identities* 5 (2012): 27-50.

③ David Lehmann and Batya Siebzehner, “Power, Boundaries and Institutions: Marriage in Ultra-Orthodox Judaism,” *European Journal of Sociology* 50 (2009): 273-308; Avraham Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious: Jewish Women in Medieval Europe* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 98.

④ Karen Dion and Kenneth Dion, “Individualistic and Collectivistic Perspectives on Gender and the Cultural Context of Love and Intimacy,” *Journal of Social Issues* 49 (1993): 53-69.



consumption, as well as openness toward various ideas, concepts, and practices such as feminist discourse.<sup>①</sup> They had some effect also on ultra-Orthodox marriage patterns.

Prolonged singlehood, including in Israel, has received substantial scholarly attention.<sup>②</sup> However, this phenomenon has not yet been studied in the context of Israeli ultra-Orthodox. This study seeks to fill this gap in the literature by focusing on the experiences of ultra-Orthodox who remained single into their mid-20s and beyond, particularly how their situation affected their religiosity.

In his rich review, Engelberg noted the prolific discourse on singlehood versus family.<sup>③</sup> Several studies suggested that a “strong family” is necessary for strong religiosity.<sup>④</sup> The reason is that most religious ceremonies are celebrated in the family environment, and most religious practices are based on the traditional family structure.<sup>⑤</sup> Studies further demonstrated that since the second half of the twentieth century, Orthodox Judaism, like other conservative religions, emphasized the importance of family life as one of its central motifs in its war against secularism.<sup>⑥</sup>

Studies among various conservative religious communities in the West showed that social pressure is often applied on singles to get married and that

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① Orna Braun-Lewensohn and Tehila Kalagy, “Between the Inside and the Outside World: Coping of Ultra-Orthodox Individuals with Their Work Environment After Academic Studies,” *Community Mental Health Journal* 55 (2019): 894-905; Gilad Malach and Lee Cahaner, “Elements of Modern Life or ‘Modern Ultra-Orthodoxy’? Numerical Assessment of Modernization Processes in Ultra-Orthodox Society,” *Democratic Culture* 17 (2017): 19-51. [Hebrew]

② For example, Ari Engelberg, *Prolonged Singlehood among Religious Zionists: Religiosity and Individualization in Late Modernity* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2020) [Hebrew]; Kinneret Lahad, *A Table for One: A Critical Reading of Singlehood, Gender and Time* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

③ Ari Engelberg, *Prolonged Singlehood among Religious Zionists: Religiosity and Individualization in Late Modernity*, 149-197.

④ Kristen Heimdal and Sharon Houseknecht, “Cohabiting and Married Couples’ Income Organization: Approaches in Sweden and the United States,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65 (2003): 525-538.

⑤ Mark Chaves, “Family Structure and Protestant Church Attendance: The Sociological Basis of Cohort and Age Effects,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30 (1991): 501-514.

⑥ Ari Engelberg, *Prolonged Singlehood among Religious Zionists: Religiosity and Individualization in Late Modernity*, 149-152.

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prolonged singlehood leads to being pushed to the margins of the devout group. These studies describe religious singles as being “in the middle,” torn between the values of their community and mainstream cultural values, i.e., Western secular values.

For example, American Muslim singles struggle with the American mainstream’s norms regarding sex;<sup>①</sup> and modern Orthodox Jewish singles in the United States and Israel were found to experience mental stress due to the requirement to avoid sexual relations before marriage altogether.<sup>②</sup>

Engelberg identified three patterns in his study of prolonged singlehood among the Religious Zionists in Israel. The most common sees the period of singlehood as a religious moratorium in which singles allow themselves to be less strict with various religious practices. The second sees singles who do not reduce their religious observance, and, in fact, their level of religiosity remains as it was before they entered the phase of prolonged singlehood. The third pattern sees singles who increasingly reduce their religious observance and move towards secularism.<sup>③</sup>

In light of the review presented above, the hypotheses of this study were:

Some ultra-Orthodox singles describe themselves as being in a state of “between” the values of their religious minority community and the mainstream cultural values, i.e., Western secular values. This tension is reflected especially regarding relations with the opposite gender.

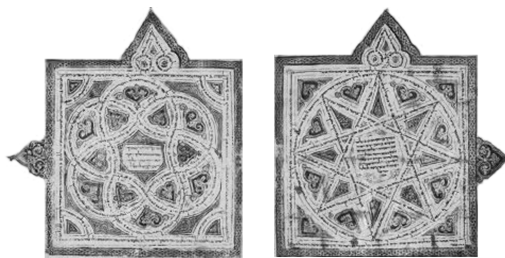
Some describe a period of religious moratorium, during which they are less strict about the observance of religious practices, intending to resume their religious observance once they marry. On the other hand, some remain observant, perhaps even more observant, believing that righteousness will advance a divine intervention that will change their personal status. Still, some

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① Zarinah El-Amin Naeem, *Jihad of the Soul: Singlehood and the Search for Love in Muslim America* (Detroit: Niyah Press, 2009).

② Air Engelberg, *Prolonged Singlehood among Religious Zionists: Religiosity and Individualization in Late Modernity*, 165-167; Yaakov Frances, “A Qualitative Study of Sexual-Religious Conflict in Single Orthodox Jewish Men,” PhD Dissertation, City University of New York, 2008.

③ Air Engelberg, *Prolonged Singlehood among Religious Zionists: Religiosity and Individualization in Late Modernity*, 169-199.



become less observant to the point of leaving the ultra-Orthodox world and identity altogether and adopting a Religious Zionist identity or a secular identity that allows for a more inclusive attitude towards prolonged singlehood.

The article opens with a brief review of the institution of marriage and the traditional partner selection process in ultra-Orthodox communities. A discussion of the methodology is followed by a presentation of findings. The article concludes with a comparative discussion of the findings.

## I . The Institution of Marriage and Matching in the Ultra-Orthodox Community

Present-day ultra-Orthodox are classified today into four major streams: (a) Hasidim, whose society is organized around a Hasidic “court” led by a rebbe, who is a fatherly figure to the congregation at large through a direct connection to the divine. (b) Lithuanian Jews (Litvak or Yeshivish), who regard the study of religious texts (Torah) as the central and constitutive value of life for males. The Lithuanian stream is more modern than the Hasidic stream, both in lifestyle and appearance. (c) The Sephardic, a stream comprised of Jews from North Africa and the Middle East.<sup>①</sup> The Sephardic joined the ultra-Orthodox in the last quarter century, adopting the Lithuanian style, including in their partner selection process. (d) Modern ultra-Orthodox, who originate from all three streams and, in recent years, demonstrate increasing integration into Israeli society, adopting “modern” concepts, values, and norms from the majority society surrounding them.<sup>②</sup>

All ultra-Orthodox streams and groups attribute great importance to the institution of marriage and see it as central to the community. For this reason, over the years, ultra-Orthodox parents could not allow the process of choosing a partner to be decided by the sentiments of their children and took charge of matching their grown children, with the soon-to-marry preferences playing a

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<sup>①</sup> Benjamin Brown, *The Haredim: A Guide to Their Beliefs and Sectors*, 17-24; Menachem Friedman, *Ultra-Orthodox Society: Sources, Trends and Processes*, 6-7.

<sup>②</sup> Gilad Malach and Lee Cahaner, “Elements of Modern Life or ‘Modern Ultra-Orthodoxy’? Numerical Assessment of Modernization Processes in Ultra-Orthodox Society.”

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minor role in the process.<sup>①</sup>

The traditional process of searching for a partner in the ultra-Orthodox community is considered, first and foremost, a business arrangement between the two sides, mainly the parents, overseen by a matchmaker who proposes partners for the children.<sup>②</sup> Parents from both sides of prospective matches examine and weigh the projected value offered by the counterparty.

The barter value, or “matchmaking capital,” is the properties and characteristics of prospective marriage candidates that parents consider when selecting a match for their son or daughter.<sup>③</sup> The parents receive the matchmaker’s offers and research those that seem suitable, paying close attention to family background.

The degree of involvement young ultra-Orthodox have in the decision about whom to marry varies from group to group within the community and sometimes even from family to family. Couples who match may be given many or few opportunities to meet before their engagement is announced, as well as more or less freedom to refuse a proposed match recommended by their parents.

Among Hasidic communities, the most conservative of the ultra-Orthodox on marriage, parents have almost exclusive control over the choice of the spouse. They arrange for the prospective couple to meet once or twice, usually at the girl’s home, for no longer than an hour. The girl and the boy sit in a room with the door open to prevent *yichud* — being alone together in private. At the end of these meetings, the pair must decide whether they agree to the match offered.<sup>④</sup>

Among the Lithuanians, as well as the Sephardic, both more modern than

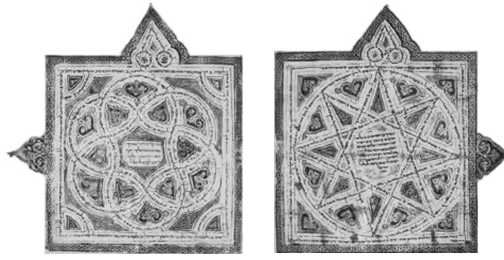
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① Sima Zalberg Block, “Gender Differences in the Involvement of Young People in the Matchmaking Process in an Extreme Ultra-Orthodox Community.”

② David Lehmann and Batya Siebzehner, “Power, Boundaries and Institutions: Marriage in Ultra-Orthodox Judaism”; Sima Zalberg Block, “‘The Art of the Deal’: Preferences in Spouse Selection among Parents in a Hasidic Community,” *Israel Studies Review* 28 (2013): 61-82.

③ Sima Zalberg Block, “‘The Art of the Deal’: Preferences in Spouse Selection among Parents in a Hasidic Community.”

④ Sima Zalberg Block, “Gender Differences in the Involvement of Young People in the Matchmaking Process in an Extreme Ultra-Orthodox Community.”



the Hasidic stream, the financial arrangements between the parents are also crucial, but there is greater individual freedom in choosing a spouse.<sup>①</sup> A prospective couple meets about five to eight times, without parental supervision, usually in a busy public place such as the lobby of a respectable hotel or on walks in public locations to avoid *yichud*. After these meetings, they must decide whether they want to formalize the relationship through marriage.

Among all ultra-Orthodox, premarital sex is forbidden, as is physical contact before marriage.<sup>②</sup> This prohibition is called *shmirat negiah* (observance of touching).

These patterns have been the norm in traditional Jewish society for years. However, prolonged singlehood has been shown to increase the degree of freedom that singles have in choosing their partner, including the number and length of the meetings between prospective couples and the location of these meetings, which for some, have moved to more intimate settings.<sup>③</sup>

## II. The Research Paradigm and Methodology

The current study utilized a qualitative paradigm that focuses on reality, as perceived by those living it, while emphasizing a context-informed approach.<sup>④</sup> This approach allows for insights into participants' experiences through their unique socio-cultural context and the significance that they attach to those experiences.

According to the verse “at eighteen the bridal canopy” (Pirkei Avot 5:

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① Benjamin Brown, *The Haredim: A Guide to Their Beliefs and Sectors*, 18-31; Menachem Friedman, *Ultra-Orthodox Society: Sources, Trends and Processes*, 6-7.

② Avidan Milevsky, Deborah Shifrah Niman, Atara Raab, and Ruchie Gross, “A Phenomenological Examination of Dating Attitudes in Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Emerging Adult Women,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 14 (2011): 311-322.

③ Sima Zalberg Block, “‘I Wanted to Choose for Myself’: Changing Marriage Patterns in the Ultra-Orthodox Society in Israel,” in *Arranged Marriage: The Politics of Tradition, Resistance, and Change*, ed. Peter Berta (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2023), 190-205.

④ Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2017); Dorit Roer-Strier and Roberta Sands, “Moving Beyond the ‘Official Story’: When ‘Others’ Meet in a Qualitative Interview,” *Qualitative Research* 15 (2015):251-268.

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21), some ultra-Orthodox families prefer to marry off their sons as young as possible. The Hasidic marry at a younger age than Lithuanians do. Hasidic girls usually get married at the ages of 18-19, and boys typically get married at the ages of 19-20. Among Lithuanians, the girls usually get married at the ages of 19-22, and the boys get married at the ages of 21-23.

No *halakhic* rulings determine at what age a person is considered a prolonged single. Therefore, we conducted a pre-test among 30 ultra-Orthodox from the various streams and groups, asking them for a definition.

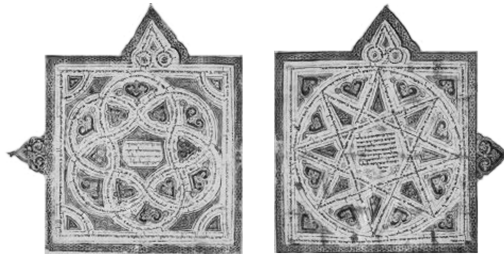
The pre-test found that in ultra-Orthodox society, prolonged singlehood is considered to start at the age of 24 in all groups and streams. Accordingly, the study population included single men and women 24 years or older from various groups of the ultra-Orthodox community in Israel.

Participants were recruited through advertisements in ultra-Orthodox WhatsApp groups, some specifically for ultra-Orthodox singles, that called to participate in the research. At a later stage, some of the participants referred the authors to additional participants (“snowball sampling”). At the end of this process, the final sample included 20 participants (ten men and ten women) who were willing to share their experiences and perceptions about their personal status.

The age of participants ranged from twenty-six to forty-two. All live in urban areas. Six participants are students in college or university; five work in education; four work in the business sector or in clerical jobs; three work in health and welfare services; and two (males) dedicate their time to Torah study in a yeshiva.

Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted in Hebrew. In the interviews, participants discussed their religious faith and practice and how these were affected by prolonged singlehood.

Interviews were conducted during 2022 by phone, Zoom, and in person, according to the participant’s preference. Each interview lasted between one hour to an hour and a half. All interviews were documented, recorded, and transcribed with the participants’ consent.



Data analysis was based on the thematic analysis method.<sup>①</sup> Analysis based on this approach consists of two levels: the first is general-thematic, aiming to identify significant themes in the interviews and correspondence, and the second consists of uncovering the meanings underlying the surface-level data, as well as the meanings of the first-level categories.

The thematic analysis included the following steps: (a) we familiarized ourselves with the data by reading the interviews several times; (b) we developed preliminary ideas by reading the first five interviews several times and identified segments representing discrete units of meaning; (c) we manually identified codes and grouped them into initial themes, revising them where necessary; and (d) finally, we refined, named, and described the interrelationships between the themes that emerged.

Data saturation was reached when analysis of the interviews suggested that additional coding was no longer feasible.<sup>②</sup>

The study's quality assurance was based on Lincoln and Guba's criteria of qualitative research.<sup>③</sup> The credibility of the findings as indicative of Haredim at large was established by including participants from various Haredi groups in order to obtain a broad range of opinions. In addition, in-depth interviews encouraged free and open dialogue. A repetitive review of data collection and analysis processes, and a peer review of the findings, also enhanced the credibility of our work.

To reduce authors' bias, we did our best to be conscious of our own perceptions about the topic and avoided guiding participants to focus on particular issues during the interviews.

The study was conducted per the code of ethics determined by the American Psychological Association.<sup>④</sup> As such, the study's purpose was

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<sup>①</sup> Michael Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 2002), 429-540.

<sup>②</sup> Patricia Fusch and Lawrence Ness, "Are We There Yet? Data Saturation in Qualitative Research," *The Quantitative Report* 20 (2015): 1408.

<sup>③</sup> Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1985), 239-331.

<sup>④</sup> Linda Campbell et al., *APA Ethics Code Commentary and Case Illustrations* (American Psychological Association, 2010).

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explained to participants before their participation. Participation was voluntary, and participants were notified that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Participants' confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout all stages of the study, including the omission of potential identifying details from the current paper.

### III. Findings

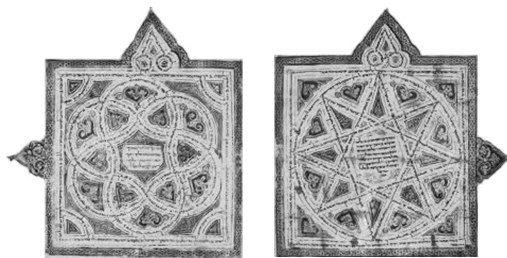
All participants reported that prolonged singlehood affects their spiritual and practiced religiosity. Some participants reported a decrease in both dimensions; some reported an increase in their faith along with a decrease in their religious practice; others reported a decrease in religious practice with no effect on their faith.

Almost without exception, those who reported a decrease in their religiosity (either in practice or faith or both) said that they do not foresee changing their religious behavior after they have married and started a family, if they do.

### IV. Religious Faith

Analysis of participants' observations about the effect of prolonged singlehood on their religious faith presents three central themes. One is disappointment in God and doubts about Him. Another is constant self-reflection, reckoning, introspection (*cheshbonnefesh*), and feeling that God is testing them or putting them on trial by not matching them with an appropriate spouse. Yet another is acceptance of God's behavior and even the strengthening of faith.

Some participants reported feeling disappointed in God. They said they used to trust God, who stood by them until the time was ripe to find a spouse, and then was no longer present in their lives. One of them, a 30-year-old Sephardic female from southern Israel, explained: "We get slaps and disappointments. We say [Psalms 121:2], 'my help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth,' right? I expect God to stand by my side and bring me redemption, but each time I get burned again."



Another, a 33-year-old Litvak female from Jerusalem, also expressed disappointment in God: “As much as I’ve strived, and I continue to strive, it’s frustrating. I sometimes ask myself: maybe God doesn’t see me.”

The concept of “striving” (*hishtadlut*) is central in Judaism. According to Meor, this is “a general term for all the acts and efforts people perform to improve their lives, their economic and social situations, and their status in any other field.”<sup>①</sup> “Striving” is a way for people to try and entice divine assistance to improve their physical existence in this world.

A 27-year-old Hasidic female from BneiBrak, who engaged in several practices considered as striving in the hopes of finding a partner, explained: “I went to the Western Wall for 40 days; it didn’t help. I went to Rashbi’s [Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai] grave; it didn’t help either. I keep giving to charity; it doesn’t help. I admit that I broke down a bit; I fell apart. It was a big disappointment.”

Some participants stated that their prolonged singlehood raised internal doubts of faith. A 36-year-old Sephardic female from southern Israel said: “Singlehood raises many questions about faith, such as ‘God, where are you,’ ‘why is this happening?’ I dialogue with God and tell Him, ‘Give me a sign of what I have not done until today that I must do in order to find my mate.’”

Another participant, a 30-year-old Litvak female from one of the new ultra-Orthodox towns in the center of Israel, described an internal struggle that haunts her every time she prays. According to her: “I struggle to pray. I tell God I have been in this cycle of matchmaking for 11 to 12 years [since the age of 18]. I pray every day, and what has changed since yesterday? What will today’s prayer do that yesterday’s prayer did not? It’s hard for me to pray because I see things are not happening. But despite these feelings, I decided I would not let up on the prayer.”

Some participants stated that their singlehood leads them to engage in self-reflection, reckoning, and introspection. They examine what they have done wrong and where they should improve religiously.

A 25-year-old Hasidic female from one of the new ultra-Orthodox towns

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<sup>①</sup> Menachem Meor, *The Believer Versus the Striver* (Jerusalem: Hamikhlala, 1994), 15. [Hebrew]

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in the center of Israel said that every Friday when she lights Shabbat candles, she reflects on her behavior over the previous week: “I ask myself, maybe the guy I met this week didn’t suit me because I didn’t pray with enough devotion? Maybe I wasn’t modest enough? Maybe I disrespected my parents?”

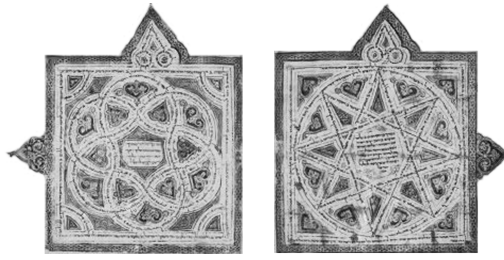
Similarly, another participant, the 27-year-old Hasidic female from BneiBrak, said: “At night, before falling asleep, I always ask myself, what have I done wrong? Almost all my girlfriends [already have] a child or two or even three, and I’m the only one alone. I probably need to fix something. A few years ago, I dated a certain guy, and my parents put a lot of pressure on me to marry him. He was a very good guy. But I don’t know why he didn’t suit me. My parents and the matchmaker told me it was a pity I rejected him and would regret it, but I insisted. Sometimes I wonder, maybe what I’m going through now is because I rejected the guy and also caused my parents agony.”

“Testing” in the Jewish religious context means that God puts a person to a test of faith by exposing that person to certain adversity, giving the person an opportunity to express faith through adherence to Him, despite the adversity experienced. Some participants expressed this sentiment.

A 29-year-old Litvak female from Jerusalem said: “Singlehood is one big test. God puts me through tests. Thank God I have been able to meet those tests so far. Lately, I am starting to feel that maybe He is putting me through tests more than others.”

Similarly, a 35-year-old Sephardic female from Jerusalem said: “They say that God tests only those who can stand it...even though I would have given up this experience. Each one and his own test. [For] one [it] is making a livelihood, [for] another coping with a health issue; I have prolonged singlehood. What shall I do? I pray I’ll succeed with God’s help.”

In contrast, some participants stated that despite the pain and agony caused by their prolonged singlehood, they accept reality as it is and explain it to themselves as an integral part of God’s way of leading the world that cannot be disputed. The 35-year-old Sephardic female explained: “I tell myself that God is not working for me. I mean, He doesn’t owe me anything, and He is the one who controls our lives and guides us, so there is no room for bookkeeping and complaints. He guides things as they should be. With God’s help, I will find the right one at the right time.”



A 26-year-old Hasidic male from one of the new ultra-Orthodox towns in the center of Israel said: “Everything in its time. There must be a reason why my pairing is delayed. Not everything is visible and known to us. The ways of God are hidden.”

There were participants who not only accepted the delay in finding their match but also stated that prolonged singlehood made them spiritually stronger and increased their faith in God. One of them, the abovementioned 30-year-old Litvak female, said: “There is a great spiritual strengthening. I pray hard, talk to God and get a lot of strength from it. In terms of faith, I’m only getting stronger.”

The 35-year-old Sephardic female explained that her faith has increased because she has been left with no other choice: “I am strengthened by faith. Clinging to faith is the anchor of my sanity. Without faith in God, I would not have survived. I believe in God by the power of inertia. I have no choice but to believe; otherwise, there is no hope and no meaning.”

Some participants attributed the strengthening of their faith mainly to a parallel process that occurred during the years of singlehood; their departure from the religious-educational framework in which they were brought up — the yeshiva or the seminar. In these institutions, strict adherence to religious practices was the default and an inseparable part of their daily routine. Being on their own and single, faith became a different kind of challenge with particular rewards.

A 42-year-old Sephardic male from Jerusalem said: “My faith grew stronger because I am not really supervised by any authority since I left the yeshiva. I am not in a setting where observance is automatic [the default] nor with family and wife, a space that also demands a commitment to a certain religious behavior. Now I have no supervision of that kind that requires me to inquire and think about what I am doing and why. This has led me to believe more strongly. Not simply to observe but [to believe] due to reason, understanding, and strong faith.”

For this participant and others, mainly men, the years of prolonged singlehood led to self-inquiry about religiosity and contemplation about which rigidities are indeed important and required according to Jewish law (*halakha*) and what the observance of religious practices actually means for them. Their

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self-reflection strengthened their faith, although in some cases, at the same time, it led to a decrease in observance of religious practices.

## V. The Practical Dimension

All participants reported a decrease in their practice of religion, especially prayer, keeping kosher laws, and maintaining modesty. The analysis of participants' answers points to five primary reasons for this process: (a) a loosening of social control on their religious observance; (b) a detachment from social frameworks with strict norms of religious practice; (c) a change in outlook and perspectives regarding religious practices and values; (d) a crisis of faith; and (e) emotional and physical needs.

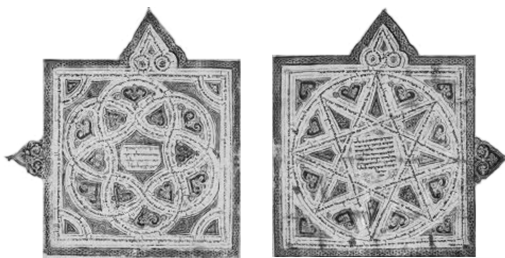
While for some participants, leaving the educational institutions in which they were raised — the *yeshiva* or the seminar — led to a strengthening of their faith, some became less observant as a result (including several who claimed their faith had been strengthened).

They said that being outside the authority of a controlled system and without intense supervision, they allowed themselves to “let loose,” as they described it. A 36-year-old Litvak male from the center of Israel explained: “Changing the framework, no longer being in the *yeshiva*, requires setting your limits. The boundaries blur, and setting the boundaries for yourself becomes more difficult and complex. That is, at this stage in my life, what I used to see as a red line, I [now] dare to cross it.”

A 30-year-old Hasidic male from Jerusalem said: “[my] religious practice has weakened. I am less strict about prayers and minyans [the minimum quorum for prayer]. [It’s] more liberating. [My] level of religious practice has decreased due to a change in the course of [my] life — leaving the *yeshiva*.”

The 25-year-old Hasidic female from central Israel said: “Over the years, you can definitely see a decrease in the [level of] observance. It is noticeable in my prayer. I used to pray every morning, but that has changed since I left the seminar. Now, I am less strict about prayers. The framework has changed, and the agenda has changed.”

Another area in which a decrease in religious observance was revealed, mainly due to not being part of a religious institution, is the observance of



kosher laws. The ultra-Orthodox world is strict about eating only food subject to particularly rigid kosher inspections. In Israel, there are over 40 panels that grant kosher certifications, with community affiliation being a significant parameter in kosher acceptance. The choice of supervising authority is an important aspect of affiliation with one community or another.

Kosher certifications divide into two main types — one, known as “ordinary kosher,” which is supervised and approved by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel (therefore also known as “rabbinic” kosher), and the “strictly kosher” (*mehadrin*), to which the ultra-Orthodox public adheres. The difference between them is the level of *halakhic* standards.

Almost without exception, participants stated that during their prolonged singlehood, they began to be less meticulous about eating food with the “strictly kosher” label and were satisfied with the “ordinary kosher” of the Rabbinate.

The 35-year-old Sephardic female said: “All these years, I was meticulous about eating *mehadrin*. Since I left the seminar, I still keep kosher, but not *mehadrin*. I live alone; I don’t eat with my parents; I am less strict.”

A 28-year-old Litvak male from BneiBrak explained: “If, as a young yeshiva guy, I didn’t dare to put food in my mouth that wasn’t *mehadrin*, after leaving the framework [the yeshiva], I allowed myself to eat Rabbinate as well. You don’t have the supervision of your parents, on the one hand, nor the supervision of the yeshiva, where you eat most of the time anyway. The food is strictly kosher, and I hang out in many places that are not *mehadrin* kosher.”

Ultra-Orthodox modesty requirements dictate that men and women who are not married should avoid closeness, bodily exposure, and intimacy. Women should dress in a way that exposes their bodies as little as possible to men so they will not arouse men’s sexual desire.<sup>①</sup> Modesty norms are intended, first and foremost, to prevent sexual intercourse outside marriage, which is prohibited according to Jewish law.

As with kosher laws, with modesty, there are differences in the degree of

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<sup>①</sup> Sima Zalcberg Block, “Shouldering the Burden of Redemption: How the ‘Fashion’ of Wearing Capes Developed in Ultra-Orthodox Society,” *Nashim* 22 (2011): 32-55.

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strictness between the various ultra-Orthodox groups. However, all streams dictate that women walk with stockings, with sleeves down to the elbow, and with a skirt that falls below the knee.

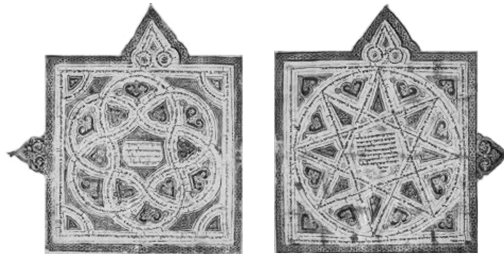
Several female participants stated that they stopped adhering to some of these norms, as the 29-year-old Litvak said: “I am no longer in the seminar, so I stopped wearing stockings. And the shirts and the skirt are not so long anymore [...]. Sometimes, I travel alone to Tel Aviv and sit by the beach, not swimming, with clothes on, but still at the mixed beach.”

Several participants stated that the years of prolonged singlehood and being outside religious educational institutions made them ponder what religious practices mean to them. This investigation led to a change in outlook and perceptions regarding some religious practices and values, resulting in a decrease in observance in certain areas. A 39-year-old Litvak male from Jerusalem said: “I can say that the examination and study in depth led me to be less strict about some commandments.”

In this context, the 26-year-old Hasidic male referred to observing kosher laws and defined his process as “development.” He said that in the past, he believed that products not bearing the “*mehadrin*” stamp were not kosher, but over the years and with exposure to more information about the subject, he learned that the kosher issue in Israel is political and that in practice there is no real difference between most kosher types. He said: “Over time, I matured. I learned that *mehadrin* is no more kosher than the Rabbinat and that there is mainly a lot of politics here, so I allow myself to eat Rabbinat kosher.”

Another participant who testified to a change in her perspective said: “I am less strict today about wearing socks. Over the years, I have developed and realized that this is not what is important, and it will not make me more religious. I want a home of Torah and values, and I am looking for an ultra-Orthodox partner for whom these things are important. I hope that the fact that I am not careful about socks will not label me as unsuitable for marriage in the eyes of ultra-Orthodox men.”

A 40-year-old Sephardic male from southern Israel referred to a perceptual change regarding modesty norms: “The first time I approached a girl in an online ultra-Orthodox matchmaking forum was, for me, crossing a red line of modesty. Even though the content of the message I sent her was a request to



communicate with her via a matchmaker, who would be a third party, I felt uneasy with my actions. I felt I had done something very wrong regarding modesty. This experience changed my essence, and I didn't feel the same after it happened. Something in me changed. I was a guy who never dared to approach a girl. The first conversation with a girl would only be on the first date arranged by a matchmaker. This step was a defining moment because I, as a bachelor, took the most guarded, sacred, and pure thing in ultra-Orthodox society, which up to that day I had adhered to strictly, and threw it away while daring to build a different world of my own, with other concepts. It was a dramatic, life-changing moment."

Some participants reported decreased observance of religious practices due to a crisis of faith they experienced due to their prolonged singlehood. One of them, the 30-year-old Sephardic female, related an internal struggle about faith she was experiencing that led her to decrease her religious observance, especially regarding modesty. She said: "Singlehood definitely caused me to slack in my observance. I constantly struggle internally [over whether my] skirt will remain long enough or whether I will shorten my sleeves. I am always at war: should I shorten by one centimeter or lengthen by one centimeter? It's a feeling of defiance, a kind of rebellion. I know it doesn't make sense that I'm sort of punishing God, but...in the past, for example, I didn't dare to go without stockings, and I expected things to happen as they were supposed to, that I would find a match. And it didn't happen. I did what I had to do; I observed the way I should, and that's the breaking point. It didn't help me with God."

These words indicate a decrease in strict observance as an expression of rebellion against God, or even punishing Him, for not rescuing them from singlehood. Still, the participant knew God's punishment was irrelevant and inapplicable.

The 29-year-old Litvak female spoke about a decrease in the frequency of her prayers in light of doubts and disappointment with God: "I try to pray at least once a day, at least the *dawn blessings*. But I skip prayers; I'm not as strict as I was in the past. It's not intentional; it's just hard for me to pray. I'm really fighting with myself about this, but I don't feel God's presence in my life, so it's very hard to pray to Him."

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A number of participants reported a decrease in adherence to avoiding *yichud* and adherence to *shmirat negiah*.

A 27-year-old Litvak male from one of the new ultra-Orthodox towns in the center of Israel explained: “In recent years, I do meet with girls alone and violate the prohibition of *yichud*. Every now and then, I also violate the prohibition of *shmirat negiah*. The body and mind demand theirs.”

Several female interviewees made similar observations. For example, a 29-year-old Litvak attested that a decrease in adherence to strict modesty norms is an attempt to create a feminine presence, not to mention a sexual presence, to be attractive and attract potential partners: “At school, we talked a lot about modesty and the prohibitions of *yichud* and *shmirat negiah*. Yet, it is hard to maintain it as physical contact and hugs are so necessary in this difficult time. This causes us to break the boundaries of modesty we have been raised with all these years. We were taught that a man must not enjoy his little pinky. And the clothing, it’s a kind of statement, when you’re looking for a relationship, and you expose yourself, your body, a little, you basically say [to the guys], ‘Hey, look, I’m here. Come.’”

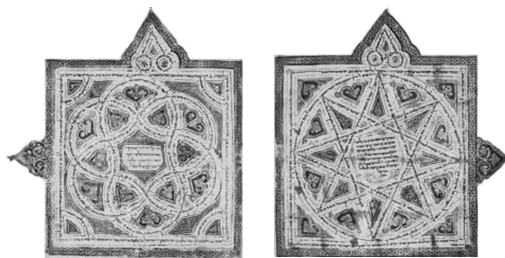
Another reason for the decrease in strictly observing modesty norms that several participants mentioned was the need to give themselves a “discount,” to make it easy for themselves during the difficult time they go through as a sort of compensation for their bitter fate.

The 27-year-old Hasidic female explained: “In recent years, with my prolonged singlehood, I allow myself to be less strict. I still keep my sleeves down to the elbow, but not necessarily beyond that. I want to give myself a better feeling about myself.”

## VI. Future Plans

Participants stated that they do not expect their religious behavior to change in the future, even if they marry, because of what they described as “reaching a different place in life,” a place in which their opinion is correct and appropriate. They described a return to stricter religiosity as “going back.”

For example, the 36-year-old Litvak male explained: “I don’t believe things will change after I start a family. I am now in a different place, which,



in my opinion, is correct, better, and more real. So why go back?”

The 30-year-old Litvak female said: “I became more modern, I developed, I went through a process. I am in a place from which there is no return. Nor would I want to [return] because I believe that everything I went through led me to a lifestyle with no fewer values.”

Another participant, the 40-year-old Sephardic male, clarified: “I underwent a fundamental change. I built a different world for myself. You can’t go back to what was.”

Only a handful of interviewees reported a desire to return to their former level of observance once they marry and start a family. Their main motivation is to be a model for their future children.

The 27-year-old Hasidic female explained: “In the future, when I get married and have children, I will return to being stricter with modesty. It is important for me to be an example for my future children.” Similarly, the 30-year-old Hasidic male said, “I guess I will go back to observing the three daily prayers and strict kosher standards. This is how I grew up, and this is how I would like to raise my children.”

## VII. Comparative Dimensions and Conclusion

A number of studies demonstrated that women tend to believe more than men in a personal God and almost see Him as a partner in a relationship.<sup>①</sup> Engelberg found that this pattern applies to Religious Zionist singles.<sup>②</sup> The reason is that, unlike Religious Zionist women, Religious Zionist men are educated in the *yeshiva*, which exposes them to a system of thought deeply rooted in the Torah, and becomes their main religious point of reference. The main attitude of the yeshivas is rationalist and sees God as sublime and supreme. Accordingly, the students strive to approach Him through spiritual

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<sup>①</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America’s New Quest for Community* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 239; Susan Starr Sered, “Mother Love, Child Death and Religious Innovation: A Feminist Perspective,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 12 (1996): 5-23.

<sup>②</sup> Air Engelberg, *Prolonged Singlehood among Religious Zionists: Religiosity and Individualization in Late Modernity*, 188-195.

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ascension, not through negotiating with Him.

The study indicated this is also the case for the ultra-Orthodox, with female participants discussing negotiations with God as an aspect of their prolonged singlehood. At the same time, men did not testify to having such a relationship as part of their attempts to make sense of their unfavorable condition.

The study found that participants who submissively accepted their situation as an expression of God's will were not necessarily more desperate; instead, some believed God would summon the right pairing for them at the right time. These findings are in line with findings among Religious Zionist singles,<sup>①</sup> among prolonged single Malay Muslim women who mentioned the notion of “jodoh” — a soul-mate as fated by God at the perfect time,<sup>②</sup> and among prolonged single Mormons that emphasized the idea of having faith in God and marrying the right person, at the right time, in the right place.<sup>③</sup>

All participants reported a certain decrease in adherence to religious practices, especially in prayer, keeping kosher, and modesty, with some noting unsatisfied sexual urges as a reason. This reason is in line with Engelberg's study, which found that life outside a family led young Religious Zionist Israelis to deviate from religious laws.

Although the decrease in religious practice is reminiscent of the experiences documented among Religious Zionists singles, none of the ultra-Orthodox participants defined themselves as Religious Zionist. Instead, almost without exception, they situated themselves in the category of modern ultra-Orthodox. This subgroup of ultra-Orthodox developed only at the turn of the century. It is characterized by openness toward various issues and modern life practices and adopting concepts and values from modern Western society.<sup>④</sup> Manifestations of this can be seen in exposure to the unfiltered internet,

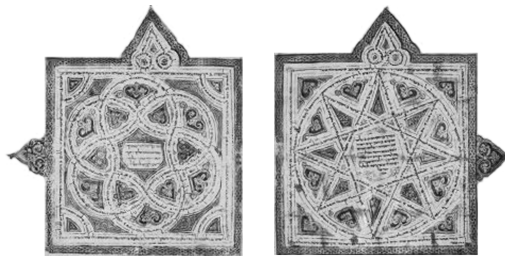
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① Air Engelberg, *Prolonged Singlehood among Religious Zionists: Religiosity and Individualization in Late Modernity*, 189-210.

② Rozita Ibrahim and Zaharah Hassan, “Understanding Singlehood from the Experiences of Never-Married Malay Muslim Women in Malaysia: Some Preliminary Findings,” *European Journal of Social Sciences* 8 (2009): 395-405; Rozita Ibrahim, “‘What Is Wrong with Me?’—Single Women's Reflections on Missing the Marriage Transition,” *Asian Social Science* 12 (2016): 213-219.

③ Jana Darrington, Kathleen Piercy, and Sylvia Niehuis, “The Social and Cultural Construction of Singlehood among Young, Single Mormons,” *The Qualitative Report* 10 (2005): 639-661.

④ Benjamin Brown, *The Haredim: A Guide to Their Beliefs and Sectors*.



perceptions of women's status and rabbinical authority, secular patterns of leisure activity, and the importance attributed to academic studies.<sup>①</sup>

In contrast to the second hypothesis, and unlike Religious Zionist singles, a majority of participants did not describe the years of prolonged singlehood as a temporary period of religious moratorium, in which they are less strict about observance yet intend to return to stricter religiosity after they finally marry. Rather, some see their newly adopted and more relaxed conduct as permanent. However, not everyone adopted this approach, and it does not apply to all aspects of life.

In one way, some participants have found new religious meaning in their lives due to their prolonged singlehood. Being alone, they find that external pressures and expectations do not dictate their faith but rather are born of inner convictions. While they are possibly less religious in the demonstrative sense, they feel more so because their beliefs were tested and have deepened.

As is the case with members of other religious groups, including the Religious Zionist, prolonged ultra-Orthodox singles do not challenge their perception of marriage as an ultimate desired existential goal.<sup>②</sup> This is not the case for secular singles in the Western world, where, while marriage is still the norm and the desire of most people, singlehood has become, in recent decades, a more common way of life.

With marriage still being a social default in the ultra-Orthodox world, young Haredi men and women who desire to remain part of the traditions and the society into which they were born are confronted with enormous challenges when trying to negotiate their situation. Their search for a partner thus also becomes a negotiation of faith and practice, creating new meanings and establishing new boundaries.

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<sup>①</sup> Gilad Malach and Lee Cahaner, "Elements of Modern Life or 'Modern Ultra-Orthodoxy'? Numerical Assessment of Modernization Processes in Ultra-Orthodox Society."

<sup>②</sup> Ari Engelberg, *Prolonged Singlehood among Religious Zionists: Religiosity and Individualization in Late Modernity*, 195-199; Rozita Ibrahim and Zaharah Hassan, "Understanding Singlehood from the Experiences of Never-Married Malay Muslim Women in Malaysia: Some Preliminary Findings"; Rozita Ibrahim, "'What Is Wrong with Me?' — Single Women's Reflections on Missing the Marriage Transition"; Zarinah El-Amin Naeem, *Jihad of the Soul: Singlehood and the Search for Love in Muslim America*; Jana Darrington, Kathleen Piercy, and Sylvia Niehuis, "The Social and Cultural Construction of Singlehood among Young, Single Mormons."