



Research Brief

Working with Couples and Families in the Orthodox Jewish Community

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The centrality of marriage and family in Orthodox Jewish life is supported by religious values; socio-cultural traditions; and community, family, and individual expectations. Throughout much of the 20th century, Orthodox Jewish life in the United States seemed insulated from the problems facing families in the wider secular world. Most men and women married (Stampfer, 2007), and divorce rates remained low (Brodbar-Nemzer, 1984). Denial about the existence of domestic violence was widespread (Hoch, 1995; Twerski, 1996).



Over the last two decades, Orthodox Jewish community members and leaders have become increasingly aware that Orthodox Jewish families are susceptible to the same issues facing all families, including economic challenges, poor communication skills, children “at risk,” increasing numbers of unmarried adults, rise in divorces, and domestic abuse (Blau, 2007; Freedman, 2005; Goldman, 2012; Klagsburn, 1995; Linzer, Levitz, & Schnall, 1995; Pelkovitz, 2010; Twerski, 2001; Twerski, 2011; Weil, 2011; Weinreb, 2000).

This research-to-practice brief draws on cultural descriptions, community perceptions, and research done in the Orthodox Jewish community. It aims to:

- Provide safety-net service providers with a brief survey of the cultural and religious life of different segments of the Orthodox Jewish population.
- Raise awareness of the challenges facing Orthodox Jewish families.
- Review how to make relationship education programs appropriate to the cultural sensitivities of young Jewish adults and families and provide recommendations to safety-net service providers working with these families.

The Orthodox Jewish Population in The United States: Diversity and Demographics

The Orthodox Jewish population consists of a number of sub-populations differing in historical or cultural origin and religious orientation. The most basic division is historical origin—the Ashkenazim are descendants of families from Central, Eastern, and Northern European countries; Sephardim are descendants of Middle Eastern immigrants who moved first to Spain and Portugal and subsequently dispersed all over the world. The most commonly used terms to identify religious orientation within the Orthodox Jewish world are Modern, Hasidic, and Yeshivish (Cohen, Ukeles, & Miller, 2012; Fader, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2013). Modern Orthodox communities follow traditional



Jewish law while maintaining a relationship with modern society. The other two more traditional groups see their religious lives as largely incompatible with secular society; as a consequence they tend to isolate themselves from the wider community. Hasidic communities center on a *rebbe*, a religious leader. Yeshivish communities are built around a *yeshiva*, which is a high school or post-high school educational institution for Jewish men.

Religious Orientation in the Orthodox Jewish world

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Source: Cohen, Ukeles, & Miller, 2012; Fader, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2013.

The Orthodox Jewish population in the United States is geographically concentrated, with 65% living in the northeastern section of the country (Schwartz, et al., 2004). While Orthodox Jews represent only 10% of the total American Jewish population of approximately 6 to 6.5 million, the proportion is increasing due to the high birth rate in Orthodox Jewish families, a trend that is even more pronounced in Hasidic and Yeshivish communities (Ament, 2005; Pew Research Center, 2013; Schnall, Pelcovitz, & Fox, 2013).

Religion, Family, and Community Life

Despite the diversity of Orthodox Jewish communities in the United States, Orthodox Jews hold in common a set of beliefs that mandate their strict observance of Jewish law, or *Halacha*, and its application to all areas of life (Schnall, Pelcovitz, & Fox, 2013). Jewish law not only governs ritual behavior, such as strict observance of the Sabbath and Jewish holidays, it also mandates premarital abstinence, religious marriage and divorce, observance of a kosher diet, modesty in dress and behavior, and appropriate behavior in a wide range of business and other personal relationships. Orthodox Jewish families tend to live concentrated in neighborhoods that include religious schools for their children, kosher markets and businesses, and synagogues where men attend daily prayer services and families go to worship on the Sabbath. Their beliefs support family life by placing a high value on marriage and promoting *shalom bayis*, a peaceful home (Schremer, 2007). Even at the time of a newborn baby boy's *bris*, the ceremonial welcome into the Jewish community, the blessings given to him are to grow up to get married, learn, and do good deeds.

One of the main values supporting Orthodox Jewish marriages is *shalom bayis*, or a peaceful home.



Most Orthodox Jewish boys and girls have differing educational and social experiences as they grow up. In Hasidic and Yeshivish communities, children attend gender separated private religious schools that teach both secular and religious subjects. They attend all-boys or all-girls camps in the summer, sit separately in religious worship, and socialize primarily with their own gender, especially as they approach adolescence (Fader, 2009; Friedman, 2012). Even in the more modern Orthodox Jewish communities, where boys and girls frequently attend the same school, most classes are separated by gender. Not only is there a physical separation in schools based on gender, the instructional style and curricula content often differ for girls and boys, especially in Hasidic and Yeshivish schools. Religious education in boys' schools, especially at the high school level and beyond, is overwhelmingly focused on Jewish legal texts, whereas religious education for girls incorporates a much broader range of subjects. Girls' education encourages an appreciation of social interactions, cooperation, creativity, and expressing talents in both academic and creative activities; education for boys typically does not (Schechter, 2012).

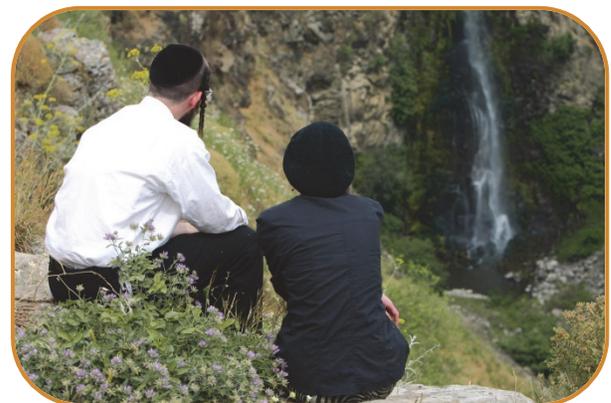
The Yeshivish and Hasidic communities encourage young adults to continue their post-high school education in a Jewish religious institution of higher education, called a yeshiva for men or a seminary for women. While young women typically remain in seminary for at most

a year or two, young men typically continue their post-high school yeshiva studies full- or part-time for a longer period. Many married young men continue learning in a yeshiva *kollel*, an institute for full-time, advanced study of the Talmud and rabbinic literature that provides limited financial support to married men.

Orthodox Jewish parents try to shield their children and teens from financial pressures and other harsh realities of life. While this gives children the opportunity to grow and learn without being weighed down by adult responsibilities, they may grow up without the problem-solving skills and self-reliance they will need to face adult financial realities (Frank, 2012; Margulies, 2012; Schoonmaker, 2012).

Dating and marriage

Hasidic and Yeshivish communities do not encourage casual dating, but rather focus on finding young men and women a *shidduch*, or a match (someone to marry). Young women and men meet and date potential spouses through recommendations from family, friends, teachers, or a professional matchmaker (Einhorn & Zimmerman, 2013; Rackovsky, 2013). Parents play a role in prescreening possible matches before their children agree to go out. Although parents look into many areas of compatibility, the system of matchmaking does not always fully explore the emotional maturity of the potential match or the emotional compatibility of the couple (Twerski, 2011). Gender segregation can result in young men and women having difficulty communicating



when they begin to date, as well as a lack of understanding of the differences between the mindsets of men and women (Biron, 2012).

Gender separation throughout the teen and young adult years' may result in decreased ability to communicate with the opposite gender. Young men in particular may have a hard time initiating conversation with young women when they begin to date (M. Rizel, personal communication, April 7, 2014).

Although the cultural expectation of how long a couple will date before making a commitment varies among different communities, the Hasidic and Yeshivish communities expect that a couple will see each other for a limited period of time before deciding to get engaged. If either decides they do not want to make a commitment, they move on to meet someone else. When a young man and woman get engaged, the families set a date for the wedding, frequently no more than two and four months later. Due to this short, intense period of dating and engagement, the couple is usually still getting to know one another when they marry.

In the Modern Orthodox community, young men and women are more likely to date casually and meet potential dates through introductions by friends or family, or by socializing at college, weddings, or special events for singles. Orthodox Jewish single adults, particularly older singles, are commonly using Internet matchmaking sites specifically geared towards them (Rackovsky, 2013).

Challenges Facing Contemporary Orthodox Marriages

Orthodox Jewish religious leaders, marriage counselors, and researchers are increasingly concerned with the condition of many Jewish marriages and the impact that marital difficulties

are having on Jewish families (Weinreb, 2000). As married Orthodox Jewish men and women become more involved with the secular world, they face challenges that previously did not exist for Orthodox couples. Friedman (2012) suggests that young people's increased exposure to popular culture, books, media, and the Internet creates false expectations and contributes to compromising a couple's ability to relate to each other as real people. Young men and women are more likely to approach dating and marriage with unrealistic assumptions about their financial or personal objectives (Alderson, Bane, Hauer, Lipiansky, & Rosenblum, 2012; Maybruch, 2012b; Schechter, 2012). Once they have children, couples must increasingly negotiate multiple work and childrearing roles (Maybruch, 2012b; Schonbuch, 2012).

The Orthodox Union (OU) conducted an on-line survey of marital satisfaction of more than 3,000 Orthodox Jewish married persons (Schnall, 2010). The survey found that 23% of respondents reported frustration with their inability to communicate effectively with their spouses (Weil, 2012). Overall, respondents indicated that the areas they perceived as most stressful were financial issues, lack of communication, problems with physical intimacy/sexuality, lack of relationship/not enough time together, and conflicts in relationship with in-laws (Schnall, 2010; Schnall, Pelcovitz, & Fox, 2013).

The financial responsibilities associated with religious obligations, such as the expense of a kosher diet, the high cost of living in Orthodox neighborhoods, and the need to pay tuition at private religious elementary and high schools, create significant stress for many families (Schnall et al., 2013; Snyder, 2011). Families that make the choice for the husband to continue to attend *kollel* after marriage face

unique financial and personal challenges. If the couple's parents are able, they offer financial support; however this may lead to continued dependence that interferes with the couple's bonding (Pelcovitz, 2013). Alternately, the wife becomes the primary financial support of the family. Many young women who aspire to being a *kollel* wife often already have jobs or the necessary education for a career. Still, the financial and personal stress increases with each child. When the husband decides to leave the *kollel*, he may lack the necessary skills or education to get a good job.

Rise in the number of unmarried orthodox jewish young adults

The Orthodox community expects Jewish adults to marry. Never-the-less, the number of adults who remain unmarried long past the typical age of marriage is increasing (Salamon, 2008). In the non-Orthodox world, remaining single past young adulthood might be viewed as a personal

choice; however unmarried Orthodox Jews in their late 20s or 30s do not usually think of themselves as having chosen to be single, and most are conflicted over this fact (Fishman, 2007; Penkower, 2010). Many single adults continue to live at their parents' home, but some move out and into neighborhoods where there are larger concentrations of unmarried Orthodox Jewish men and women. Despite the fact that there is a religious prohibition against premarital intimacy, those that remain single for a prolonged amount of time may find intimacy outside of marriage (Fishman, 2007; Penkower, 2010).

Domestic violence

Domestic violence is defined as "a pattern of coercive control" that one person exercises over another in order to dominate and get his way. Abuse can be physical, emotional, verbal, financial, or sexual (Twerski, 2011). While the few studies that have attempted to derive domestic violence rates for Orthodox Jewish women have been limited in scope, it is estimated that 15% to 25% of all Jewish women have experienced domestic violence (National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, 2007).

Cultural/religious factors play a critical role in shaping how victims address abuse and whether the victim will be willing to access services and assistance (Widawski & Frydman, 2007). Before Orthodox Jewish victims seek help, they must not only make decisions about their own and their children's safety and welfare, they also have to overcome deep personal, cultural, and communal barriers. Orthodox Jewish women are raised to believe that they are responsible for keeping peace in the home (*shalom bayis*). As a result, the Orthodox Jewish victim of domestic abuse feels she is responsible for bringing *shonda*, or shame, on her family, children, and community (Blackman, 2010). There is often strong communal and family pressure to remain married. In addition, victims fear that their abusers will not give them a Jewish divorce, or



get. As a result, Orthodox victims commonly stay in abusive marriages longer than other victims. When Orthodox Jewish victims break their silence and seek help, they have specific religious needs that can only be met if service providers are adequately informed and prepared (Widawski & Frydman, 2007; SHALVA, 2010). These can include counselors and therapists who have an understanding of the culture of the religious community, the need for kosher food and space for a large family at a shelter, access to religious schools for their children, and legal counsel who is familiar with the process of the *get*.

National Domestic Violence Hotline
1-800-799-SAFE-7233. Advocates are available 24/7 in more than 170 languages.

Shalom Task Force Domestic Abuse Hotline – 1-888-883-2323.
Provides referrals to resources tailored to Orthodox Jewish victims of domestic violence.

Sister to Sister – 1-718-338-2943
(<http://sistertosisternetwork.org/>.)
Provides comprehensive resources and a support network for Orthodox Jewish divorced women, especially single mothers raising children and young divorcees.

Culturally Sensitive Relationship Education

A healthy marriage is considered the foundation of the home and something Orthodox Jewish families aspire to and really want to work for. Even though divorce rates have risen, there is still an element of shame and disappointment over the ending of a marriage. Orthodox Jewish synagogues, schools, and other agencies have begun to implement programs aimed at

improving marriage stability and preventing abuse. While many programs are religious in content, the Orthodox community is also interested in integrating skills-based relationship education in a manner that will be acceptable to young adults and couples. Generally, skills-based relationship programs are more acceptable if they are offered under the auspices of Orthodox Jewish institutions that have a connection to the community they serve. Refreshments are a good incentive to encourage participation, but food needs to be kosher. Instructors need to dress and speak in a manner that respects the groups' cultural expectations for modesty in clothing, behavior, and content. Graphics and language used in program materials have to be acceptable to the target audience. For instance, some groups do not accept pictures of couples holding hands. In light of the gender separation in the Orthodox Jewish culture, it is critical to teach couples and individuals that everyday relationship conflicts are normal for couples, not pathological.

For successful relationship education for youth and young adults, educators must be sensitive to the population served by each school where programs will be offered. Educators typically need to offer classes separately to young women and men and adapt teaching materials, examples, and presentation styles for each setting. Young men in particular are not conditioned to talk about relationships and need to be invited into a conversation about relationships. In those communities where dating is normally delayed past high school and beyond, communication and conflict resolution skills can be taught to high school students using examples that are applicable to friendships or relationships with parents, peers, and teachers. Once single young men and women have reached dating age, they are more open to programs that specifically address male-female communication or warning signs of unhealthy relationships.

One of the keys to success in offering relationship programming across the spectrum of the Orthodox world is sensitivity to the population served, adapting materials and presentation styles as necessary for each setting.

Recent research on relationship education among Orthodox Jewish engaged and newly married couples indicates there is a need for more extensive premarital education in the following areas: recognizing and communicating expectations; conflict management skills; setting personal, couple, and family goals; emotional aspects of the intimate relationship; and determining roles and responsibilities (Maybruch, 2012a). Traditionally, the Orthodox Jewish bride (*kallah*) and groom (*chassan*) prepare for marriage informally by observing and learning from family members and teachers (Maybruch, Pirutinsky, & Pelcovitz, in press). During their engagement, the *chassan* and *kallah* take a series of classes from a trained premarital teacher who instructs them in the details of the religious laws guiding the intimate behavior between husband and wife (Maybruch, Pirutinsky, & Pelcovitz, in press; Schnall, Pelcovitz, & Fox, 2013). Some community leaders advocate for an expanded role for *chassan* and *kallah* teachers beyond the traditional religious teachings because they generally develop a close relationship with their students and are thus able to offer more, such as communication skills, or to refer them to a respected course (Biron, 2012; Friedman, 2012; Lasson, 1999; Revah, Hershoff, & Tandler, 2012).

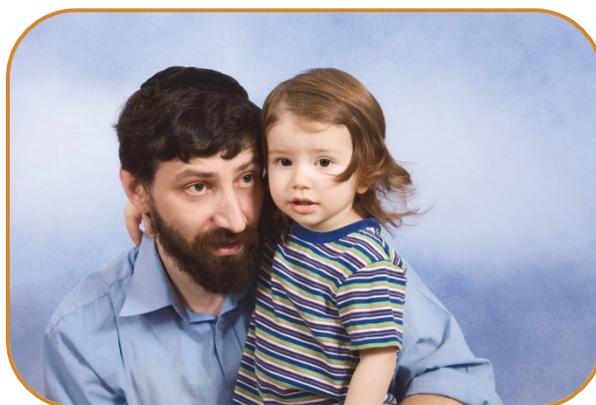
Orthodox Jewish communities in various parts of the country have started to offer skills-based relationship programs for engaged or married women and men, primarily because of the concern over the rise in the frequency of divorce. While many programs are offered to groups of couples, some couples may not be comfortable attending programs that are offered

in group settings and may prefer the opportunity for private relationship education programs. In many Hasidic communities, even married couples are not willing take a communication course together as a couple and will attend classes only if they are offered separately for women or married men.

Orthodox Jewish communities all over the country have shown an increased interest in offering relationship programs for married couples or for married women and men, primarily because of the concern over the rise in the frequency of divorce.

Recommendations For Safety-Net Service Providers

The 2011 Jewish community study of New York found that 41% of all Jewish households had sought help for at least one type of social service (Cohen, Ukeles, & Miller, 2012). Furthermore, the study indicated that as many as 54% of poor households sought services from an agency. Single parent households were the most likely to seek assistance, especially in the areas of help with job seeking and housing assistance. The authors of the study concluded that the extent of the need for services is far beyond the resources of even the largest Jewish communities. Where there is a greater need than Jewish communal institutions can meet, human-service agencies, congregations, schools, and community centers play a vital role



in connecting people to services and support available through the wider safety-net of government programs and agencies.

Association of Jewish Families and Children's Agencies – A membership association for approximately 125 Jewish family service agencies across the United States and Canada. Ranging in size from small departments of local Jewish federations to some of the largest human services agencies in North America, members provide vital services to clients of all ages, faiths, and economic backgrounds. The Association counsels families, feeds the hungry, assists the elderly, and protects the vulnerable, and is united by the values of Jewish tradition, working together toward a common goal of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world.

<http://www.aifca.org>

Safety-net agencies, both Jewish communal agencies and institutions of the wider community, have a stake in promoting the welfare of children and the health of families. Relationship education can be a critical link in supporting families. Orthodox Jewish couples may, however, be reluctant to participate in relationship education programs offered by safety-net agencies from outside the Jewish community because the couples may see it as a form of values education that should more appropriately be provided by their own community institutions.

Orthodox Jewish couples may consider family finances and budgeting as a more value-neutral of relationship education. Couples are becoming increasingly aware of the need for financial education for both two-parent and single parent households. It is, however, important that agency staff respect the unique financial priorities of their Orthodox Jewish clients. For instance, Orthodox Jewish parents find certain financial choices, such as putting

their children in private religious schools or living in an Orthodox neighborhood, as essential, even if it puts additional financial strain on the families. Demand for career education and placement is also increasing, as Orthodox Jewish couples recognize that the way to change their financial situation is through career preparation that can lead to good jobs.

Demand for career education and placement is increasing as there is more recognition that the way to change the financial situation for couples is through career preparation that can lead to good jobs.

Safety-net agencies are successfully offering skills-based communication programs in a wide range of Orthodox Jewish communities. They may perceive these approaches, such as teaching communication styles, positive expression, and conflict resolution, as more value-neutral. Consequently, they may successfully integrate this type of education into safety-net program offerings, possibly through partnerships with communal agencies of the Orthodox Jewish world.

Most Orthodox Jewish men and women live family and community-centered lives. Safety-net agencies interested in providing links to relationship education to Orthodox Jewish families can best approach this task by recognizing the strengths of those families and



the communities where they live. When agency staff overcome their preconceived ideas and respect that the client knows what he or she needs in a given circumstance, the provider agency and client can develop a true partnership (Notario & Ortiz, 2014).

Most Orthodox Jewish men and women live family and community-centered lives. Safety-net agencies interested in providing relationship education services to Orthodox Jewish families need to start by recognizing the strengths of those families and the communities where they live.

Agencies typically use the labels culturally appropriate or culturally sensitive to describe programs and materials. Safety-net agencies need to expand these concepts and redefine them beyond the limited applications where they are commonly used. The client is experiencing the world through the lens of his or her own culture. Agencies likewise need to use a broader cultural lens that looks at their clients as experts in their own lives.

About the Author

Sarah Silverman has doctorate in Social Anthropology from the State University of New York at Stony Brook. She did ethnographic fieldwork on women in Nepal and co-authored the monograph, *The Himalayan Woman: A Study of Limbu Women in Marriage and Divorce*. As a planning consultant at Ukeles Associates, Inc. (UAI), she conducted quantitative research on Jewish institutions in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Missouri, Connecticut, and California. For the last 15 years, Dr. Silverman has worked at Shalom Task Force in New York City, an organization that helps prevent domestic abuse and build healthy marriages in the Orthodox Jewish community. She thanks her colleagues for their insights and comments in preparing this brief.

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This product was produced by ICF International with funding provided by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Grant: 90FH0002. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.