# SURVEY OF YESHIVA HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

# REPORT

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# I. BACKGROUND

For many years people have been asking about the efficacy of Yeshiva high school education. In recent years the question has taken on greater urgency with skyrocketing tuition alongside anecdotal reports of students "flipping out" after graduation, going "off the *derekh*," or getting caught up in the temptations of campus life. This research study intends to provide a snapshot of the religious portrait of graduates of (Orthodox) Yeshiva high schools beginning with their post-college years.

This portrait is composed of two core areas, practice and belief. Regarding practice, the meaning of the contemporary picture becomes apparent when compared to the worlds from which those students came – whether and how they are different from the homes in which they were raised. And while there is no way to accurately gauge the level of religious behavior in their childhood homes, their self-perception of whether and how they are different from those homes is significant. Do they see themselves as being like, more religious, less religious, or just different from their parents?

Regarding belief, many of the minutiae of Jewish belief are introduced through education. The typical Yeshiva high school experience is one which focuses not only on halakhic practice but on areas of Jewish faith. As such, the current ideological positions of the participants in this survey are compared with the ideological messages they remember being taught in their schools. Again, perhaps as important as to whether they are aligned with the messages they were taught is whether they are aligned with the messages they think they were taught.

This survey was undertaken as a private research project by the author after 35 years of work in and for day schools. It was not sponsored by any granting organization and not influenced by any agenda other than my own desire to find out where the graduates of Yeshiva high schools are. I am grateful to Rabbi Dr. Shalom Berger who was helpful in the formulation of some of the questions. Rabbi Dr. Chaim Waxman was helpful in offering his guidance and support.

Since this survey was a private venture, work on administering and processing it, as well as on producing this report, was done on private time. As a result, there was a delay of a little more than a year between the administration of this survey and the publication of this report. In the interim, an important survey of the Modern Orthodox community was conducted and published by Nishma. There is some overlap between the two and it is possible that some populations were better represented in one of the two surveys, reflected in some differences between the conclusions. There are also areas that the Nishma survey probes that this does not, as well as areas that this survey explores that were not included in the Nishma study.

### Methodology

A survey questionnaire was designed to assess markers of gradation of observance and ideology which are markers of identity in the Orthodox, and specifically in the Modern Orthodox, community. One set of questions regarding observance asked about their recollection of practices in the home in which they were raised; a second set of questions related to the same markers in the respondents' current lives. Similarly, in the area of ideology, one set of questions

focused on the messages they believed the schools were delivering and a parallel set asked the same questions about respondents' current beliefs.

The survey was developed using Google Forms to collect the data and distributed through social media, primarily Facebook. The nature of social media is such that individuals intersect with many different circles, and those circles in turn with others. As such, recipients in the author's inner circle were encouraged to distribute the survey their own circles.

**Response to survey**

Because the survey was distributed through social media and not through individual contacts there is no way to gauge response rates. A number of people contacted me individually – some to complain over the length of the survey (it took 15-30 minutes to complete), of the difficulty in completing the survey using a smartphone, or of the perceived bias in questions which did not specifically probe the LBGTQ community in greater depth. Others contacted me to thank me for the survey which forced them to think about their religious identities or for giving them a voice. One optional question asked if respondents would be willing to be interviewed for an in-depth understanding of heir their religious lives and their education, and if so, to leave an e-mail address. Of 1257 respondents, 524 (42%) indicated a willingness to be interviewed and recorded their names and e-mail addresses. I hope to be able to follow up this quantitative study with a qualitative one involving personal interviews.

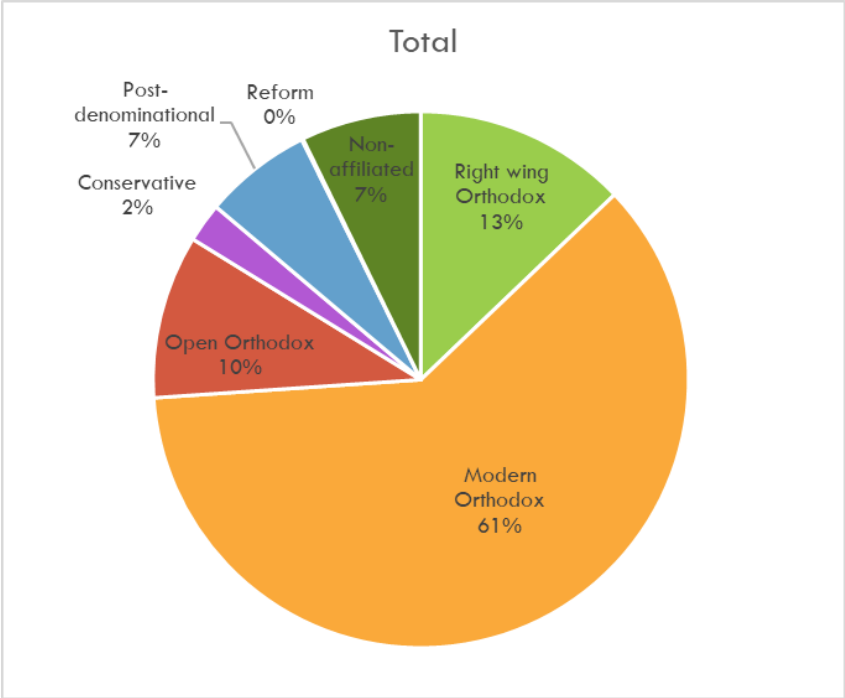
**Response demographic**

The survey was released on Nov 17 2016 and closed to further responses on Dec 14 2016. Respondents grew up in 267 different zip codes from 20 geographical areas including Greater NY/NJ, Boston, Toronto, Montreal, Virginia, Los Angeles, Houston, Rochester (NY), Indiana, Atlanta, Chicago, Florida, San Diego, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Ottawa, Providence (RI), Cleveland, Columbus, St. Louis, Dallas, Denver and Seattle. The 800 respondents who chose to identify their high schools attended 80 different schools. Those who attended post-high school Yeshiva/seminary programs in Israel identified with 37 different programs. The diversity of geography and educational institutions suggests that the survey indeed reached a broad population.

There are limitations to this survey. The method of its distribution does not guarantee a representative sampling, even though it is clear that it did reach multiple segments of the population with equal opportunities for distribution through each respondent. There is a population which does not use social media, specifically the Haredi population. As such, those participants who became Haredi are less likely to be represented in this study.

The overwhelming majority of respondents (84%) identified currently as being Orthodox, divided as follows:




## II. INITIAL DATA AND ANALYSIS

***Demographic background***

51.1% of respondents were female, 48.9% were male. 95% of the respondents identified as straight; 4.9% of respondents identified themselves as LBGTQ, half as open LBGTQ and half still in the closet. 89.8% identified as Ashkenazic, 7.1% identified as Sefardic. Most of the others were from mixed parentage.

*Geographic distribution*

69.2% of respondents grew up in the NY-NJ metropolitan area. The remainder came from a wide range of locales – Chicago (4.8%), Silver Spring (2.7%), Baltimore (2.5%), Toronto (2.5%), South Florida (2.4%), LA (2.4%), Philadelphia (2.4%), Atlanta (1.8%), Cleveland (1.2%). Smaller numbers of responses came from Seattle, Detroit, St. Louis, Memphis, Montreal, Virginia, Houston, Rochester (NY), Indiana, San Diego, Ottawa, Providence (RI), Dallas, and Denver. These numbers are not surprising given the demographic of the American Orthodox community, although the Los Angeles community may be underrepresented.

*Marital status*

36.8 % of the respondents had graduated high school prior to 2004. The rest of the respondents were evenly divided as graduating between the years 2004 and 2011. Among the older cohort, 86% are married, 3% are divorced, 9% are single. For the younger cohort, 52% are married, 3% are engaged, and 43% are single. In this sample, the marriage rate jumps from 34% to 65% eight years after graduation from high school.

*Supplementary Jewish education*

The plurality of respondents (43.4%) did not participate in youth groups while in high school. The two most highly attended youth groups were NCSY (31.1%) and Bnei Akiva (19.8%).

62% attended Jewish camps, of which 95.5% were Orthodox camps.

79% attended Yeshiva (men) or seminary (women) programs in Israel post high school. Of those, 67% of respondents chose to identify the Yeshivot/seminaries they attended. Of those, the mostly highly attended Yeshivot included Har Etzion, Eretz Hatzvi, Mevasseret, Shaalvim, Hakotel, KBY, Or Yerushalayim, Torat Shraga, Reishit, and Orayta. The mostly highly attended seminaries attended included Lindenbaum, Harova, MMY, Midreshet Moriah, Migdal Oz, and Orot.

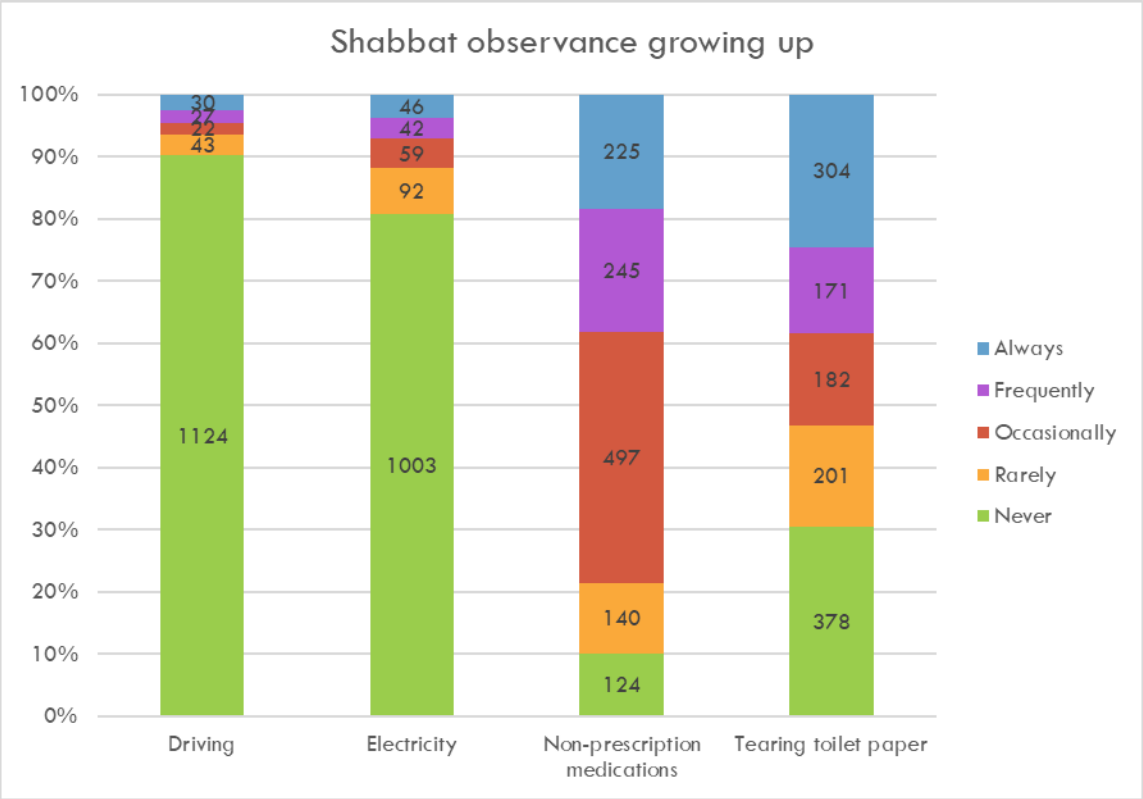
*Religious background*

The overwhelming majority of the students came from homes which would fall into the spectrum of the mainstream Orthodox community, with 13.3% identifying their childhood homes as Right-wing Orthodox and 76.5% identifying as Modern Orthodox. It is valuable to note that some groups, like Sefardic and Chabad respondents, did not identify as either of the above. It is also worth observing that, offered the category of “other”, there were 54 (!) different write-in alternatives.

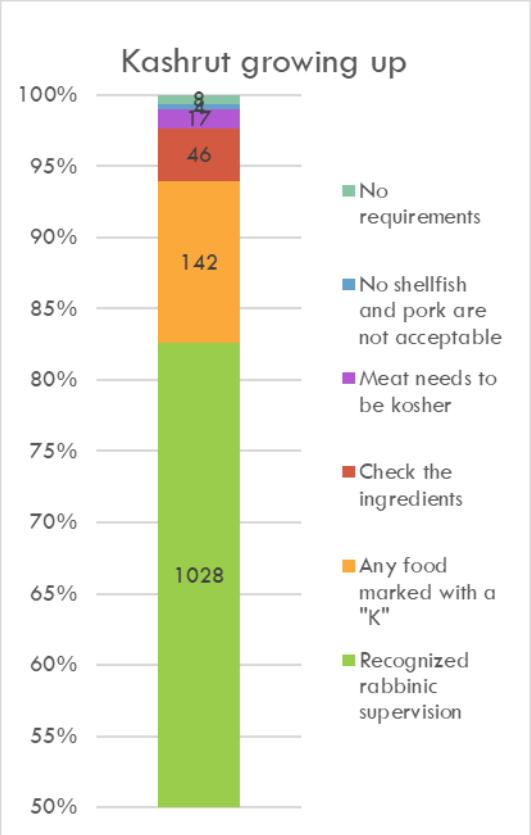
90% of respondents indicated that their families never drove on Shabbat, 94.5% indicated strict separation – including waiting periods – between milk and meat in the home, 93.9% indicated a requirement for some kind of certification on kosher products.

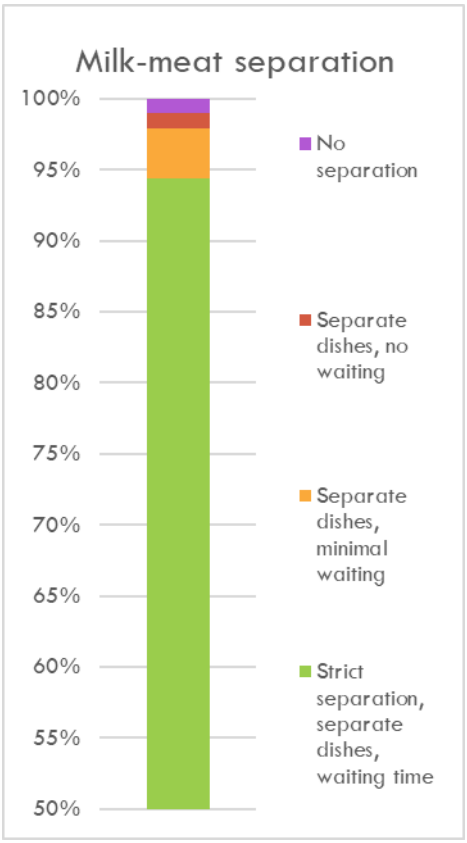
The spectrum of observance was apparent in some of the nuances. While 90% never drove, only 80.5% reported abstinence from turning on electrical devices at home and only 77.1% percent indicated that they never watched television on Shabbat, likely reflecting a disparity between public (driving) and private (using electrical applicances) observance. Similarly, while 93.9% required rabbinic kashrut certification for products in the home, only 76.4% indicated the same requirement for restaurants, suggesting that communal norms on having a home that others could eat in was more important than the personal observance of the restrictions.



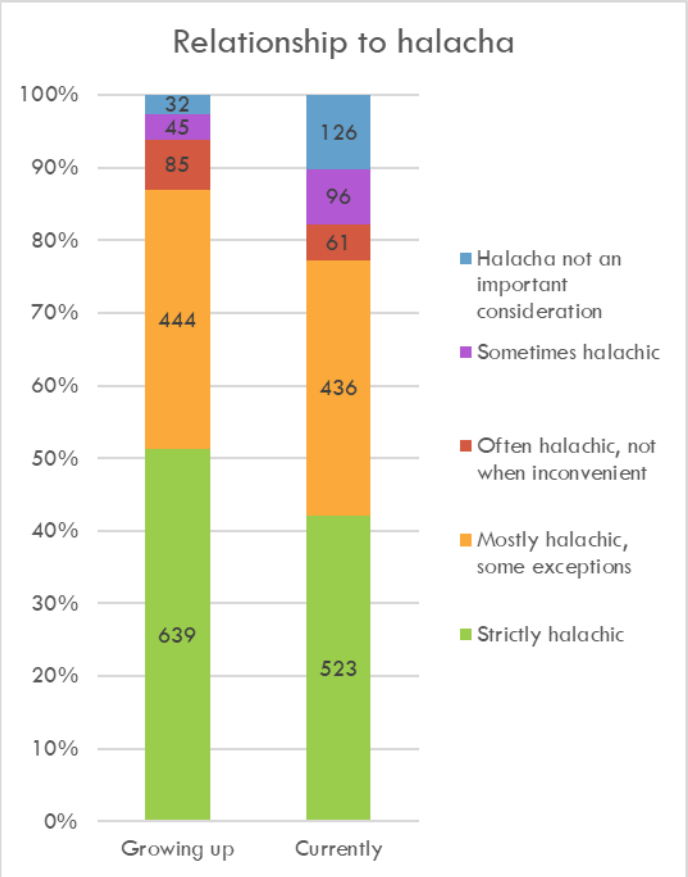

On the other end of the Orthodox spectrum, 21.2% refrained from using non-prescription medications on Shabbat (a rabbinic restriction) and 47.1% refrained from tearing toilet paper on Shabbat. These families represent the strictest observances measured. Related measures of personal observance reflect a significant percentage of families in which active religious life and halakhic obligations were taken seriously. 32.9% indicated that their parents always recited blessings on food; 26.1% indicated that their fathers studied Torah daily while another 23.6% that their fathers studied Torah weekly. 51.4% indicated that they observed *halakha* strictly with no exceptions, and 47.3% indicated that their parents were extremely active in Jewish communal life. 35.6% indicated that Shabbat *zemirot* were a regular feature of the Shabbat experience, 44.5% reported that their father went to synagogue daily, 20.4% reported that their mother covered her hair all the time. The number of families with these intensified observances is greater than those identifying as Right-wing Orthodox (13.3%), indicating that there were a considerable number of families identified as Modern Orthodox whose halakhic practices fell within the guidelines of strict halakhic observance.



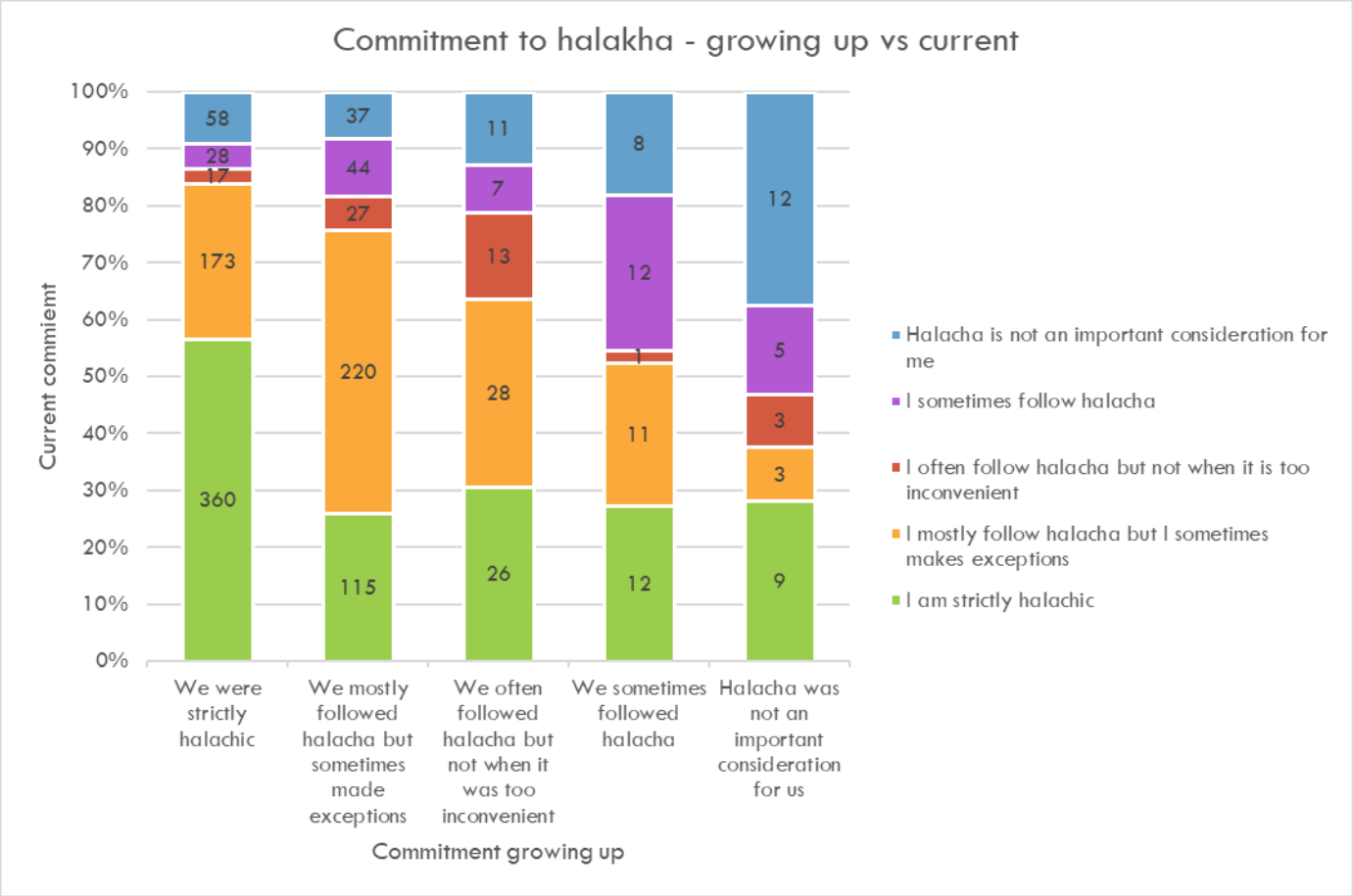



***Current practice vs childhood practice***

In almost every area measured there was a slight decline in observance between the childhood religious practice and the current practice. Responding to the strictness of halakhic observance, 51.4% reported that their childhood homes were strictly halakhic with no exceptions and another 35.5% reported strictly halakhic with some minor exceptions (total of 86.9%), while for the current cohort 42.1% reported strict observance with no exceptions and 35.1% indicated that they were strictly halakhic with minor exceptions (total 77.2%). Significantly, 9% of respondents indicated that they currently have no driving restrictions on Shabbat (compared to 4.5% of childhood homes), 17.9% indicated no restrictions on turning on electrical appliances on Shabbat (compared to 7% of childhood homes), 6.4% indicated no separation at all between milk and meat (compared to 1% of childhood homes), 5.3% indicated no kashrut requirements at home (compared to .6% of childhood homes), and 9.6% indicated no restrictions on eating out (compared to 2.6% of childhood homes).

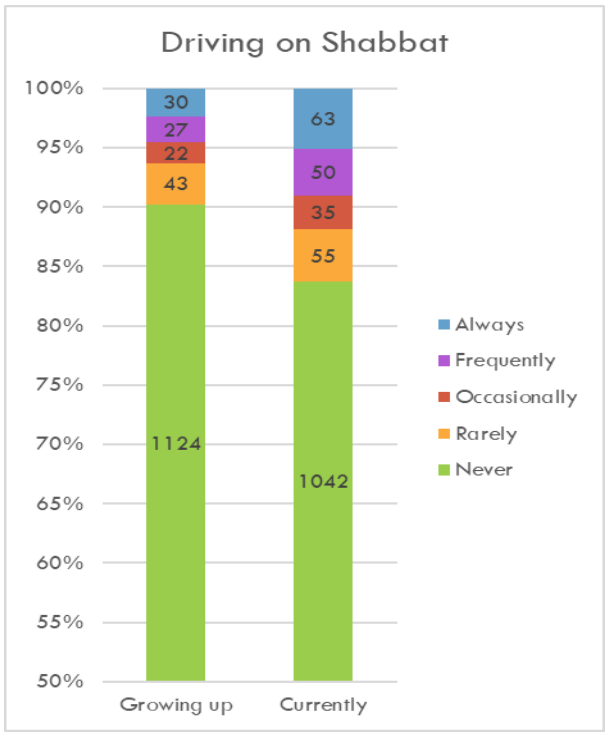


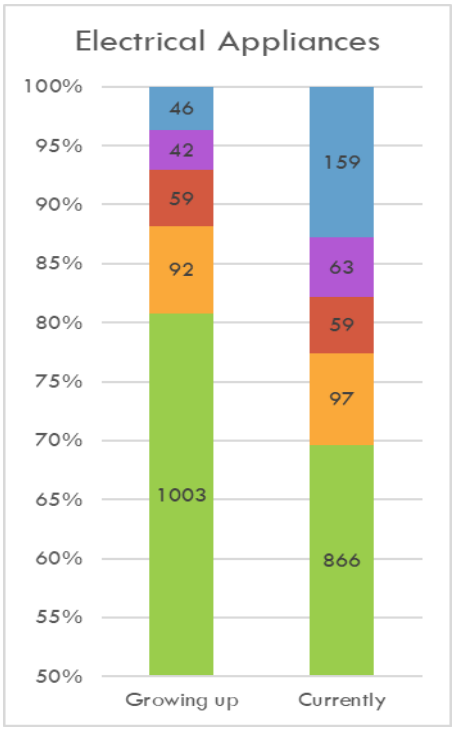

When we break this down, comparing practice in the childhood homes and current practice, the picture becomes clearer. Of those growing up in strictly halakhic homes, 9% now indicate that halakha is not an important consideration. Similarly, for those who grew up in homes where halakha was very important but where there were exceptions, 8% now indicate that halakha is not important to them. Those numbers jump to 14% and 18% respectively when we include those who say that they sometimes follow halakha. On the other end of the spectrum, 29% of those who grew up in homes where halakha had little to no importance now consider themselves strictly halakhic, and that jumps to over 50% when we include those who are halakhic with some exceptions.

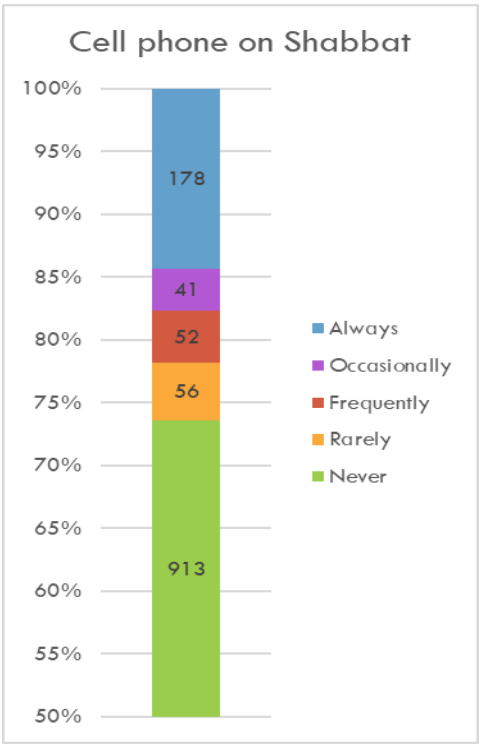



*Shabbat restrictions*

In the area of Shabbat, while 90% of childhood homes refrained from driving on Shabbat, 83.4% of respondents currently do the same; 80.5% of childhood homes refrained from turning on electrical appliances on Shabbat while 69.6% currently practice that same level of restriction.

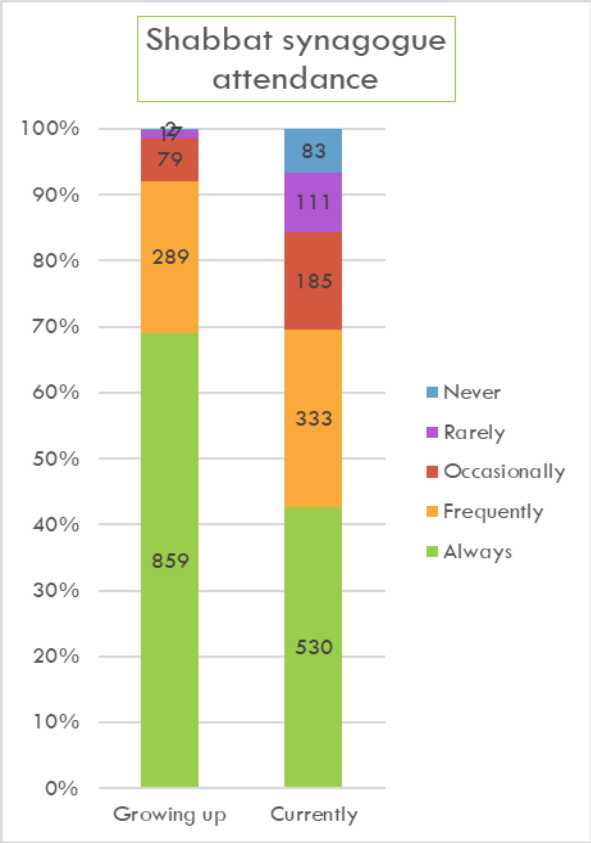


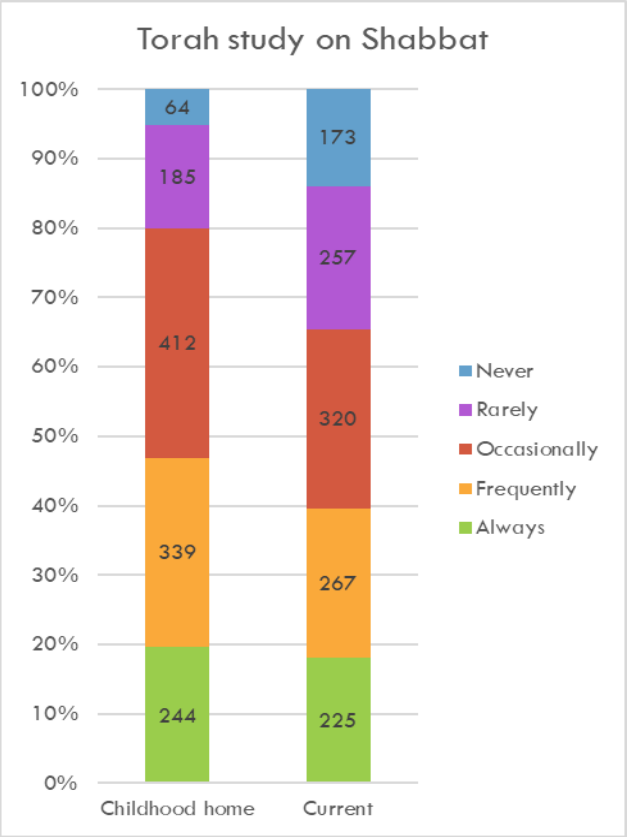

Interestingly, while anecdotal reports over the past few years pointed to the "half-Shabbos" phenomenon of high school students who were Shabbat-observant but could not resist using their phones on Shabbat, this study suggested that there was no greater use of cell phones than of other electrical appliances. While this could reflect a cohort effect, namely, that people in their 20s and 30s were not as tied to their phones as the high school students who grew up in the social media era, it could also be an indicator that the effect diminishes with age and maturity. It is also possible that those who, while in their parents' homes limited their violation of Shabbat to cell phones, when they left their parents' homes they expanded their violation to all electrical appliances.

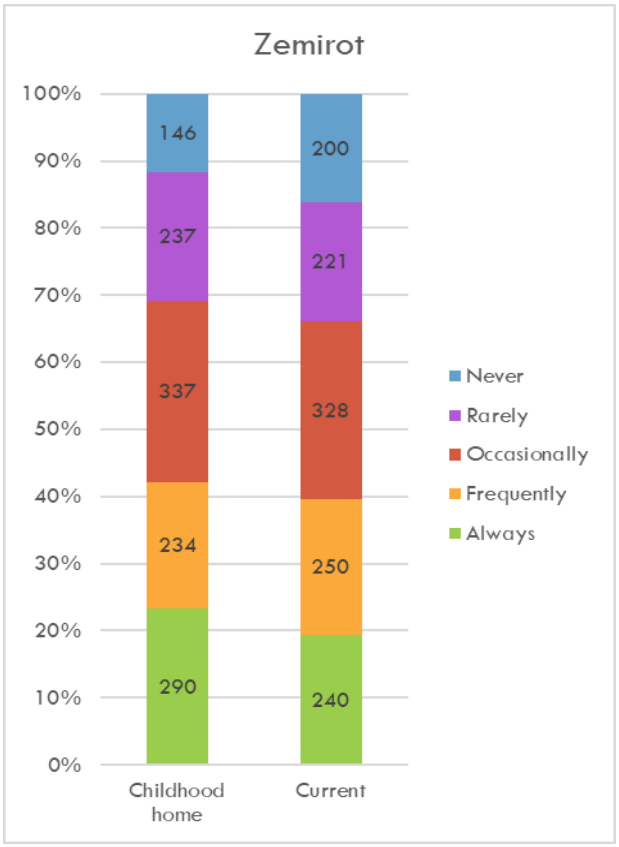
*Shabbat activities*

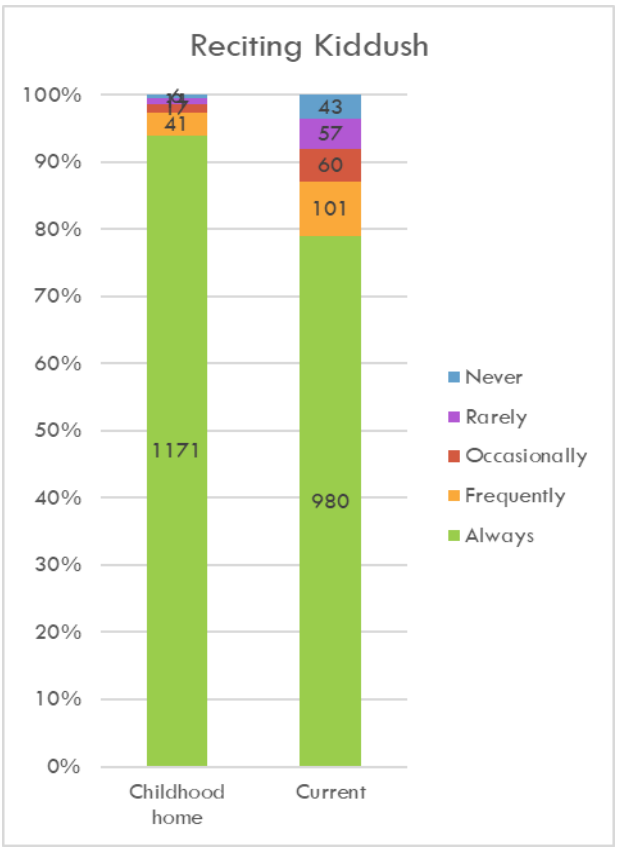


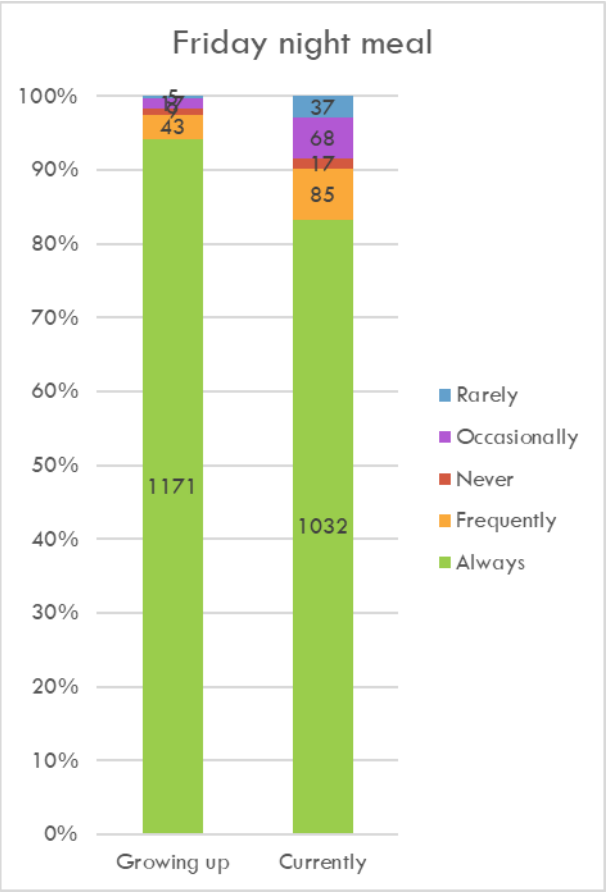

While on a halakhic level the primary focus of Shabbat is on restrictions, the Orthodox Shabbat experience has a significant communal dimension including synagogue attendance, meals with Kiddush and singing *zemirot*, and Torah study.

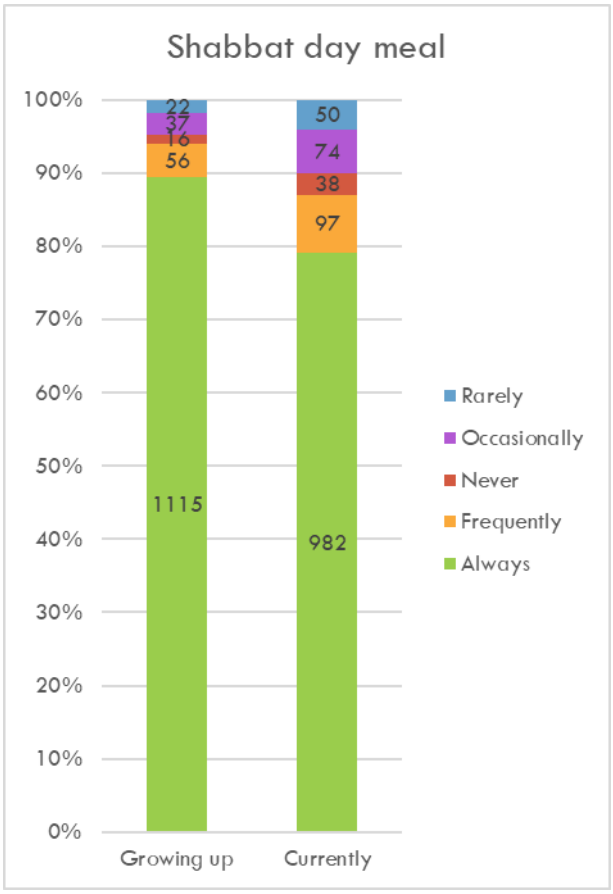
Friday night meals growing up were always held in 94% of the homes, currently 83% of participants had Friday night meals all the time. A similar decline was observed by Shabbat day meals, from 89% growing up to 78% of the current practice. A slightly larger decline was recorded for reciting *Kiddush*, practiced in 94% of homes growing up (similar to the Friday night meal) and dropping to 78% for the current generation (similar to the Shabbat day meal). A significant decline was observed in Shabbat synagogue attendance, 92.2% of childhood homes went to shul "usually" or "always" while 69.5% of respondents currently do. The practice of singing *zemirot* at the meals was less prevalent overall, both in the homes growing up and in the current practice, and there seemed to be almost no change between the childhood practice and the current one. Similarly, the practice of Torah study on Shabbat was observed always or frequently in 47% of childhood homes and 40% of current homes.



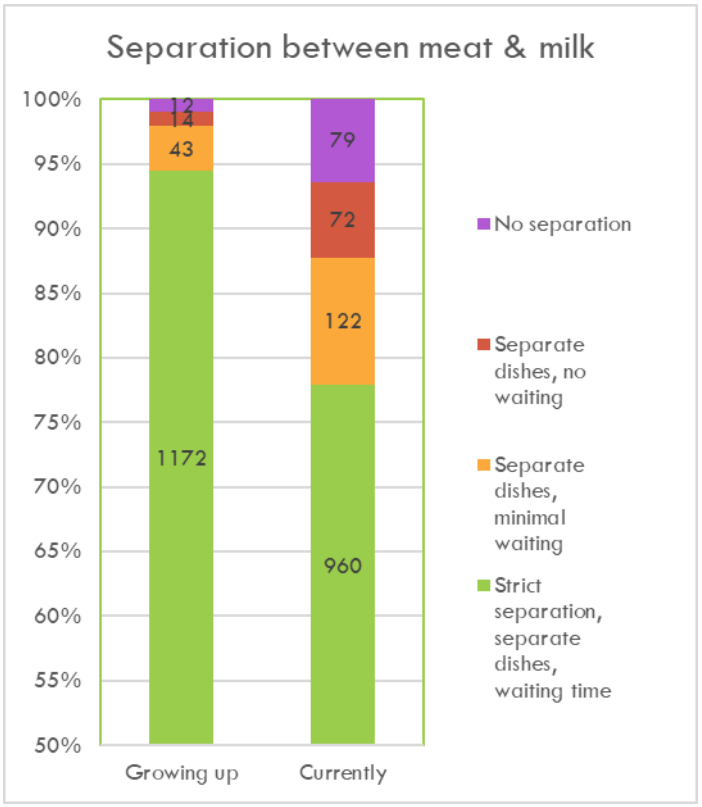


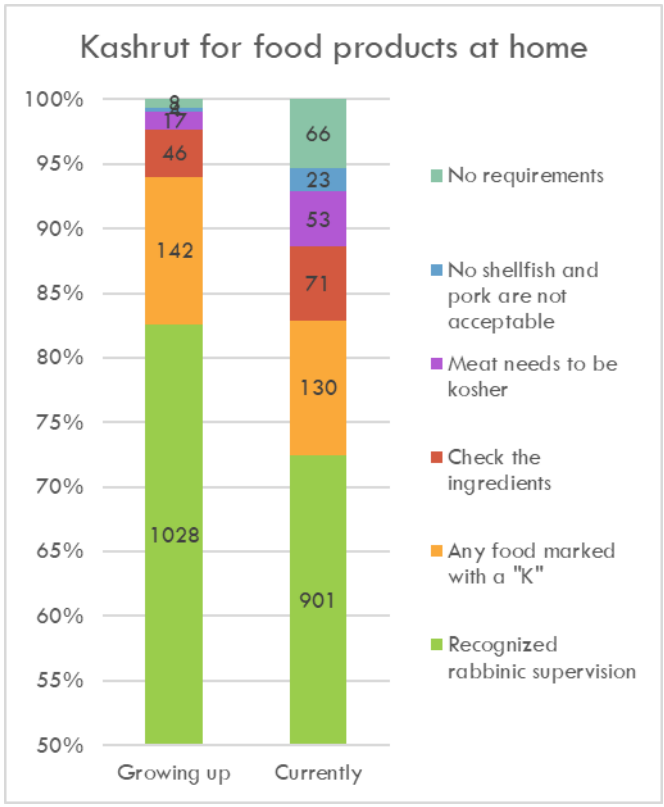



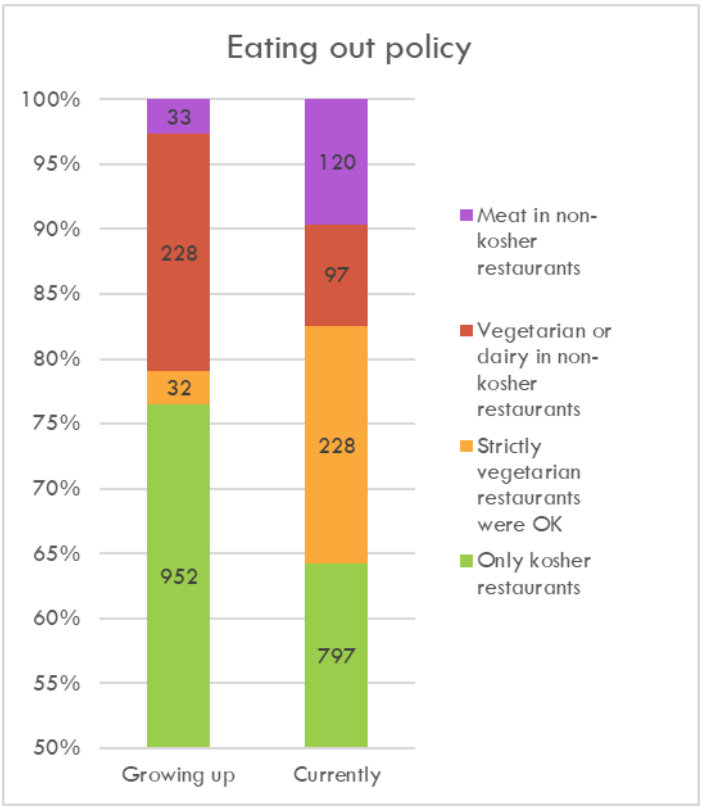

*Kashrut*

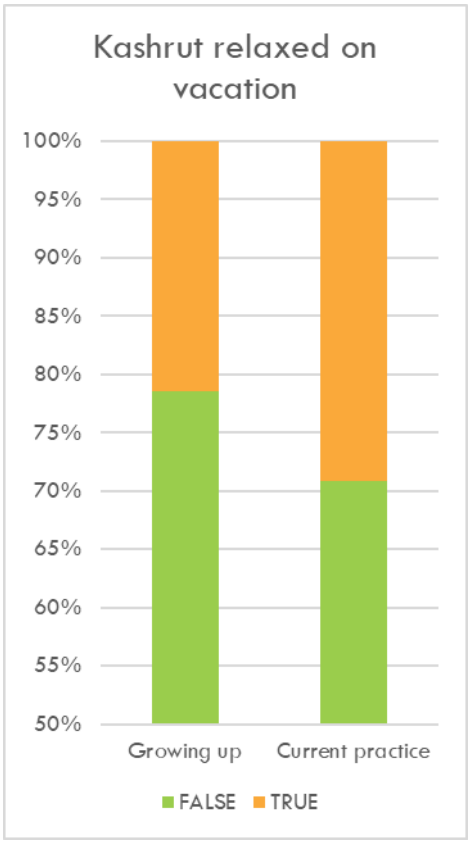
Observation of Kashrut reflected a slight decline similar to the one noted in Shabbat observance. 95% of childhood homes kept strict separation of milk and meat with waiting times, while 78% currently do; 94% of childhood homes required some form of kashrut certification while 83% currently do; 76.4% of childhood homes ate only in kosher restaurants while 64% currently do; 79% of childhood homes reported that kashrut rules were not relaxed on vacation while 71% currently report the same.

As was true for the homes in which they were raised, home Kashrut observance is consistently adhered to more than Shabbat observance, perhaps reflecting the idea that respondents want Jews who are more observant than themselves to feel comfortable eating in their homes.



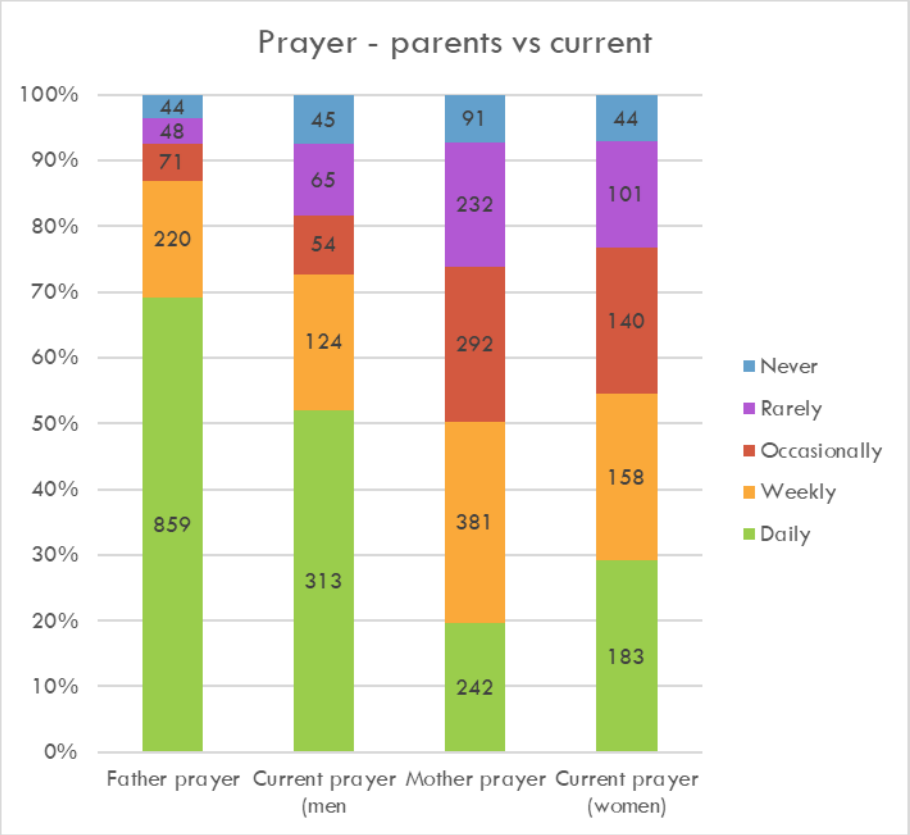



*Prayer*

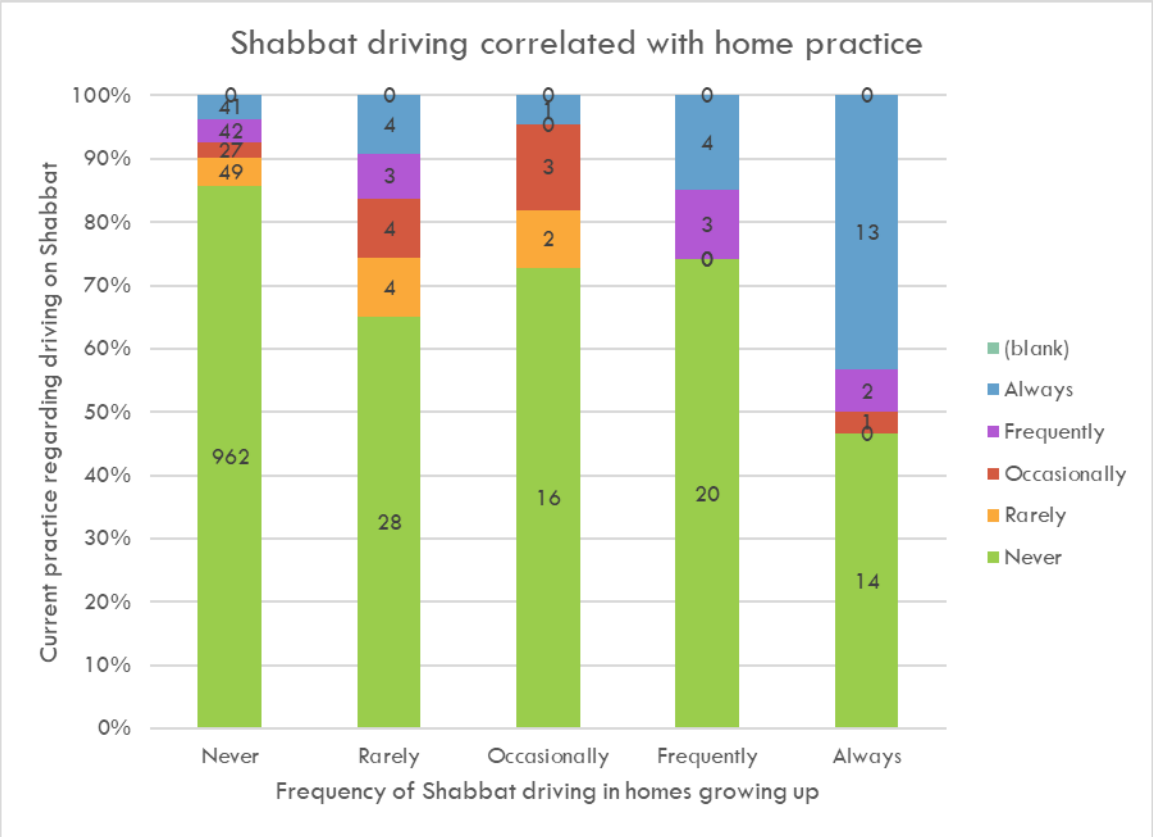
A similar decrease in practice was observed in the realm of men's prayer, but a quick look at the data suggests that the current generation of women may be praying slightly more frequently than their mothers. It is unclear if this reflects a broader trend linked to greater opportunities for women's Jewish learning and public roles or may be linked to the private nature of mother's prayers, usually not in synagogue and possibly after the children have left for school , so that the children may not have been aware of the mother's prayer practice.

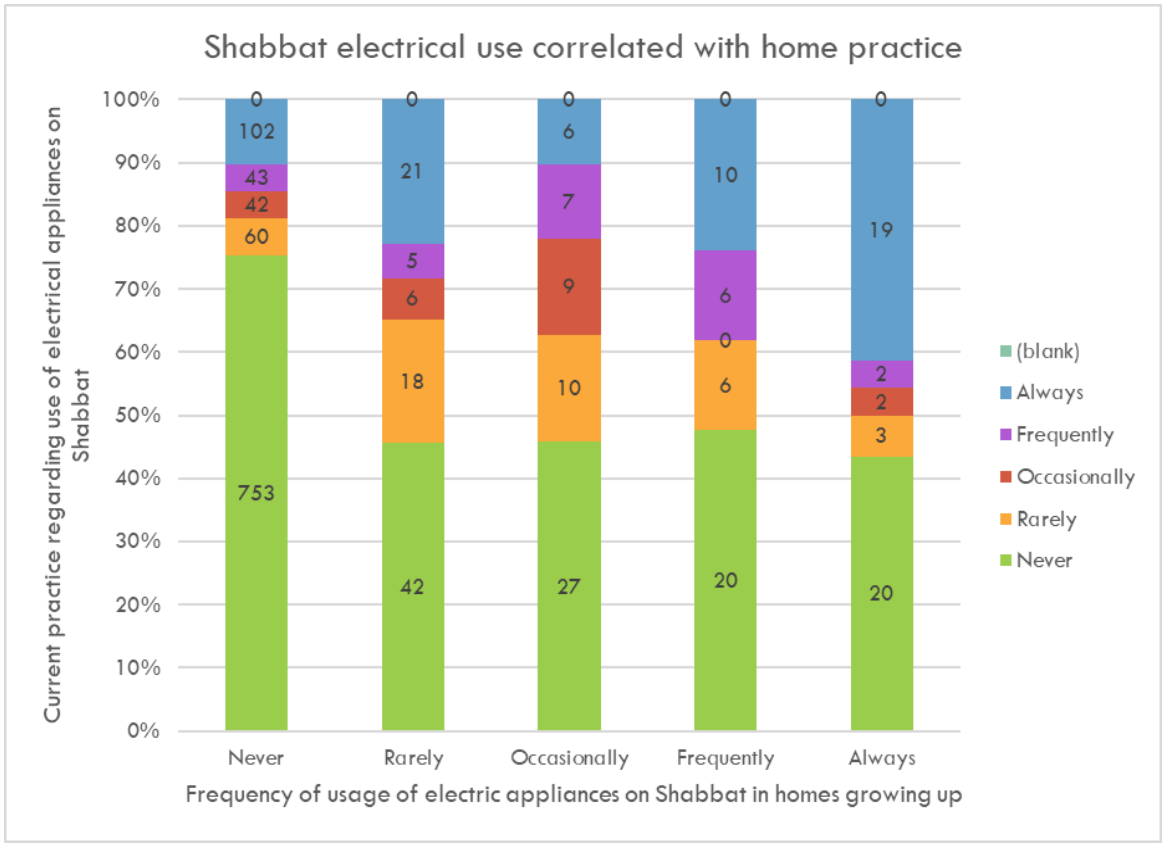


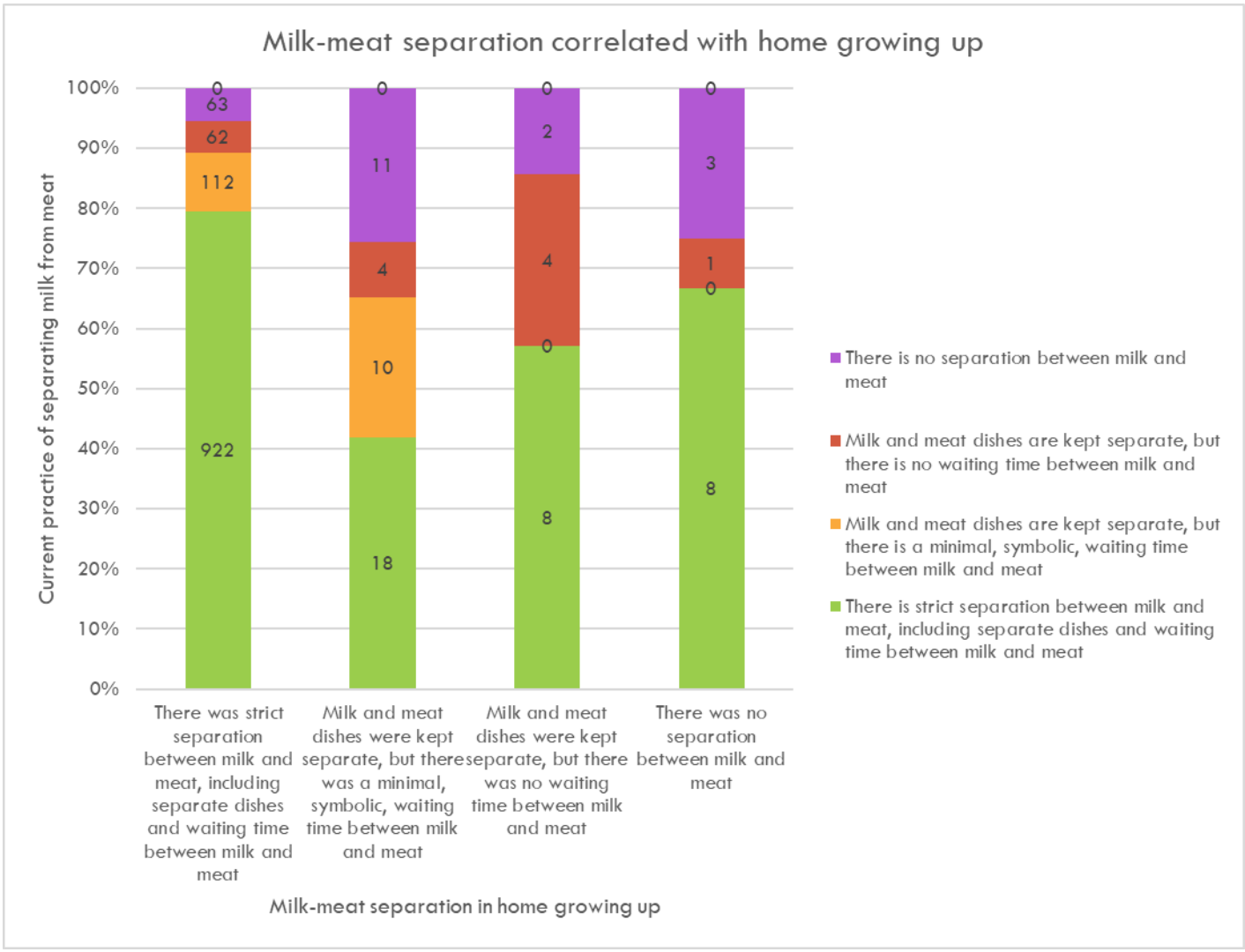
***Correlating childhood home practices with current practice***

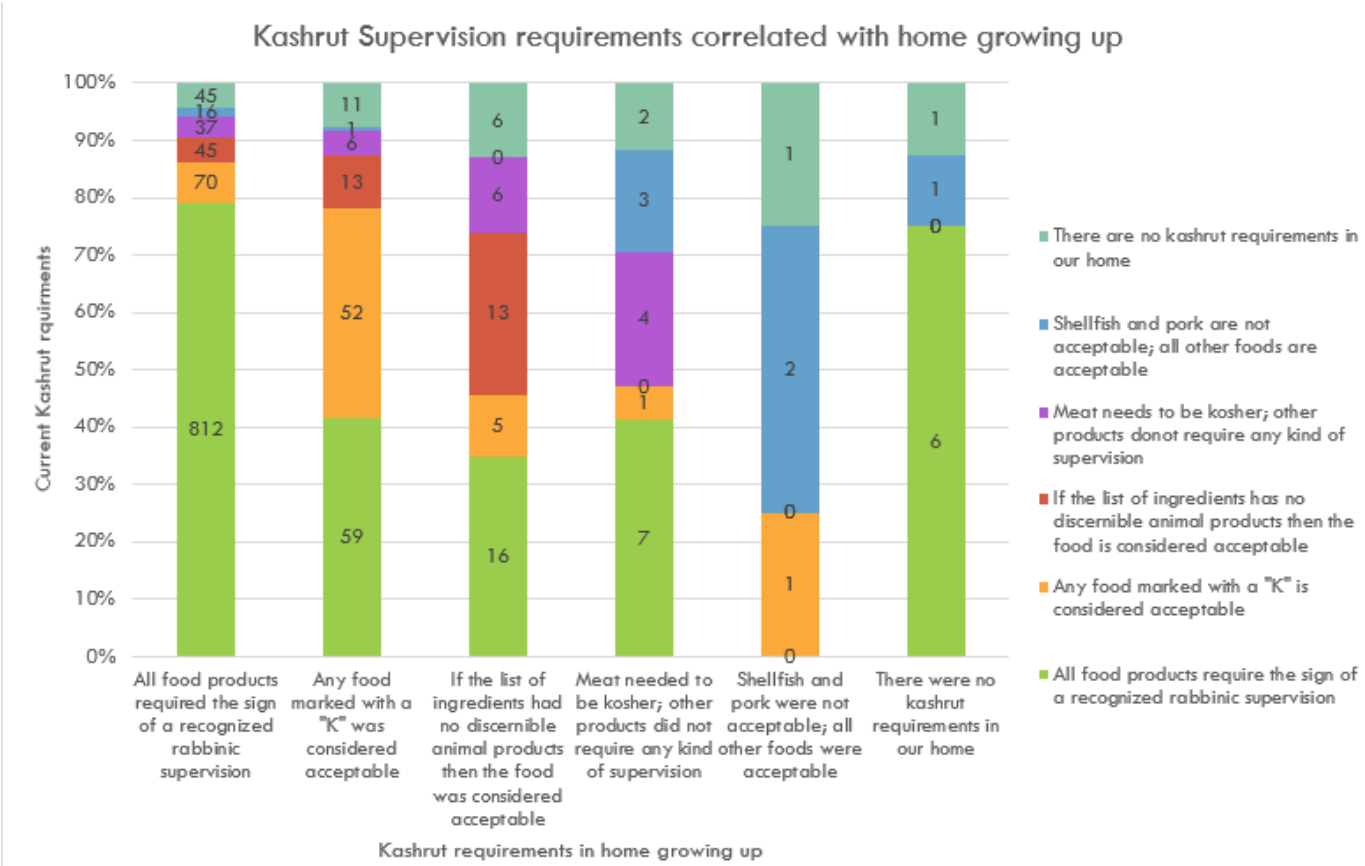
These overall shifts beg the question of how many who grew up in observant homes are now less observant or non-observant, and vice versa. This is valuable because there appear to be 9% of those who grew up in Orthodox homes who no longer consider themselves Orthodox. A close look at the data will help us to understand to what extent that group is affecting the overall numbers.

Using Shabbat observance as a gauge, 8.9% of students who grew up without Shabbat driving now drive regularly and 20.4% who grew up without using electrical appliances on Shabbat now are regular users of electrical appliances.







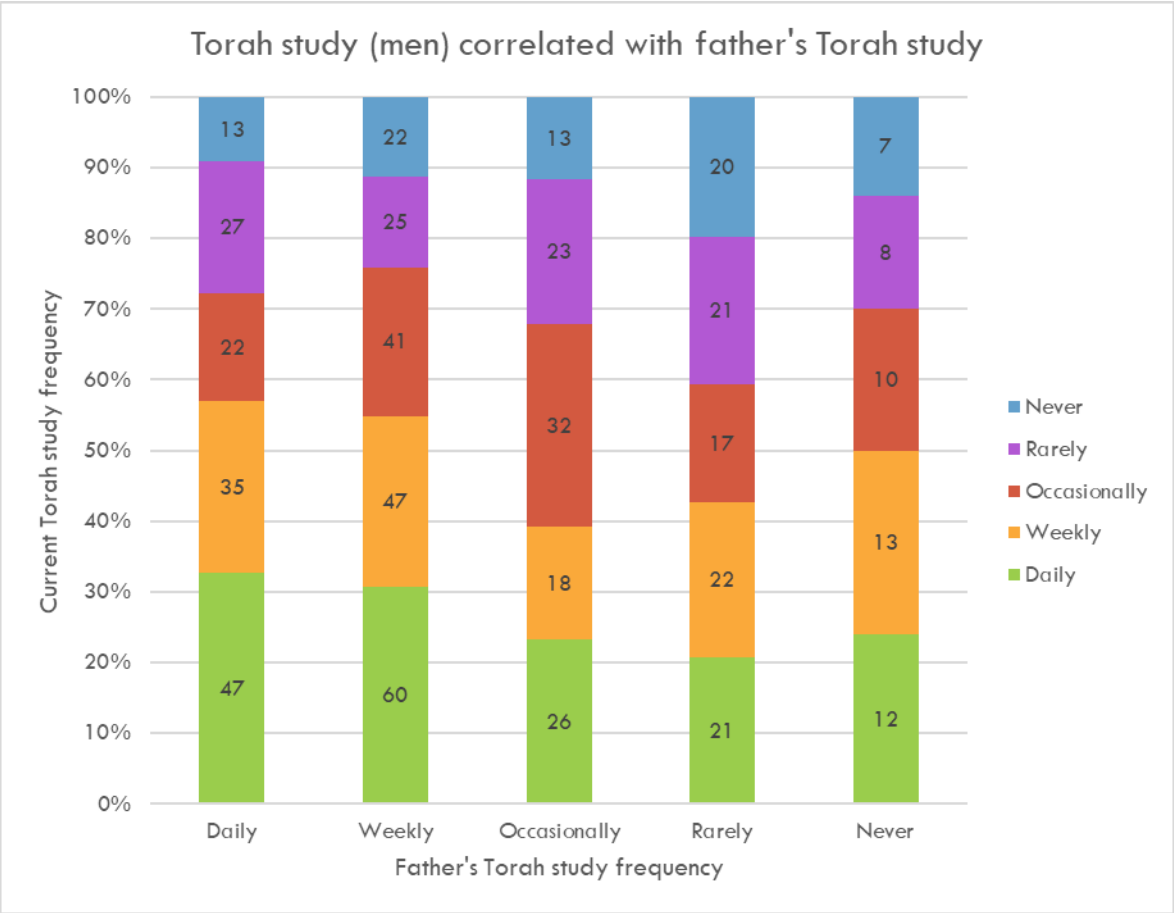



In the reverse direction there were many fewer respondents who grew up in homes that were not observant (that is, where driving and usage of electrical appliances were regular), and the numbers may be too small to be statistically meaningful. Nonetheless, among the respondents, more than half of those growing up in non-observant homes are now observing relatively strict regulations for Shabbat driving and kashrut, and nearly half observe significant restrictions on usage of electrical appliances on Shabbat. While it seems unlikely that the number is representative of a broad population, it does reflect that there are shifts towards observance amongst those growing up non-observant. A separate study to explore this population more carefully would be valuable.

The two competing trends – slightly diminished observance amongst those growing up in strict homes and elevated observance amongst those growing up in less-observant homes – may be the result of the phenomena of a shift toward the middle, what Daniel Kahnemann calls "regression to the mean" (*Thinking Fast and Slow*, p. 177). If this is indeed what is happening, then it is possible that the school's role is to set that mean, and it is that mean which helps to shape the religious direction of students from across the spectrum.

A somewhat different perspective emerges from an analysis of the data on men's Torah study, often taken as a significant marker of the level of religious seriousness. When we compare the frequency of Torah study of the two generations, those whose father's studied Torah daily or weekly are only somewhat more likely to have higher frequency of Torah study themselves, and

there does not seem to be a strong correlation between the father's practice and that of the son. Further, overall, there are slightly more (166 in the current generation vs 144 in the previous one) yet significantly fewer studying Torah weekly (135 in the current generation vs 195 in the previous one).



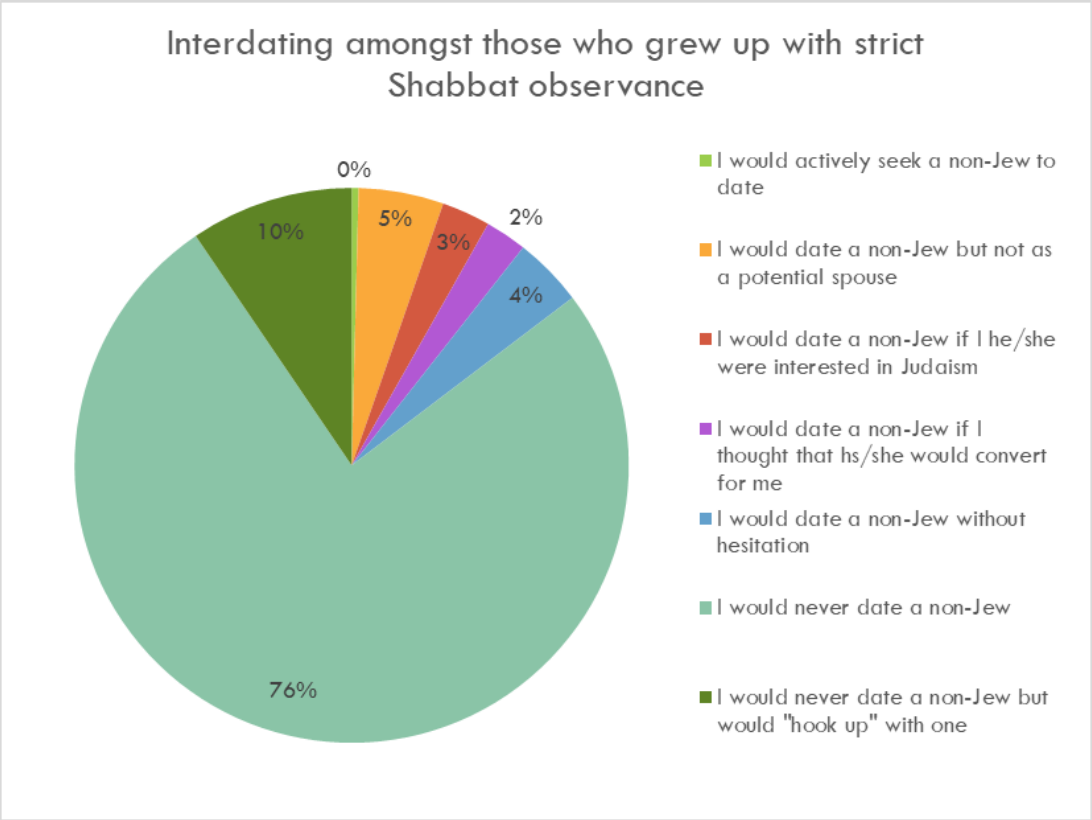
One anomaly in the above trends regards reciting blessing before eating. In this metric there was a very slight overall increase over the previous generation. This phenomenon may be another example of regression toward the mean, in that the parent's adherence to this standard was considerably lower than in other areas of observance.

### *Relationships, Dating and Intimacy*

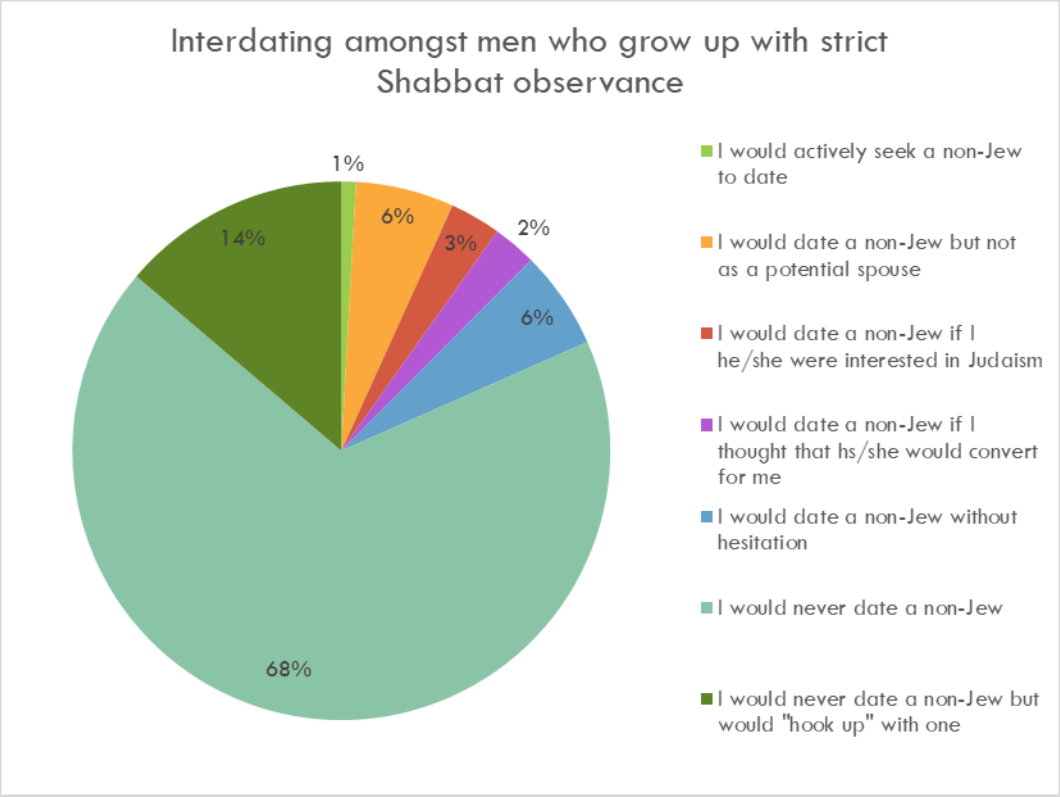
Shabbat and Kashrut are generally understood as markers of Orthodox observance, likely for two reasons. First is social cohesion. Shabbat is communal and family time, and much of Orthodox communal life takes place on Shabbat. Similarly, Kashrut plays a significant communal role, as observance of its laws enables community and extended family members to share meals at home. Another reason for the central importance ascribes to these two practices is social isolation from the "outside" community. Whether discussing Friday night college parties or social gatherings at work, participation or non-participation in Shabbat events represents an emotional threshold. Crossing that threshold grants access to one community – often at the expense of the other. The social nature of eating, whether in the university cafeteria or in the workplace, presents another threshold, defining where one is "in" and where one is "out."

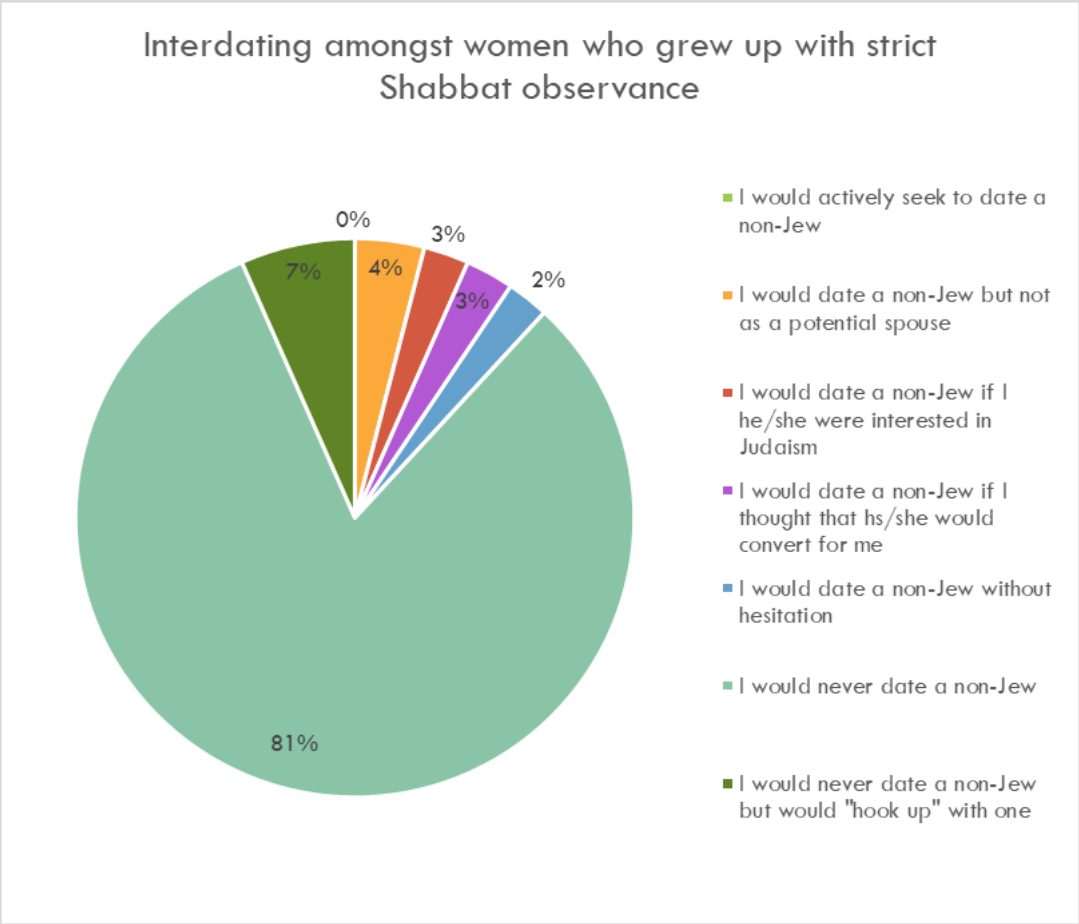
A third marker of identity expressed is the social sphere and relates to interactions between the sexes. This includes the question of dating non-Jews as well as observance of halakhic strictures regarding physical intimacy outside the context of marriage. In the teen and post-teen years, when emerging and young adults are grappling with heightened sexual urges, these areas often command outsized attention and significance, and become the markers of the "truly" observant. It should be noted that the comparisons here are between observance and attitudes in these areas and other areas of halakha, not to childhood observances, as there is no way to gauge the nature of these activities in the childhood homes.

The data indicate that respondents were prepared to take far greater halakhic liberties in these areas, even abrogating certain social norms, than in other areas of observance. This became apparent in questions asking about dating attitudes, observance of the restrictions on intimacy, and in direct questions regarding attitudes toward those strictures. Perhaps most striking is that of those who grew up in Shabbat observant homes, 14% would date a non-Jew under a variety of circumstances and another 10% would "hook-up" with a non-Jew for a sexual encounter.



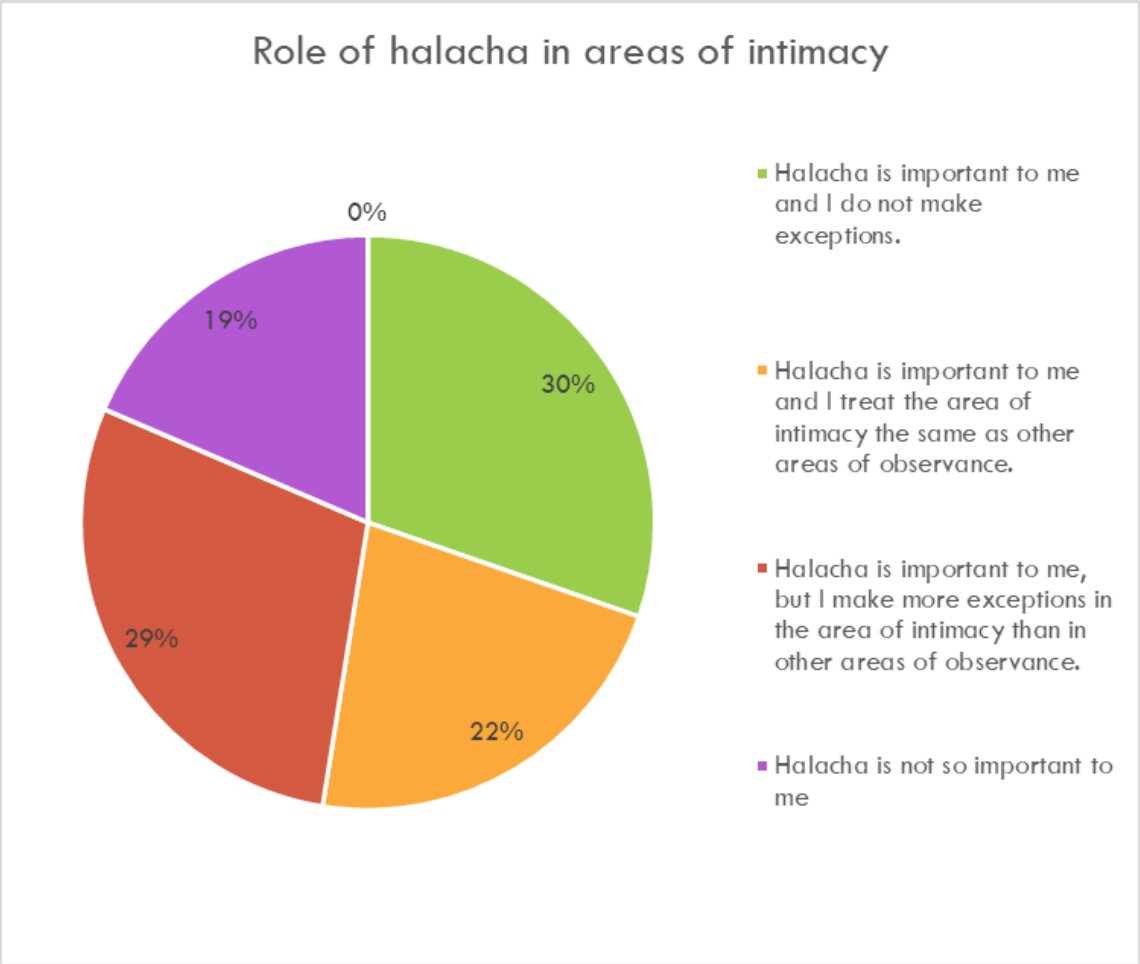

In this area there were marked differences between men and women, with men more prepared than women to date non-Jews or hook-up.



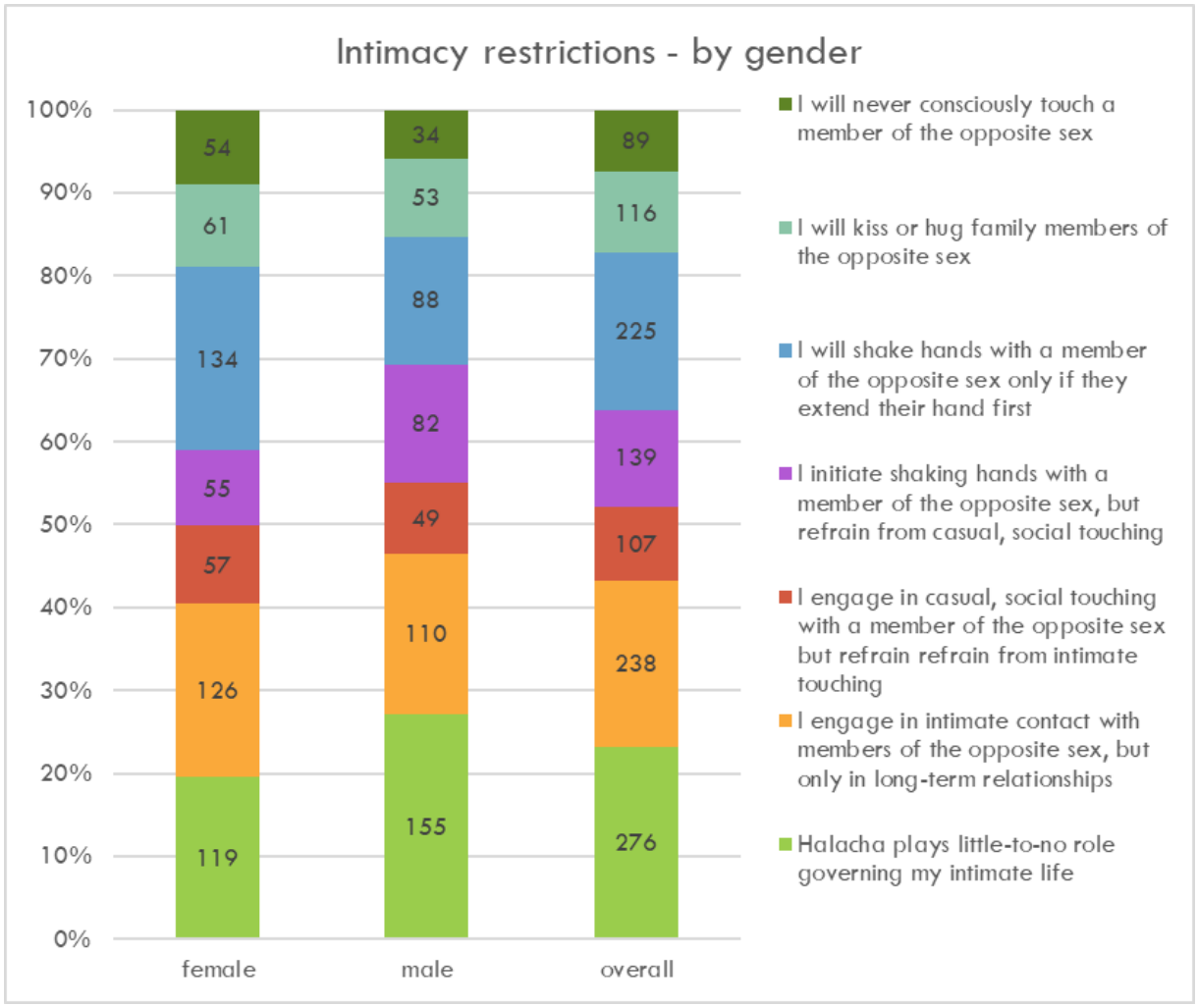



Interestingly, for women, there was no difference between those under 30 and those over 30. By contrast, for men, whereas 18% of men under 30 would be willing to hook-up with a non-Jew that percentage dropped to 8% of those over 30.

Regarding attitudes towards halakhic restrictions on intimacy, this area deviated greatly from other areas of halakhic observance, with 29% of respondents indicating that although halakha is important to them they make more exceptions in the area of intimacy than in other areas of halakha.




The general statements about the role of halakha in their lives is borne out by questions asking about specific behaviors in this area. Whereas there are multiple halakhic opinions about shaking hands with members of the opposite sex or kissing family members, all other intimate contact is prohibited whether by Rabbinic decree or by Torah law.



# III. SECONDARY ANALYSIS

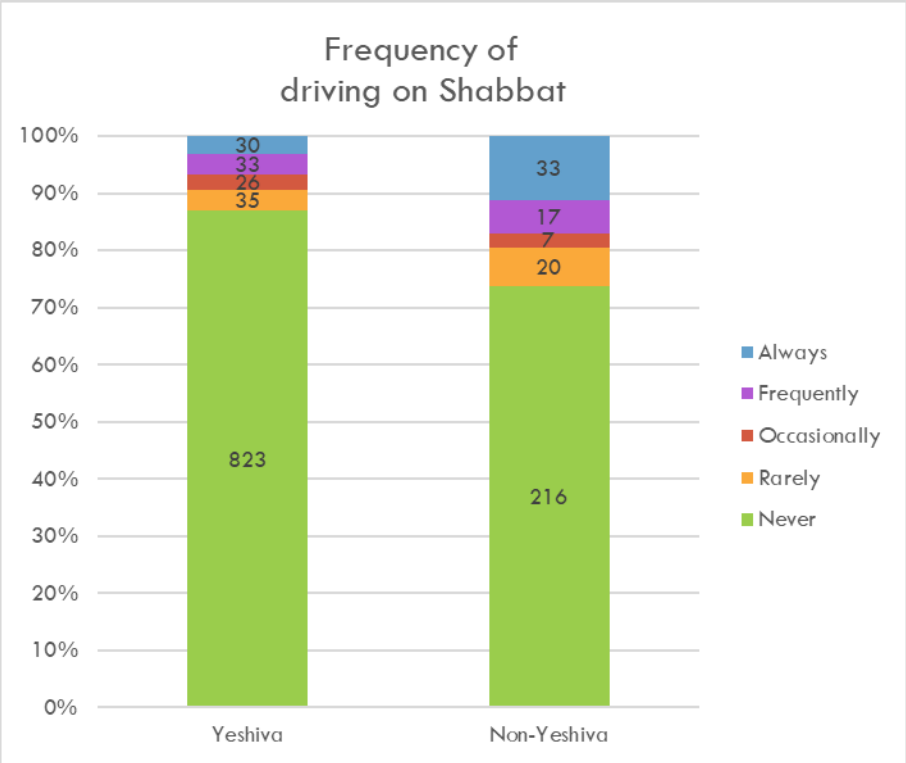
In this section we dive a little deeper into the data to see how the results are affected by secondary factors, such as the gap year of yeshiva/seminary study in Israel, or can be divided based on sub-groupings such as the respondents' current religious affiliation.

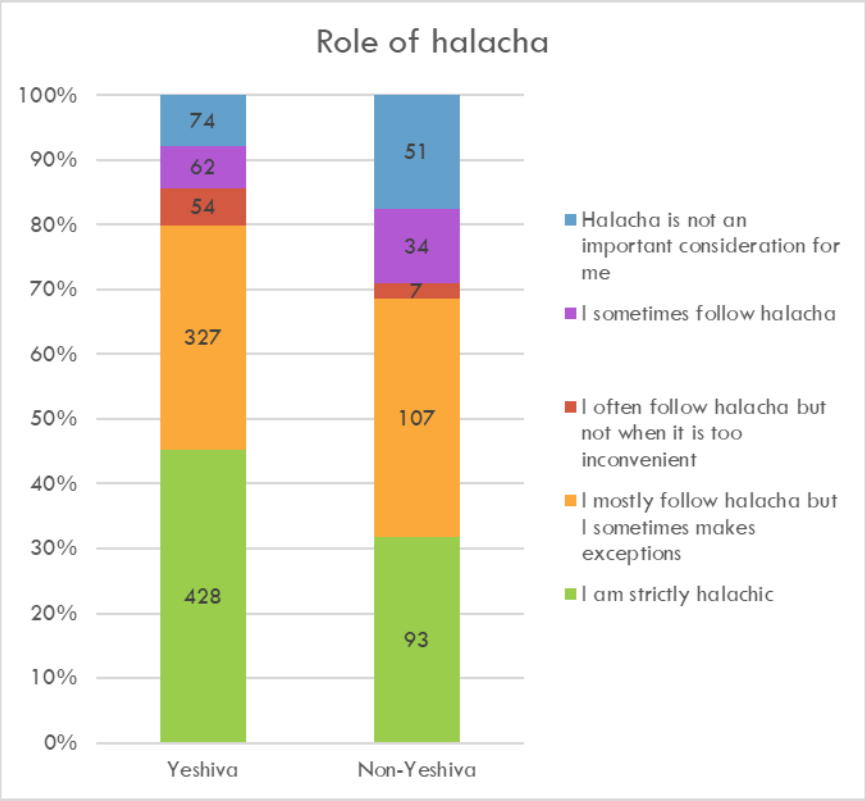
### *Yeshiva/seminary post high school*

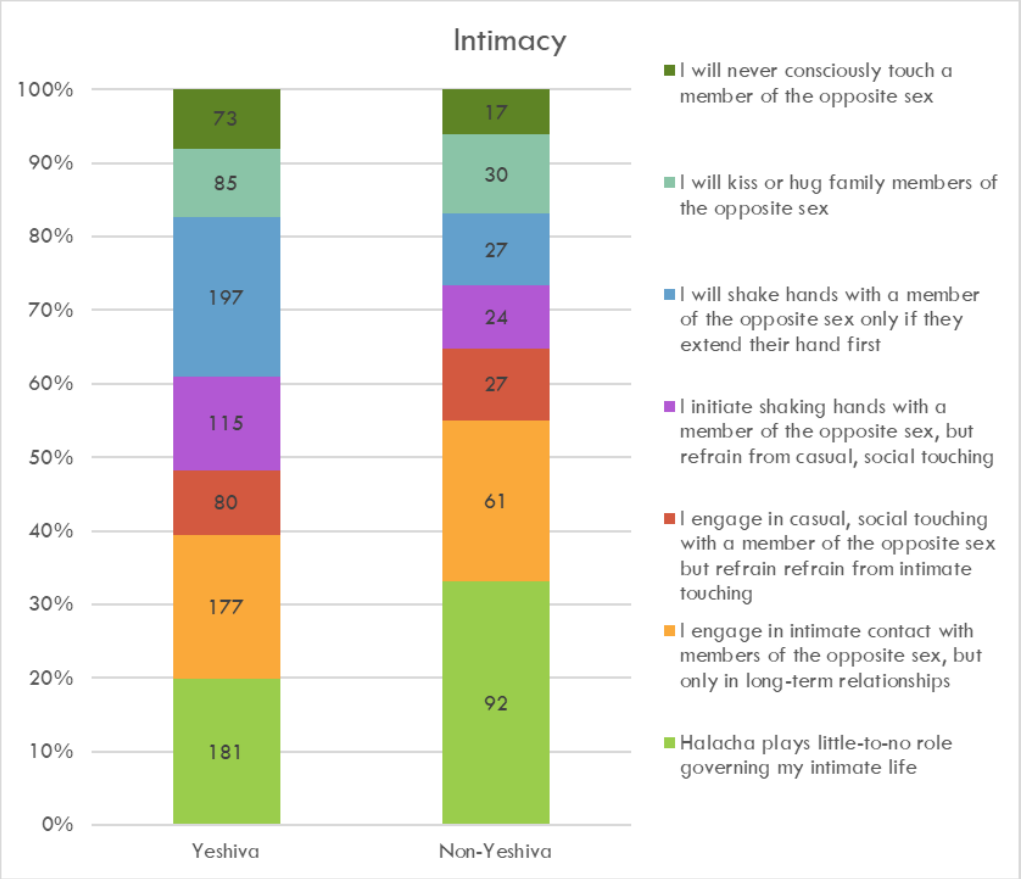
It has become common for Yeshiva high school graduates to take a gap year (or two) in Israel studying I a yeshiva (men) or seminary (women) before beginning their university studies. In this sample, 76% of graduates took a year for such study. That group can be self-selecting; that is, that the more religiously committed are more likely to take such a year. Even though there were marked differences in observance between those who did and did not take a gap year to study in yeshiva (and it is unclear as to whether those differences are because of the yeshiva/seminary study or because those who decide to do yeshiva/seminary are more committed initially), the greatest difference was with regarding to intimacy restrictions and frequency of Torah study.

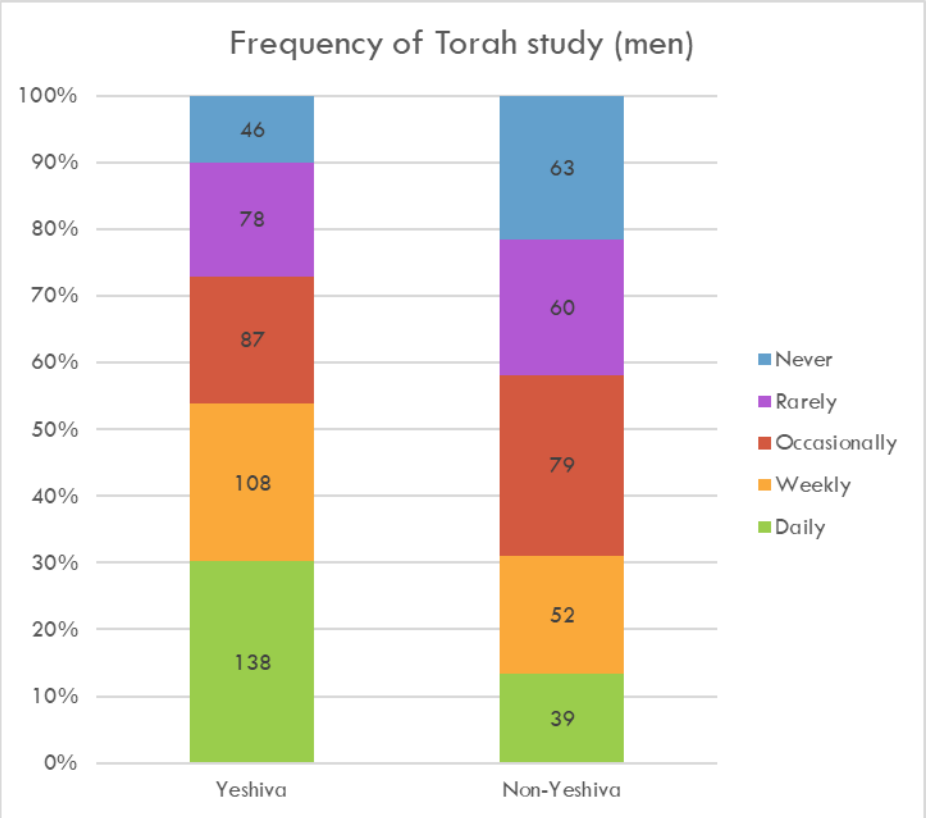
What does seem to emerge from an initial survey of the data, however, is that the level of observance and relationship to halakha of those who attended yeshiva/seminary approaches the levels identified with the homes in which they grew up. If the effect is the result of choice due to the yeshiva/seminary experienceand not to self-selection, then it seems that the success of the yeshivot/seminaries is that they serve the function of roughly reproducing the religious levels of the parents' generation.

Although there are studies from thirty years ago regarding the short-term impact of yeshiva/seminary studies, this current survey suggests that more research needs to be done about the long-term impact of the immersive, long-term yeshiva/seminary experience on religious observance. It also opens the question of what the impact of post-high school yeshiva/seminary study would be without the benefit of the day school background, as well as whether one of the key functions of the day schools is to prepare students for post-high school yeshivot/seminary study in Israel. Further, there is anecdotal evidence of a trend in which yeshiva/seminary alumni who are seriously committed to halakha slowly moderate their practice the longer they remain unmarried, and hence disconnected from the mainstream family-oriented communities. This study was not designed to gauge that, but that is a trend worthy of its own exploration.



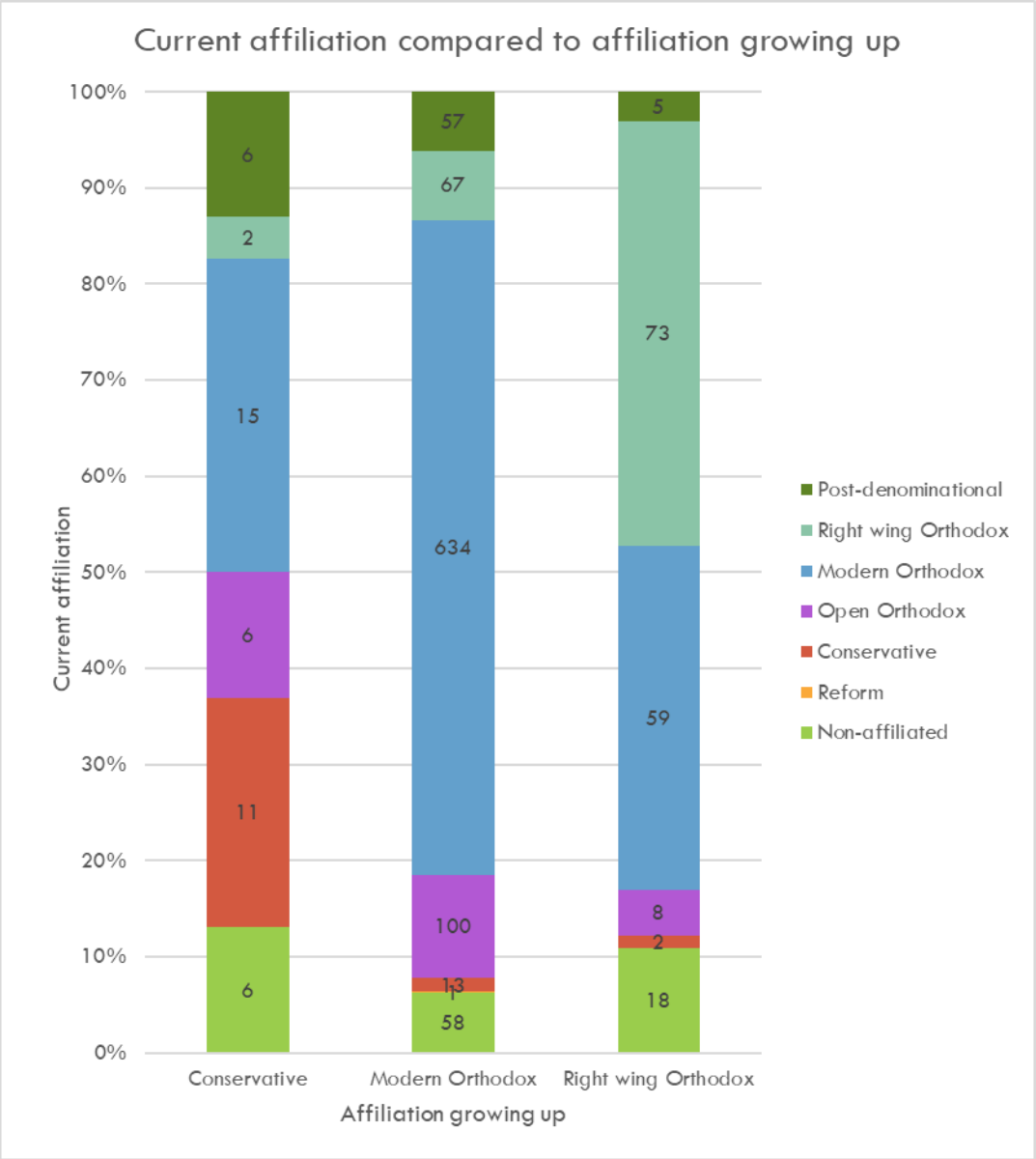


Of those who attended yeshiva/seminary, 21% currently live in Israel as compared to 14% of the those who did not attend yeshiva/seminary. Interestingly, when we include those who are still seriously considering moving to Israel, both groups are equal at 48%. This is a significant percentage of the population, and is dramatically different from the broader American Jewish population.

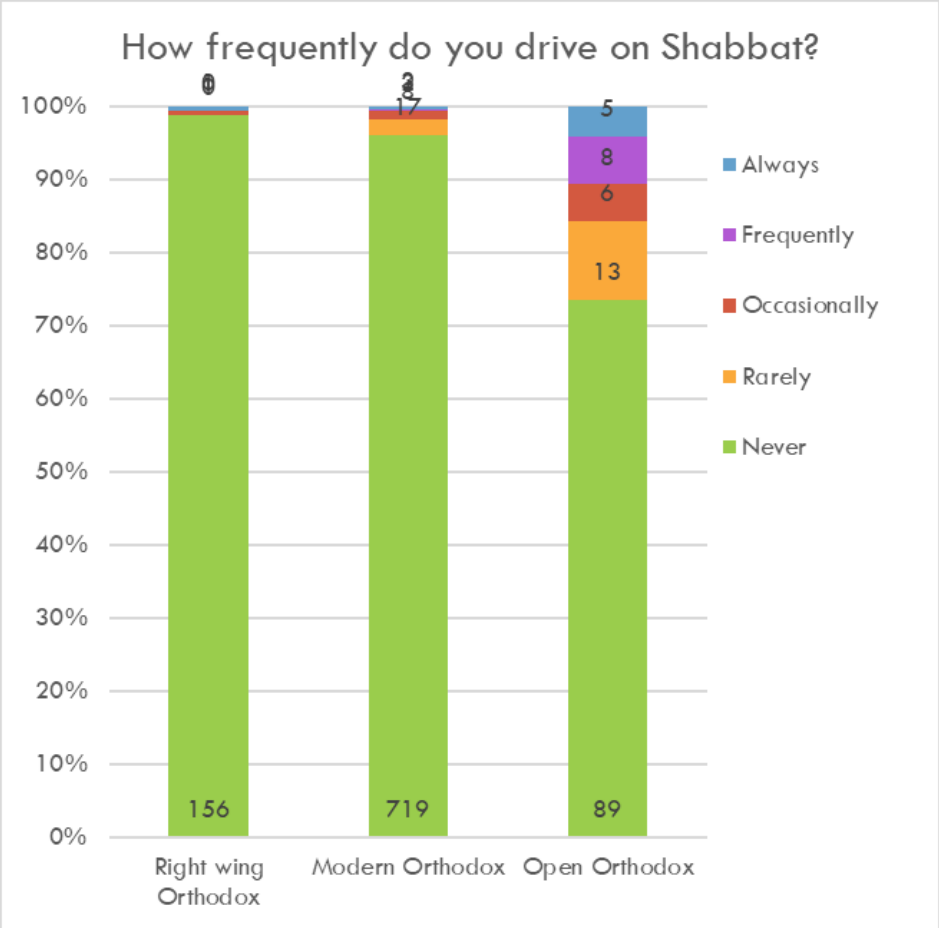
### *Affiliation*

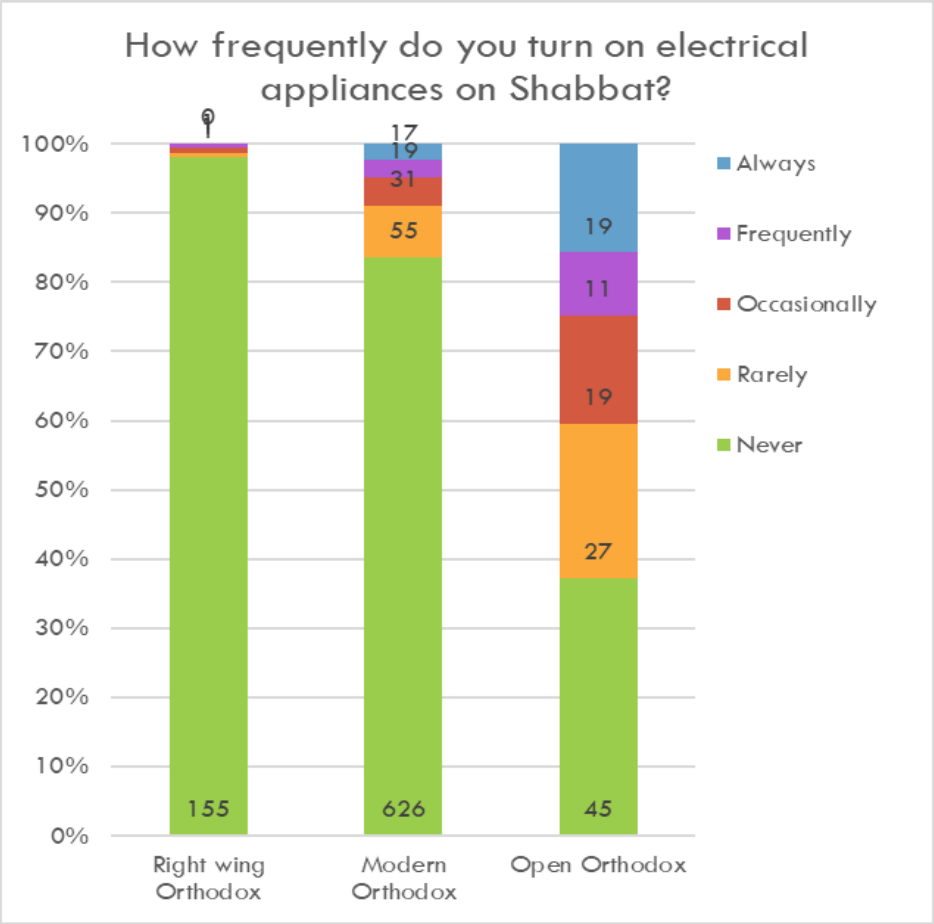
We earlier noted that 62% of respondents identified as Modern Orthodox, 13% as Right-wing Orthodox, and 10% as Open Orthodox. When we compare them to the homes in which they grew up, and assuming that the schools establish the mean (or the center), we again note that there appears to be a move towards that center.

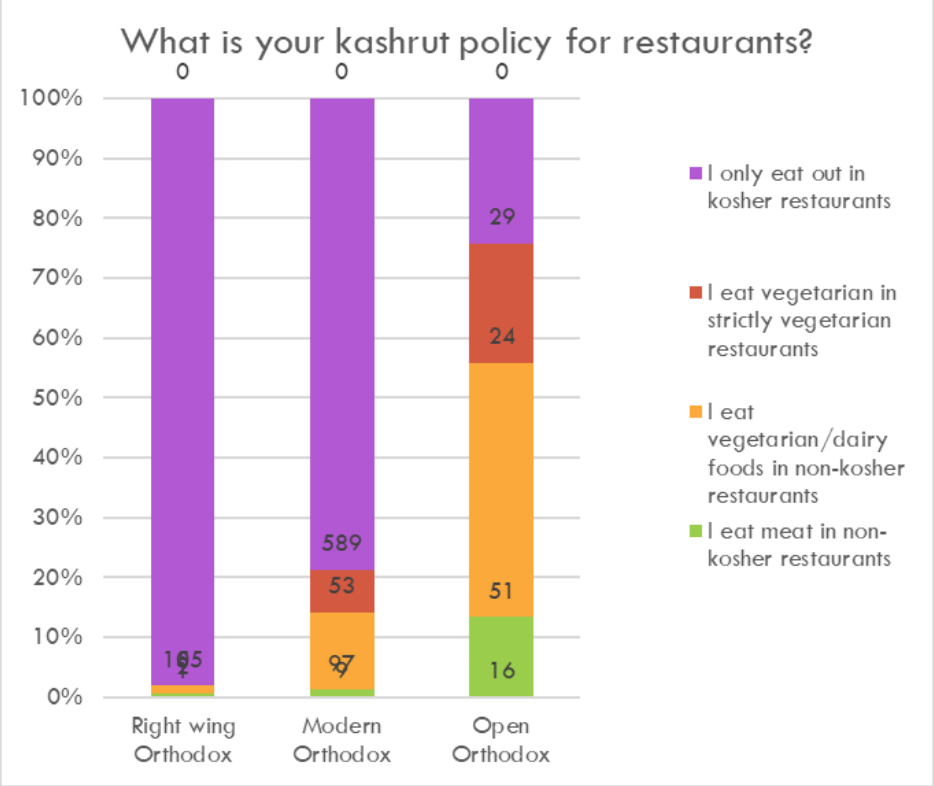


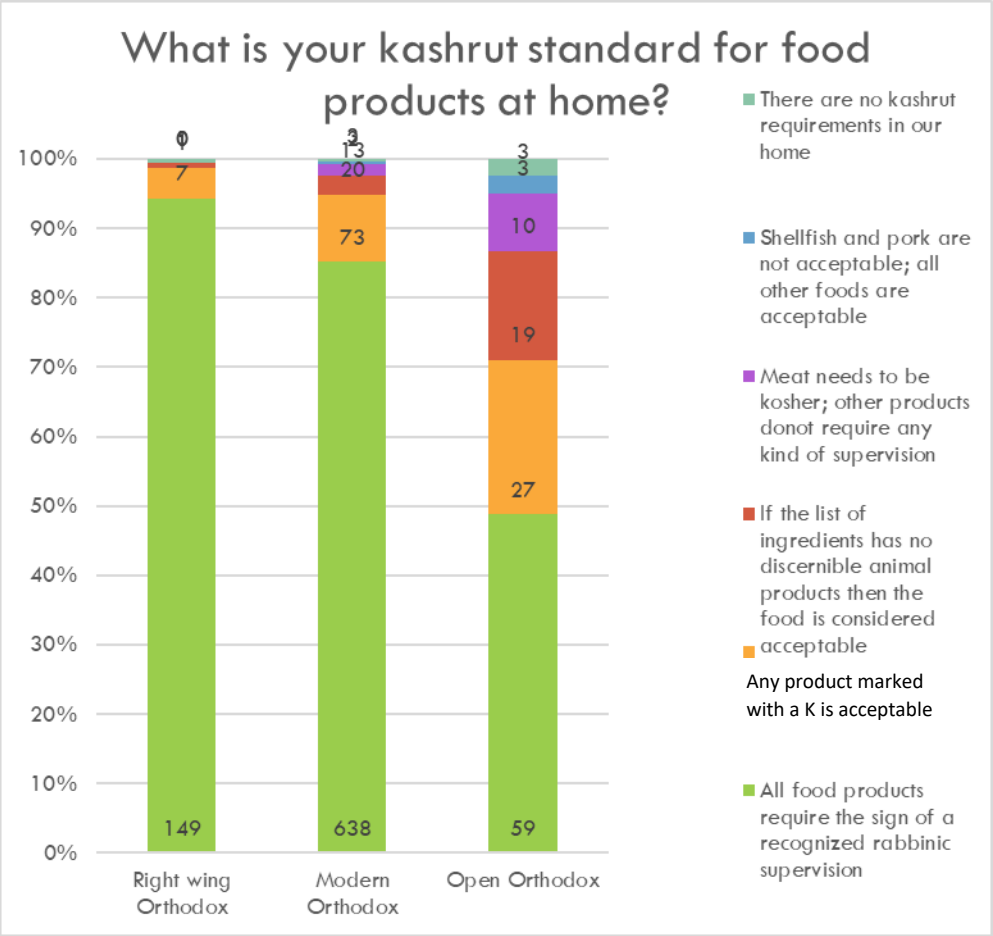
Very few of those growing up as Conservative still identify as such, the largest group of respondents growing up Conservative currently identify as Modern Orthodox. Less than half of those growing up as Right-wing Orthodox currently identify as such, and almost as many as identify as Right-wing Orthodox currently identify as Modern Orthodox or Open Orthodox. By contrast, nearly 80% of those raised as Modern Orthodox currently identify as Modern Orthodox or Open Orthodox.

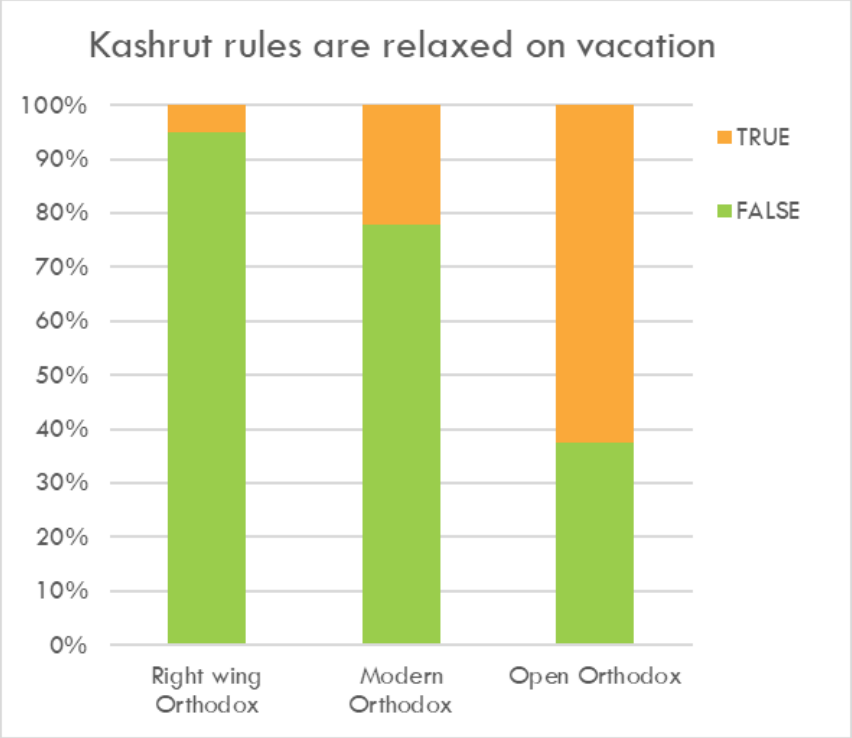
Most respondents readily identified using the three variations on the Orthodox label, although there were some who did not want to be pegged with a label, and the labels reflected different levels of halakhic practices in every area measured. There were substantive differences between the practices of those identifying as Right-wing Orthodox and the Modern Orthodox, and even greater differences between those identifying as Modern Orthodox and Open Orthodox across a range of practices including specific halakhic observances, engaging in Torah study, and the role of halakha in the lives of the respondents.

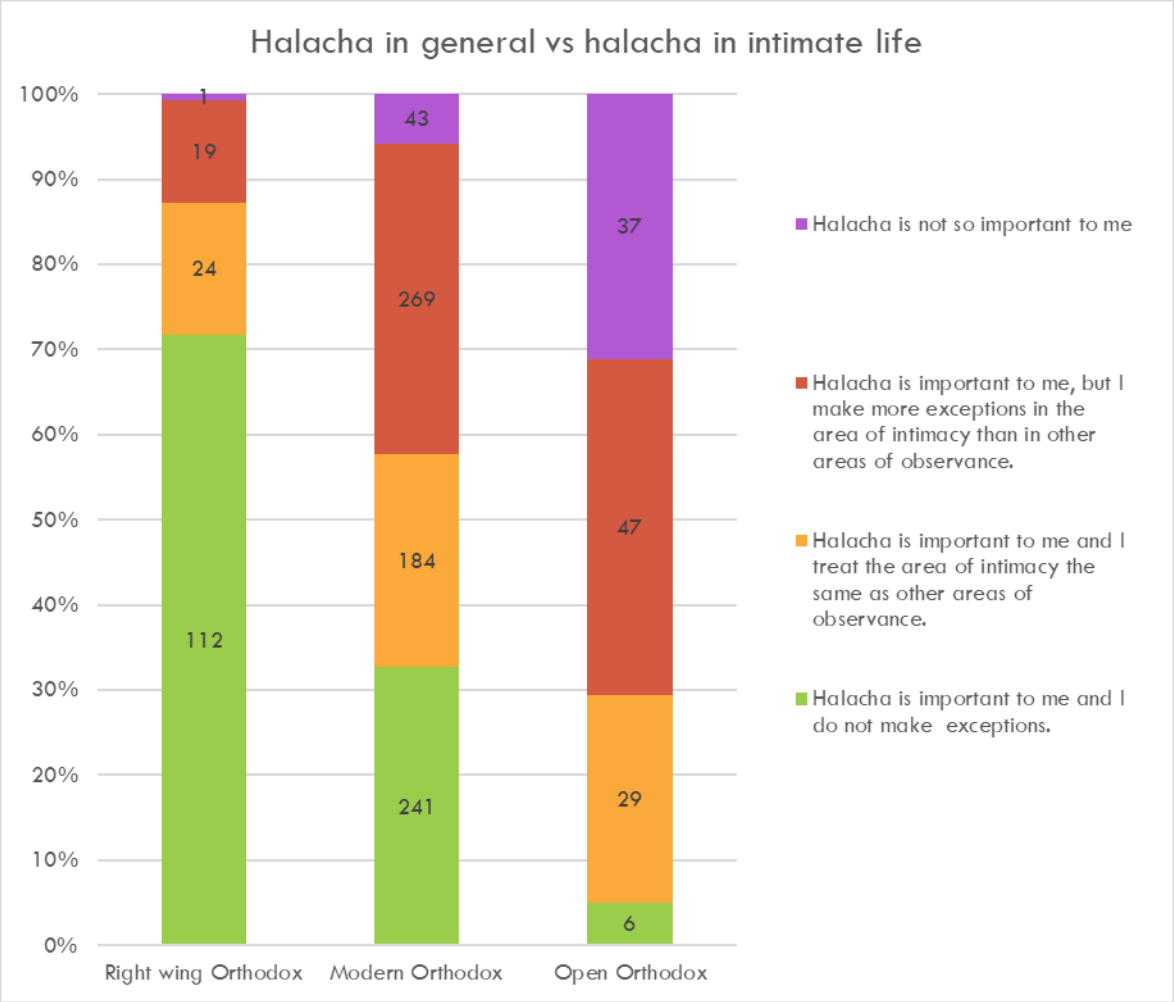


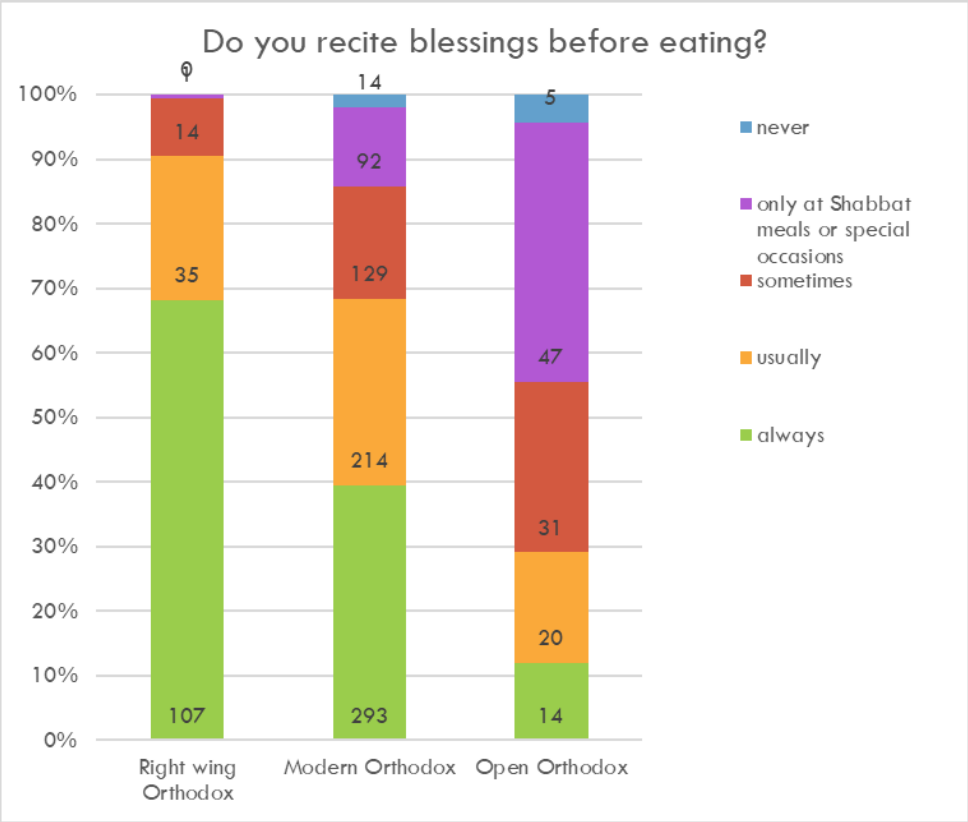


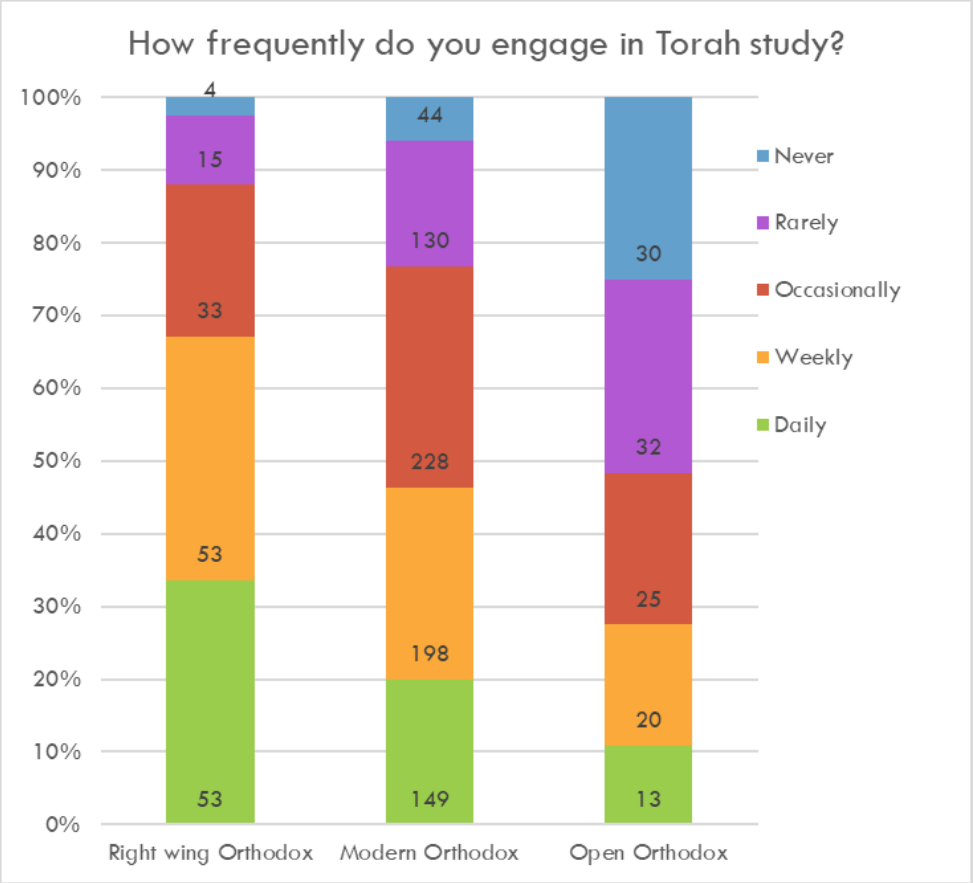





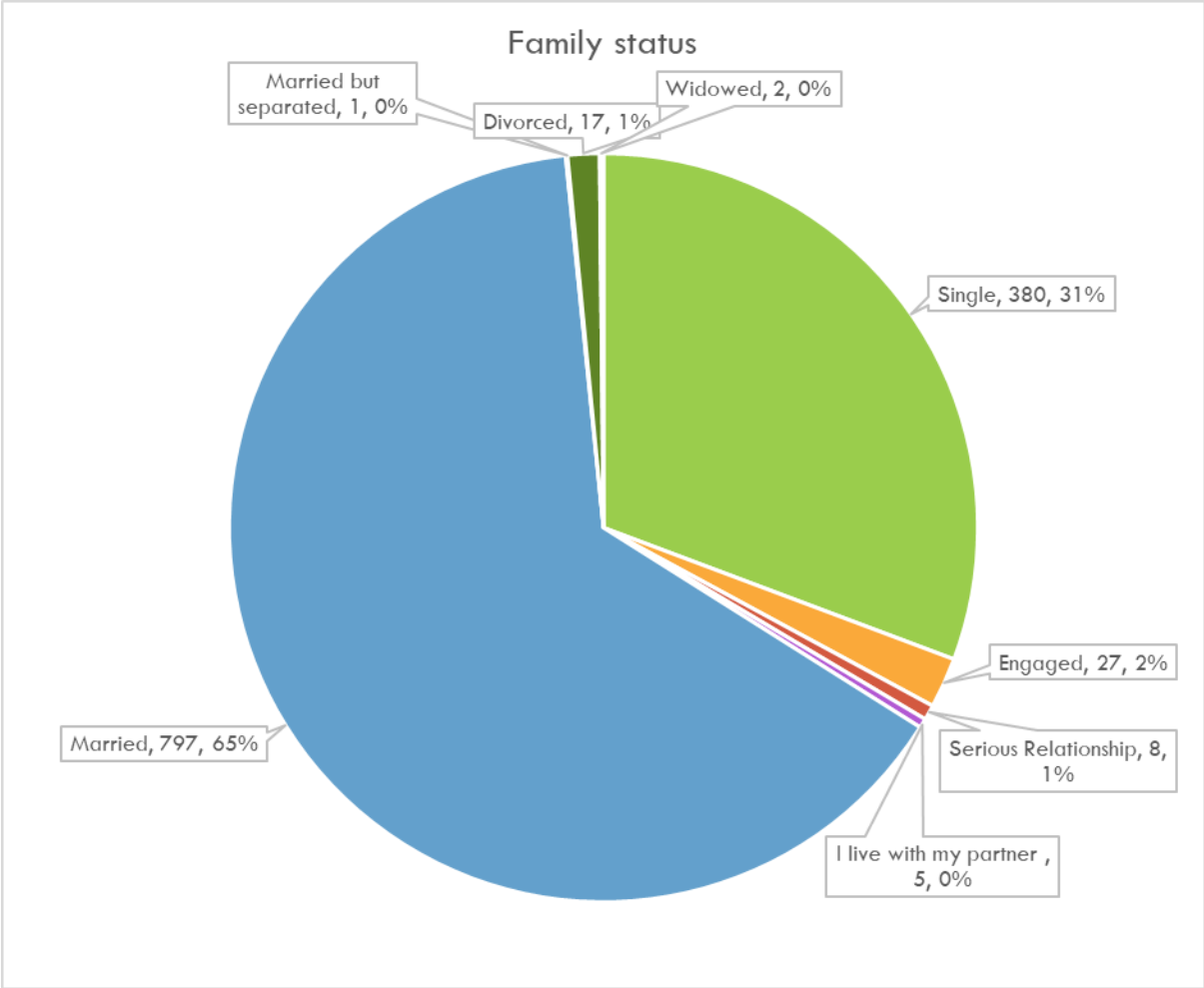




***Family Status***

Within the sample in this study, 65% of respondents were married, 31% were single, and the remaining 4% opted to write in statuses across a range. Three-fourths of those who were married had children, and more than half of the marrieds had two or more children.

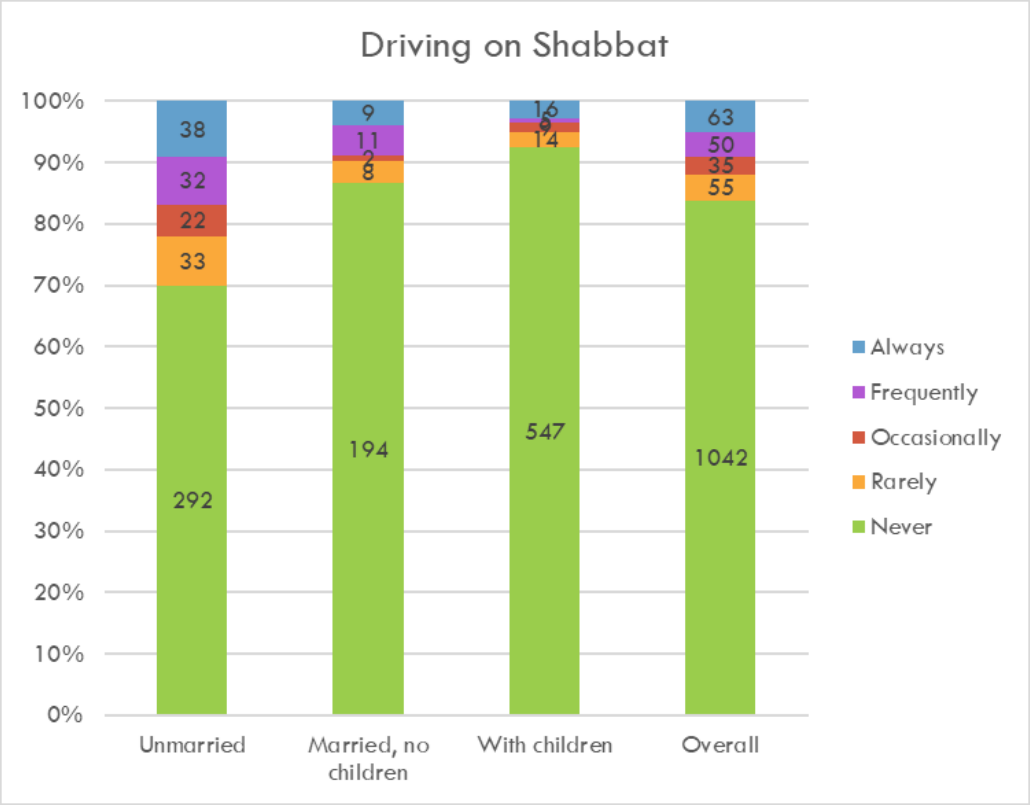


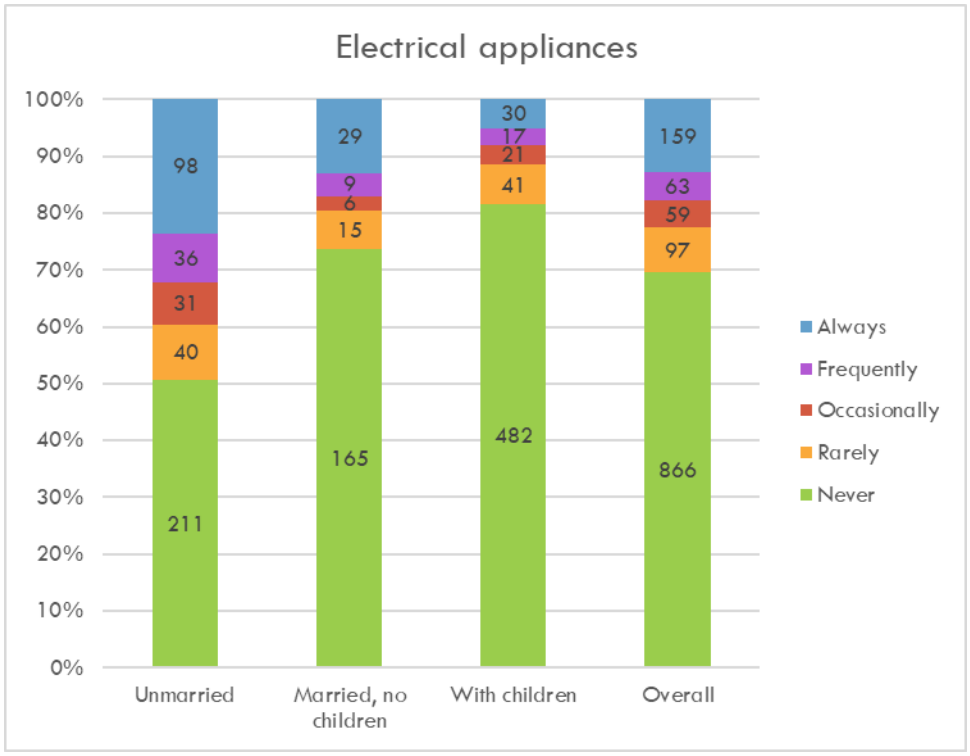

Perhaps the most significant correlate to practice is family status. Unmarried respondents were far less observant than their parents, married participants without children were moderately less observant than their parents, and participants who were married with children had observance levels almost identical – or even exceeding – those of their parents.

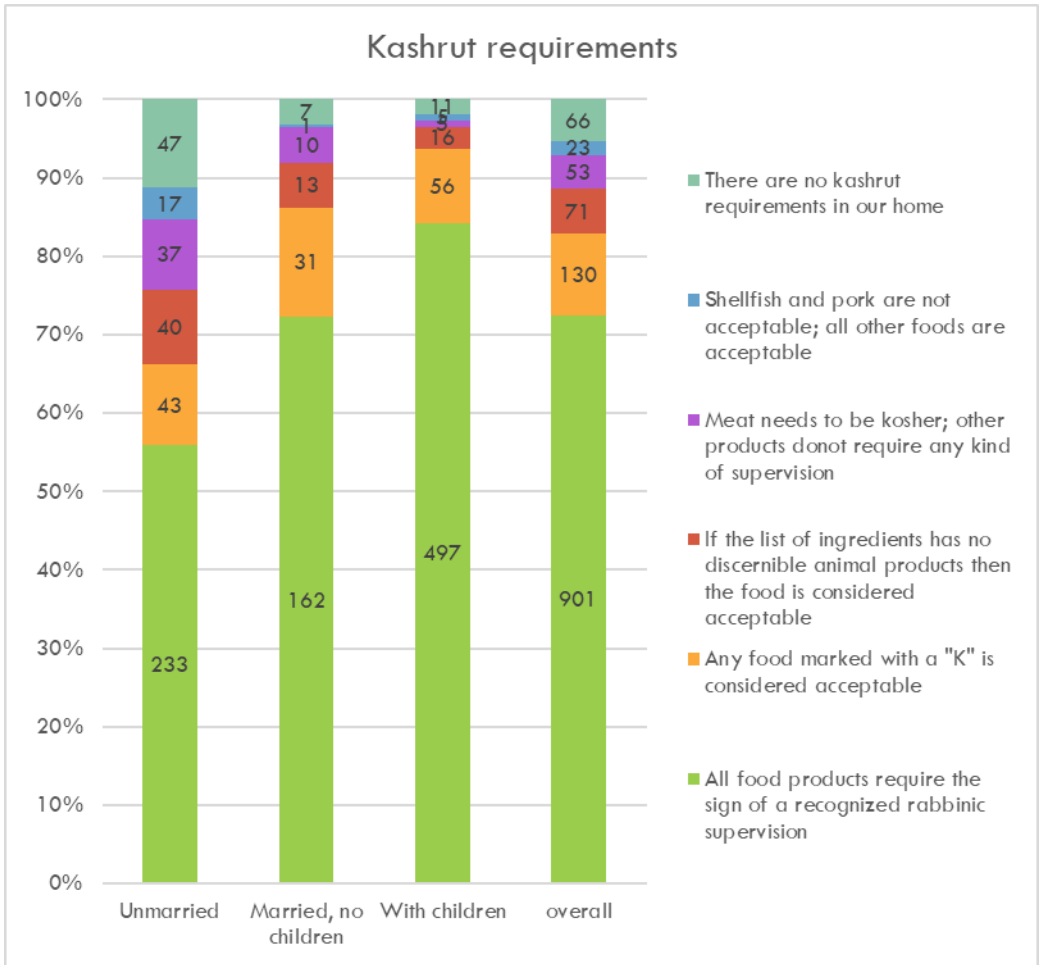
This phenomenon has already been noted in other studies, but family status is highlighted here as perhaps the single most significant and consistent gauge of continuity of religious observance. It is possible that the responsibilities associated with establishing and raising a family generate a process of rethinking long-term religious priorities and imagining the religious lives they want to foster in their nuclear environment. In this sense, for many, the unmarried years may function as an extended Jewish version of Rumspringa (and, as noted earlier, for others, extended singlehood and alienation from community mat serve as a catalyst for

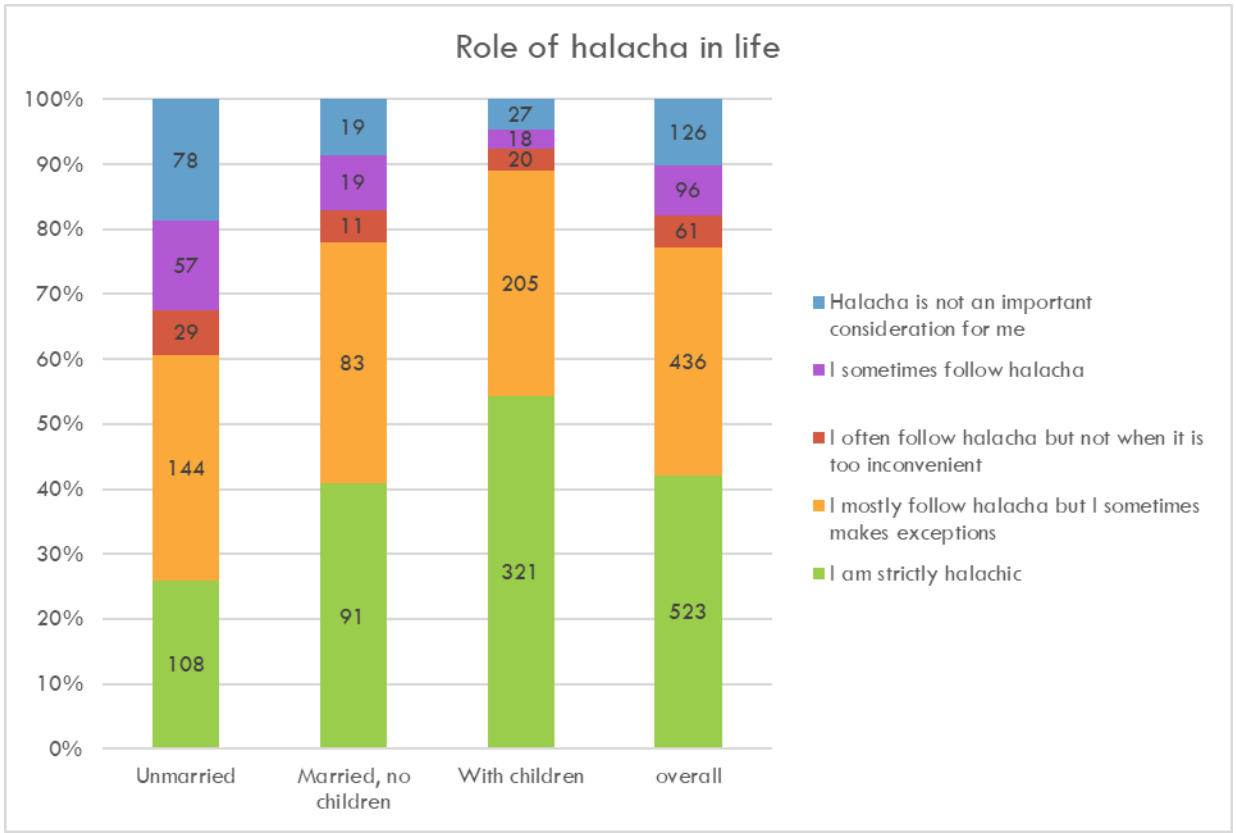
moderating previously strong commitment). What is not clear is if the realities of establishing a home are the catalyst for the end of the period of personal exploration of if the decision to end the period of exploration is the catalyst for being able to make the decision to marry and establish a family. The practical implications of this distinction are significant. If the former, then the Jewish community should be finding ways to help Jewish singles get married, and the associated responsibilities will foster increased observance. If the latter, then those efforts will not bear meaningful fruit.

It is also possible that, since Orthodox Jewish practice is deeply linked with community, it is the feeling of belonging to a community, and the need to conform to the associated communal norms which generate increased levels of practice. The communal institutions are still, for the most part, geared towards families, and unmarried individuals feel left out. If this is the case, then efforts need to be made broaden the nature of communal institutions, including synagogues and communal events, so that singles feel part of that community.



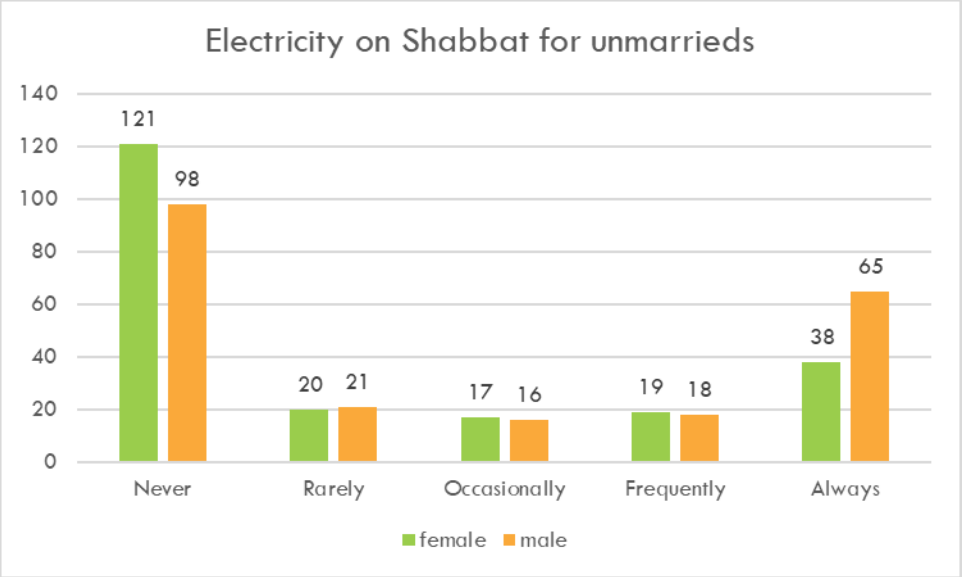


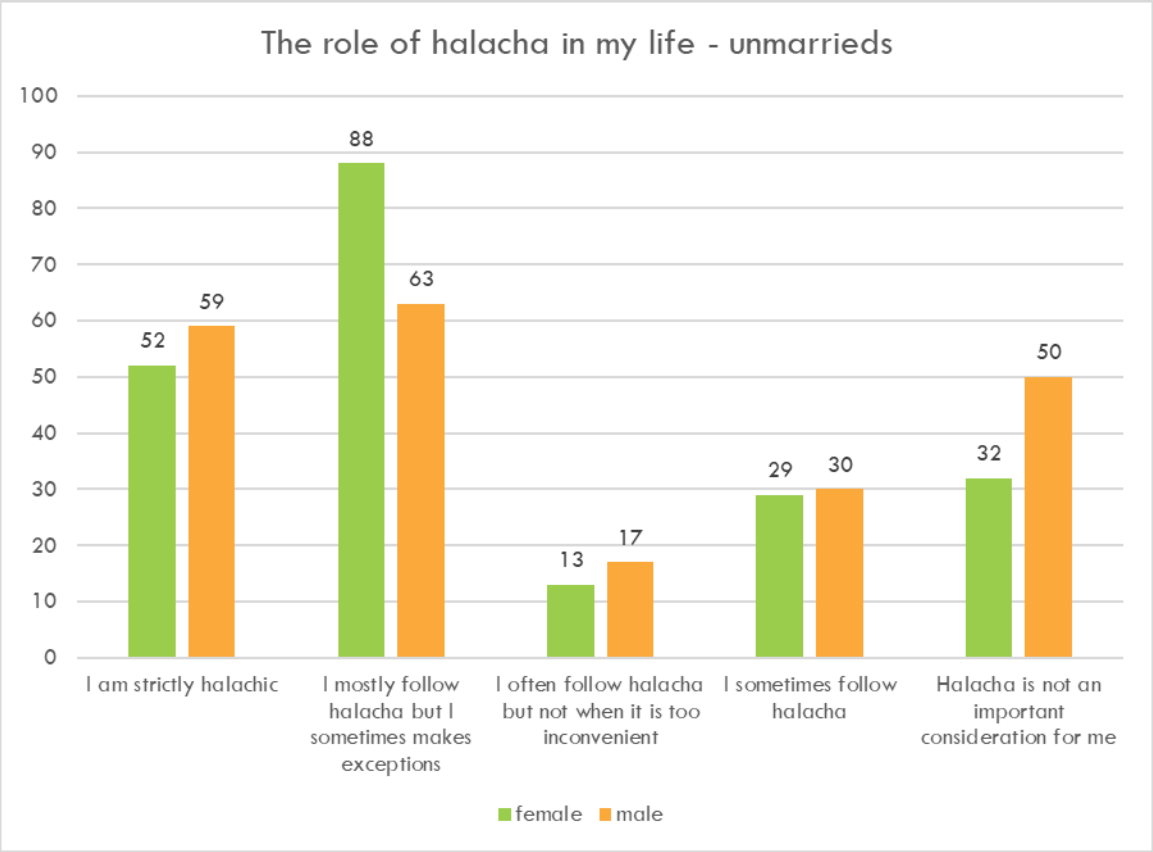




For those who are not married, there were slight differences between men and women, with some interesting results. The number of unmarried men (219) and women (219) was nearly

equal. Relating to specific Shabbat practices, women seemed slightly more observant. When asked overall about the role of halakha in their lives, more men than women indicated the strictest level of observance but many more women than men indicated a level of observance one notch below the most strict.



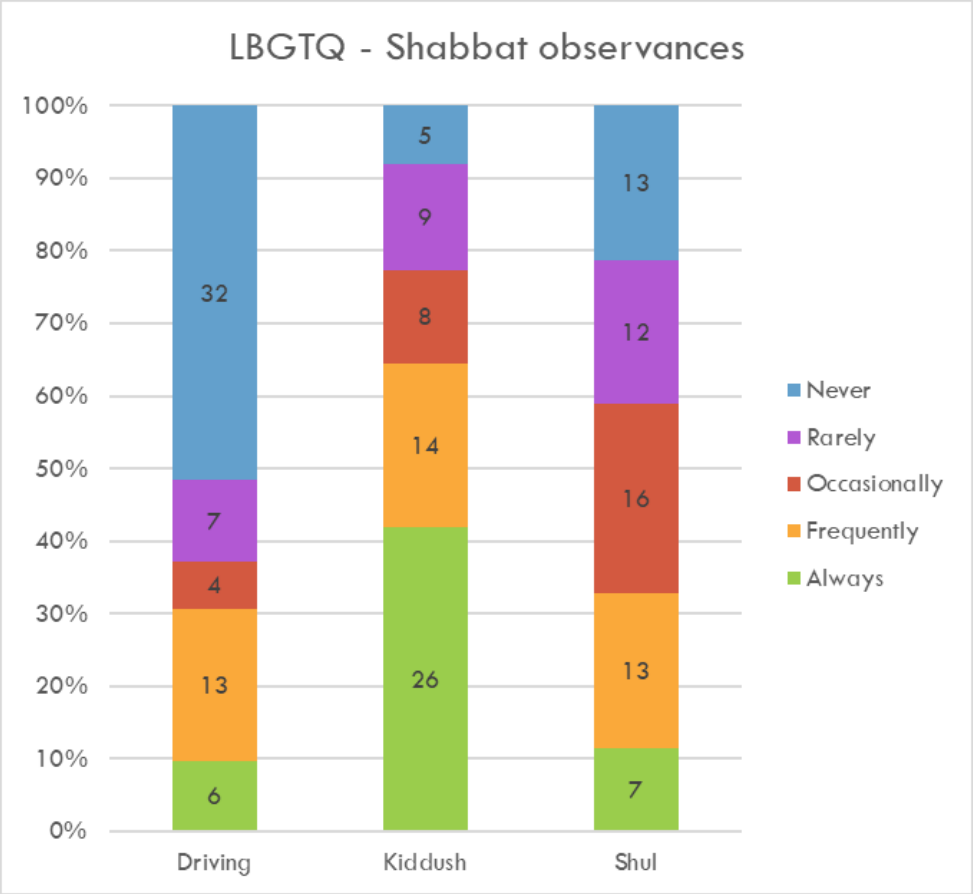


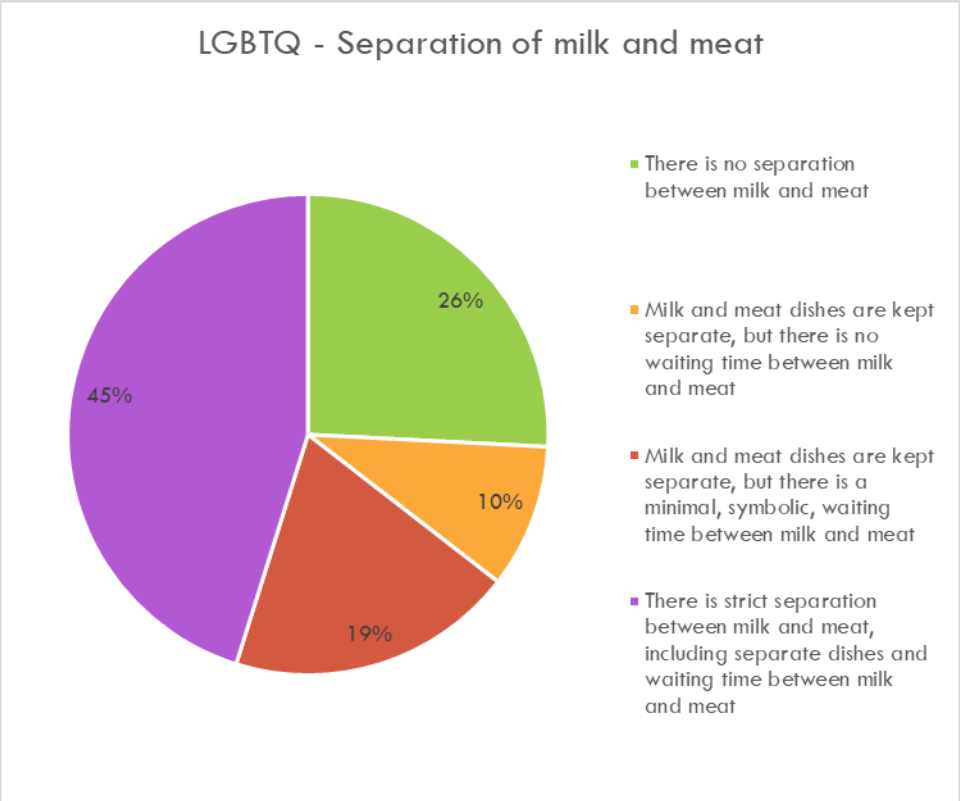

***LBGTQ***

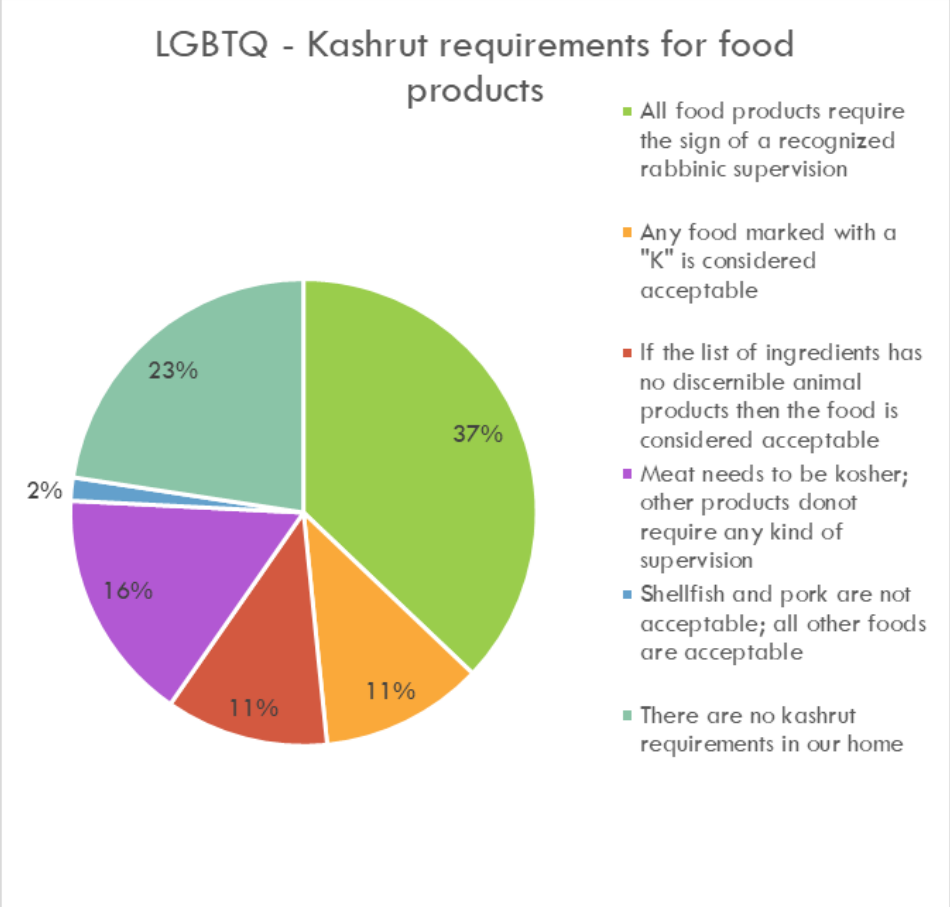
As indicated earlier, 4.9% or respondents identified themselves as LBGTQ. 61% of the LBGTQ identified as male and 39% identified as female; none left the gender field blank. 55 out of 62 respondents who identified as LGBTQ came from strictly observant homes, and levels of observance for this group were about 10% higher than for the overall LBGTQ respondents, consistent with the patterns seen in the straight respondents. Since this survey was administered via Google Forms, I was able to track data as it arrived. At every stage of data collection, the percentage of LGBTQ respondents ranged from 3-6% of the total. Many of the questions posed were not relevant to them (i.e., intimacy with members of the opposite sex), and personal communications from some members of that community indicated a reluctance to participate in the survey because the survey did not delve more deeply into that community. The relatively small number of respondents in this survey (62) suggests that this population deserves its own, tailored study. Nonetheless, the responses from that community reveal a complexity of the respondents' relationship to Jewish life and practice.

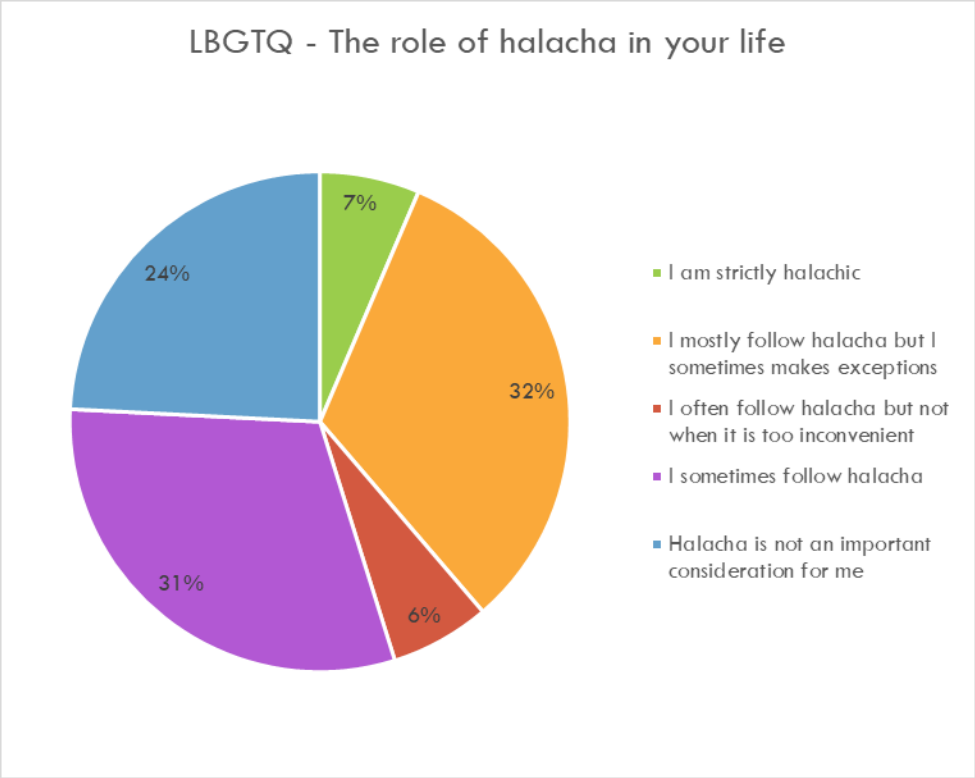
While some LBGTQ respondents had little interest in halakha, and that is easily understandable given fundamental conflicts between halakhic restrictions and the emotional/sexual needs of this community, a significant percentage of the LGBTQ respondents indicated considerable

commitment to halakhic practice (39% identified as mostly or strictly halakhic) and involvement in Jewish life as a whole.







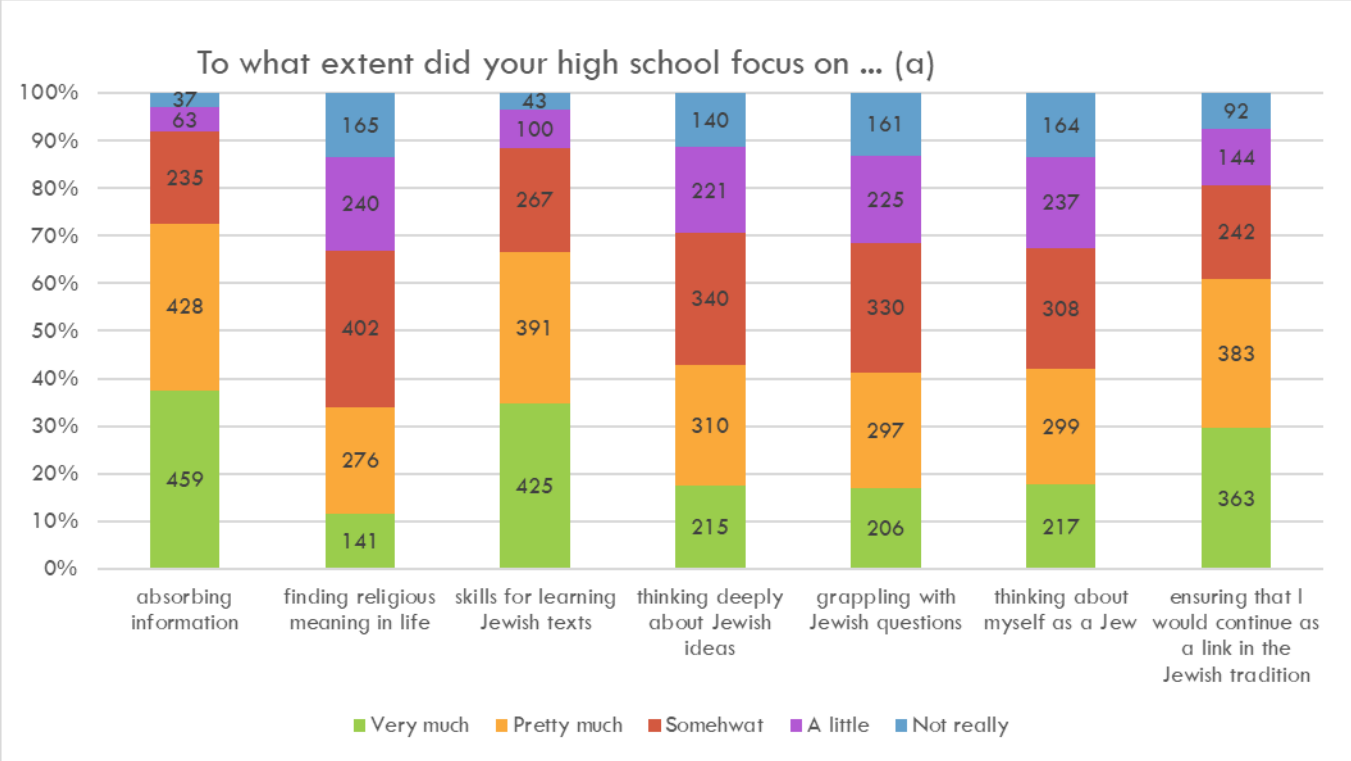

## IV. JEWISH EDUCATION

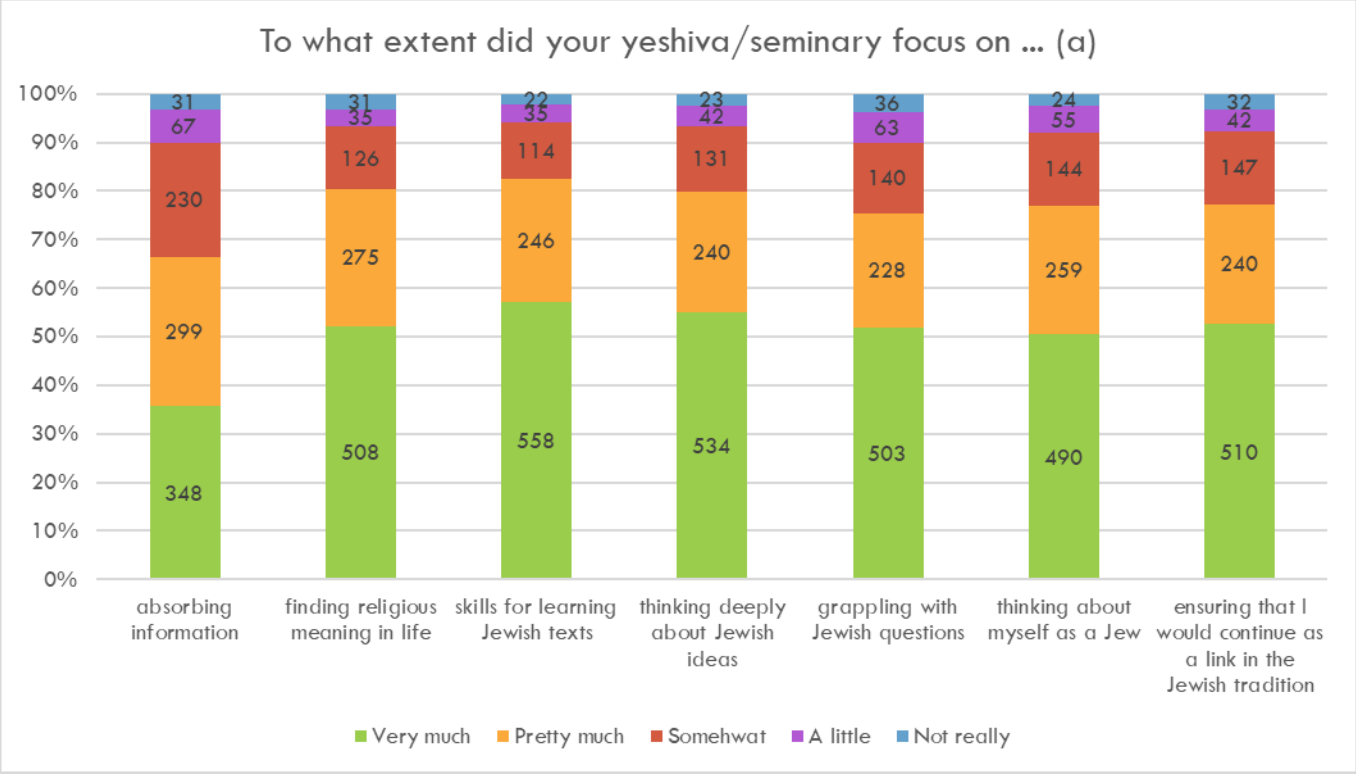
### *Educational messages*

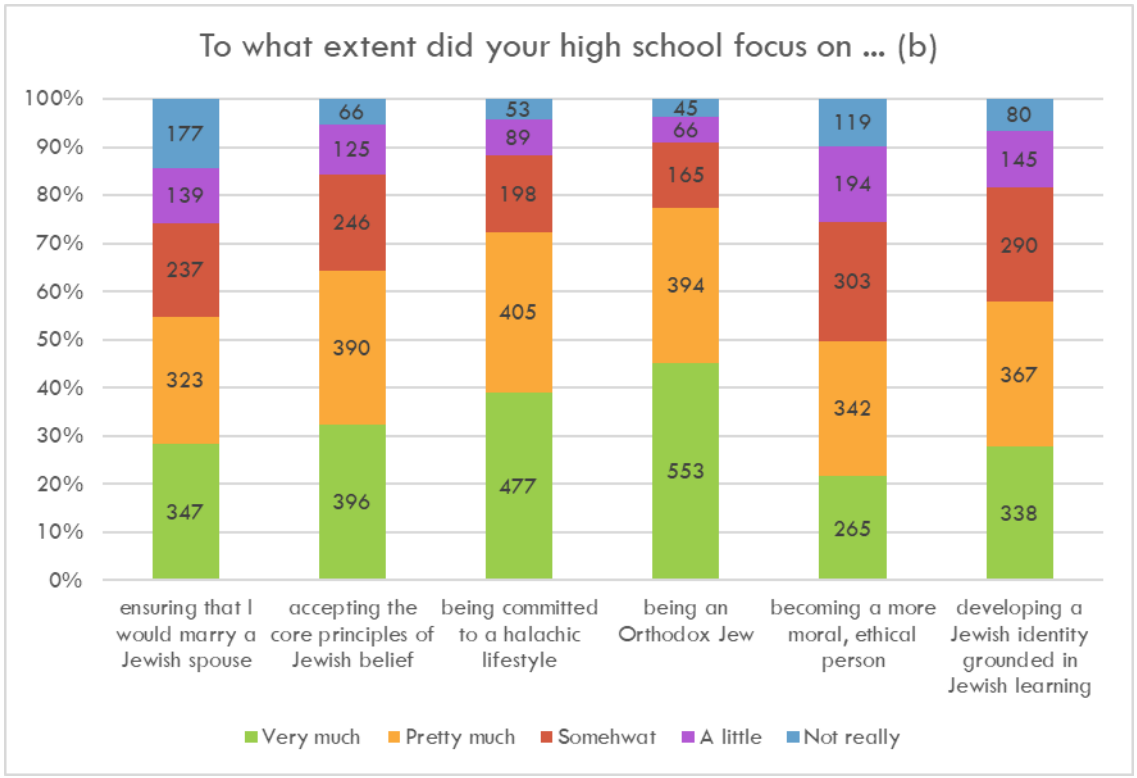
Respondents were asked two kinds of questions regarding their educational backgrounds. The first asked what, in their perception, their school focused on and prepared them for in their future Jewish lives. The second focused more narrowly on various questions of belief which, in many Orthodox communities, are considered dogmatic. Following up on this second set of questions, respondents were asked about their own, current beliefs. The following two charts summarize the data from the respondents' experience in their high schools and in their yeshiva/seminaries.

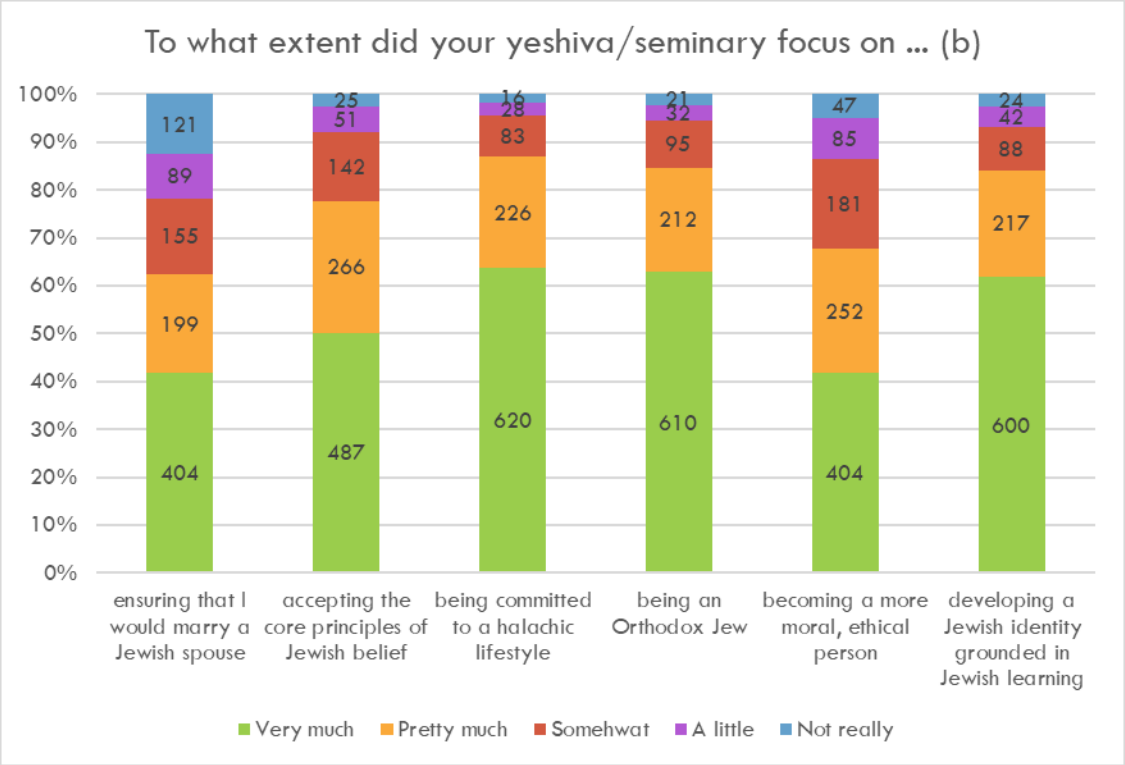
A comparison of the two indicates substantive differences in the foci of these two different educational institutions, at least in the perceptions of their alumni. Whereas the focus on absorbing information seems consistent amongst the two institutions, the focus on finding religious meaning in life or developing a Jewish identity is much more pronounced in the yeshivot/seminaries than in the high schools. Also more pronounced in the yeshivot/seminaries is the focus on leading a halakhic lifestyle, becoming a more ethical person, and continuity as a member of the Orthodox community.

A caveat, again, is in order. We are dealing with memory of experiences which took place a minimum of four years (and in some cases more than ten years) before this survey was administered. Memories of experiences can be affected by a multitude of factors including conversations with others about those experiences and the very last experience (see Kahneman, pp. 377-385), so that the memory of a high school or yeshiva/seminary experience may be different from the actual experience. Nonetheless, the memories are significant, as these still have a significant impact on the long-term educational outcomes.





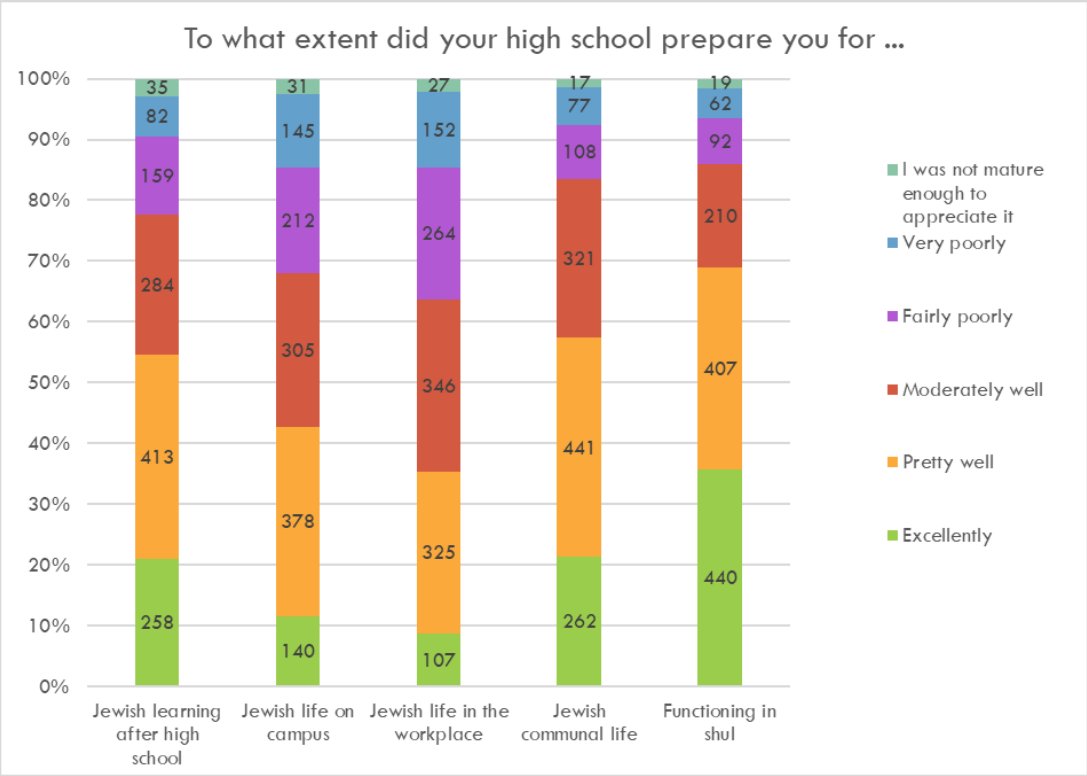



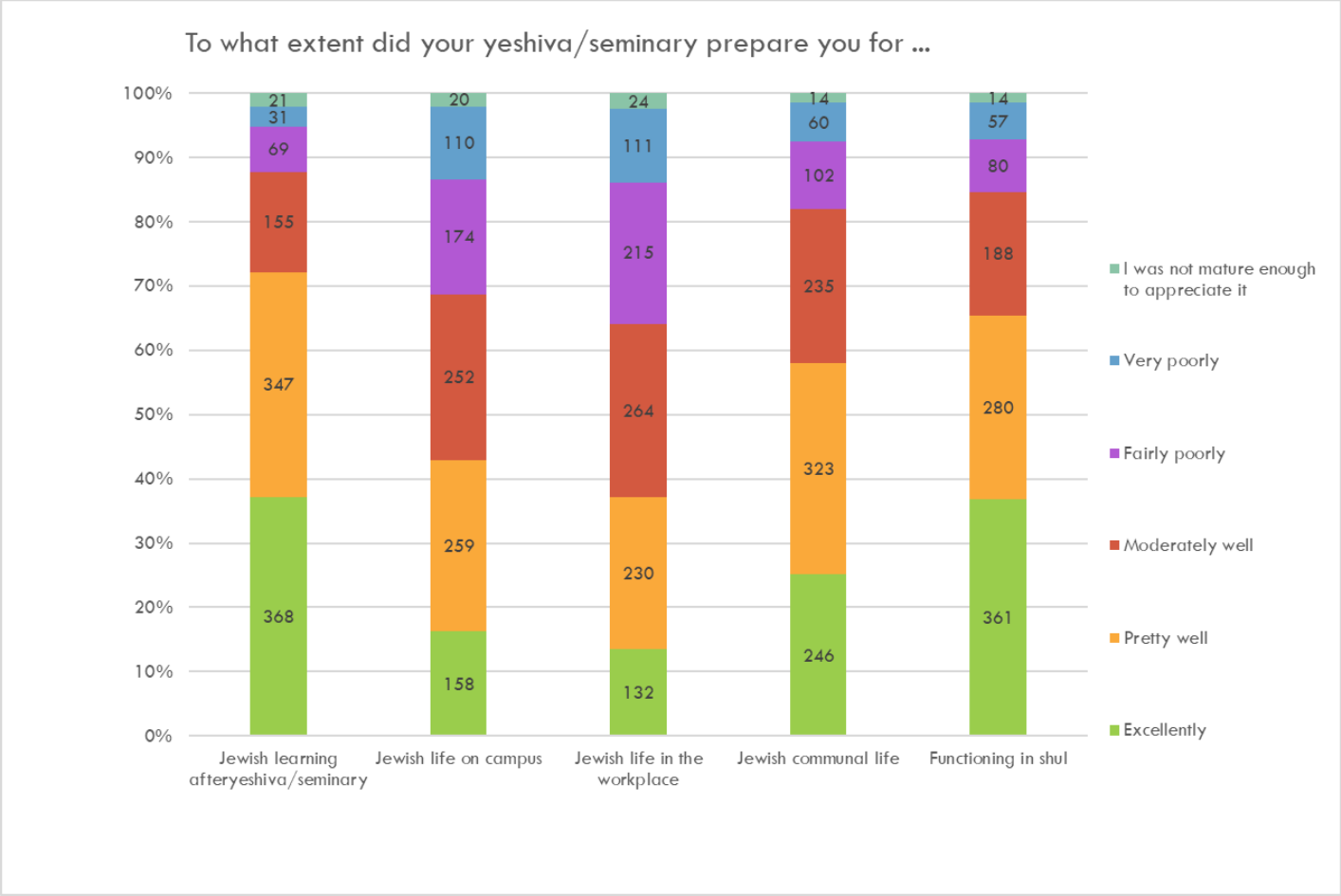



To a large extent these differences are understandable. The high schools deal with students who are younger and less mature, the high schools are tasked with delivering a dual curriculum, the high schools are built on traditional Western models of academic accountability, and – with rare exception – the high schools are generally not full immersion programs. Further, the high schools are often community-based institutions aiming to attract a broad population, and may need to adjust their ideological messages accordingly. The yeshivot/seminaries are substantively different in each of these ways, they are not community-based, and tend to be more independent and have a more narrowly focused ideological agenda.

That being said, it is interesting that there is not a greater emphasis in the high schools on identity-building. It is also interesting that, in the high schools, the most highly emphasized value was "being an Orthodox Jew." This was ranked higher than absorbing knowledge, learning skills for studying Jewish texts, being committed to a halakhic lifestyle, or accepting principles of Jewish faith. It is hard to know what "being an Orthodox Jew" means, but it is apparently a phrase which was repeatedly emphasized – more than any other – with implications beyond practice and belief.

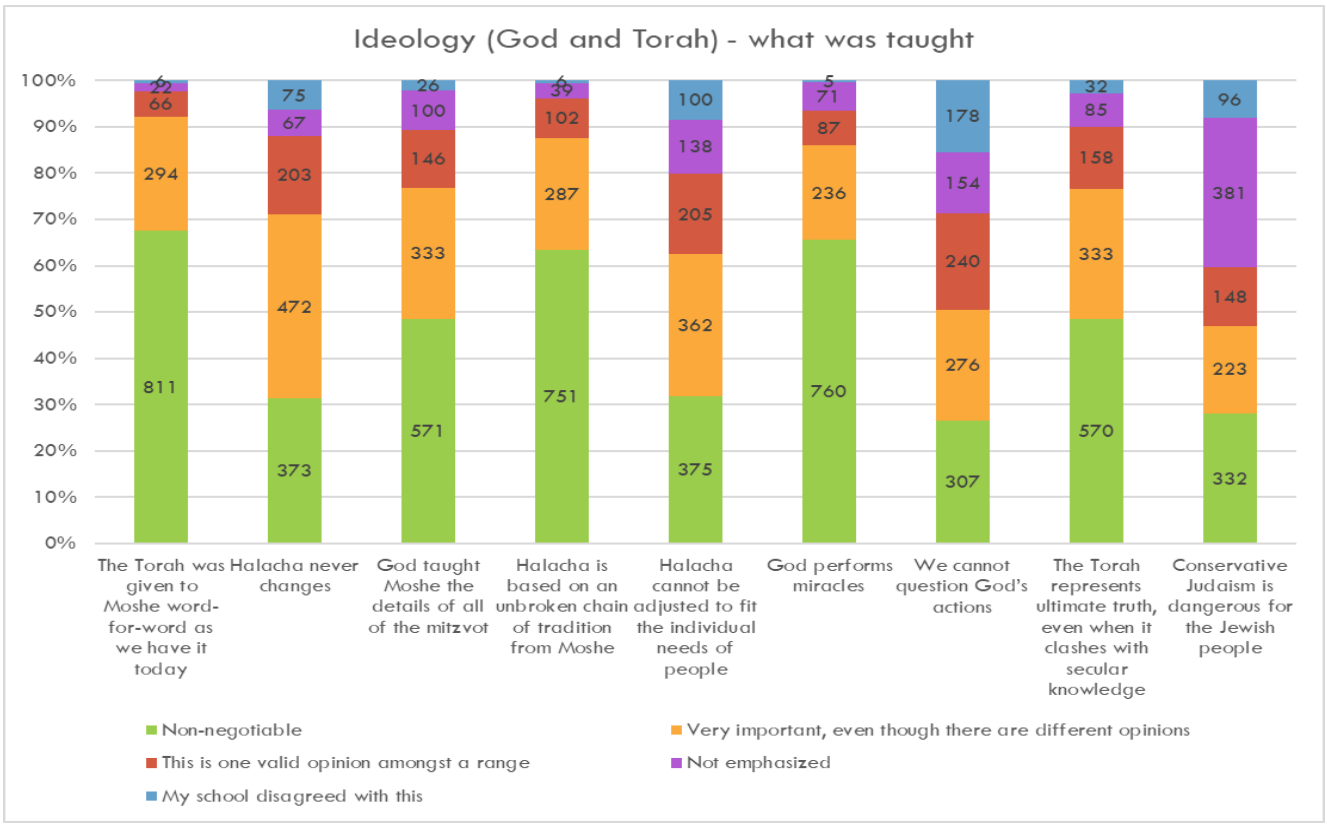
A different set of questions asked students what they thought their educational institutions (high school and yeshiva/seminary) prepared them for. For these there was remarkable consistency between the high schools and the yeshivot/seminaries. Students ranked their educational institutions best at preparing them for Jewish learning after they left those institutions and for functioning in shul, and worst in preparing them for Jewish life on campus and in the workplace. This raises important questions about the educational foci of these institutions as they prepare the students for functioning Jewishly in Jewish contexts but not for functioning Jewish in the contexts where they face the greatest challenges.

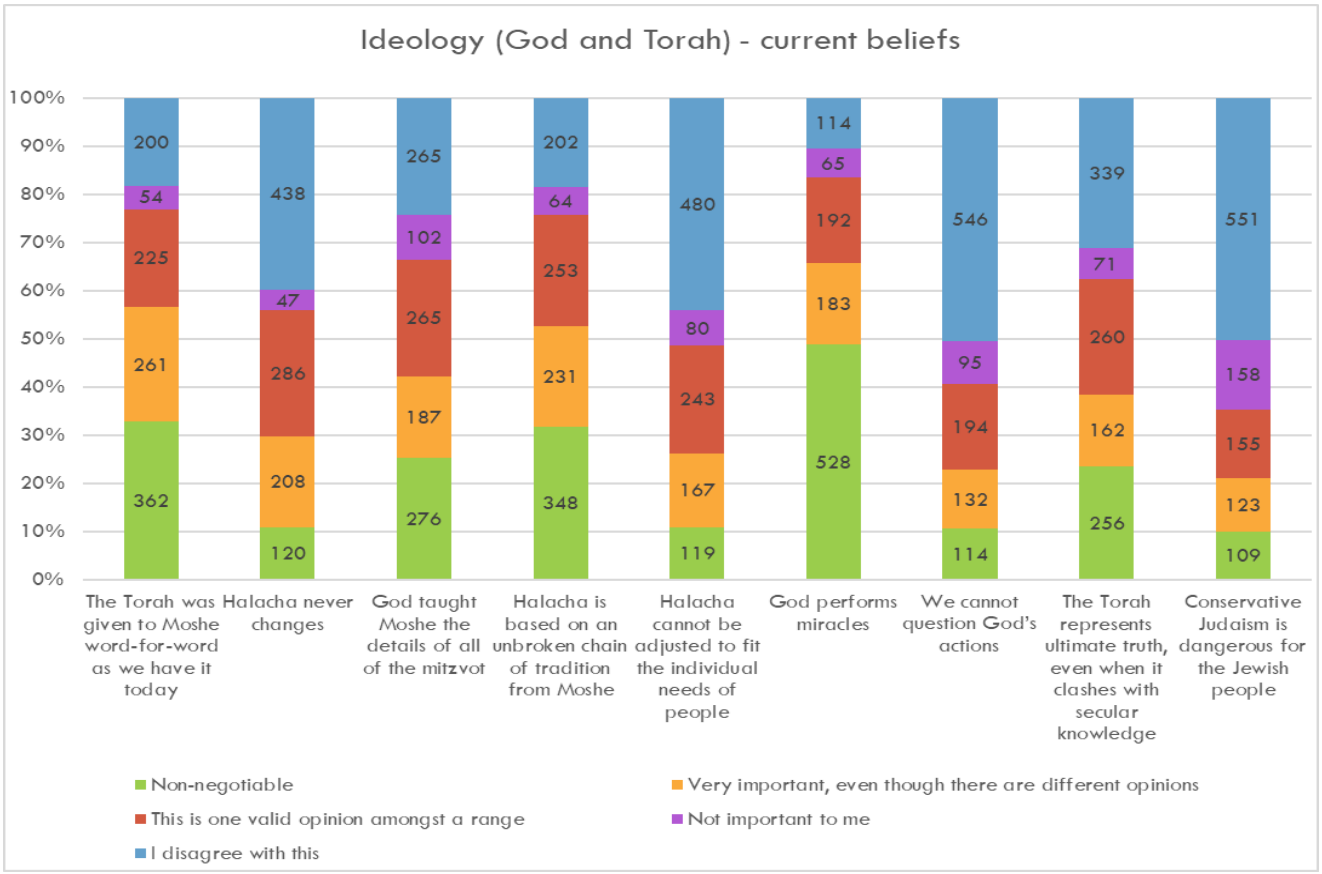





***Beliefs***

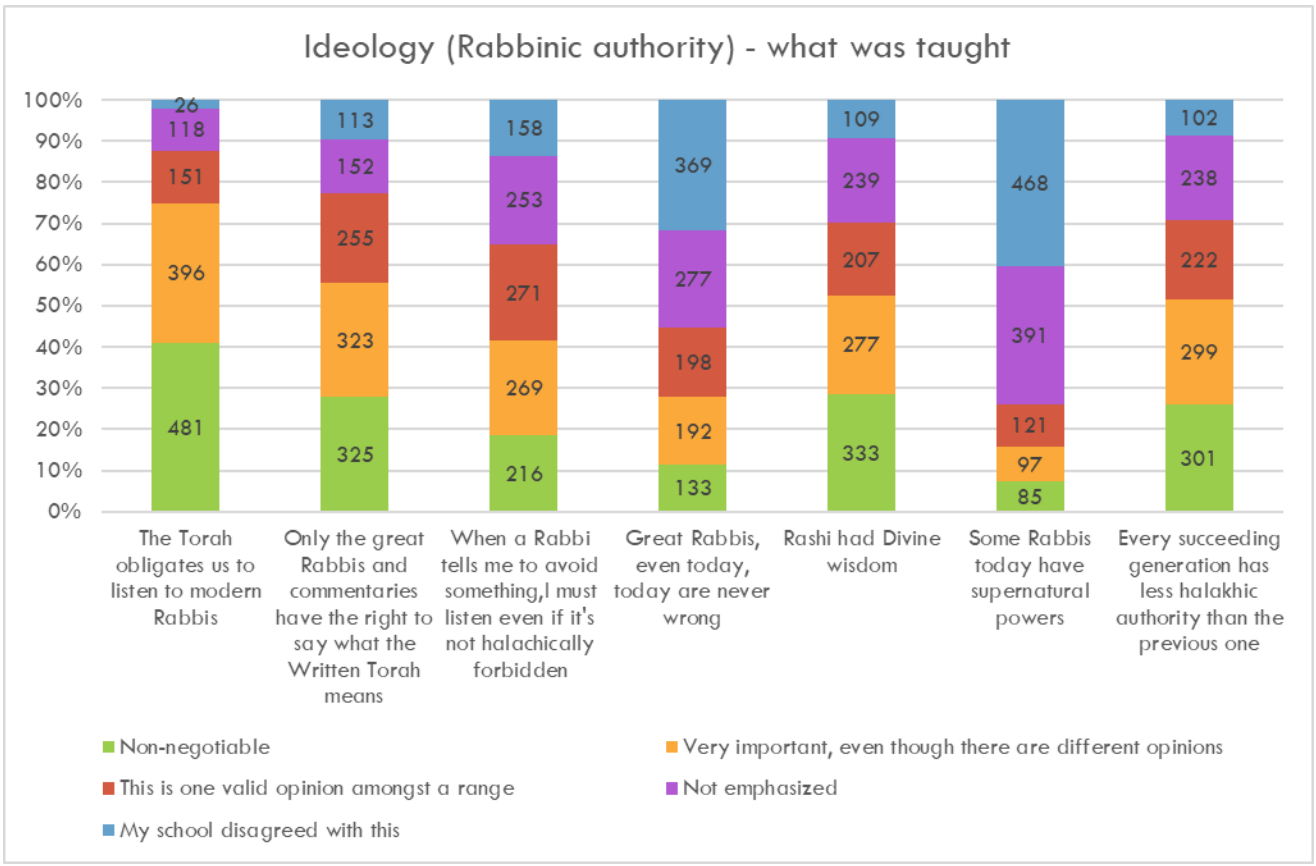
Orthodox Judaism comes with a set of beliefs, some rooted in dogmatic formulations (e.g., Maimonides' Thirteen Principles) and others disseminated through popular Orthodox literature, rabbinic teachings, and communal norms. It is in this area that the data reveal the greatest disparity between what the students were taught and their current beliefs. The belief statements are divided into four categories – the first is ideological statements about God and Torah, the second relates to Rabbinic authority, the third to the Jew in the world, and the fourth related to the status of women.

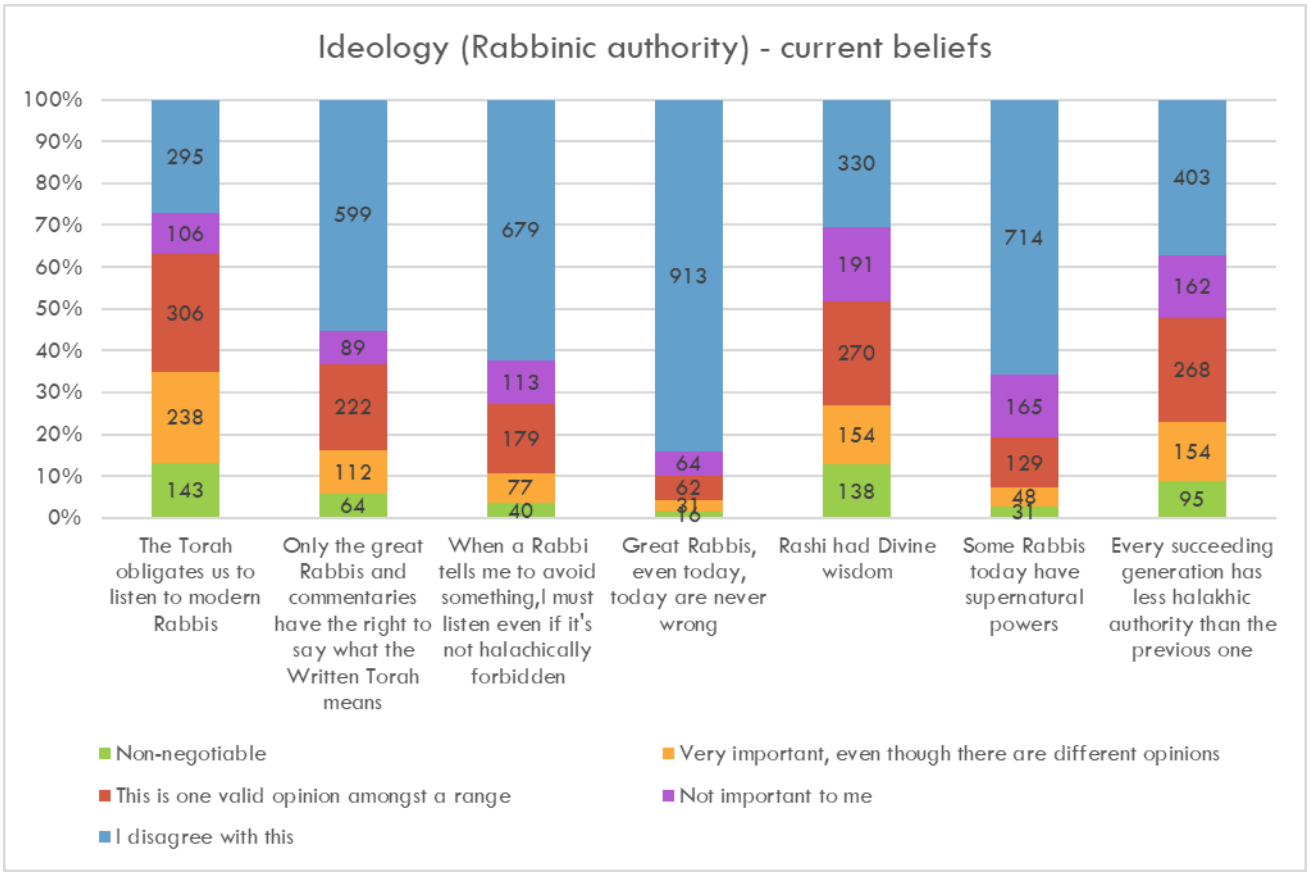


The data show a remarkable dissonance between what respondents believe they were taught in their formal Jewish education and their current beliefs. Regarding whether the Torah was given to Moshe word-for-word as we have it today, 67% recall being taught that as a non-negotiable axiom while less than half of those currently accept it as axiomatic. Regarding halakhic immutability, 31% recall that being an axiomatic teaching while a third of those currently accept it as such. Similar disparities exist regarding nearly every one of the faith statements listed. Equally significant is how many disagree with those very statements that were emphasized as non-negotiable. 18% reject the purity of the Torah text, nearly 40% reject the immutability of halakha, 24% reject the notion that God taught Moshe the details of the mitzvot, 44% reject the idea that halakha cannot be adjusted to meet personal needs, 51% reject a limitation on questioning God's actions, and 32% reject the idea that the Torah represents an ultimate truth.

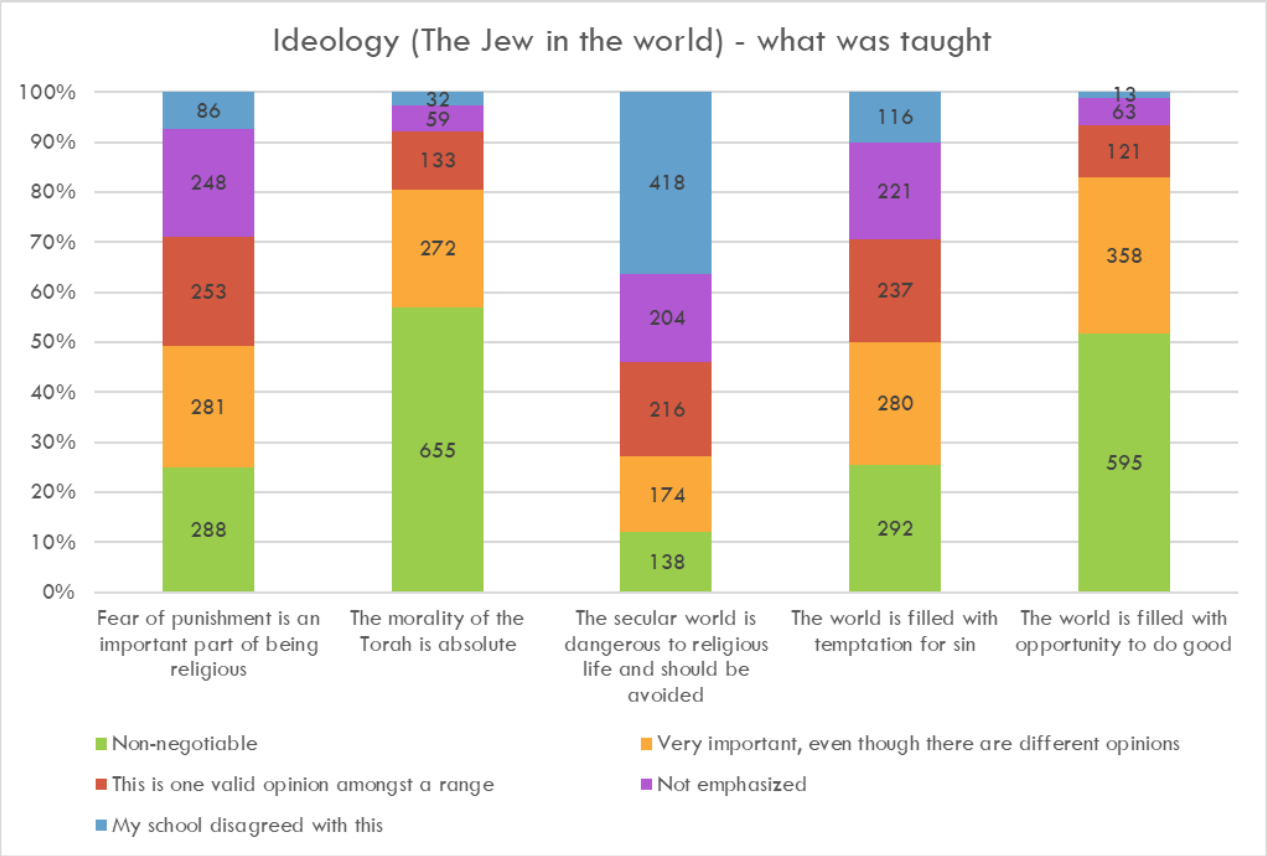
A similar trend was observed in the second category, related to Rabbinic authority. More than 40% recall being taught that it is axiomatic that we are obligated to listen to modern Rabbis, but only 13% of those currently accept that in the same way; 28% were taught that Biblical interpretation is limited to great Rabbis; less than 5% currently accept that as axiomatic; 28% were taught that it is necessary to believe that Rashi had Divine wisdom, only 13% currently accept that; 24% were taught that they must accept that latter generations have less authority than earlier ones, yet only 8% currently accept that position. Again, even more striking are those who reject those axiomatic positions. 28% reject the obligation to listen to modern Rabbis, 55% reject the limitation of Biblical interpretation to great Rabbis, 31% reject the idea that Rashi had Divine wisdom, and 37% reject the idea of the diminishing authority of Rabbis in each generation.

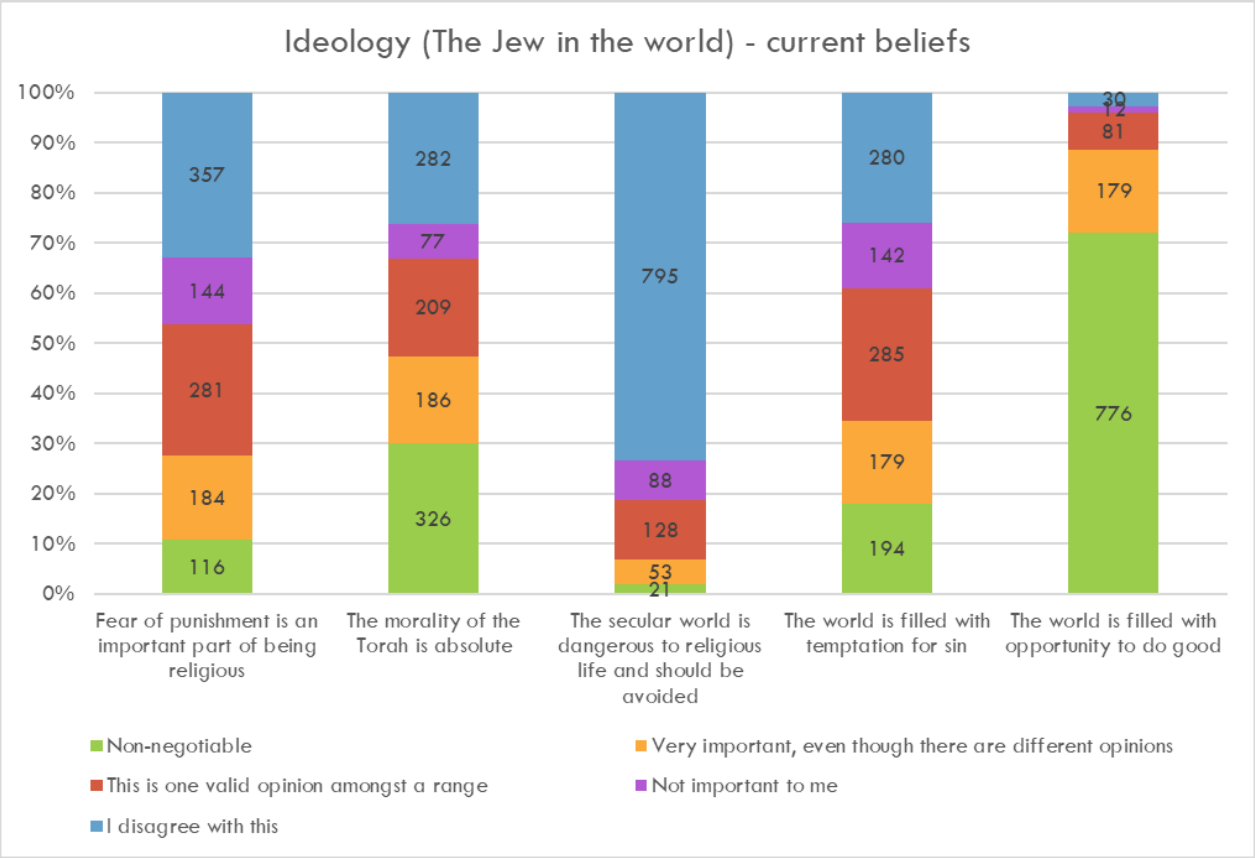





Regarding the third category, the Jew in the world, the pattern of the severely diminished or rejected role of doctrine continues, although the dogmatic nature of many these statements regarding what was taught was considerably less than in the first two categories we examined. This is likely because the study was done on students graduating from Modern Orthodox schools, where integration into the secular world is considered a given (and the statements reflect a more hard-line right-wing Orthodox perspective). In this category, few of the belief statements were taught as axiomatic, many fewer currently accept as non-negotiable the principles which they believe they were expected to accept, and many outright eject those positions. Fear of punishment as an important religious belief was taught as very important to almost half of respondents, but was rejected outright by a third. The danger of the secular world was taught as very important to more than one fourth of respondents but rejected by nearly three

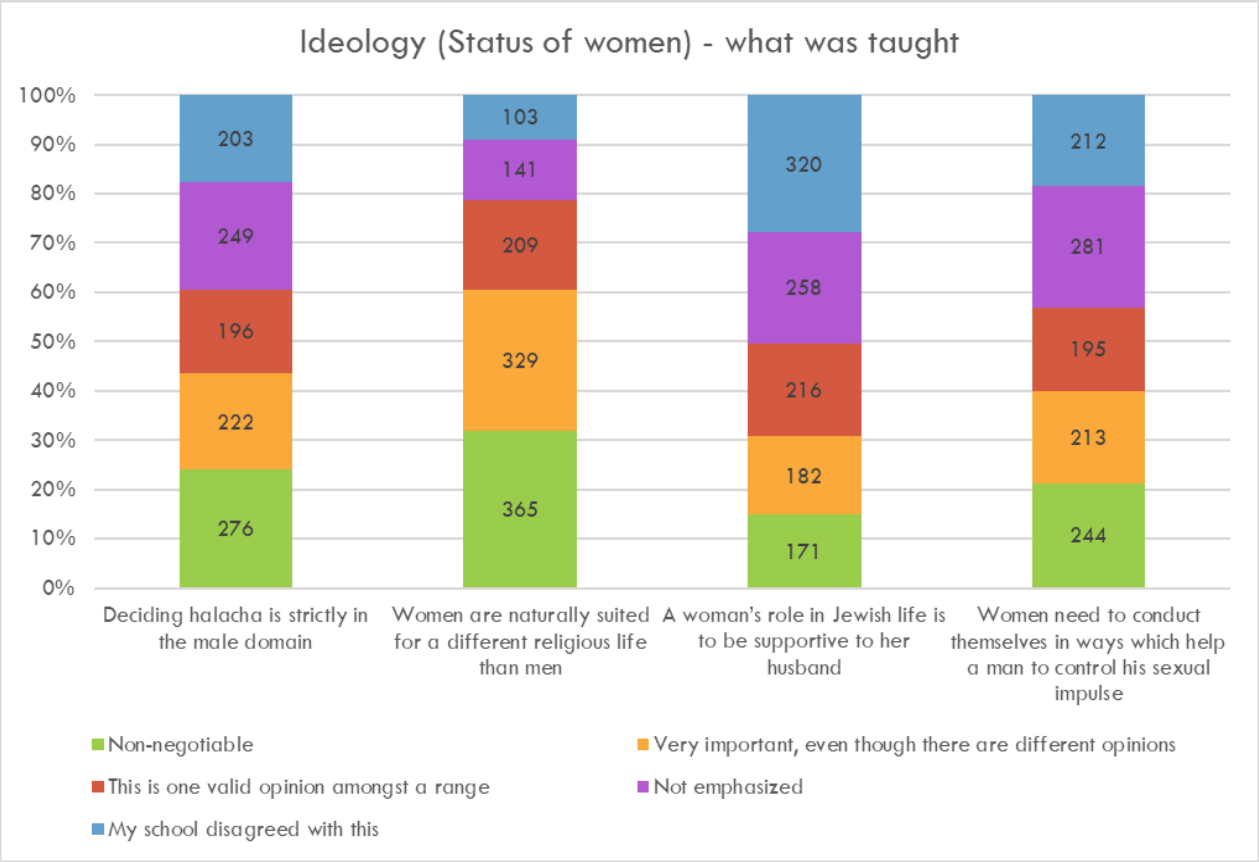
fourths.

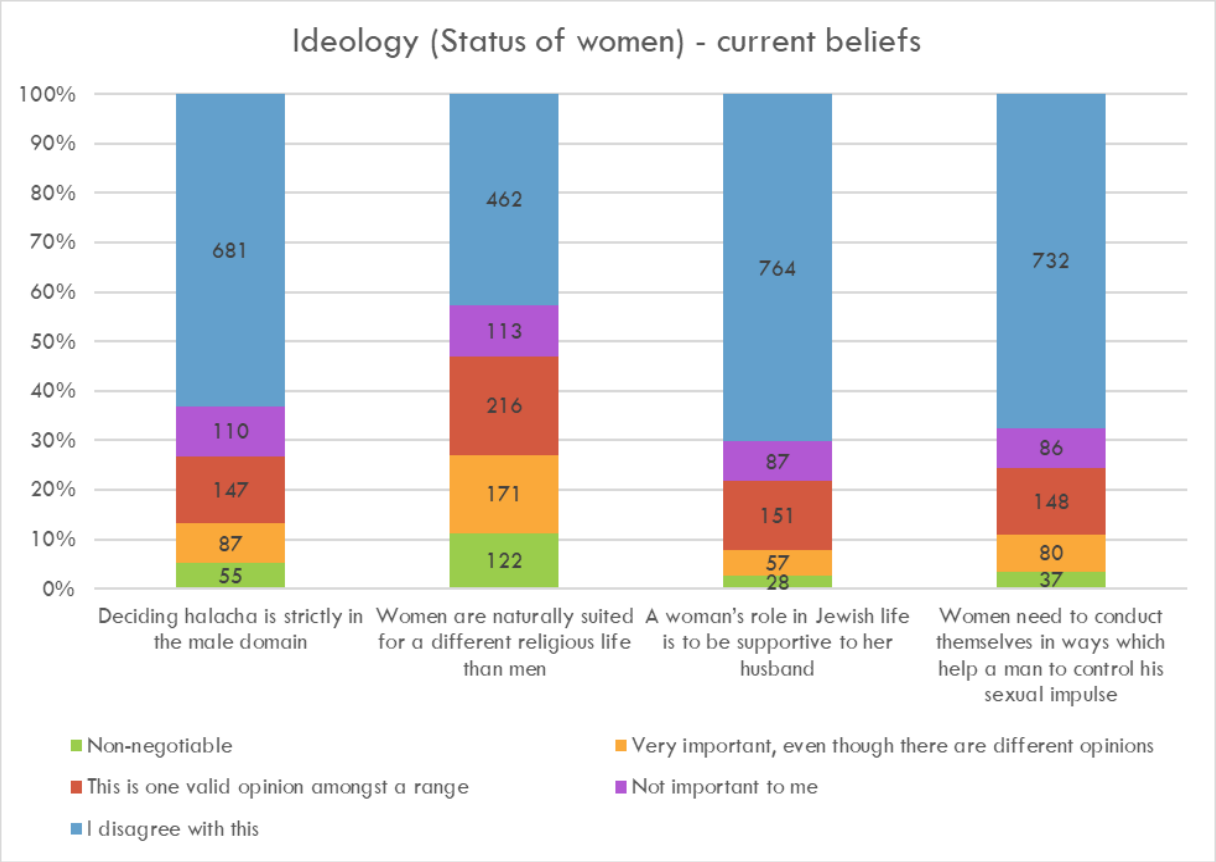





The fourth category, the status of women, is not an area which in the pre-modern world was addressed as a matter of dogma, yet in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries became a hot-button issue, particularly with the rise of secular and religious feminism, increased opportunities for women to study Torah on a substantive level, mixed-seating in non-Orthodox synagogues, Orthodox women's prayer groups, women's empowerment in public Jewish life, and halakhic egalitarianism (the recent Orthodox ordination of women predates the formal educational experiences of the respondents). Thus, many of the statements were considered important though not axiomatic (i.e., they are not issues of dogma), but were roundly rejected by a large number, and in most cases an overwhelming majority of respondents.

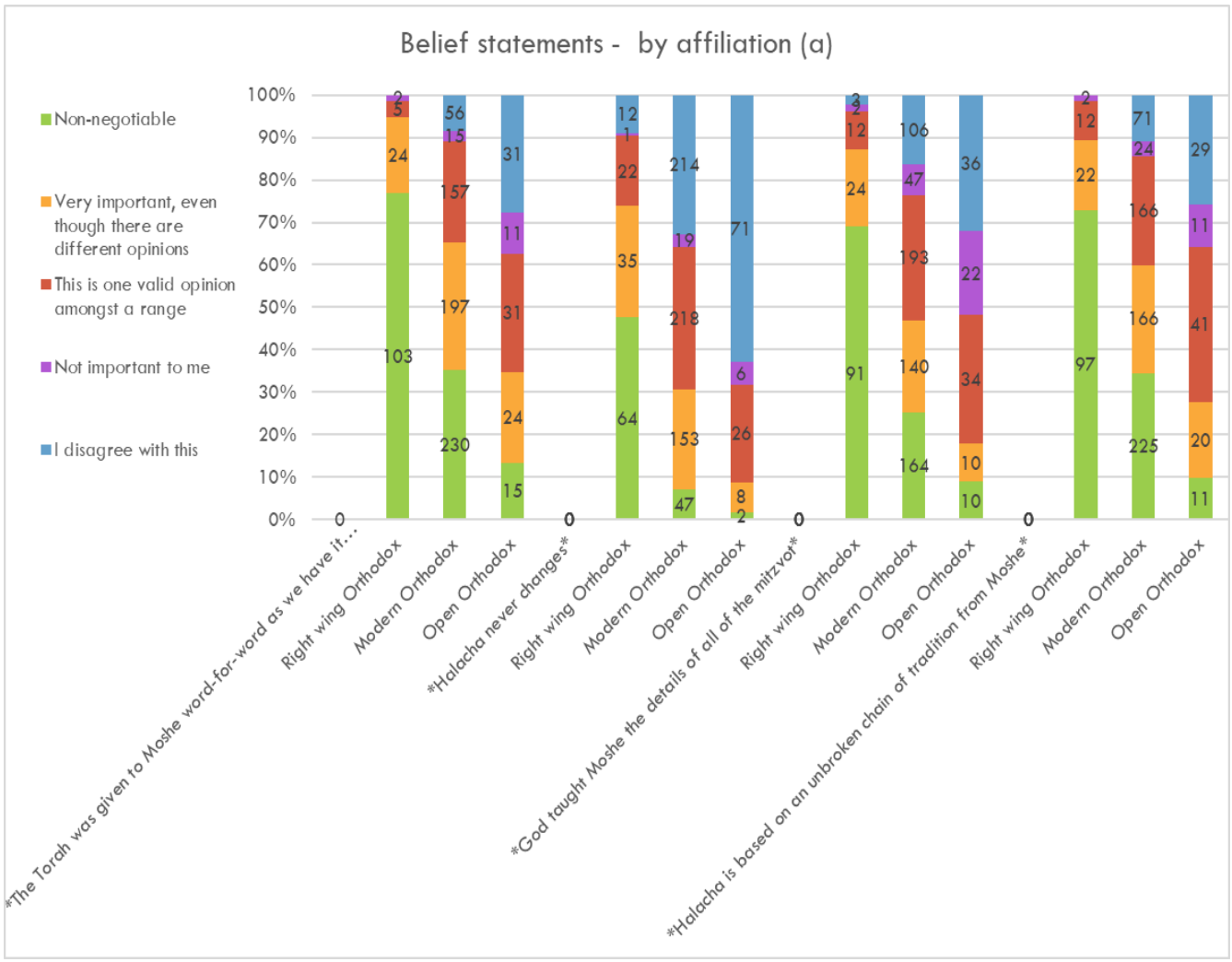
The statement that halakhic decision-making was limited to men was taught as being very important to 43% of respondents, only 12% currently accept that position and more than 60% reject it outright. The idea that women are naturally suited for a different religious life than men was taught as very important to more than 60% of respondents, 26% currently accept that position and more than 40% reject it outright. The role of women as primarily being supportive of their husbands was taught as very important to more than 30% of respondents, only 7% accept that position and more than 70% reject it outright. Finally, the idea that women bear responsibility to help men control their sexual impulses was taught to nearly 40% of respondents, yet only 10% currently accept that position and nearly two thirds of the total reject it outright.

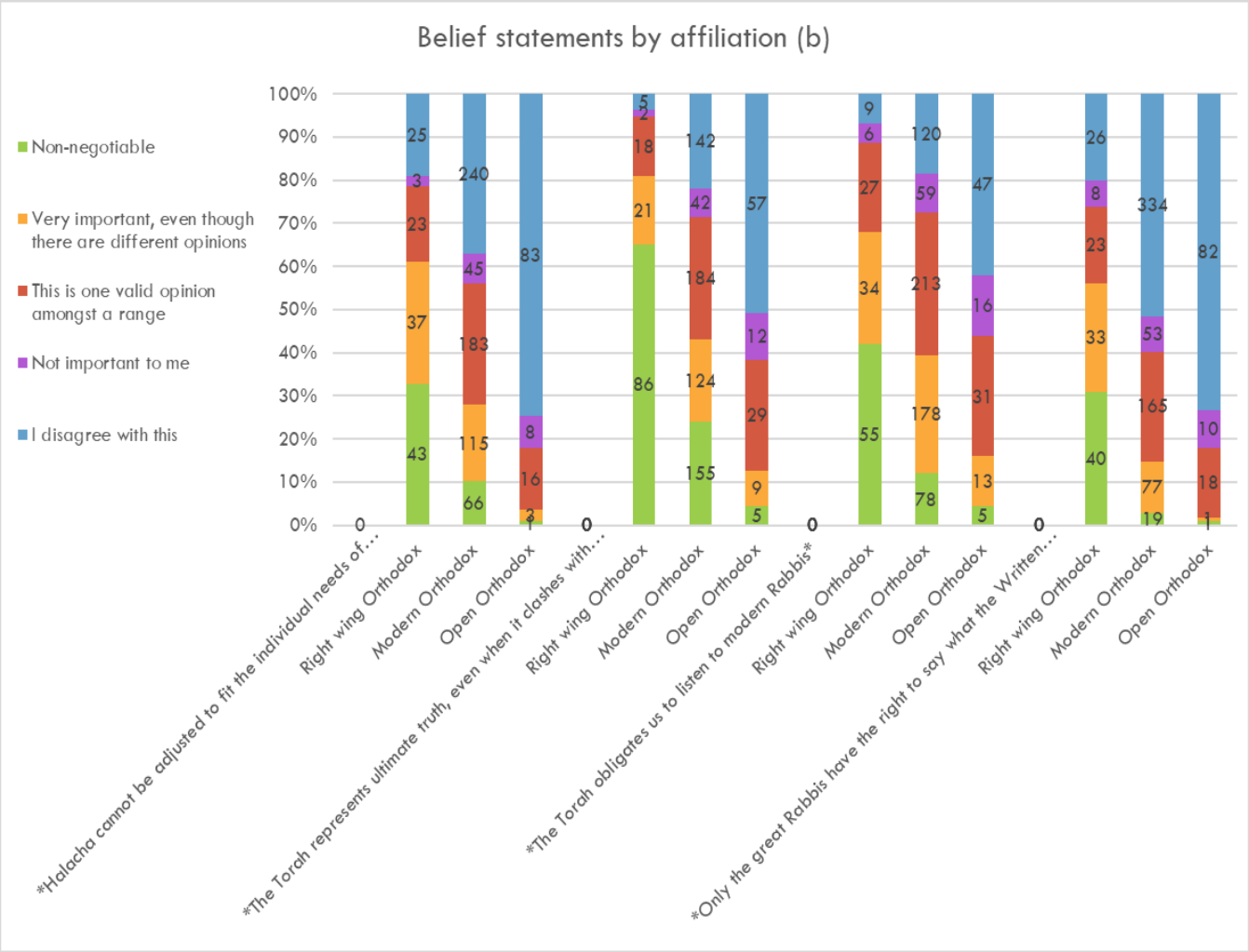


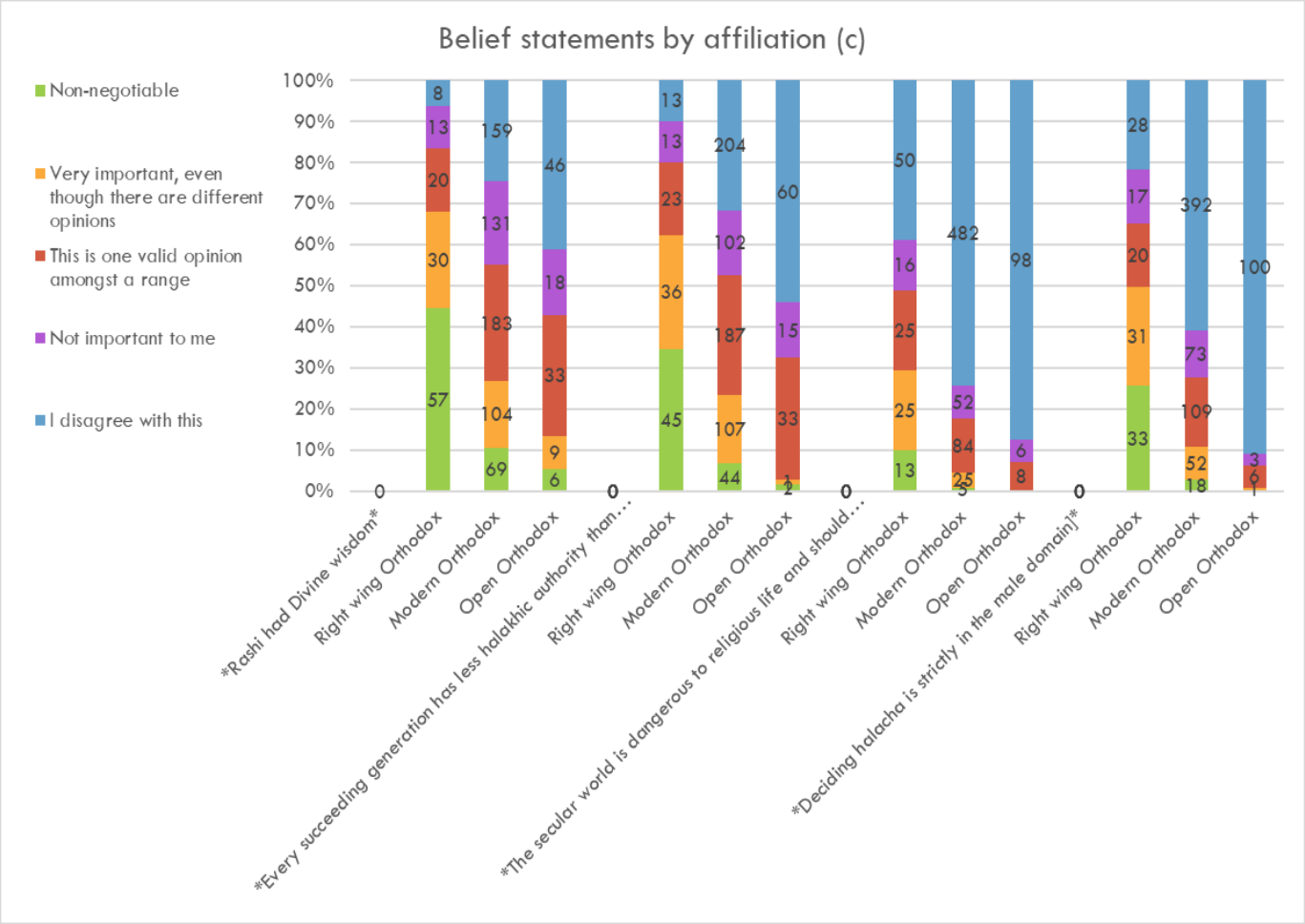



It is clear that in the area of beliefs, the gap between what the respondents were taught and their current religious positions is far greater than the disparity in the area of practice. That is, that there are many who practice mostly as Orthodox Jews, identify as Orthodox Jews, yet their beliefs are far from what traditional Orthodoxy identifies as core beliefs.

When we subject the area of beliefs to analysis based on affiliation, the gaps between those who identify as Right-wing Orthodox, Modern Orthodox and Open Orthodox are even greater than in the area of practice. For Right-wing Orthodox respondents, a greater percentage identified multiple areas of belief as dogmatic than the messages they were taught. This shifted dramatically for the Modern Orthodox, for whom there were many fewer who identified beliefs as dogmatic, and even more dramatically for the Open Orthodox, for whom dogma nearly disappeared and few identified any beliefs as very important. The three charts below compare the responses in a sampling of the areas identified above.

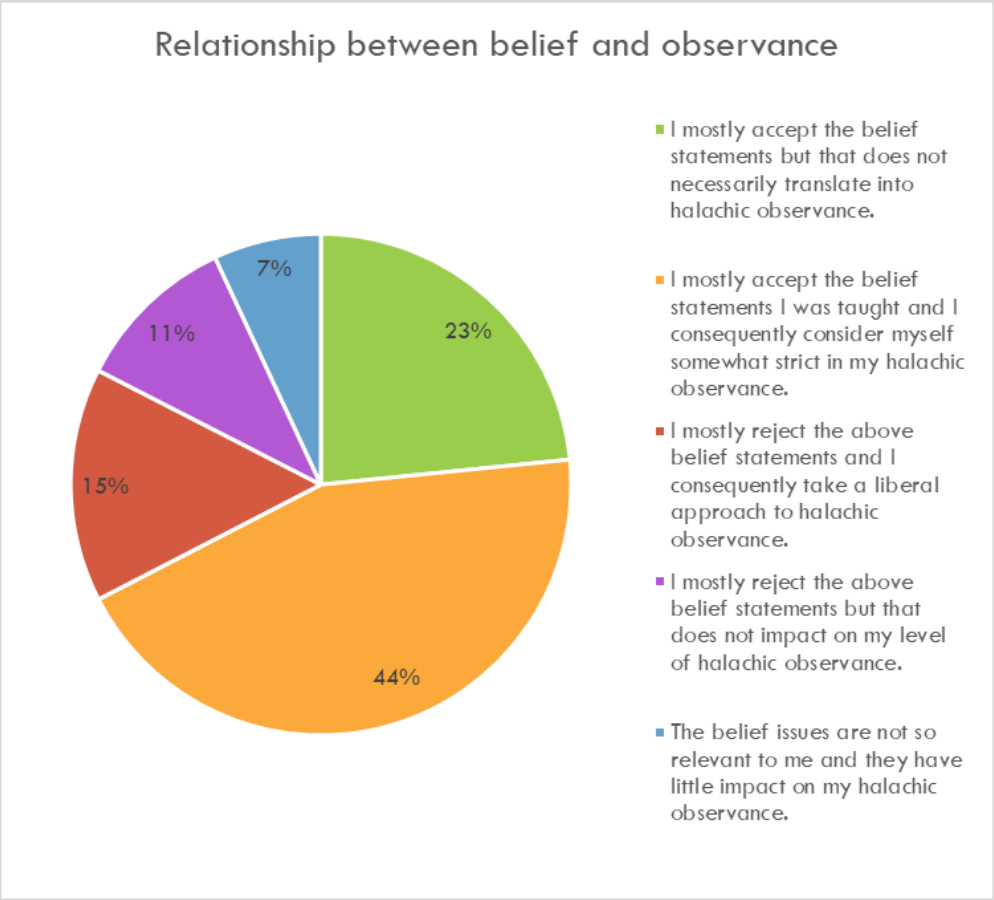






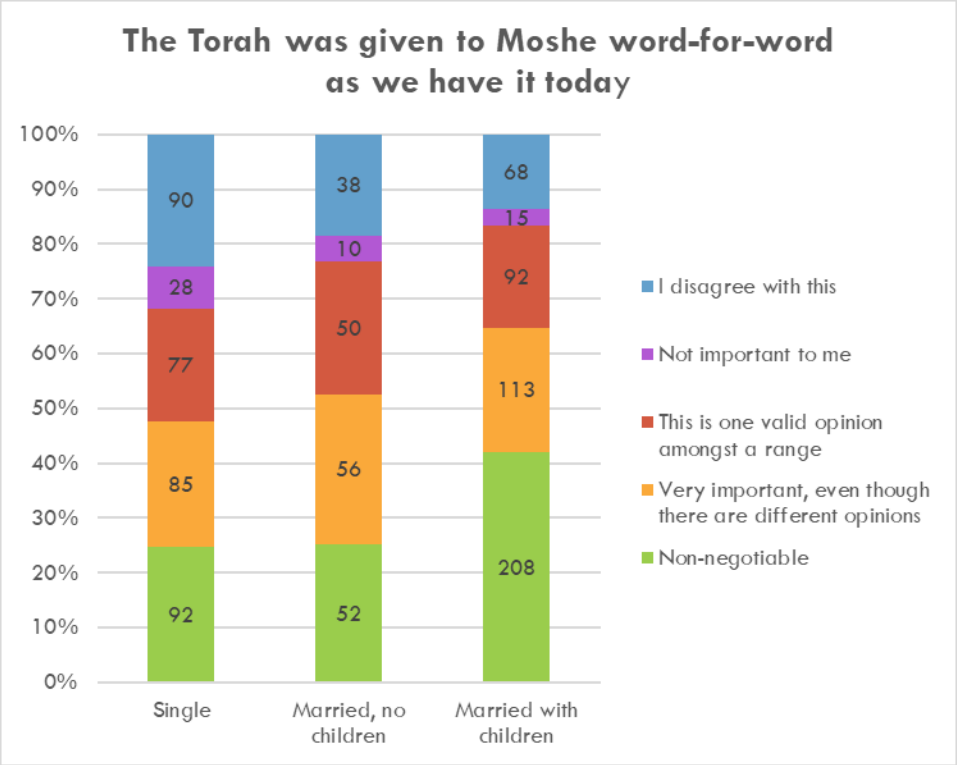

When asked about the impact of belief on practice, 59% explicitly link their current level of observance with their acceptance (44%) or rejection (15%) of the belief statements. For 34%, their current beliefs are not linked to their levels of observance.

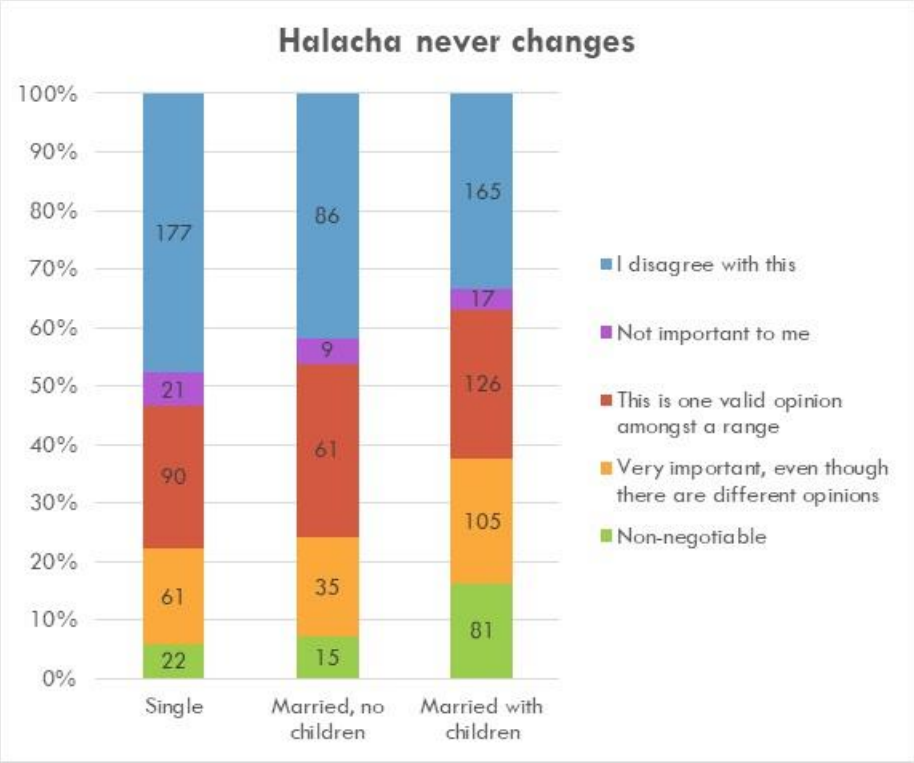
For the Right-wing Orthodox, much higher levels of significance of belief statements (either non-negotiable or very important) correlate with stricter levels of observance in all categories. Similarly, for the Open Orthodox, substantively lower levels of significance for belief statements correlate with lower levels of observance. This suggests that for the Modern Orthodox, there is a significant population (at least 34% of them) living outwardly as Orthodox Jews, perhaps taking extra liberties with halakha when outside the confines of communal life, but ideologically very distant from traditional Orthodoxy.

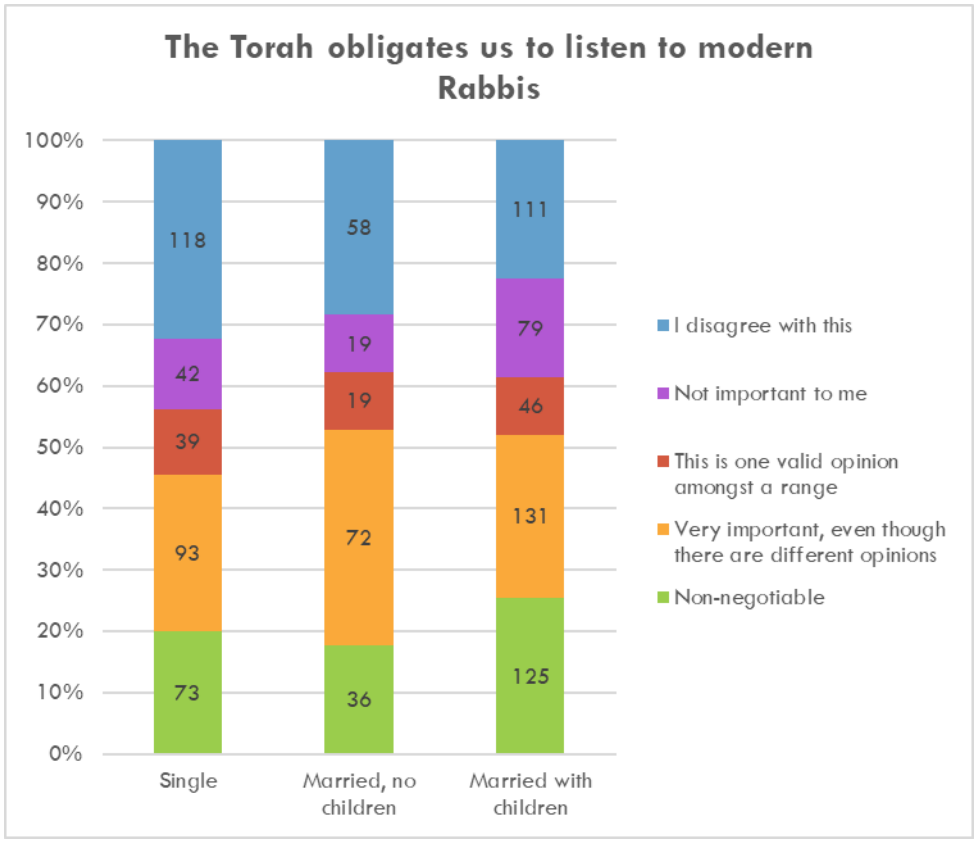


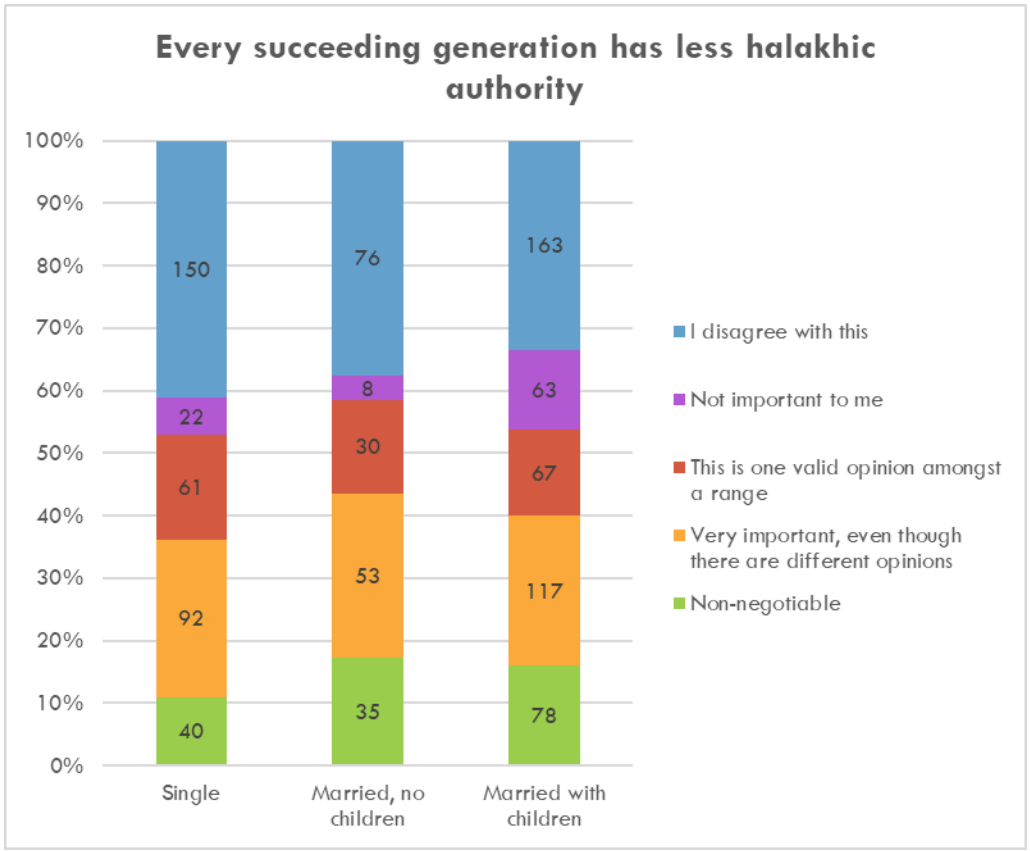

***Family Status***

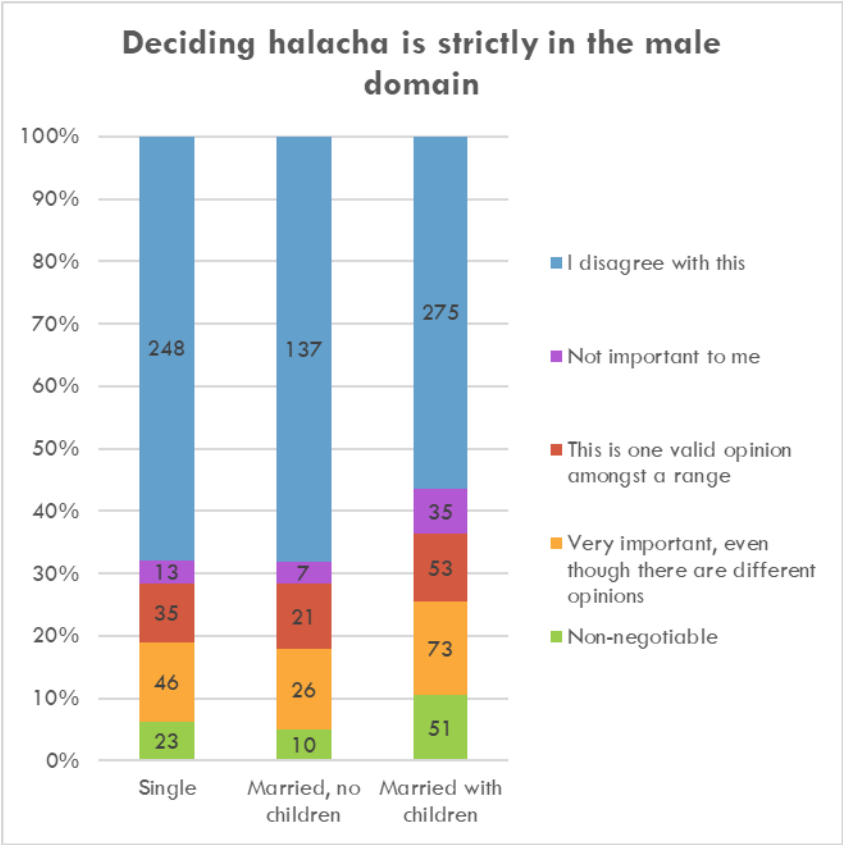
When it came to observance, family status emerged as a significant factor. While family status plays a role regarding beliefs, so that those who were married with children held more traditional (i.e., taught) beliefs than those who were unmarried, the beliefs nonetheless are still distant from those taught in the formal educational settings. We bring a sampling of those below to illustrate.








## V. SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

1. Based on the sociological definition of Orthodoxy as observance of Shabbat and Kashrut, more than 90% of respondents identified themselves as coming from Orthodox homes. Of those, 86% still consider themselves Orthodox. Put differently, 9% of those growing up in mostly-to-strictly halakhic homes now indicate that halakha is not important to them, and that climbs to 16% when we include those who only sometimes follow halakha. Those numbers, however, do not reflect the nuances of the range of practices of those who still do observe. Amongst those who still consider themselves Orthodox there is an observable decline of as much as 20% in the level of observance, depending on the specific practice being measured. For a smaller group there is an intensified observance. The drop-off in observance can be caused by a wide variety of factors including maturity at the age of decision-making, friction with parents or authority figures, sexual orientation, and ideological exploration. The popular term “off-the derech” refers, in the reality of this survey, to the percentage of the respondents who consider themselves completely non-observant.

2. Family status plays a profound role in the religious observance of respondents. Married respondents are more observant than unmarried, with marriage serving as the transition between singlehood and family life. Those with children are as observant – if not more punctilious – than their parents.

3. Between 8-10% of respondents who identify as Orthodox, identify as Open Orthodox and attend egalitarian *minyanim*. This is a group which has consciously chosen to identify as Open Orthodox, rejecting labels both to their right and left. How the educational and Rabbinic communities relate to this population – whether through rejection or acceptance – may impact whether they continue to maintain halakha as an important factor in how they live their lives.

4. There are measurable, consistent difference between the public observance of Shabbat and the private Shabbat observance in the home. There are parallels to this public/private distinction in the area of Kashrut, albeit reversed because of the communal/family importance of keeping a kosher home.

5. Respondents take greater halakhic liberties with restrictions to premarital intimacy and physical contact with members of the opposite sex than with any other area of halakhic observance. A significant percentage, even of those who are punctilious in other areas of observance, indicated that the *halakha* plays a smaller role in governing their intimate behavior.

6. There is little correlation between the frequency of the parents' studying Torah and the frequency of their children studying Torah as adults.

7. The hook-up culture, as part of integration into broader society, is beginning to break down traditional taboos of interdating, with possible future implications for intermarriage.

8. "Half-Shabbat" (i.e., full Shabbat observance with the exception of cell phones), while discussed anecdotally as a phenomenon for high school students, does not appear to be a phenomenon in the post-collegiate group.

9. Respondents who spent a post-high year of yeshiva/seminary study in Israel scored higher – but not dramatically – in almost every category related to observance, identity, the role of halakha in their lives, and connection to Israel. It is unclear whether this is because of the study in Israel or whether the group which elected to take that gap year of study had a greater proclivity towards increased Jewish commitment and expression. The long-term impact of the yeshiva/seminary gap year in Israel requires further study.

10. While there is a segment of the Modern Orthodox community whose halakhic practice is indistinguishable from right-wing Orthodox, most of Modern Orthodoxy is associated with a slightly lower level of halakhic practice than Right-wing Orthodoxy. Open Orthodoxy is associated with a significant decline of halakhic practice.

11. Statistically, in a typical high school class of 25 students, there is likely to be one student who identifies as LBGTQ. This has significant implications for the messages conveyed in

schools and synagogues, and the manner in which the LBGTQ community is spoken about in any public forum.

12. LBGTQ Jews from Orthodox homes are not simply looking for a way out of observance or the community, but, to a large extent, want to remain as part of the community. Given the communal nature of the Orthodox community, whether they remain observant may depend on the community's ability to integrate them.

13. In the perception of the alumni, high schools do not focus on helping their students to develop their Jewish identity. Further, while the alumni felt that the schools prepared them best for functioning as Jews in purely Jewish contexts, they felt underprepared for functioning as Jews on campus and the workplace. This has potentially significant implications for a population which will spend the bulk of its waking hours in those challenging environments.

14. In the area of dogma, alumni of the high schools and yeshivot/seminaries de-emphasize or reject most of the beliefs accepted traditionally as dogmatic or normed as core to identification with Orthodoxy. This general rejection extends even to those who are married with children, for whom recommitment to intensified observance was important. Educational institutions need to rethink either the emphasis on these topics and redirect their energies towards practice, values and identity, or – if they deem the dogma to be non-negotiable educationally and religiously – to draw resources from their emphasis on other areas (skills, knowledge, practice, commitment, etc.) and refocus those energies on the dogma.

The Modern Orthodox community, with all of its communal institutions including family, schools, and synagogues, seems to be able to approximately replicate its numbers. The communal forces, which seem to drive much of personal practice, are weakest during the extended period of exploration, which lasts until marriage and child-rearing. During that period of exploration there is a marked drop-off in observance.

These mimetic practices, driven primarily by family and community, are given formal language in the educational system. That formal language is the language of halakha and of formal Jewish learning, which – based on the survey – seem to be of premium value in the Modern Orthodox high schools. This primacy comes, it appears, at the expense of issues such as Jewish identity formation. Jewish teens are being prepared for formal Jewish life in exclusively Jewish settings, but not for life in a complex world with competing social and intellectual and pressures in university and work environments.

All this relates to practice, so that it would be fair to say that, when the dust settles, the graduates of Yeshiva high schools are largely Ortho*prax*. Regarding the beliefs of Orthodoxy, the Modern Orthodox community is quite diverse, and many of the religious beliefs once considered axiomatic are held by only a minority of the communal members. Additionally, there are currently multiple "labels" used for identification, some of which formally or informally legitimize or even embrace the fluidity of the dogma. This diversity, combined with contemporary acceptance of the fluidity of identities – including sexual identity – poses

one of the great challenges to the current generation of educators and religious leadership. The extent to which the leadership accepts or rejects this diversity will have a profound impact on many of the students currently growing up in Modern Orthodox communities and attending its schools. The extent to which they will consider their education and community relevant or irrelevant because of its relatability or lack of to their *weltanshauung* will influence whether they continue to identify with the Orthodox community and continue their religious practice.

### *Areas for future study*

This study was designed to open the doors of inquiry into a massive educational system. Its conclusions are intended to pose questions, which will hopefully be discussed by both the professionals working and leading the Yeshiva high schools as well as by the parents and the lay leadership of those schools. With all that this study has revealed, it has raised even more questions for further inquiry. They include:

- An exploration of the moderation of practice/belief with increased years of singlehood
- A better understanding of the world of the Orthodox LGBTQ community
- A deeper understanding of the experiences of the various populations described in this study, along with an understanding of the processes involved in the shifting of religious beliefs and practices over time and through life stages
- A greater understanding of the long-term impact of the high school experience on religious life, attitude, and experience
- A study directed at teachers and school leadership to gauge their perceptions
- The role of socialization within the Orthodox community and within the educational setting
- The emerging Open Orthodox community
- An understanding of the nature of Torah study taking place amongst graduates

Some of this could be accomplished through quantitative studies such as this one, but some of those questions would best be answered through qualitative, in-depth research.

***Addendum***

In light of requests from some readers, I am posting the following addendum to the data. Here we look at observance amongst graduates who made Aliyah as compared to those who did not. (Interestingly, in the area of belief, the differences were too minor to be considered meaningful.) First, it should be noted that there may a self-selection process at work, namely, that those who make Aliyah tend to be more Jewishly committed. Second, there seem to be conflicting trends within the data. On the one hand, those who made Aliyah seem to be more observant when it comes to specific halakhot, yet they deem themselves as more flexible regarding halakha and its role in their lives. There is much to say about this, but it may be related to differing conceptions of halakha between Orthodoxy in Israel and in North America.