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RELIGION

Mazel tov! A Match

Orthodox Jews find bliss with some help from the Net



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PASSAIC - For some online Romeos, it's the shiny hair, the knowing look or the shapely figure of the woman in the photo that makes them point and click.

For Yossie Frankel, it was the woman's resemblance to a famous rabbi. Despite her gender and her hairless chin, the beauty with the faraway look reminded him of Rabbi Shnuer Zalman, the bearded founder of the Chabad Lubavich group.

She "was almost the exact feminine version," he recalled. "She was gazing off into space with this holy smile."

A year later, Frankel, 40, is happily married to the woman in the photo, who, it turns out, shares his passion for goofy puns, folk music and Torah. The Passaic couple credits Frumster.com, a dating Web site, with helping them find true love.

Frumster.com is one of a growing number of sites that seek to match observant Jews with their basherts (soul mates). Others include online matchmakers Sawyouatsinai.com, Bergenfield-based OnlySimchas.com, and Luvbavich-run Mitmazel.com. Frum is slang for "Orthodox," and Frumster.com's 14,867 posters have screen names like "StopURmomZkvelling" ("stop, your mom's beside herself with joy") or "Majorchutzpah" (major gall). In their profiles, men describe the kind of yarmulke they wear (black velvet, knit, leather-suede), and women say whether they wear skirts exclusively, or occasionally indulge in pants. Both sexes specify whether they observe the Sabbath and keep kosher.

Far from being a monolithic group, Orthodox Jews span a wide spectrum of religious observance. Frumster.com tries to reflect that, said Ben Rabizadeh, the site's director of business development.

"Our arena is not as much personality, it's in finding the same values, the same religious outlook," he said.

The Web site was devised in 2001 by Grayson Levy, a Canadian who felt that other options for Jewish Internet dating were too secular. On JDate.com, a well-known Jewish dating site, candidates have names like batchelorboy30, romanticrebel or QTinNJ. The most common religious affiliation is "reform" or "traditional." Non-Jews are allowed to post ads.

Sima Baron, a 33-year-old Passaic woman, switched from JDate to Frumster because she felt the responses she got from JDate suitors weren't serious enough.

"They just seemed to be, 'cute picture, great eyes,'" she said. "Sometimes on Frumster I get the same thing. But then they follow up; they pick out certain things. I can just feel that they're trying to get at really getting to know me."

Friends Rabizadeh, 28, and Derek Saker, 35, bought Frumster.com from Levy last summer. They operate the site out of a small, carpeted room on the first floor of Rabizadeh's Passaic Park building. Posting a profile is free, but posters pay \$8.95 a month to correspond with other posters. Still, the site is not yet profitable, and the two men have the rumpled shirts and slight stubble of Internet entrepreneurs. The one thing that sets them apart is their black yarmulkes.

Rabizadeh and Saker, who identify themselves as "to the right" of the religious spectrum, reject posters who are not sufficiently marriage-minded. There are no message boards, because the content can't be monitored. Instant messaging is forbidden, because it promotes "friendships that lead nowhere," according to Rabizadeh.

Getting married is a central rite for observant Jews, but leaders lament that modern life has brought forth a "singles crisis." Commitment to jobs, the heightened divorce rates and the growing number of Jews returning to religious life have created a glut of Orthodox singles, leaders say.

Observant couples have traditionally met around a friend's Sabbath table or via third-party matchmakers. Passaic Park's flourishing Jewish community has a network of matchmakers who devise ways for single men and women to meet. For some singles, though, the traditional way doesn't always work.

Matchmakers proved mostly unsuccessful for Batsheva Frankel, an artistic, cherub-faced Grateful Dead fan who became religious as an adult. As a single woman in her 30s, she was often paired with men in their 50s. When she resisted a match, the matchmakers would act surprised.

"They do have this attitude - you're being too picky - like you're picking out oranges or something, not your life mate," she said

She posted her photo and her description - "frum but funky"- on Frumster.com. This catch phrase, along with her moody photo, inspired a divorced Lubavicher named Yossie to e-mail her back.

Seven months later, they were dancing to a Grateful Dead song at their wedding. On their joint Web site, they detail exactly how they met.

Although a few years ago it was unheard of in the Orthodox community, Internet dating has become acceptable. A new Web site geared toward Passaic's single Orthodox women links to Frumster.com and Sawyouatsinai.com.

"It's not uncommon for people to say 'we met online,'" said Rabbi Benjamin Yudin, a pioneer of Fair Lawn's Orthodox community.

No rabbis have officially endorsed the Web site, but those interviewed for this article didn't seem to have a problem with it. With the "singles crisis" in mind, some even offered a kind of grudging encouragement.

"There are far too many people that are putting off meeting people and settling down," said Rabbi Moshe D. Krupka, a Passaic resident and executive director of programs for the Orthodox Union, the country's major observant Jewish group. "If this is filling such a need, so be it."