

Nothing by halves

Judy Silkoff finds out how traditional matchmaking has adapted to the 21st century

For many people, the word "shidduch" will conjure up instant images of Yente the Matchmaker singing about supposedly perfect catches who are "young... at 62" and "tall... from side to side." Those who think the world has moved on from "Fiddler on the Roof" will probably steer clear of well-meaning offers of blind dates set up by relatives and friends.

But for young men and women looking to meet Mr or Ms "Jewish Right," opportunities are somewhat limited. Party animals may do well on the Jewish charity-ball circuit, but a shidduch may be the only avenue open to the less gregarious. Fortunately, Yente has been updated for the 21st century and the shidduch option is actually a lot less painful than might be supposed. Furthermore, it is no longer confined to more Orthodox circles.

"The idea of a shidduch definitely has more widespread appeal these days," said Rebbeztan Judy Ginsbury of Hendon, who co-ordinates Strike a Match (SAM), a three-year-old project of the United Synagogue's Rabbinical Council. "Youngsters are simply not finding places to meet up with one another."

Explaining its procedures, she said: "When someone approaches their rabbi to ask if he can think up a suitable match for their child, instead of him having to find the time to work on it himself, he gives the congregant a form to fill in and passes it on to me. I then meet with the single, conduct a short interview and see if I can come up with someone suitable. If the other party agrees, phone numbers are exchanged and a date is organised."

Since its inception, SAM has notched up quite a few engagements. Even in cases where the original partnership was not successful, people have found third-party advice on dating helpful and have contacted Rebbeztan Ginsbury about subsequent relationships.

Counseling is available too with Connect, a matchmaking bureau sponsored by the Jewish Marriage Council due to celebrate its diamond anniversary next year.

"I like to spend time with clients... finding out what's been going on in their lives," said Connect volunteer Judy Korman. "If someone prefers to avoid that kind of personal introspection, it's fine, too. But if, down the line, problems arise with a date we've set up, it does help me understand where they might be coming from."

Connect accepts only those who can prove they are halachically Jewish and free to marry. A Cohen would never be set up on a date with a divorcee, whom he is forbidden to marry in Jewish law.

Once Connect has agreed to take someone on to its books (a nominal fee is charged for two years' membership), they are asked to compile a short biography to be shown to prospective dates. Mrs Korman stresses that this will contain no photographs, only a written description.

"We don't want people to ask to meet someone for the wrong reasons," she said. "Appearances are important, but I encourage my clients to go on dates even if they're a little uncertain."

Another option is the recently launched British branch of the American organisation JChain, sponsored by the Jewish Learning Exchange and others.

Small groups of up to 10 married women get together regularly in private homes for a shidduch meeting, at which they tell each other about different singles of their acquaintance.

JChain now operates around 12



Together: Zippy Bergin and David Myerson, who met through a dating website, at their wedding in Manchester last October DAVID CHESSER

house groups with a central office in Golders Green to co-ordinate shidduch meetings and liaise with shidduch organisations locally and abroad.

One vital aspect of its work is that it strictly forbids *lashon ha-ra*, speaking ill of someone. Generally, halachah rules out making any negative statement about another person, even if it is true. But when it comes to intermediaries advising on proposed shidduchim, the laws are more complex.

It may be sometimes permissible to state a proven truth that might make one or other of the parties think twice about a proposed match: for example, if a girl is trying to hide the fact that she suffers

from an eating disorder, or if a boy has problems with alcohol abuse. Participants in JChain meetings are invited to attend regular lectures on the relevant laws; and, in order to prevent idle gossip, the names of the singles discussed at various groups are kept confidential.

Of course, despite the plethora of modern initiatives, sometimes all it takes is the skill of a good old-fashioned matchmaker. One London lady, who got into the shidduch business "by accident" after being asked to find a wife for a friend's son, has made many successful matches in the 15 years since. Quite apart from the obvious advantages offered by her (free) service to the singles who come her way, she is constantly aware of what matchmaking has added to her own life.

"I continue to try to make shidduchim because it's a tough world out there and I feel so desperately sorry for youngsters who want to get married but can't meet the right person," she said. "But as a result, wherever I go in the world I have honorary grandchildren — sometimes born at a rate of two or three a week! The only thing I ask of the people who I see is that they try to make shidduchim for others in the future."

One alternative method of finding a partner is via the Internet, which is exactly how Zippy Bergin, a 28-year-old teacher from Manchester, met her husband David Myerson.

David, an accountant aged 27 from Liverpool, and Zippy had signed up around the same time with the on-line Orthodox Jewish dating service "Frumster", which is based in the United States but open to applicants world-wide. Both regarded the Internet as just a different way of meeting people and felt they had nothing to lose.

They liked what they read of each other's profiles and, after chatting by e-mail, realised that they vaguely knew one another and that they lived nearby. Five months after their first meeting, the couple, who now live in North-West London, got engaged. "The value of Frumster is that everybody on it is looking for a serious relationship and so you know they are on there with the right intentions," Zippy said.

"It is a good way to be introduced to somebody. You get to know a little bit about them beforehand and so you can see if there is the potential for a good match.

Internet dating is a bit of a hush-hush subject but it really shouldn't be, as more and more couples are meeting through it. David and I would never have met if it hadn't been for Frumster — and we lived round the corner from each other."

Members can choose whether or not to post a photograph alongside their profiles or simply send one out to interested individuals. Amy (not her real name), a 36-year-old London lawyer, who also met her husband David through Frumster, chose to do neither. She and David decided to go out solely on the basis of their first e-mail communication. As he was also London-based, they arranged their initial date for that same evening.

"Our reasons for arranging to meet in person so quickly were quite different," recalled Amy. "I was a little hesitant about joining Frumster because it seemed like quite a desperate step. I knew that if I didn't follow through on David's e-mail immediately, I'd chicken out. David, on the other hand, had had some experiences of corresponding with girls who kept pushing off the idea of meeting in person. He was keen to go along with my sense of immediacy!"

Although that first date left her with the impression that David "was a lovely guy but not for me," the two kept in touch and two months later decided to go out again. This time, the chemistry was right and some six months later, they got engaged.

"I come from a fairly secular, traditional Jewish background," she said, "and always thought I would meet my future husband at a party or something. That's the most natural way. But if you're looking for something more 'arranged,' joining Frumster has many advantages over a regular matchmaker: it's a lot less hit-and-miss — you don't find yourself being set up with someone just because they're in vaguely the same professional field and age group."

Another happy client is Ruchi, a divorcee with two young children from Ramat Beit Shמש in Israel, who met husband Boruch from Manchester (not their real names) on line. Persuaded by a work colleague to register with Frumster for fun, she did not submit a picture of herself because she thought it too cheap.

Boruch was the second man to contact her and after a week of e-mailing, they began to speak by phone. Two weeks later, they exchanged photos, he eventually flew to Israel to meet, and within six months of their first e-mails, they were married and now live in Ramat Beit Shמש.

Internet dating is "much less stressful than blind dating," said Ruchi. "I have always hated singles' weekends and I am very wary of shidduchim. This is so much simpler and the best part is, if you really meet a creepy guy, you can get rid of him with just a click of the mouse."

For Derek Saker, Frumster's marketing director, one of the reasons it scores above the traditional shidduch is that "we allow singles to take charge of their situation and become less reliant on others to find them a suitable match. Indeed, almost 50 per cent of all Frumster marriages were initiated with an e-mail sent by the woman. Although this may not seem surprising from a secular perspective, it is highly significant from an Orthodox point of view, where women are usually dependent on another's suggestion or recommendation."

Since its 2001 launch, it has built up a membership of 14,000 and has married "290 members," he said. "Once would-be candidates have got past Frumster's rigorous screening process to check off 'religious level, sincerity and a demonstration of a serious intent towards marriage,' the singles essentially become their own matchmakers."

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