

Points to Ponder: Positive Action Items

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If one browses through the majority of Jewish media venues, local papers, internet sites, blogs and the like, it is clear that never before has so much attention been given to the areas of dating, shidduchim, and healthy relationship building. In my role as director of YUConnects, I have the privilege of conferring with many roshei yeshiva, rabbis and rebbetzins, psychologists and social workers (also referred to as relationship-building experts), community activists and leaders of other similar organizations who uniformly agree that healthy relationship-building in dating and marriage should be high on our respective lists of priorities and communal values. As a result, many small and larger shidduch-making initiatives and social programs have been launched by singles and marrieds. While we may differ in opinion regarding solutions posed, it is evident that all those inspired are working round-the-clock to increase comfortable meeting and networking opportunities in an effort to bring more couples into matrimony.

The Time is Now

Each week, YUConnects receives dozens of new calls and e-mail requests from individuals looking for a match, or from their loved ones calling on their behalf asking for suitable networking ideas. Using a multi-pronged educational and research based psycho-social approach, the program has successfully matched 206 individuals with their life partner, 103 couples, *kein yirbu*. This January, YUConnects enters its fifth year of operation. We host monthly social events, frequent educational forums, a growing database of over 2,200 members, and manage close to 100 volunteer trained connectors worldwide; collectively these activities are responsible for close to 200 dates a week. We recognize that to make an even greater difference, we need the positive participation, public support and open-minded attitudes of all.

Unfortunately, we still encounter a number of callers who, after being explained how the program works, respond with statements like “I’m sorry, it’s not for my son to meet with a matchmaker; just text me if you meet any suitable girls, I’m sure you know his type.” The same parent may add, “But wait, can you meet with my daughter?” Or from a young woman we may hear, “Thanks, but there’s no way I will sign up for an online program, it’s like posting myself on ebay; please keep me in mind when you meet some nice guys.”

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When receiving such requests, we politely try to explain that—for those at YUConnects trying to keep order of all the young men and women they meet—we are blessed to utilize an advanced high-tech online system, ensuring everyone's confidentiality. We recognize that this system of providing personal resumes or profiles has many feeling uneasy, as they ask "how did we get to this point?" but until we come up with better strategies, let's embrace the available programs to advance forward with the goal in mind.

Whether it is a hesitance to sign up for one of the three membership options on the on-line database, declining an invitation to come to a social or networking event or Shabbaton (even when the rabbis encourage it) "until I am older," etc., each one of these seemingly individual preventative acts poses additional barriers in increasing meeting opportunities for not just one, but potentially for many prospects.

Yes, certainly, it is lovely to meet someone at a Shabbos meal or through a mutual friend. And, yes, of course, we all wish (I did too) we could meet in a most natural and effortless fashion, but it doesn't always happen that way. True, while some happy couples meet today via the suggestions or at the homes of their close friends, many others are equally as blessed by introductions through acquaintances or even strangers who were networking on their behalf.

A few months ago, two young male YU alumni visited our office. At that time, one of the men was already an online member, a frequent event participant, and dating a lovely young woman through the volunteerism of an online connector. He brought in his friend, who had expressed some resistance in joining the program, to introduce him to the office staff. As he continued to show some hesitance, his friend turned to him and eloquently relayed the following: "If you were in the market for a new job today, chances are that you would do everything in your power to network with past colleagues, close friends, casual acquaintances, etc. You would take advantage of all that technology offers by connecting to professionals suspended in multiple degrees of separation from you and by chasing any possible lead that could help you achieve success. Simply put, you would stop at nothing to land the most suitable job. By contrast, can you imagine applying for a job by saying, 'I won't fill out an application, I'll pass on an interview, you really don't know anything about me, but please—offer me a job.'"

While some may feel that comparing the dating atmosphere to a job-hunt sounds a bit crass, the young man above raised some noteworthy points. There is no question that the dating years can be a trying time in a young man or woman's life, and for some, this period continues on for much longer than one would like. Let us try to be as positive and open-minded to the possibilities out there and maximize opportunities. And if one has a negative experience, which unfortunately does happen, let's not reject an entire system by saying, "the suggestions I received were so off that I will never accept another suggestion made online," or "there was no one for me at that event, so I'm done with those."

There are so many phases in our life, in addition to dating and relationship building, that we commit ourselves to perform a plethora of acts of *hishtadlut*, hoping to reach a targeted goal. Not always are we awarded the projected prize from a directed act of effort; it may arrive through a different one, which may not have had any pre-conceived calculation, yet we are still expected to entertain all reasonable acts of *hishtadlut* in front of us.

The Master of the Universe has invited many more messengers to help Him in His task of facilitating matches, and the time has never been better for us to smile and welcome them our way.

Toward a Broader Perspective

What is truly beautiful today is the way progress IS being made. Part of our program's mission is to broaden horizons in meeting and relationships-building opportunities. Below are a few highlights, infused into all elements of YUConnects programming modules.

Form versus Substance

Take, for example, the “tablecloth question.” While many laugh and consider it unthinkable to ask about colored tablecloths, disposable dishes or the like when considering a dating partner, too often inquiries are made into other matters that have little prognostication for a happy marriage. Our office often fields questions or statements like, “Where does her family spend their vacations?” “Why can’t you suggest someone a few years older; a few months younger or two inches taller?” “Why that choice of occupation?” or “I can’t see myself with someone from that community, an alumnus of that post-high-school program in Israel,” or other narrow pronouncements. Relationship-building experts commonly refer to this phenomenon as a focus on “form versus substance,” that is, people place more weight on peripheral, circumstantial or even influential institutions, communities, or experiences the person traveled through, rather than evaluating the individual’s unique array of character traits, current values, aspiring goals, dreams and practices, many of which come to life through the dating and marital experience.

Some may argue for the value in these inquiries saying they maximize compatibility and minimize differences; yet, we all know that no two individuals or families are exactly alike. Then there is the known reality that most people do not fit neatly into any one or all boxes and categories used by matchmaking databases and sites; so while we use this technological framework to manage the thousands of profiles today, it’s optimal to view suggested matches with an open mind and fluidity. Social events and informal contexts also offer opportunities for people to meet without being distracted by any line item on a profile.

Nevertheless, regardless of the introductory venue, even if one marries someone with a very similar upbringing and shared values, all individuals and couples can expect to continue to evolve and navigate through inherent differences and the natural transitions, trials and tribulations of married and family life. Individuals and couples who fortify their relationships with healthy expectations, open-mindedness, flexibility, a deep friendship, mutual respect, a positive attitude, commitment and the resilience needed to genuinely appreciate that G-d holds the master plan for our day-to-day pursuits, can easily set aside their checklists, avoid absolutes, and devote proper attention to the meaningful ingredients of long lasting relationships.

While some preliminary inquiries may be warranted, provided that they are in fact grounded on factors correlated with a healthy marriage, one of our roshei yeshiva shared with his colleagues at a YUConnects meeting that he advises his students to agree quicker to a first date. His rationale to his students is that “the date itself is shorter than the amount of time spent calibrating in advance whether to have that non-committal first cup of coffee or soda.” For these reasons, we

are working with Dr. Chani Maybruch in examining her data on factors found to be important criteria for selecting a spouse. This empirical information will help us prioritize and focus our programming efforts on the factors that matter most for a successful marriage. (See “Essentials to Look for in a Spouse” for preliminary findings.)

A Focus on the Person being Suggested

When matchmaking sites operate with intermediaries of online matchmakers (such as SawYouAtSinai and YUConnects), the mediators are strongly encouraged to take the time to get to know their members. The vastness of the internet is then combined with the personal and discreet touch of a trained matchmaker looking out for the best interests of their members. While this methodology is ideal, grounded in a sense of familiarity and comfort, we are seeing many targeted matches being suggested today by those who have never met the person before.

Perhaps the one suggesting the match read about the prospect on an online profile, heard about them through a friend, or just glanced at them in a social context. It is advantageous to explore these match ideas, although randomly generated, in the same way one would consider a match idea from a close friend. We watch several match ideas rejected simply because the person receiving the match feels that the person suggesting the match “does not know me.” Some people today are expending much time and energy searching to identify someone who knows both parties well enough to present the match idea, in fear that without the right messenger the match idea will remain dormant. True, many of these match ideas may not result in a date; yet, it’s wise for the match receiver to take a few moments to inquire and focus on the suggested person’s qualities (rather than focus on the matchmaker’s whereabouts), as it may lead to a fruitful endeavor.

How often do all of us hear of engagements where the person or matchmaker, who suggested the match, only met one of the parties for a brief moment, or never met but heard a bit about the single person on a subway ride, and Hashem, the greatest matchmaker of all, planted that given match idea in that matchmaker’s mind. Fortunately as meeting venues continue to grow in popularity, and with sophisticated algorithms to generate match ideas (irrespective of whether the site uses matchmakers or not), the trend of accepting match ideas only from those who know the person best is becoming less of a priority and more of a preference.

Be Wary in Dismissing Match Ideas

Along very similar lines, we are working hard to discourage peers, those dating and marrieds, from discounting match ideas suggested by others. Because of speedy communication venues available today, it is common for a person or parent who receives a match idea to confer with a mutual friend or acquaintance to seek confirmation as to whether the proposed match is a good idea. “Can you see it?” is the colloquial question asked, which we try to discourage, as it assumes that the person being asked has special prophecy talents to predict the match potential. Yet we all know of happily married couples, whom had they relied solely upon the first ratings of others regarding their compatibility, would not have met.

A mother recently called for assistance. She explained that a few weeks ago, she was contacted by a college friend, now residing in another state, about a young girl in her community who was

suggested for the caller's son. Her immediate response was, "I can't see you being *machatanim*, in laws, with her mother." Valuing her friend's opinion, the calling mother immediately dismissed the match without asking for any elaborative details. Shortly thereafter, the mother who received this call realized that her initial response was based on a mild conflict, an isolated incident, with the mother of the young woman, completely unrelated to the possibility of whether the young man and woman proposed may like each other or whether the two mothers would get along as cordial in-laws. Other frequent discounting comments resemble the following, "don't bother, their personalities will never match, or they won't be attracted to one another." I shudder each time I hear these flippant remarks (and see them in texts), wondering about the awesome responsibility we take by withholding match possibilities best assessed by a dating couple themselves. These scenarios serve as a humble reminder of how careful we must be with our words when asked for our impressions of others. In Part II of this publication, Rabbi Daniel Feldman will provide examples of when and where we are halachically permitted to share important information regarding a match.

Ongoing Matchmaker (Connector) Training

For all of us engaged in matchmaking, acting overzealously and simply fixing people up, "because you never know," without providing substantial rhyme or reasons behind suggestions proposed, emotionally drains daters and naturally causes them to be more cautious in accepting subsequent suggestions. For these reasons, professional trainings that beginner matchmakers participate in are paramount to channeling their enthusiasm and steering them away from hurting people along the way in attempting to reach success. Similarly, ongoing training reminds both beginners and seasoned matchmakers to limit their role to introducing and skillfully mentoring when called upon and not to take control of any courtship.

Empowering Individuals to Make their Own Decisions

In this way, we can assist individuals and couples, deemed mature and ready to date, to be empowered in their dating experiences and relationships, feel responsible, confident, and take pride in their own decision-making processes leading to marriage. Bystanders may posit that the individual or dating couple is perhaps making the mistake of a lifetime, yet it is not for any of us to place pressure on the important decisions of others. Sometimes, we see couples who date for months or are already engaged to marry, who decide together that their relationship is not meant to be. While these occurrences may be disappointing, there is comfort in knowing that the couple has determined what is best for them, regardless of the opinions of others. [Some couples may decide on their own to revisit these relationships at a later date, but again, the initiative comes from them.]

Less Focus on Protocols and more on "The Relationship"

A trend we have noticed, and are trying to address in promoting the aforementioned empowerment model, is the heightened acceptance of protocols and formalization revolving around the meeting, rather than **the relationship** itself. Just recently, I met a young woman ("Sara") who is courting a young man ("Michael") long-distance. The couple was introduced while Michael was visiting his friend in Sara's town and they dated a few times in person. He hopes to return in six weeks and they are now communicating via Skype. In a conversation with

Sara, I was struck by how much attention was being given to discussions between the two of them, on how often they should speak, whether they can be dating others and how long each Skype or phone meeting should be, etc. Sara herself, a lovely young woman, pointed out that though she isn't sure yet if "he is the one," she did enjoy the initial dates and does look forward to speaking to and seeing Michael. Through our conversation, she came to realize that discussing the formal dynamics of the relationship is inhibiting building its potency.

Other frequent examples are when couples set definitive time limits on first calls and dates, saving a certain conversation until a specific numbered date, or even the way in which people terminate dating relationships. General suggestions offered in dating workshops as to times, dating spots and conversation areas can be helpful, but are meant to serve as broad guidelines and not as transactional components. When communication lines are open between the couple, a "go with the flow" approach can often nourish potential relationships without having protocols erect unreasonable barriers.

We are finding that some dating practices, perhaps more suitable for members of a community where very little interaction between the opposite genders exists prior to marriage, are being misapplied to dating trends of other segments of Orthodoxy. Far be it from me to judge or evaluate any of these practices, as they are working well for my relatives residing in those communities. However, the challenge arises when some of practices do not gel nicely with the same couple's hopes and expectations of a courtship.

So for example, parents notice and question, "Why is my son not calling to arrange the first date; why does he ask his friend to arrange the time and place?" The son might respond and say, "but it's awkward to call her for the first time." Chances are, the young man has spoken to other young women previously, and given his upbringing, it may not be as awkward as he suggests. Additionally, we all experience many awkward moments in life and learning to deal with them is how we build character and resilience.

The digital age is propelling some of these practices even further, making it more fashionable to send a quick e-mail to inquire about someone suggested, perform a Google search, and text the matchmaker to arrange the first date. Concomitantly, we should keep in mind that those dating have shared that the current technological advances make too much information readily available at the touch of a few key strokes, leaving little room for basic conversation, exploration and mystery for the first phone call and date.

Yet setting all of these possible explanations aside, we encourage the first phone call for the majority of our constituents, since nothing replaces a gracious phone call; when a man politely introduces himself to a woman, maybe converses for a few minutes, and then asks of her availability to meet. Additionally, this call reduces many steps in a matchmaker's role today (stay tuned for the findings of *The YUConnects Matchmaker Study* in Part II), allowing the matchmaker to move ahead and make more matches.

The reassuring news is that once a couple feels comfortable and invested in their courtship, there is a natural relaxation of the majority of these protocols. And, the couple will acknowledge that in-person time spent together is far more effective in building a meaningful relationship than a

series of texts and e-mails. Yet we are doing our best to encourage daters to evaluate any borrowed protocols earlier on in their dating, considering any relevance to their respective cultural background and relationship aspirations, still allowing for individual differences and circumstantial modifications along the way.

Community Partnership and Support

As demonstrated through this rich publication (and stay tuned for Part II to be released shortly), YUConnects is working skillfully and carefully to raise individual and communal awareness of the current strengths and challenges involved in making shidduchim, to increase global positive action, meeting venues, and healthy relationship-building opportunities.

YUConnects, along with all other important Jewish organizations, deserves communal recognition and financial support. The program's commitment to hosting frequent events, managing a growing database, training volunteer connectors, introducing more and more members, offering pre-dating and pre-marital educational relationship-building workshops, presenting at pastoral and communal symposiums, and serving as an ongoing resource to lay leaders developing their own singles programs, is unique and should be viewed as heartwarming.

Upon an engagement, my favorite response to my proffered “mazel tov” is when I am told, “I never thought I would date or marry someone ... younger, older, from that family background or community, etc. Yet, we have so much in common, and are so happy together.” My smile becomes almost as wide as theirs, as we continually see firsthand examples of relationships that one (or both) would never have imagined possible. The gentle insights and mentorship available to dating individuals along the way is often the noteworthy catalyst which couples make mention of in their appreciative remarks to YUConnects, helping them reach their wedding day. Once married, YUConnects staff offers a skill-based educational workshop in partnership with the SHALOM workshop to newlyweds to enrich their relationships even more.

In sharing with one of our supporters that we reached the 100 couple milestone; he smiled and said, “That's not only 100 couples, that's 100 additional Jewish families.” How true! In addition, there are many more engaged and married couples who have met through a helping hand initiated by the program. For example, the following scenario often occurs: we set up a couple on a date, they meet and decide they are not for one another, but the young man or woman proceed to identify the other's bashert. Thankfully, we know of many such chain-reaction stories. How about the new friendships and meeting opportunities emerging through frequent events? And several of our 103 couples, energized to “pay it forward,” have shared that their actions have already led to many more courtships and marriages.

Financial support is needed to continue our steadfast work and expand services. When soliciting funds, some people say, “But my children are already married,” or “Fix up this family member or friend—and then I will donate a gift.” While it may not be my daughter or your son directly benefiting from this program on a given day, someone always is. Supporters can be proud in knowing that their funds are enabling more meeting and networking possibilities for many singles each and every day.

Now is definitely the time to participate in this noble mission, and proactively explore and support the multiple venues available today. Join with us and may Hashem bless you and yours in truly making a difference in building the Jewish future.