

Dating or Waiting: When Am I Ready?

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My first year at YU, after spending two years in Israel after high school, was a period marked by transition. I had left the cocoon of the Israel experience and was confronted with the challenge of integrating and harmonizing continued growth in Torah with a secular education. I arrived on campus as a 20 year old with dating far from my mind.

My YU roommate was holding in a different place. He had maintained sporadic contact with his high school girlfriend during his years in Israel, and she had already been back for a year pursuing an accounting degree when he returned to YU. He was ready to explore and was actively engaged in discerning if she was “the one.” He had already chosen a career path and was spending many hours on the phone with this young woman each evening.

The contrast was a lonely one. He had someone to share the vicissitudes of life with and I did not. Yet, as much as I craved the companionship that he had, I was less directed and sure of myself than he was. An honest self-assessment coupled with consultation with mentors revealed that I was not ready to be dating.

The first aspect of guidance is the belief that every person is created in the image of G-d, and has a specific life task and partner to help them accomplish their divinely ordained purpose. Sometimes people attempt to live up to someone else’s persona, rather than their own. They will bolster their fragile self-esteem by comparing themselves to a roommate or friend. They may even demean and criticize themselves because of the success of another. One should be careful not to be unduly influenced by those around them who may be on a different life trajectory. Dormitory or apartment living with others has many benefits, but care should be taken to remind oneself that competition does not have a place in this transcendent part of life.

With this understanding in tow, we are ready to begin exploring how each individual can attempt to assess his or her emotional aptitude in beginning dating for marriage purposes. There may be objective criteria, but they are subjectively applied. A specific young woman may fit the criteria and be ready to marry at a given age, while a young man may not be ready at a similar age and vice versa. Disparate backgrounds will logically impact the age of the prospect one dates, lifestyle

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goals, choice of community to reside in, and a myriad of other factors relevant in the consummation of a match.

What are some of those objective criteria? About 20 years ago, the book *The Art of Loving* by Eric Fromm was a must-read in a certain yeshiva for all boys entering the dating world. Fromm focuses on family-of-origin issues and the ability to individuate and build healthy relationships of one's own. Rav Eliyahu Dessler's essay on *chesed* in *Michtav MeEliyahu* Part I (known as "*Kuntrus HaChesed*") is also a foundational work elaborating on how true love is knowing *how to give*. This is hinted at by the root "*hav*," "to give," found in the word "*ahava*," "love." Loving another is an "art," hence, one must be adequately prepared to enter into a marital relationship. When studied with a keen eye and a listening heart, both of these works educate the reader to the reality of needing to be in a certain *emotional space* to sustain a lasting relationship.

I recently worked with a female client who was dating a man with a narrower view on certain issues, than her own personal perspectives. She was frustrated by some of his attitudes, but to her credit grew to understand that she needs to respect but not necessarily agree with him on every position and outlook. A commitment to love another requires embracing differences while working together to achieve unity of purpose that goes beyond "my" needs and wants. Being open minded, respectful, flexible and receptive to the opinions of others (within the confines of halacha when referring to areas of religion), are key elements to a happy marriage.

True love also requires being vulnerable. A person with a strong ego is able to reveal their fears, weaknesses, frailties and great dreams. People with perfectionist tendencies often have a difficult time sharing their developing emotional world. They may overly intellectualize things in a way that stunts the development of promising relationships. This type of personal growth and introspection, the ability to be in touch with one's own emotional experience, is crucial toward forging the relationships discussed by Rav Dessler and Eric Fromm. Stated a bit differently, "inner-work" is at the root of truly giving oneself over or making room for another. Transitioning from "I" to "we" is a brand new qualitative reality. Rav Yosef Dov Solovetichik, zt"l (cited in *Mesorah* Vol. II pg. 5) used this psychological transformative insight in his explanation of the *bracha* recited on *eirusin* (betrothal), categorizing it as a new type of "*birkat hamitzvah*" appropriate for a change in status taking place on various planes—emotional, physical, existential and halachic.

Marriage requires ongoing nourishment to truly reap its rich rewards—particularly during the beginning stages, when we are taught by Chazal that "*kol hatchalot kashot*," "all beginnings are difficult." Rav Shlomo Wolbe zt"l notes in his *Kuntrus Lechatanim* that *shana rishona* is a qualitative concept rather than a quantitative amount of time. Challenges come and go, thus it is wise for a young man and women to devote some time to introspect and ask themselves some questions before embarking on dating, evaluating if they possess the tools and inner fortitude to ride the normal waves of life.

Am I a resilient person? A flexible person? Do I have experience bending my will to the will of another, even when I may have strong reservations? What personal conundrums have I weathered in relationships or otherwise that I can lean on for guidance? Do I know what a deep emotional relationship and commitment is?

In many ways, a marital relationship makes demands of a person similar to the requirements between a person and G-d, humbling ourselves to a Higher will. Contemplating one's religious level and outlook can also be a helpful exercise in this exploratory analysis. Therapists have long noted the interplay between one's relationship with G-d and with one's parents;² these complexities are often transferred onto the marital playing field as well.

Marriage does best when comprised of two healthy individuals with a strong appreciation of their own strengths and weaknesses. The term "best" would signify working toward an emotionally healthy self prior to beginning the dating process. This self-awareness enables individuals to join as one. While individuals and couples may face earlier or ongoing challenges relating to relationships with family members, childhood friends or others, addressing these issues before marriage will allow the couple to blossom together in many other realms, such as their mutual goals, common values and interests, spiritual growth, personal and professional pursuits, and life perspectives.

Thankfully, we live in a society where therapy is no longer taboo. It is not uncommon to hear people say in casual conversation that their therapist advised them of something. Both undergraduate campuses of YU have active counseling centers that students and alumni can access, in addition to wonderful faculty members, rebbeim, mechanchot, mashgichim and mashgichot. If a student is concerned that he or she isn't fully prepared to enter into a relationship or is having difficulty clarifying their readiness for marriage, he or she should be encouraged to take advantage of these wonderful resources.

Sometimes one may meet a person but is not yet "ready" to date. This can be tricky, especially when the other party is, in fact, ready. We all know of people who pushed up their timetable because the "right" person suddenly came along. Sometimes one party will wait and other times he or she will marry another. It is helpful to be open, flexible when possible, and reassess often, since we never know when divine *hashgacha* may come knocking.

Parental input is important to this process. Every dynamic is different, but presumably at younger ages there will be more significant parental involvement. It is advisable that parents not only love and guide us, but also respect our choices. Many times, the goals of parents and child are not unified in the courtship process. While the child's happiness is at stake, it is important that the child communicate clearly and respectfully with his/her parents in terms of how they can help or how they may be hindering prospects. Friends and even parents may have subconscious agendas that may cause friction and frustration in the dating process. Additionally, emotional and psychological awareness of one's own environment and origins is certainly a helpful tool in preparation for joining a new extended family with its own fresh style and influence. Communicating within our own family of origin about our emotional universe is a necessary building block toward strong marital communication.

² See, for example, Angie McDonald et al. "Attachment to God and Parents: Testing the Correspondence vs. Compensation Hypotheses," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* (2005), Vol. 24, No. 1, 21-28.

Placement in the family hierarchy can also play a role. There may be an older sibling not yet married and a younger sibling may be uncomfortable preceding his/her sibling. Although delicate, communication and sensitivity to the parties and circumstance involved is of the essence. It may be reasonable for a younger sibling to wait a minimal amount of time in this context, but certainly not to delay one's prospects significantly or indefinitely.

It is important to realize when deciding to start dating that you can theoretically be married within the year from when you begin, maybe even sooner. This requires an awareness of the practical and less romantic side of married life, financial responsibility.

How will we support ourselves? Am I able to articulate my career aspirations? Are my parents willing and able to help me financially in the early years as I complete my schooling? I'd like to continue studying or learning for a few years, how will that impact upon my potential mate and marriage?

I have met with people post-marriage who were not firmly in touch with the reality they purportedly signed up for. Love doesn't conquer all and it certainly does not pay the bills. This does not mean that every detail must be ironed out in advance, but rather that dating requires a certain level of maturity and sense of responsibility.

Additionally, one should have a clear demarcation in their mind between what is a "need" and what is a "like" when looking for a spouse. These categories can be rather subjective, but each individual should be honest in assessing what they can and cannot live without. One's dreams can be ambitious, but should also be realistic. It may be helpful to discuss your views on these areas with a parent or an experienced mentor, encouraging that person to share their insights on areas that they find to be most predictive of a healthy marriage. One should also have a genuine sense of wanting to share with and give to another person. Some experts say the readiness stage is preceded by an internal loneliness. This includes the desire to share dreams, ideals, resources and personal space. There should be an intuitive internal call toward this process, rather than an "I'm back from Israel" or "I just graduated, time to start dating" approach.

I recall many years ago hearing a dating schmooze in the YU *beit midrash* from Rabbi Hershel Reichman, Shlita. He gently chided us, exclaiming, "Don't ask what she can do for you, ask what you can do for her," adapting JFK's inaugural address to our nation in 1961. Character refinement and kindness ultimately assures a successful marital union. Almost everything else is secondary to these qualities. Many of us are accustomed to focusing on the glitz and glamour promoted prominently by society at large. Before we begin this most important stage of life, we should inculcate within our psyche that Torah values must reign supreme. An individual who is hung up on a certain look, type of family or salary range may be sabotaging his or her chances at marriage. Rav Avraham Pam zt"l has an excellent essay in *Atara LaMelech (Chayeh Sarah)* in helping one access these timeless values.

As people transition into dating, it behooves such individuals to be keenly aware that dating is just one of the many activities that they will be involved in. I know of too many examples where dating began to dominate a person's life at the expense of all else. One must always remember that dating is a means to an end and not an end unto itself. There is often more time and financial resources available before marriage. Therefore, while certainly giving dating the

requisite attention, one should also be sure to cultivate friendships, travel, join community service initiatives, expand their Torah knowledge, and continue climbing higher in their personal and professional milestones. Each of these endeavors will not only serve as a solid foundation for the future home they build, but nourish their spiritual and emotional strides in the interim.

With focus on these various areas, coupled with ongoing prayer, it is my fervent prayer that G-d grant all those engaged in this process an easy, meaningful and fulfilling road toward finding their *zivug*.