

# Seeking Mr./Mrs. “Perfect”: Denying Mr./Mrs. “Right”

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## What is Perfectionism?

*Chaim is what you might call a “professional dater.” Since he was 22, he always knew “exactly” what he wanted in a girl. A delightful person and conversationalist, a Ben Torah who learns daily and a successful orthodontist to boot, he was a matchmaker’s dream initially. He would sincerely and succinctly articulate to anyone who asked, exactly what he was looking for in a mate. “A person just like me in a girl,” he would say. But inevitably every date or two would end in disaster. Somehow, Chaim would go out and each girl would have something that was “flawed.” Now 35, Chaim was worried that he would never find that “perfect girl to bring home to his mother.”*

Perfectionism involves the relentless striving for extremely high standards, judging one’s self-worth based largely on one’s ability to strive for and achieve these unrelenting standards and then despite the regular negative consequences involved in sticking to these impossible, demanding standards, continuing to go for them despite the huge cost (Schwartz, 2008) .

Put bluntly, when one is more wed to his ideals about dating than to the potential for a meaningful, lasting relationship with an excellent partner with whom to grow together, he might be suffering from perfectionism.

“So wait a minute,” you ask, “now *ambition* and *striving for perfection* are also bad?” You might even be wondering how psychologists reconcile this diagnosis with a healthy Torah outlook. After all, who among us hasn’t noted the concept of *shleimut* – of perfection, as a primary goal of Judaism? Why be concerned with a pervasive preoccupation with perfection?

The answer is clear. Perfection is *not* a Torah desired concept to be *had* in relationships. It is something to be *built* in relationships. The Malbim (Yeshaya 42:19) distinguishes between two similar Torah concepts – *temimut* and *sheleimut*. While on the surface these two concepts seem similar, *temimut* refers to perfection. It is a notation that implies no blemish whatsoever. (*temimut*, he notes, is only relevant to an animal who achieves *temimut* at the time he is offered as a *korban*). *Sheleimut*, refers to a complete achievement – doing the best that is possible for the particular type. Rav Shimshon R. Hirsch (Commentary to Beraishit 33:18) adds that the concept of *sheleimut*

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must involve a certain internal harmony within the individual striving for it. To the person seeking a relationship while seeking perfection all along, these stages are never possible.

Moreover, psychologically, we find that those who approach dating and relationships with a perfectionistic perspective, are often unhappy with their quest for perfection (Ben Shahar, 2009). They might exhibit distinct indecisiveness, severe issues that are often perceived as controlling in relationships and a general misunderstanding of the self and others in relationships. All of these factors certainly would not be in line with the standard Torah outlook on relationships.

## Indecision

*Sarah has been dating Barry for the last 7 months. Barry is special to her. Barry treats her well and she feels that she will likely grow together with him. Although she knows all of these things, she still experiences extreme anxiety whenever anyone, especially Barry, discusses moving the relationship "further." Whenever asked by her mother or her counselor why she is hesitant, the answer is always the same: "How can I be SURE he's the right one? How can I KNOW?"*

Someone once noted that buying coffee today has become a major undertaking for him. The reason is that frankly there are too many choices. A recent documentary about COSTCO noted that part of its success is that it limits the number of choices offered to its consumer members. Wherever we go, we seem to be faced with too many decisions (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). While we might appreciate having the freedom and power to buy exactly that which we want, that very freedom of choice can breed the need within us to seek perfection in our choices and never settle or make do. This inherent need, often found among a group labeled by American psychologist Barry Schwartz as **maximizers**, find the sheer number of alternatives in a decision to be overwhelming leaving them often feeling anxious and depressed (Schwartz, 2004).

If this is the case with coffee and lima beans, whose cost of error is minor, imagine the pressure when the decision is one of a spouse and the stakes, hopefully forever?

Moreover, what do you do when the orthodox community inspires such specificity -- as it demands that our young people seeking relationships identify themselves and potential suitors on the basis of differentiation so fine, they would make the students of the Brisker style of learning proud in the sharpness of delineation? We have become convinced that the idea of *bashert* is so daunting and yet so G-d-given, many are paralyzed by indecision instead of committing to long lasting relationships.

Is the concept of *bashert* so myopic and fixed as it is believed to be? Or is that vision built on, and promoting perfectionism?

Shlomo HaMelech notes (Kohelet 7:26) that he found *HaIsha* – the woman -- more bitter than death. On the other hand, in Mishlei (18:22) he notes that if one finds *isha*, he finds *tov*. Rabbi Dr. Benzion Sorotzkin once noted that if one is seeking **HaIsha** -- with an assumption that there is only one for him and that one must be perfect, the experience will be more bitter than death. However, if he can find *isha* – a woman about whom he can say *tov*, he has found the true ideal treasure (Sorotzkin, 2005). The same is true for women searching for men - if one seeks

perfection while dating instead of seeking a mate, the quest can be arduous and can likely bring about much frustration and anxiety.

Rav Eliezer Papo in the *Pele Yoetz*, (*Erech Zivug*), identifies a *bashert* as being fluid, based upon one's desires (*bakashot*) and his *hishtadlut* (efforts). Rav Pam used to compare a *bashert* to a bus ride. It depended upon where one was going. According to this approach, Torah relationships do not demand perfectionism – only *tov* (Notes to *Sicha* on *Parshas Chayei Sarah*).

Some try to allay their fears by seeking reassurance. **Reassurance** is the evil partner of the perfectionist. While temporarily providing relief to anxiety, reassurance-seeking continually reinforces the faulty belief that one cannot make his or her own decisions or the provider of the reassurance is later assumed to not have understood or to be out of the loop on these issues.

In relationships, we often find many who are afraid to commit without reassurance and blessing from one's rebbeim. – and that the reassurance must be recited by those rebbeim, perfectly. And while in certain worlds this is the norm, often things that are a norm in a Chassidic world have perfectionistic roots in a different environment. Rav Elazar Schach ztl. (*Lulei Toratcha* p. 240) used to bemoan the “laziness” of our generation who are afraid to think or daven on their own. Indeed Rav Hershel Schachter writes that Rav Soloveitchik ztl. noted that our practice never insisted on holding up a *shidduch* until the rebbe approves (*MePeninei HaRav*, p. 212). Demanding this approval is perfectionistic in nature and serves as a religious cover for a psychologically driven desire for reassurance that can never be filled by someone else. That never-ending reassurance behavior has been correlated with depression and poor relationship functioning (Jacobson, 2007).

Sarah, and people suffering from the same indecisiveness like her, need to be aware of the perfectionistic tendency and its dissimilarity with religion. She needs to honestly set a personal limit wherein she can separate qualitative time to get to know someone from never-ending indecision and reassurance seeking and know that she needs to confront decision making. A good CBT therapist can be useful in helping her identify and work on decision making skills here.

## Control issues

*Jack is a 30 year old accountant who lives in a strong singles community. He is active in the shul, works full time, is a gourmet cook and is quite the social butterfly. His apartment is one of the “go to” meals in the community for Shabbos. The women in the neighborhood who have gone out with him all say that he treats them well. When asked why things don't work out, none of them seem to be able to answer the question. It seems that Jack breaks off the relationships early on before anything substantive can develop. Jack sees it differently: “I can already see it is not going anywhere. It's just not how I thought it should be. We just don't see eye to eye on when to have children, the specific number of kids we would have, or whether they would excel in baseball or basketball first. Why prolong the emotional misery?” he asks. About another girl with whom there was potential he would say “I think everything's great but she's just not the way I imagined my wife to be” and ended it there.*

When events stray from what a person's sense of how things “should be,” bouts of intense angst and emotional discord are characteristic. But Jack's case highlights yet another aspect of

Perfectionism- **dichotomous thinking**. Dichotomous thinking is the tendency to categorize all aspects of life into one of two perspectives -- "All good" or "all bad." It can take only one stain or blemish to have the person completely find justification in discarding anything or anyone who evidences a perceived flaw.

Moreover, the fear of rejection is so high, that at times the person would rather end it with his or her dignity now, than risk having trouble seeing or being around the other person in the future. After all, how can this couple ever talk to one another ever again if they did not hit it off now as potential mates? What will that do to future Friday night meals?

This highlights another flaw in perfectionist thinking. Instead of asking themselves if the situation and the relationship can work out and how, the perfectionist becomes overly focused in judicial proofs as to why it cannot. With such high consequences at stake, the desire to maintain "perfection" is evident. At the same time, the tension of maintaining that perfection is anything but *shaleim*.

Jack could benefit from learning how to take risks in his relationships. By understanding how he tends to see relationships in a very controlled "black and white" style and his tendency to try to control his environment to ensure he doesn't get hurt, Jack could learn how to allow relationships to develop and perhaps find purpose and enduring relationships that blossom through effort. Again, with awareness and active work on his part, Jack can improve his future relationships and establish deeper, more meaningful ones instead of struggling to maintain his present relationships on a shallow level.

## The Self in Dating and Relationships

*Cheryl was very nervous about dating. "So what do you discuss on a date? What's the point and what's the goal?" Her friend Chaya who was an experienced dater told her "Make it simple. Dress to impress and make your parents proud." As Cheryl's relationship was getting more intense she found her anxiety rising too. She openly explained her worry, noting, "but I don't feel it."*

Cheryl and her friend highlight some of the differences perfectionistic thinking can have on relationships. After all, everyone wants to "date right" but is there really an objective "right way" to date? To the perfectionist, dating, like most other arenas of life, is very factual and grounded. Successful dating to the perfectionist is built upon where we went, how well was time spent and was the environment and the date "perfect." However, at the same time, it is also quite shallow and very impersonal. To a perfectionist, dating is no different than a job interview. It is not about connecting, it is about making sure that you "do" your best and "get" the best.

Chaya seizes on Cheryl's concerns and grounds her in simple terms. "Dress to impress," may secure you the job you want, but it does not land you a long term relationship. Perfectionistic thinking is often highlighted by a focus of attaining a goal instead of developing from an experience and continuing to grow from and within it. When it comes to a job, this could be workable but in a marriage, it is a disaster. The problem starts in the dating focus. Rav Matisyahu Salomon describes the negative consequences to one's spiritual and emotional life when s/he becomes obsessed with making an impression on others rather than focusing on impressing himself with his own growth. (*Matnas Chaim, Kinyanim I: 68-69*) Elaborating on this idea in the

context of dating, Rabbi Dr. Benzion Sorotzkin noted that “focusing on **selling** yourself rather than **being** yourself is very detrimental to developing a relationship (Sorotzkin, 2005).”

Chaya’s next piece of advice is therefore also quite telling. “Make your parents proud” as if she was not in the dating process at all. And yet, in absenting herself from the dating picture, Chaya highlights a certain aspect of perfectionism that hurts the dating process. Namely, someone who always focused on doing things to please and to impress others (in this case the parents) will find it difficult to suddenly focus on what type of spouse she’s looking for, and would be happy with. S/he never realized that personal opinions and happiness were even important! But with misguided communal pressure to “just get married already” or “not be too picky” we sometimes forget that some perfectionists will turn that over to an opposite extreme and absent themselves from the process entirely.

When Cheryl’s relationship seems to be advancing, she begins to report more intense anxiety. As a result, she worries that she is “not feeling it.” Has she considered that “feeling it” may be what is causing her anxiety? When a person sets an amorphous goal “to feel” but does not know what that feeling is, then in the mind of the perfectionist it becomes something that is “not there” or at least not there “enough.”

The Talmud tells us that 40 days prior to the birth of a child, a heavenly voice declares who is destined to marry whom. The Chazon Ish is purported to have noted that only one whose heart is open to listening to this heavenly voice will be able to hear it and actualize it (*Maaseh Ish* I:212). As he notes elsewhere, emotions are Hashem’s agents sent to highlight that which has already been determined on high (See *Alei Shur* I:313). Rav Chaim Friedlander adds that if one is disconnected from the situation or absents herself from it as Cheryl and Chaya do in this situation, there can never be any emotional connection to begin with and the situation becomes overrun with anxiety as the people involved deny themselves the opportunity for anything intense and worthwhile (*Siftei Chaim, Moadim* II: 346).

## Misunderstandings about Relationships

*“He must be perfect” Rachel’s mother told the shadchan. “Minyan three times a day is given, work a full time highly successful job, learn before work, help my Rachel with the kids and put them to bed nightly, work out regularly and call his mother and me each day too.”*

Of course mothers want the best for their children. But is the best that which is had or created? Moreover, are the “lists” we develop too specific and minute that they lower our antennae to those “in the ballpark” who actually might be excellent potential spouses?

**Inherent incompatibles**, or when a person seeks two or more things to coincide which cannot coexist together, is a fundamental problem for those with perfectionistic thinking. When one strives to “be perfect” at everything, the tendency tends to spread forward into the selection of a spouse who is also “all perfect.” The issue becomes compounded as time goes on when people believe that the longer they are “out there” the more they “have to” find the mysterious Mr./Mrs. “Perfect” who will have made all that time “worth it.” This in turn, raises the perfectionistic thinking and raises the bar in dating which leads to increased anxiety on the part of the perfectionist.

**Judgementalism** and **misinterpretation** become quite common features that will drive perfectionistic thinking to a higher level. As the years go by and the demands go up, the perfectionism leads the person to become irritated with the dating process. Comments made about and by potential suitors tend to be misconstrued and misjudged, leading to people pulling out of a dating situation before determining that it is indeed “not for them.”

Rav Shlomo Wolbe lets young people in on a little secret: “One day, your spouse too, will learn that you are “only human and not an angel.” He adds that this realization is a great thing. For on that day, the young couple will get a chance to realize that they have room to grow together instead of receiving things “ready-made (*Kuntres Hadracha L’kallot*).” That day the couple will take a great step forward in their quest for *sheleimut* – something that is created when a couple works together – not something that is had.

“But we disagree so we must not be for one another” is a common thought pattern of the perfectionist. It too, is built on faulty logic that couples never disagree and if one does, then something isn’t “perfect” in the relationship and thus, it should be destroyed. The *Avot* and *Imahot* certainly came from different backgrounds and even disagreed on lofty matters. Rav Moshe Soloveitchik used to note that disagreements aren’t the reason to nullify a relationship (*V’HaIsh Moshe* p. 216). The general inability to communicate and clarify issues and positions is. Relationship expert John Gottman notes that a certain amount of disagreement is necessary in good relationships. For in finding certain aspects of disagreement, couples are assured that they are not running away from challenges and confrontations but rather learning from them (Gottman, 2000).

## Conclusion

Microsoft’s policy is that if a product is 80% complete it is ready to launch. This policy is built on the principle that at 80%, it is workable and can be improved into a better system over time. Tal Ben Shahar, calls this the 80-20 rule and successfully applied it to the lives of regular people striving to find happiness instead of perfection and it served as the thesis of his course, the largest one ever taught at Harvard University (Ben Shahar, 2011).

Relationships are similar in that regard. Constant search, research, review, rebooting and booting out of relationships is personally harmful and can lead that quest for Mr./Mrs. “Right” to go on indefinitely. But the truth is, perfectionism is not a death sentence to a person or in a relationship. The issues are quite workable. Through good awareness and where necessary, therapeutic intervention, perfectionists can successfully learn to shed their rigid thought processes in favor of relationships that are built upon communication, trust, love and support for one another.

In the meantime, perfectionists (and those of us who love and live with them) are best off remembering a few good things about Mr./Mrs. Right:

Mr./Mrs. “Right...”

- **“Is”** (exists) and **not** “Should be” (a figment of imagination).
- **Is a friend** and partner, **not** a trophy.
- **Is “optimal”** and “excellent” but hopefully **not** “Perfect.”
- **Is created together** and **not** found ready made.

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