

Essentials to Look for in a Spouse

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Sarah had been dating Zvi for a few months and she felt that they were ready to become engaged. One night, he suggested that they go to a certain venue. Sarah was quite surprised at his suggestion, since that venue was in dissonance with her sense of morality and she frowned upon entering such a place. After she asked Zvi more questions about the reasons for his choice of venue, she discovered that they had critical differences in values and did not seem to be headed in the same life direction. When Sarah's mother told me this story, she was perplexed that her daughter and Zvi had felt almost ready to get engaged when they did not yet know some of each other's most firmly held values.

When individuals and their families inquire about a potential spouse, they are sometimes interested in an abundance of peripheral information about the person. In an effort to find indicators of compatibility, it is common to research factors such as the person's schools, synagogue, community, profession and friends. In addition, physical traits, earning power, the promise of parental support and social popularity are often considered valuable in determining future marital satisfaction. Yet these criteria are often circumstantial, transient, or subjective—and do not necessarily shed light on a person's essence or on a person's potential to be a suitable spouse. The following discussion will focus on some match criteria that research suggests are highly correlated with a satisfying and stable marriage.

Research on Important Match Criteria

Recent empirical research of individuals with marital experience within the Orthodox Jewish community sheds light on what to look for in a potential spouse in order to ensure a satisfying and stable marriage. The data for this study emerged from a larger study conducted by the author that pertained to relationship education and marital satisfaction of Modern Orthodox Jews. This research, involving approximately 2,650 individuals, was performed at the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration at Yeshiva University under the guidance of Dr. David Pelcovitz, together with Dr. Efrat Sobolofsky and Rabbi Dr. Chaim Feuerman.²

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² Maybruch, C. (2012) Relationship Education for Modern Orthodox Jewish Adolescents as a Factor of Marital Satisfaction: A Quantitative Study. *Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration.*

With impetus from Dr. Sobolofsky, director of YUConnects, a subsection of the study described above was dedicated to researching what factors are deemed to be important criteria for choosing a spouse using a sample of individuals with marital experience. A full, detailed description of the research is planned for future publication. This article will highlight some of the findings and discuss practical applications that may benefit individuals who are dating, those who seek to suggest suitable matches, professional dating and couple counselors, rabbis and rebbetzins, and other communal leaders.

Approximately 500 individuals, aged 20–30 (98 percent married for the first time, 2 percent divorced, widowed or remarried) evaluated the importance of 14 criteria in choosing a spouse. The following two questions were posed: (1) How important were these aspects of your spouse to you before marriage? (2) Now, based on your marital experience, how important are these aspects to the success of your marriage? Using a six-point scale ranging from “very unimportant” to “very important,” participants rated the extent to which the following criteria were important to them: (1) attraction, (2) brings out the best in me, (3) education, (4) emotional stability, (5) family structure, (6) finances, (7) health, (8) intelligence, (9) interpersonal skills, (10) level of religious observance, (11) personality, (12) self-esteem, (13) shared vision and dream, and (14) values. The percentage of participants who rated each aspect as “important” or “very important” were calculated to compare the relative importance that participants ascribed to each of the criteria.

The six highest ranking criteria, in order of importance, that participants reported to have been “important” or “very important” to them before marriage were: (1) values, (2) emotional stability, (3) personality, (4) level of religious observance, (5) brings out the best in me, and (6) interpersonal skills. The top six criteria that participants reported as “important” or “very important” to them in light of their marital experience were: (1) values, (2) emotional stability, (3) brings out the best in me, (4) personality, (5) interpersonal skills, and (6) shared vision and dreams.

The results demonstrated that there are a few core criteria that individuals with marital experience had considered to be essential before their marriage, and continued to see as important after marriage. Of all the criteria included in the survey, values and emotional stability were regarded highest in importance by participants. These two were ranked as “important” or “very important” by over 80 percent of participants, both before and after marriage. Personality and interpersonal skills were ranked high in importance by approximately 75 percent of participants, both before and after marriage. Interestingly, while “brings out the best in me” was high on the list even before marriage (75 percent), it was ranked even higher in perceived importance after marital experience (over 80 percent). In addition, having a “shared vision and dream” was ranked as more important after marriage (approximately 75 percent). At the same time, the “level of religious observance” dropped somewhat in perceived importance (from 75 percent to 71 percent) and was therefore not one of the top six criteria in perceived importance after marriage.

The following discussion will explain how the six criteria that were ranked highest in importance based on the marital experience of the participants can inform the decisions of those who are dating and others assisting in the dating process. It will also demonstrate how these criteria are related to marital satisfaction based on previous empirical research. Criteria that are conceptually related will be presented together. An analysis of the possible reasons for the

differences between the relative importance that participants reported to have ascribed to criteria before vs. after marriage, and their implications, is planned for a future publication.

Values and Shared Vision

The values of a person serve as the basis for many of the essential qualities that one should look for in a potential spouse. “Values” refer to what is important to people in their lives.³ They represent broad goals that apply across various contexts and time, and that often motivate individuals in their behavior.⁴ Shared values have been correlated with higher marital satisfaction. For example, Jewish Israeli couples who shared similar values with each other also reported higher levels of marital satisfaction.⁵ Likewise, marriages between American couples who reported shared values, such as placing a high value on belief in G-d, religious commitment and commitment to good parenting, were associated with a significantly greater ability to manage conflict.⁶

Since sharing values is essential to developing a thriving marriage, it is important for dating individuals to discover each other’s values. However, it is not an easy task to accomplish. In the case described above, Sarah might have speculated about Zvi’s values based on his previous choices and practices. She might have observed that he attended all of the “right” schools, chosen the “right” profession, and that he currently spends his day in pursuit of ventures she deems important. Therefore, she concluded that they must be headed in the same direction. However, these indicators could still be inaccurate, as Sarah discovered on their final date. If Sarah and Zvi’s values dictate that their trajectories for their life goals are even slightly off now, they will probably grow further apart as time goes on.

The ideal way a couple should discover one another’s values is by having discussions about things that are important to each other. They might ask each other the following questions, while keeping in mind that they are only projections of the future.

- What are your goals?
- What are your dreams?
- What are your relationships like? (examples: family members, friends, co-workers, mentors)
- Who do you admire and why? (examples: family member, friend, mentor, teacher, etc.)
- How do you deal with stressful situations?
- If money was no object, what would you change about your life?
- How would you choose to raise your children similarly or differently than your own experience?
- Who do you enjoy going to for Shabbos? What is Shabbos like in their home and why do you like it?

³ Bardi, A. & Schwartz, S. H. (2003). Values and Behavior: Strength and Structure of Relations. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 29(10), 1207-1220.

⁴ Bardi, A. & Schwartz, S. H. (2003).

⁵ Gaunt, R. (2006). Couple Similarity and Marital Satisfaction: Are Similar Spouses Happier? *Journal of Personality*, 74(5), 1401-1420.

⁶ Rosen-Grandon, J. R., Myers, J. E., Hattie, J. A. (2004). The Relationship Between Marital Characteristics, Marital Interaction Processes, and Marital Satisfaction. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 82(1), 58-68.

Based on the answers to some of these questions, they can draw more accurate conclusions about one another's values.

In contrast, a potential date's background, past experiences, and many current involvements are insufficient and often faulty determinants of shared values. Sarah's ideal spouse could come from a very different background, and could currently have a different life style than Sarah would have chosen for herself. What he did in the past, or is doing in the present, may be largely based on circumstances beyond his control or may be only temporary. Although many individuals in Sarah's shoes would be reluctant to pursue such a *shidduch*, and might decline the match altogether, what should be most important to Sarah is the direction in which he is headed in the future.

To Dream the Possible Dream

A person's values also shape their dreams and vision for the future. Couples in satisfying marriages are aware of and support each other's vision and dreams.⁷ These may include dreams about personal improvement, education, religion, career, parenting, greater involvement in community affairs, or travel. Couples who intimately know each other's dreams are better equipped to understand what lies behind their difference of opinions in a conflict.⁸ On the other hand, conflict gridlock tends to occur when a spouse is unaware that his or her dream underlies a perpetual disagreement between them.

For example, a conflict about where to live will become gridlocked if each spouse merely repeats his/her point of view along with current practical reasons for it. In contrast, they will come to a greater understanding of the feelings behind their opinions and be able to mutually resolve the conflict if they discuss how their past experiences helped shape where they want to live now, what living in a particular place means to them, and how it is tied to their dreams for the future. Couples who are committed to their relationship will want to help one another meet their respective needs and fulfill their dreams. Therefore, a couple who is dating should communicate and share their personal goals and dreams to ensure that they can commit to respect and support one another's dreams later in a marriage.

Emotional Stability

Loving couples who care about one another's well-being are inevitably affected by one another's emotional ups and downs.⁹ Ideally, one's spouse serves as a trusted confidante and source of support to rely on through the vicissitudes of life. Yet extreme emotional instability can put an excessive strain on a couple's relationship. For example, when a spouse is depressed, it is common to notice a cyclical relationship in the marriage. The spouse's depressive symptoms are

⁷ Barnacle, R. & Abbott, D. (2009). Couple and Relationship Education Update: The Development and Evaluation of a Gottman-Based Premarital Education Program: A Pilot Study, *Journal of Couple and Relationship Therapy*, 8, 64-82.

⁸ Gottman, J. M. & Silver, N. (1999). *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.

⁹ Whisman, M. A., Uebelacker, L. A., Weinstock, L. M. (2004). Psychopathology and Marital Satisfaction: The Importance of Evaluating Both Partners. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 72(5), 830-838.

associated with decreased marital satisfaction for both spouses, and the decrease in marital satisfaction increases the spouse's depressive symptoms.¹⁰

On the other hand, couples who interact well in the face of emotional instability have been shown to have a more satisfying relationship than those who interact less effectively.¹¹ Understanding the nature of the instability can help guide the couple's decision about whether or not to marry one another, as well as inform them of how to best support each other while dating and after marriage. Therefore, it is wise to seek professional guidance when dating a person who has a history of, or exhibits symptoms of, emotional instability.

Personality and Interpersonal skills

In an effort to determine the influence of personality traits and interpersonal skills on marital satisfaction, the majority of research studies have focused on specific measurable, observable behaviors during couples' interactions in daily life and during conflict. Such research can be challenging to apply with practical ramifications, since it is difficult to clearly define and quantify emotional expressions during observations of couple interaction and to replicate study results.¹² Nevertheless, several studies conducted by researchers with extensive experience have found significant factors that contribute to healthy couple interaction.

Above all, the way a couple responds to one another's bids for emotional connection during daily life experiences influences their marital satisfaction. Spouses who respond favorably to one another's bids for emotional connection, who, for example, enthusiastically reply to what their spouse says or asks, report greater marital satisfaction.¹³ These positive interactions also help a couple ride the waves of the inevitable conflicts that arise in marriage. It is as if they invest in an emotional bank account from which positive feelings can be withdrawn to support each spouse during a conflict.¹⁴

Furthermore, the way a couple deals with conflict has been found to be the greatest predictor of marital happiness and stability.¹⁵ Engaged couples who were observed communicating effectively during conflict were found to have high levels of satisfaction over their first six years of marriage.¹⁶ These couples entered into a disagreement in a calm and neutral manner, voiced their complaints without criticism or contempt, were open to accepting the influence of one

¹⁰ Davila, J., Karney, B. R., Hall, T. W., Bradbury, T. N. (2003). Depressive Symptoms and Marital Satisfaction: Within-Subject Associations and the Moderating Effects of Gender and Neuroticism. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 17(4), 557-570.

¹¹ Karney, B. R., & Bradbury, T. N. (1997). Neuroticism, marital interaction, and the trajectory of marital satisfaction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72, 1075-1092.

¹² Bradbury, T. N., Fincham, F. D., & Beach, S. R. H. (2000). Research on the nature and determinants of marital satisfaction: A decade in review. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 964-980.

¹³ Driver, J. L. & Gottman, J. M. (2004). Daily marital interactions and positive affect during marital conflict among newlywed couples. *Family Process* 43(3), 301-314.

¹⁴ Gottman, J. M. & DeClaire, J. (2001). *The Relationship Cure*. New York, NY: Crown.

¹⁵ Gottman, J. M., Coan, J., Carrere, S., & Swanson, C. (1998). Predicting marital happiness and stability from newlywed interactions. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 60, 5-22.

¹⁶ Gottman et al., 1998.

another, and made efforts to de-escalate any negativity of their spouse by not responding to it in kind. On the other hand, another study determined that negative behaviors including stubbornness, defensiveness and withdrawal interfered with a couple's ability to cooperate and resolve their conflict constructively.¹⁷ Interestingly, expressions of affection, humor, interest or enthusiasm during conflict were found to have the power to eliminate the damaging effects of high levels of negative communication skills.¹⁸

Individuals who demonstrate the positive interpersonal behaviors described above are likely to contribute to a happy relationship. Yet, along with the conduct of a potential spouse, one's own attitudes and actions play an equally central role in creating a fulfilling marriage.¹⁹ Consequently, to prepare for marriage and to achieve a desirable dynamic with a compatible spouse, one should engage in self-reflection about one's own personality during the dating process. This process includes exploring one's personal strengths and weaknesses and how they are manifested interpersonally. This exploration is often essential in two ways. First, in my experience mentoring couples, I have seen that often to find the "right" person, one must *be* the "right" person. Dating can become a vehicle for self-growth to help a person become a better candidate for a relationship and to be an ideal future spouse. Second, self-reflection and working on one's own *middos* (character traits) can enable one to appreciate and accept the strengths and weaknesses of another person, which can foster tolerance, understanding and respect between them to enhance their courtship and—ultimately—their marriage.

It is recommended that dating individuals seek feedback from loved ones, matchmakers and their dates to help them self-reflect and hone their interpersonal skills. A trusted and experienced dating mentor can also provide concrete tips and advice to approach dating in general, and to address specific questions. Of course, the Torah's attitudes and behaviors that foster friendship and love between people provides an excellent guide.

Brings out the Best in Me

An area that was rated high in importance by many individuals with marital experience was "brings out the best in me." This open phrase could have been interpreted by the respondents in several ways. Some might have considered it to mean that a person can be true to himself because he feels so comfortable when he is with her. Others may have felt that it implies that she feels her "best side" and finest personality traits emerge in the context of her relationship with him because their personalities are so compatible. Essentially, though, it echoes the words of Koheles (4:9), "Two are better than one"—each one of them is enhanced because of their relationship together.

¹⁷ Burpee, L. C., & Langer, E. J., (2005). Mindfulness and marital satisfaction. *Journal of Adult Development*, 12(1) 43-51.

¹⁸ Johnson, M. D., Cohan, C. L., Davila, J., Lawrence, E., Rogge, R. D., Karney, B. R., Sullivan, K. T., Bradbury, T.N. (2005). Problem-Solving Skills and Affective Expressions as Predictors of Change in Marital Satisfaction. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 73(1), 15-27.

¹⁹ Johnson et al., 2005.

Marriage researchers have found that one of the factors that cause couples to feel more committed and satisfied in their relationships is that they feel their partner develops them into better people, also known as self-expansion.²⁰ Included in a scale that measures the extent of self-expansion in a relationship is that being with one's partner:

- Makes you a better person.
- Results in you having new experiences.
- Improves your ability to accomplish and learn new things.
- Has strengths (e.g. abilities, skills) that compensate for your weaknesses.
- Helps you expand your own capabilities.
- Enables you to have a broader perspective on things.

The more each half of a couple can agree that “my partner brings out the best in me” in the ways described above, the happier they will be together.

Conclusion

Groundbreaking research in the Orthodox Jewish community has found several criteria that individuals with marital experience believe are essential to a fulfilling marriage. It is advisable that individuals who are dating, and those who are involved in helping along the process, keep these findings in mind. Knowing “what to look for” will hopefully help many people succeed in finding spouses with whom they will discover the joy of marriage.

²⁰ Lewandowski, G. W., Jr., & Ackerman, R. A. (2006). Something's missing: Need fulfillment and self-expansion as predictors of susceptibility to infidelity. *Journal of Social Psychology, 146*(4), 389-403.