

The Concept of *Bashert*

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Navigating the dating landscape can be an experience fraught with frustration and uncertainty. In addition to the inherent complexities of the dating process, some individuals feel the overarching pressure to find one's *bashert*, one's unique soul mate who is thought to be predetermined by celestial forces. The anxiety-ridden question of whether "this is the one" whom G-d chose for me to marry can prevent the cultivation of a healthy relationship. This article presents some of the classic sources on the idea of *bashert*, and evaluates how some *Rishonim* approach the assertion that each person has a predestined mate. Additionally, it suggests how Chazal's views about *bashert* can be integrated into one's dating experiences in a healthy manner.

The earliest and most extensive sources on the topic of *bashert* can be found in two separate Talmudic passages. The Talmud (*Sotah* 2a) states:

Rav Shmuel the son of Rav Yitzchak states when Reish Lakish began to teach [the subject of] Sotah, he would begin by saying that a man receives a wife in accordance to his merits.

א"ר שמואל בר רב יצחק כי הוה פתח ריש לקיש בסוטה אמר הכי אין מזוגין לו לאדם אשה אלא לפי מעשיו.

Rashi [ad loc] clarifies that a person who is righteous is rewarded for his goodness by having the opportunity to marry an equally pious individual. While this Gemara indicates that G-d plays a significant role in the shidduch process by rewarding a righteous individual with an equally righteous spouse, the match is not made pursuant to a predestined metaphysical connection. Rather, man's actions are the predominant factor underlying the process of how one's mate is chosen.

The Gemara immediately challenges the concept that man's actions determine who he will marry with the famous dictum said by Rav Yehudah in the name of Rav:

Forty days before the creation of a child, a Heavenly voice issues forth and proclaims the daughter of so-and-so will go to so-and-so.

ארבעים יום קודם יצירת הולד בת קול יוצאת ואומרת בת פלוני לפלוני.

Clearly, Rav Yehudah's heavenly focused approach to *bashert* is wholly different than the position espoused by Reish Lakish. The Talmud reconciles these two divergent views through the statement that one's *zivug rishon*, first mate, is determined in the Heavenly realm, while one's *zivug sheini*, second mate, is determined by one's own deeds and personal initiative.

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While the exchange in *Sotah* establishes the concept of *bashert*, the idea of a predestined soul mate finds a more radical application in *Moed Kattan* 18b. Generally, marriage is prohibited on *Chol Hamoed*, the intermediary days of a festival, so that one can wholly focus on the joy of the holiday and not on one's own personal happiness. However, the Gemara states in the name of Shmuel that:

<p><i>It is permissible to betroth a woman on Chol Hamoed lest another [man] interject himself [and betroth her first].</i></p>	<p>מותר לארס אשה בחולו של מועד שמא יקדמנו אחר.</p>
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This statement seems to be at odds with the principle of *bashert* elucidated in *Sotah*. How is it possible for another individual to step in and short-circuit the Heavenly voice that predetermined the relationship between a specific male and specific female? How can a man possess this ability? The Gemara answers that it is the prayers of this individual that may possess the power to dissolve the intended union. If this man truly desires to betroth a woman for whom he is not predestined, his prayers may be potent enough to dissolve the intended match, thus threatening the intended union. Therefore, in order to ensure the actuality of the *bashert* relationship, Shmuel sanctions betrothal during *Chol HaMoed*.

Although this passage clearly affirms Chazal's belief that each individual has a predestined match, some *Rishonim* further radicalize the application of *bashert*. The *Ba'alei Tosfos*, most notably Reb Yechiel Mei'Paris as well as the Ritva, add that if a preordained match is broken by the prayers of a third party, any new union created with a member of the original *bashert* relationship by definition will not be a joyous one since it is not truly the intended relationship.

Rashi (D'H Oh Ihu) understands the Gemara in a more extreme fashion by explaining that the *bashert* union is so strong that even *tefillah* is ineffective to dissolve the match. Based on the continuation of the Gemara, Rashi explains that Shmuel encourages betrothal during *Chol HaMoed* not to ensure that no man prays to marry a specific woman, but to ensure that no man prays for a woman's life to be shortened before she can become betrothed to her originally intended mate. According to Rashi, *tefillah* might be effective in this woman meeting a more immediate death, but it has absolutely no ability to change one's *bashert*.

Only slightly less radical is the position of the *Nimukei Yosef* (10b in the pages of the Rif) who avers that even though *tefillah* might have a short-term effect on changing one's *bashert*, ultimately the Heavenly voice must come to fruition and the original *bashert* match will somehow find themselves together. What all three of these positions share in common is that *bashert* is not simply a theoretical concept, but a serious notion with both practical and halachic ramifications.

The Meiri establishes an intermediate position that upholds the concept of *bashert*, but seeks to limit its range of application, essentially eliminating any practical expression to the idea of *bashert*. While most *Rishonim* believe that the *zivug rishon* and *zivug shaini* discussed in the Gemara in *Sotah* literally refers to a first marriage and a second marriage, the Meiri (*Sotah* 2a) explains these concepts in a totally different vein. He understands that a *zivug rishon* is speaking of a marriage that occurs at a very young age, before one truly has his own meaningful actions and *zechuyos* (merits). For such a person, the only means of determining his mate would be

through the Heavenly channel of a *bas kol*. However, one who marries at an older age, the *zivug sheini* of the Gemara, is a more fully formed individual with a track record of actions upon which a match can be determined.²

While the Meiri acknowledges the theoretical concept of *bashert*, but limits its application, the Rambam completely eliminates the notion of a predetermined marriage. In general, the limitation of our classic understanding of *hashgacha pratis* (Divine intervention on an individual level), and the ability of miracles to change the natural course of the world, is a theme that manifests itself throughout the Rambam's writings.³ As such, the Rambam's reluctance to embrace the concept of *bashert* is consistent with his overall worldview. The Rambam writes in a *teshuva* (436) that it is only the *kochos hateva*, the natural forces such as the wind and the rain, that are under the domain of G-d's control in this world. One's choice of a spouse, and other such worldly decisions, lie fully in the purview and control of man. The Rambam marshals support from the halacha that a betrothed man is exempt from serving in the army because a third party might step in during his absence and claim his intended's hand in marriage. The Rambam argues that if marriages are predetermined, and thus outside the control of man, why would the Torah be concerned about the engaged man going off to war? Furthermore, the Rambam explains the famous Talmudic dictum that "*hakol bi'yidei shamayim chutz miyiras shamayim*"—everything is in G-d's hands besides fear of Heaven—to mean that "fear of Heaven" reflects all human choices. Therefore, all human choice and endeavors are firmly in man's control.⁴

What emerges from the above sources is that with the exception of the Rambam, who outright rejects the notion of *bashert*, and the Meiri and Chasam Sofer,⁵ who modify its application, that the majority of the Rishonim, embrace the notion of a singular, predetermined partner. This of course raises the question of in what way, if any, should this concept of *bashert* play a role in the process of forging a healthy and vibrant relationship with one's potential spouse? The reality is that both research and experience have borne out that loving and dedicated relationships are developed over the course of many years. It is by no means a reflection of an unhappy marriage for one or both spouses to sincerely believe that they could have married one of many people and been able to have built a loving and fulfilling marriage. As complicated as relationships may be, finding one's lifetime companion often boils down to finding a person who you enjoy being around, who you are attracted to, who shares key values with you and who has a similar life

² The Chasam Sofer, *Teshuvos Chasam Sofer* 7:34, also explains the Gemara in a way that limits the scope of predeterminism in the dating process, albeit in a way that is quite different than the Meiri. The Chasam Sofer, based on an idea of the Arizal, clarifies that the *zivug rishon* of the Gemara refers to a state in utero in which G-d, recognizing that man is only complete when connected to another soul of the opposite sex, unifies two souls. Since that man's completion comes via the spiritual unification with another, creation would be incomplete without the existence of a soul mate during its creation process. However, once man is born and his life is directed by his own choices, then his spouse, his *zivug sheini*, is determined by his own actions.

³ See, e.g., *Moreh Nevuchim* 2:25.

⁴ Parenthetically, the Rambam, in his rejection of the concept of *bashert*, does not explain the Talmudic statements that clearly believe that relationships are predestined.

⁵ See note 1.

vision to your own, and then dedicate yourself to a lifetime of working on yourself and on the relationship. This is a formula that potentially could exist with a number of people.

How then are we to synthesize the practical dating experience in which the notion of *bashert* plays essentially no role, together with Chazal's view, which clearly assumes that each person has a specific individual for whom they are intended? How is one to navigate between real life experience that often rejects the concept of *bashert*, and our full acceptance of Chazal who affirm it?

Perhaps one can suggest that there is a world of difference between the mindset of someone embarking on the dating stage of life and the attitude of one who successfully has been able to cultivate a loving marriage. While the individual who is dating should recognize that preoccupation with the notion of *bashert* can become a debilitating and counter-productive mindset, one who is fortunate enough to have built a strong marriage over the course of many years might allow themselves a different sort of reflection. Namely, that after a lifetime of developing a loving and affectionate bond together, of laughing together, of building a functioning home together, of having and raising children together and generally sharing all of the victories and vicissitudes, all of the intense peaks and valleys that constitute one's personal tapestry, that it is hard to imagine one's life with anyone else. In a sense, that is a vision of *bashert* that is less a potential cause for anxiety during dating and more of a rewarding end goal to aspire to over the course of a lifetime.