

Reflections on the Mirror: Meditations on Attraction, Decision- Making and Values

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Physical attraction is an important part of the healthy marital relationship and bond. While the details and dynamics of what is termed attractive shifts over time, its importance remains a truism from an intuitive, psychological and even religious perspective. The majority of people in what are generally called happy and successful marriages find their spouses physically attractive. The Gemara *Brachot* 57b in fact says that an *isha naeh* (pleasant/attractive wife) is one of the things that goes beyond settling one's mind but expands a person's experience and thinking. Similarly, many of the greatest heroes and heroines of the Torah are described by the *midrash* as being extremely physically attractive on top of their noble character and deeds.

As many know in real life terms, and several research studies reinforce, the details of attraction and how attractive someone is rated is fluid; attraction is not objective or static but dependent on many factors including context and content. Both objective and subjective factors intersect to create one's overall attractiveness. Simple examples of this are that with increased familiarity (Principe and Langlois, 2012) and positive time spent together, people tend to rate each other more attractive, and with increased fear or excitement, attractiveness of people increases (i.e. going on a roller coaster and bungee jumping—perhaps good date ideas) (Langlois et al., 2000).

This fact has practical relevance for many during dating (other than dating ideas). Despite the stereotypical storyline of Hollywood—eyes meeting across a crowd and sparks flying as violins play—love at first sight is just an illusion; in reality, attraction, as relationships in general, need

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to develop. The closeness and connection that emerges in dating nurture a sense of interest in and attraction to the other person. While there are statistical anomalies, people who would be objectively rated as extremely unattractive or extremely attractive, physical attraction, which many often think of as automatic, can mature through relationship when given the opportunity. For this reason, when I and other psychologists frequently hear, “We’ve been dating for a little while, I think s/he is a great girl/guy, and I think there are a lot of good things about him/her, but I am not sure I am attracted to him/her—should I continue?,” barring other more complicating factors and issues, we generally may offer a nudge toward giving the attraction an opportunity to mature. In short, giving a date a chance despite assumptions of attractiveness can, in many cases, make sense, since looks can “grow” on the person with time together.

The Role of Attraction in the Decision-Making Process

Attraction is appropriately an essential part of the dating experience. People dating seriously should find each other attractive, but the fundamental question vis-à-vis dating is how large a role does attraction have or should have in the decision-making process of dating and spousal choice.

It is undoubtedly one decision factor amongst many, but why is it such a significant and powerful deciding force in dating and marriage? While this question seems obvious or even downright silly, the answer is a key to understanding how physical attractiveness can become overvalued and misappropriated in the decision-making process.

First, attraction is a natural force and an intuitive drive. It is of the more instantaneous and visceral means through which one can know and judge people. Currently, in the digital age, information, and pictures in specific, are readily available and generally a part of the matching process. Looks are perhaps used more in the decision-making process today than ever before, and decisions about those looks are probably calculated quicker than at any other time in the past, with more expectations and more competing images in memory than ever before. [Digital era notwithstanding, pictures remain pictures—imperfect, distorted and manipulable.]

Many studies have shown that with attractiveness comes the assumption of greater success, goodness and positivity (Langlois et al., 2000). Securing an attractive date or spouse would then be a testament about oneself and become an instant boost to one’s potential self-worth. Even more so, attaining the attractive date or spouse may earn the respect of friends and peers as an “appropriate” match, reflecting his or her true status. In this way, the match is not only a personal affair but one that invites many commentators; dating is not happening in a vacuum in the company of two people deciding on the goodness of their fit, but is encroached upon by a gallery of spectators that opine on whether the date is a good match, good-looking enough, appropriate, etc. The values and expectations of everyone from parents, friends and community impact on the very personal process of dating and decision making. While the set of expectations discussed here is physical attractiveness and beauty, the same influence on decision making can be said of any communal, familial or personal value, including but not limited to choice of profession, educational attainment, community status or wealth.

Attractiveness is also a feature that people use to fill in incomplete data about people, with people generally assuming that better-looking individuals are better people. For that reason, in dating systems where there is limited contact and information about the dating partners, attraction may be even more significant in people's decision-making process.

Not surprisingly, the need for attraction is more common among males (many studies, such as Buss, 1989; Todd et al., 2007; and Bokek-Cohen, et al., 2008, along with any matchmaker, can corroborate this). In addition, the basics of a market economy in which men (either in fact or belief) are in "more demand," and therefore have a larger range of choices, support this preference. In fact, this setup reinforces the attitude of men being able to be particular about their preferences (e.g., attractiveness, age, level of familial support, or any random preference), as they are encouraged by their long lists and no market forces encouraging them to compromise from their ideal (realistic or not). (This description is not a statement of fact of all dating men but a description of statistical norms.) This cycle leads to an overvaluing of beauty with no economic incentive to decrease the behavior, leading so far as to have much buzzed-about columns and blogs espousing the importance of cosmetic surgery for girls who are dating and a slew of excessive beauty tips and obligations to "catch your man."

In fact, the sense of male advantage continues through marriage with some research showing that men who are rated as objectively more attractive than their spouse, and thus at an "advantage," tend to be less supportive in their marriages, given their sense of having settled or feeling that they could have done better (McNulty et al., 2008).

Given this potential for a dangerous overvaluing of physical attractiveness, a closer consideration of its role is required.

Is attraction a necessary prerequisite for marriage or simply an entrance fee to the position of spouse, but wholly disconnected from the actual responsibilities that the role demands? While we certainly know that caring, flexibility and selflessness are important characteristics in successful marriage partners, is attraction even on the list or is it residual from the desires of adolescence and emerging adulthood? Even if it is important, how important is it and how much attraction is needed, and does this youthful sort of attraction pass the test of time if not cemented by the bonds of the travails of a journey together?

Values in Decision-Making

It is here where our higher sense of values kicks in and pushes us from responding to simple drives, market forces, peer pressure or strutting our plumage like peacocks as subjects of evolutionary biology. It is the decision-making leading to long-term and meaningful commitments that shapes who we are and what our future lives are going to, in large degree, look like. At this crossroads of life is where we express our humanity, and even more important our psychological and religious development, that we raise ourselves from reflexive and automatic experience to reflective and proactive choice.

This perspective of dating is consistent with what is known as the Stimulus-Values and Role model of dating and spousal choice (Murstein et al., 1970). At first, during the open field process—the initial dates and meeting points—couples attend to the various stimuli of their date or prospective date (e.g. physical attractiveness, intellect, family type, age, schools, etc.), but as dating and closeness increases there is a deeper assessment of values, including longer-term goals and vision for marriage and life. This stage expresses much more of the personal self and leads to greater vulnerability but also greater closeness. It is this post-stimulus stage that propels the young couple forward to the next stage in their relationship, when there is a particular assessment for the compatibility and fit of the couple as they have a wider range of knowledge of the person, his personality, history and context. [Though in many dating couples in the Orthodox community the values and roles stages are largely consolidated into one, the concept remains the same.] Dating starts with the basic observable stimulus and moves as the relationship progresses to the more internal and substantial qualities upon which the decision-making of marriage rests. That is the typical and most natural course of action.

In a similar vein, but from a different vantage point, a very recent (Funyama et al., 2012) and novel fMRI (functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging) study of men and women during a spousal contemplation task where subjects were asked to think if the person they saw on the screen would be a suitable spouse or not, an interesting pattern emerged. While there were significant differences between men and women, with men showing a distinct pattern of amygdala stimulation (related to urges and sexual availability) and women showing a distinct pattern of neocortex stimulation (related to long-term planning and elaborate simulation or imagery) in support of evolutionary biological models of spouse selection criteria (procreation for men and being taken care of for women), what was indeed common to both men and women was that the posterior region of the left superior temporal sulcus lit up during that task, a brain region reported to be stimulated during evaluation of character and self-assessment. On the neurophysiological level, a core element of the spousal choice task is self-assessment, whether that is to see the goodness of fit, likelihood of acceptance by the other or just a self-evaluative process in entering into the relationship—the science cannot yet tell us precisely, but evaluation beyond the stimulus is critical.

Following this idea, **what many refer to as the shidduch crisis may be nothing more than a crisis of values.**

Psychological and Religious Values of Attraction

So what are the psychological and religious values of attractiveness in marriage?

To begin with, it is one of the many factors that draw people together, a basic stimulus that can attract interest from others. It is only a stimulus that requires relationship to fill it in with substance, meaning and sustainability. As the *midrash* describes, marriages motivated by extrinsic and less than ideal motivation and not suffused with meaning are doomed to produce a negative outcome. [(*Yalkut Shimoni Ki Tetzai* (525) in the parsha of *eshet yifat toar*—a cautionary tale of lust-based marital choice; *Tanna D'bei Eliyahu Zuta* -17). There are four archetypes in regard to marriage choice. Some choose a spouse on the basis of their sexual

desire, some for wealth, some for status and some *leshem Shamayim* (for its own intrinsic value). The progeny of inappropriately motivated marriages experience fitting ironic ends: children of lust-alone marriages can end up being despised (i.e. *ben sorer umoreh*, wayward and defiant son); children of wealth-alone marriages can end up poor; and children from status-alone marriages can end up with a decrease of status; only an appropriate union leads to the ideal outcome. In fact, an over-focus on sexual or physical attractiveness can lead to an underdeveloped emotional relationship with limited interest in each other or limited problem-solving skills. [An initial study I conducted of couples who carefully observed *taharas haMishpacha* (family purity) demonstrated that those couples had an improved ability to problem-solve cognitively and verbally as opposed to resolving issues with physical contact solutions.]

It is undoubtedly true for the majority of people that finding their spouse physically attractive is an important ingredient to a successful marriage. This notion was found even among elderly couples (above age 70) and not only was that feeling important for the relationship, but it was also predictive of physical health (Peterson & Miller, 1980).

Furthermore, having one's spouse think of oneself as attractive builds a sense of esteem; one wants to be seen as attractive by one's spouse because a spouse in a healthy marriage is generally the most important person in one's life and the source of much of the person's self-esteem. This is no different than people wanting their spouse to appreciate and perhaps express good feelings and thoughts about them that they are good, intelligent, successful, etc.

The positive value of attraction further leads to the connection of the couple. In the extreme example, Chazal (*Sotah*, 11b) describe in great detail how the Jewish women in Egypt caused the national redemption through using their allure for the purpose of pulling the men out of despair and building the nation. Attraction and connection go together, expressing both a pragmatic purpose and a deeper vision of connection. The women's mirrors, tools of vanity, found their ultimate purpose as the source of purity in the *kiyor* (laver) of the temple (Rashi, Shemot 38:8).

Using attraction is a laudable and important feature of marriage, as demonstrated by Abba Chilkiya (*Taanit*, 23a) the great and enigmatic *chasid* of the Mishna who the Jewish people would turn to during difficult times. When a group of young rabbis visited him, they saw many puzzling behaviors, all of which showed his piety and upright character. When they returned to his home from the field, they saw his wife all dressed and adorned in her best jewelry and finery. He explained that his wife greeted him in this way so that he would never stray from her and maintain his fidelity. Using the natural attraction and keeping passion internal to the marriage is a value, not only to avoid sin, but more important, to build and maintain healthy attraction and marital satisfaction. Interestingly, this is similar to studies demonstrating that attraction is important throughout marriage with greater prosocial and supportive behavior when the wife is rated as more attractive than her spouse (McNulty et al., 2008).

Perhaps this ultimately highlights a truth of our interaction with reality, whether in the psychological emotional world or even with the physical world, that it is only our subjective investment of relationships that imbues meaning. Physical and aesthetic beauty can be given higher purpose through its subjective meaning just as we can be elevated through spiritual, religious and psychological meaning.

One final clinical footnote. Describing attraction as a shifting dynamic and secondary to emotional and purposeful attachment is not meant as a denial and abnegation of the physical self but rather placing it in its proper place. Denying one's genuine feelings of attraction, repulsion or indifference is potentially unhealthy. Some may be tempted to deny such "primitive" feelings as attraction or the importance of physical appearance and simply rely on what they say to themselves and others say to them, "it will come" or, "is it really that important?" Perhaps it is their aspiring to a lofty psychological and spiritual maturity or following the exhortations of their matchmakers or teachers, even if they, at some truer point are not fully comfortable with that advice. This denial of genuine self-experience is one potential factor in early divorces and broken engagements (especially for women) in our community. There are times that, despite ignoring the lack of attraction or hope that it will come, feelings of attraction and connection may just not come. In such situations seeking guidance, before and during the deliberation and engagement period, from a competent and attuned therapist and/or rabbi is critically important.

The balance between the realism of the stimulus and the substance of the relationship and its values are the critical key to success.

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