

Some Day My Tzadik Will Come?

In Israel, as in America, finding a mate takes perseverance.

By Hillel Kuttler



DENNIS IRWIN

Michele Chabin had been through the dating wringer,

so—on this splendid, Indian-summer morning at a Jerusalem café—when better to discuss singlehood in Israel than on her third wedding anniversary.

The freelance journalist went through it all, during her 20s in New York and 30s in Jerusalem: matchmakers, pubs, parlor meetings and blind dates. Some of Chabin's most disastrous experiences came just before she met the man she would marry: Like the guy from a prominent American family, who took her out on a date to Tel Aviv and refused to return her to Jerusalem. And the European visitor with

whom she was set up, who kept canceling dates before admitting that he really didn't want to go out. Why? He complained that she was too old.

"I said: 'But you're older than I am.' And he said, 'I have a low sperm count and doctors said that if I want to have children, I have to marry a very young woman.'

"That was the date from hell that never even happened."

So when Chabin married at 40, she joked, half of Jerusalem let out a cheer. "There were a lot of happy people all around. They knew I'd been waiting a long time for the right person. And when I found him, I was a little amazed, too. It was worth the wait."

To hear Israelis tell it—whether young or middle-aged,

religious or secular, sabras or Westerners—dating challenges mirror those of Jews elsewhere: I'm meeting people—but not the “right” person. The best prospects are taken. Not enough good men. Too few good women. The opposite sex's expectations are too high. Or too low.

Israeli singles didn't all decry a supposed lack of opportunity. They said they felt pressure to marry in this family-centered society, but that coupling later is no longer such a shandah. Finding mates takes effort, but they all concurred that friends and relatives are a huge help.

Sherry Zimmerman, a former New Jersey family lawyer and co-author of a book on dating strategies for Orthodox singles, remembers a conversation she overheard walking home from synagogue one day in Beit Shemesh. No sooner had one woman mentioned that her brother-in-law would be visiting from the states than another asked if he was looking to be fixed up and offered to help.

Zimmerman later learned of a local, female-run match-making group that gathers monthly. “They think that it's important to help people get married, and they know how hard it is,” Zimmerman said.

Why is it hard? One high-technology marketer in Tel Aviv, a 42-year-old single Tel Aviv man who gave his name only as Avraham, blamed the country's educational system for not inculcating family values. He also criticized imported American television shows for portraying relationships unrealistically and unhealthily.

He and others interviewed pointed to the Israeli trend of people delaying marriage in favor of such post-army-service pursuits as traveling, college and careers.

Zimmerman and her good friend and co-author, Rosie Einhorn, a psychotherapist, put a finer point on it: Israelis, like American Jews, are not just delaying marriage but postponing marriage-motivated dating. Meaning, they said, that while peers are marrying, singles are not pursuing serious, long-term relationships until later, when many potential mates are taken.

“If you're at the point of your life when you want to get married, you might get lucky and find someone, but the odds are not good,” said Zimmerman. “Whether in Israel or America, we suggest to people that they set up social networks, which will help them meet people. Here in Israel, people are less inhibited ... there's more networking.”

Which is exactly what works for Aya Cohen. The 24-year-old Hebrew University sociology student has met her last two boyfriends through recommendations from friends. “My friends know me. They might tell me someone's available. Then I'll ask: ‘Who is he? What does he do? How well do you know him?’”

“Men are direct here, generally. If a man or a woman wants to start up with another person, they do,” she said. “Women are less direct, but will flirt in response, and men will understand that this is the intention. I'm relatively more bashful, but if I feel like I want to pursue a guy, I do.”

Some of Cohen's friends find dates through Internet sites, an increasingly popular, socially acceptable way for sin-

gles to meet. Cohen, however, avoids the Internet because she suspects that applicants lie. She likes going out to pubs, parties and coffee houses with friends and chatting with friends of theirs who drop by and often provide leads.

Eli Harel has never tried the Internet, but likes SpeedDating events. Those are a relatively recent format for singles evenings in Israel. A person hops from table to table and conducts a series of five-minute interviews and chats with members of the opposite sex. The format puts the meat-and-potatoes right upfront, cutting through idle chit chat: Tell me about your values, your family, your goals. That suits Harel fine, because the 35-year-old Tel Aviv engineer is dating with marriage in mind.

He's gone to three SpeedDating events. “You get right into the *tachlis*,” said Harel, who went out for six months with one lady he met. “You see what a woman is like, intellectually and family-wise. By the fifth discussion, you're more relaxed, less official, almost like friends stuck in the mud together, so you can joke. ‘So how were those first few guys you met?’ The atmosphere is freer.”

Harel, a modern Orthodox man with a knit kippah, prefers Shabbat dinner parties because they afford valuable insights into a woman's character and manners as she interacts with other guests. So much so, Harel believes, that connecting there puts the pair five dates ahead of where they would have been if meeting on a blind date.

In Israel, SpeedDating-like events generally are organized by for-profit companies. In America, they were begun in California by the outreach group Aish HaTorah. Such community, even national, efforts on behalf of singles are exactly what Israel needs, according to Liaura Zacharie, a married Jerusalemite. She initiated a push to bring together singles, which she dubbed Eden 2000.

Zacharie's initiative drew support from government officials through her appeal to addressing the demographic threat of what she called “this urgent social issue.” With one million single Israeli Jews—20 percent of the country's Jewish population—and fewer children being born, Zacharie said, Israeli leaders are wrong “to view marriage as a private matter” and instead should address “the seriousness of this situation.”

But Chabin, for one, is not enamored with Eden 2000. She is still steamed at being excluded from most of its events during her dating years. At that time, she said, gatherings were limited mainly to those 35 and under. Women 35 and under, that is. Men over 35 were invited, she maintained. “That was a huge mistake because the people who need help to get married the most are not those under 35, but over 35. And why cater to men who refuse to date women their own age? What kind of policy is that?”

Still, she said, all's well that ends well. “I married at 40 and had twins at 43. Can you imagine?” said Chabin. “You can find love at any time, at any age. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.” ■

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