



New Hope for Out-of-Town Singles

There is no pleasure like the resolution of doubts, say Chazal. We have been hard-wired by our Creator to expect a certain order precisely because He created an orderly world with rules governing both the natural and spiritual universe. And when the functioning of those rules cannot be discerned, when we cannot make sense of the data, we are unhappy.

Perhaps the most disconcerting experience of doubt is when something in the Torah does not make sense to us, since the Torah is Hashem's most direct revelation of Himself. A breakdown of the laws of nature or our inability to discern the Providence concerning the Jewish people also occasions distress, since Hashem also reveals Himself through nature and the history of the Jewish people.

Accordingly, there is no joy like that experienced when all the pieces of the puzzle in a Talmudic *sugya* fall into place or one learns a Reb Chaim Brisker that resolves a series of seemingly irresolvable questions on the Rambam. When Yosef told the brothers, "*Ani Yosef*," I imagine they experienced a certain relief along with their fear—relief at the resolution of so many puzzling questions with just two words.

At a much lower level, we experience a similar pleasure when we chance upon a solution to a particular problem. To take a very mundane example: Can there be anyone who was not tempted to give a little shout for joy the first time they saw the Shabbos lamp invented by a former Har Nof neighbor of mine? The elegance and simplicity of the solution to a problem that many of us might not have even known was a problem—how to read in bed on Shabbos—provided one of those moments when the penny drops, as the British say.

Few, if any, social problems admit the same type of neat solution as that provided by the Shabbos lamp. Social problems typically involve a balancing of many values that cannot all be maximized at one time. In addition, any proposed solution runs the risk of creating other problems worse than that being cured.

Recently, however, I learned about a potential solution to a very specific, well-defined societal problem that strikes me as

almost as elegant, in its own way, as the Shabbos lamp. The problem to which I refer is the difficulty experienced by *frum* singles living away from the highest concentration of potential marriage partners in the New York metropolitan area.

The problem is obvious. Each date for someone living outside of the New York metropolitan area is likely to cost at minimum several hundred dollars and generally many times that. In addition, such meetings involve an immense investiture of time, and they often require relying on the kindness of friends or even strangers for lodging, meals, etc. Those alone constitute what the economists call significant barriers to entry and help ensure that even the greatest out-of-town single will have far fewer *shidduchim* suggested and even fewer that reach the stage of actually meeting than she would have if she lived in the New York area.

Even when meetings are made, there is a greater feeling of anticipatory pressure because of the time and money invested, and a greater feeling of disappointment afterward if things don't work out.

As a consequence, many young women who grew up outside of the New York area feel that they have no choice but to move there after seminary. But that solution is problematic for many reasons. First, as Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky said, the ideal is for a young woman to spend her last years before building her own family near her mother. Second, in New York the out-of-town single lacks the familiar social structure of her home community and in many cases finds herself the lowwoman on the totem pole when it comes to communal assistance in *shidduchim*.

It was the specific plight of an out-of-town single that prompted Jeff Cohn to devote himself full-time to his MakeAShidduch Foundation three years ago. A young woman close to his family in Baltimore traveled to New York for a *shidduch*. The *shadchan* had extracted a commitment in advance from the young man that he would go out at least twice, but after the first meeting, he refused to go out again.

Now, Cohn has come up with a solution for the plight of out-of-town singles based

on videoconferencing technology widely used in industry today. His idea is to set up sites in major out-of-town communities and five or six in the New York area that would allow singles living outside of New York to meet those in the tri-state area without having to make a major initial investment of time and money in travel. Indeed the technology will make it possible for singles in any two major Jewish communities anywhere in the world to conduct preliminary meetings at almost no expense. The technology is well-tested and well within the communal budgets of at least ten major Jewish communities outside New York.

True, meeting by videoconferencing is not identical to meeting face-to-face, and Cohn has no intention of making the former a substitute for the latter. He would limit the number of times a couple could meet by videoconferencing to no more than two. The goal is simply to reduce the high entry barriers and the unnatural pressures on long-distance dating that result in significantly fewer *shidduchim* for out-of-town singles. The cost of the meetings by videoconferencing, once the technology is in place, would be less than the cost of a couple of soft drinks at a Manhattan hotel.

The aim is to make the meetings via videoconferencing as close as possible to a regular *shidduch*. This is most definitely not some form of computer dating. Indeed the hope is to have the videoconferencing in private homes. Cohn is in ongoing consultation with leading Roshei Yeshiva and Rabbi Moshe Heinemann about all halachic issues connected to the project. In Rabbi Heinemann's opinion, "ShidduchVision will revolutionize the world of *shidduchim*."

A few weeks ago, the Novominsker Rebbe told me that he views the so-called *shidduch* crisis as the most devastating problem facing the Orthodox community—a matter of "*dinei nefashos*." Perhaps for that reason, the area has attracted some of the most innovative and imaginative practical solutions. Videoconferencing for the initial meetings of out-of-town singles directly addresses at least one piece of the larger puzzle and offers hope of a solution that inspires us to shout, "Eureka!" ■