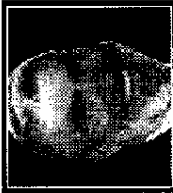


Two Sides of the Shidduch Crisis

By Yonason Rosenthal



The shidduch crisis remains at the top of the communal agenda. Rav Ahron Leib Steinman has said that there is no greater tragedy facing the Torah world today than the growing number of young women who are not finding their spouse. And I have heard the same thing from the Novominskier Rebbe.

Still, not all the news on the shidduch front is negative. The ShidduchVision initiative out of Baltimore has the potential to dramatically decrease what economists call barriers to entry for singles living outside the New York metropolitan area. Such singles often find shidduchim a nightmare in terms of the time and expense involved – not to mention the emotional devastation if there is absolutely no click after much time and money has been invested in the first meeting. ShidduchVision offers the possibility for “out-of-town” singles to conduct the first few meetings (only) via videoconferencing to decide if they wish to proceed further.

In addition to dramatically lessening the financial and emotional costs of those initial meetings, ShidduchVision, which has the endorsement of a long list

of leading rabbanim and roshai yeshiva, makes it dramatically easier for singles in Lakewood or New York to consider meeting someone from out-of-town. The infrastructure is already in place for such meetings in private homes in Lakewood, Chicago, Baltimore, Detroit and Toronto will be on board soon. Other cities will join as the idea catches on.

Recently sixty major American roshai yeshiva signed a Kol Koreh that urged all those involved in shidduchim to give priority to those shidduchim in which the young man and young woman are close in age and to focus on older girls. They were responding to the most easily quantified demographic factor underlying the shidduch crisis: too few young men chasing too many young women.

And if you ask, how can that be given that roughly the same number of men and women are born every year (indeed slightly more boys are actually born), the answer lies in the current social norm for young men to be on average 3.5 years older than their wives. In our rapidly growing community, there are approximately 4% more children born each year

than the year before. So if boys of 22.5 are seeking their spouse among a pool of girls of around 19, there will be 100 boys looking for their spouse among a group of 114 girls.

Only narrowing the age gap between the boys and girls in shidduchim, by either convincing girls to start dating later or boys to start earlier, or some combination of both, can alleviate this inherent inequality of numbers. That was the thrust of the roshai yeshiva's letter.

Changing social norms once they have become engrained is notoriously difficult. But there is evidence that the North American Shidduch Initiative (NASI) has succeeded to some extent in doing so. NASI began by offering financial incentives to shadchanim for successful shidduchim in which the age gap between the parties was two years or less – the closer in age the greater the incentive. The organization distributed over \$100,000 to shadchanim involved in over 100 shidduchim. While NASI no longer offers monetary incentives, it succeeded in raising consciousness of the demographic trap and increased the willingness of young men and their parents to consider shidduchim with girls closer in age. It has on file 700 successful matches that met the original criteria for the financial bonus.

Ultimately, however, most people will not act against what they perceive as their individual interests – particularly on a matter of great importance for them – for

the greater societal good. Even parents who do not feel their daughters are ready for marriage or parenting will continue to push them prematurely into the shidduch market unless they are convinced that a substantial number of other parents are making individual judgments about their daughters' maturity level rather than being driven into a frenzy by the fear of their daughter being left behind.

Sometimes it is possible to create pinpointed incentives to overcome reluctance to depart from the existing norms. The NASI bonuses to shadchanim were one such example, and a number of cities have tried to aid local girls with similar incentives to shadchanim. One idea that is frequently mentioned would be to lessen the period in the “freezer” in Lakewood for shidduchim with older girls or those close to the would-be chassan in age. That has not yet happened.

Apart from artificial incentives, perhaps the most important argument is that older girls do offer several advantages as potential spouses. Not every boy will be a Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, who explained his decision to marry a woman four years older than he: “For what I have to achieve in life, I can't marry a child.” But most can appreciate the value of a certain maturity in marriage and parenting. After an earlier article on this subject, I received a spate of letters from Bais Yaakov graduates stating that among their classmates,

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