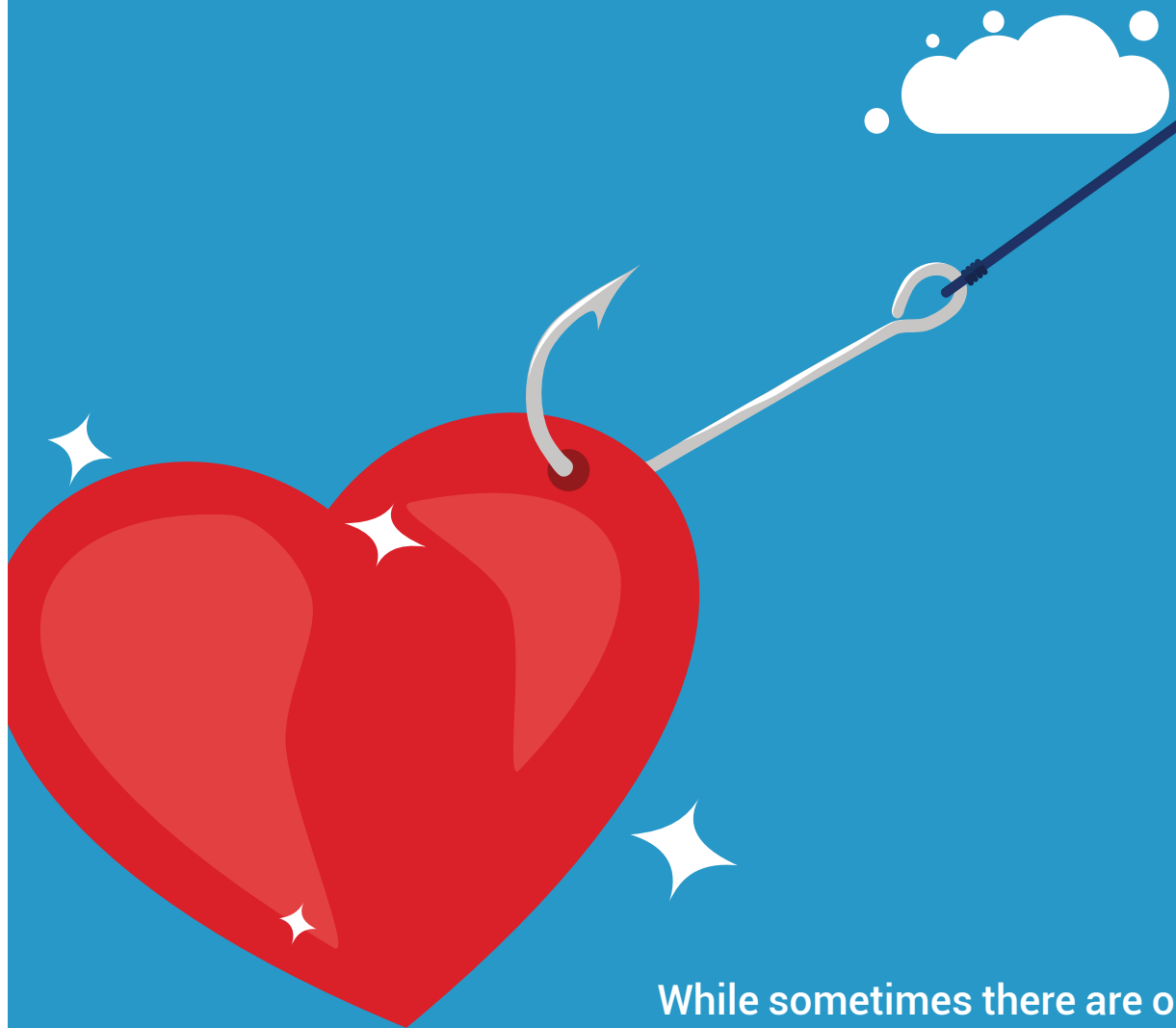


*If Things  
Aren't Going  
As Planned,*



**MAYBE  
THERE'S A  
REASON?**

**RABBI DR. YOSSI IVES**



While sometimes there are obvious reasons why some young men and women are finding it hard to find a marriage partner—either the young person or their family is significantly disadvantaged in some way—in most cases it is mystifying.

**It is time we got smarter about how to deal with this challenge.**

# B

aila, everyone was sure, was going to ace the *shidduchim* process. Because she was an all-around great girl, everyone was sure she would be married in no time. When, at age 20, Baila announced that she was ready, the offers started coming in. After 12 *shidduchim* had not worked out—with ten of those rejected by her—Baila’s parents started to become concerned. So they went to speak to their rav, who advised them to tell their daughter to focus on the important things: If the boy is a good *bachur* with fine *middos* (character traits), everything else will fall into place.

Baila, having attended *Bayis Yehudi* (Jewish Home) classes, wheeled out the argument that there needs to be *hamshachas halev* (attraction), which, she declared, just wasn’t there with any of her previous suitors. Prospects 13 and 14 come and go, and now unsolicited advice starts coming. Aunt Mashie from Boston diagnoses that Baila is too picky, whilst the nosy next-door neighbor has let it be known that she thinks Baila is commitment-phobic. By now, she is 23 and her parents are getting anxious; the opportunities are fewer and great suggestions are becoming sparser still. Baila’s younger sister is now of *shidduch* age and the pressure is growing.


This story is repeating itself in countless families—good, solid families—and it can no longer be ignored. While sometimes, there are obvious reasons why some boys and girls are finding it hard to find a marriage partner—either the young person or their family is significantly disadvantaged in some way—in most cases it is mystifying. Because no one’s

life is in danger, families often feel they have no right to expect help or sympathy, but the truth is that these situations cause many people enormous distress.

### BAD NEWS AND GOOD NEWS

The bad news is that in most cases people experiencing difficulties with *shidduchim* are struggling with some kind of intrapersonal issue—there is some internal obstacle or obstacles holding them back. The good news is that this problem is usually relatively minor and can be addressed quite easily. While occasionally I find that the person has a serious psychological issue, overwhelmingly the issue that is causing the problem is minor, even though the havoc it is causing is not. People are rejecting *shidduchim* proposals outright based on serious errors of judgment; they are abandoning *shidduchim* because of issues that have nothing to do with the suitability of the match; and in some cases they are persisting with doomed *shidduchim* because they are not reading the situation correctly.

We need to help those who need it gain greater self-awareness so they can make smart choices. Kept in the dark, the person is likely to repeatedly stumble on the same issues, but illuminating the situation makes it possible to see the situation more clearly and take effective steps to avoid tripping up. While without doubt many young people, females especially, struggle to receive suitable *shidduch* offers, this is by no means always the case. From my experience, many of the young men and women have been on well over a dozen *shidduchim* and they were mostly broadly suitable ideas, yet nothing materialized. Rather than explain this in the abstract,

An illustration on a teal background. A large, light blue hand with a white bandage on the index finger reaches down from the top left, holding a large, vibrant red heart. A woman in a dark blue business suit and skirt walks from right to left, her right hand touching the bottom of the heart. The scene is decorated with stylized white clouds. The text is written in a white, cursive font in the lower-left quadrant.

*Singles are not picky;  
they are stuck. If we are  
serious about making  
an impact on this issue,  
we need to help them  
become unstuck.*

let's get back to Baila's story.

Knowledge is power

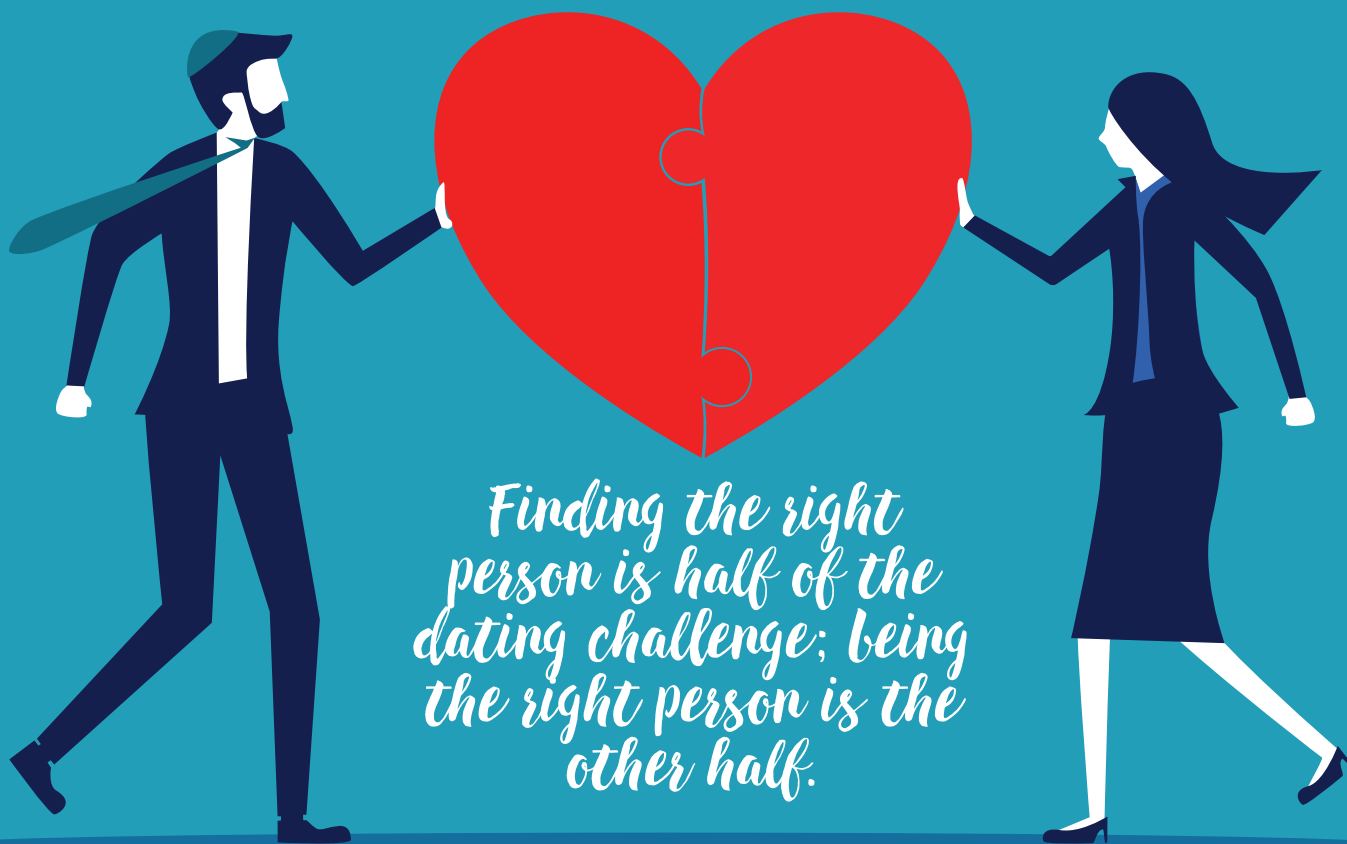
Baila was being set up with mostly highly suitable matches. Each person was being thoughtfully recommended by an experienced *shadchan* and was being properly vetted by her parents. Indeed, with each *shidduch* prospect the first few dates went well, as there was much in common between them. However, she would start to back away once things started to get "too serious." Now dating person number 15, who everyone insisted was ideal for her, Baila was experiencing her usual misgivings: "There are some things about him that bother me; I can't go through with this." The reasons were flimsy at best and by Baila's own estimation the boy more than met

her key requirements. Baila naturally questioned how, if he was suited for her, she would be so resistant to marrying him. The long-suffering *bachur* was by now ready to quit, having put up with Baila's endless prevarications.

I helped Baila understand why she felt compelled to withdraw from suitable relationships. It is called an avoidant attachment orientation. For various reasons, a person may develop an unhealthy relationship orientation, which sometimes manifests itself in an extreme fear of attachment. They perceive the person they are dating as if they were a vicious tiger waiting to pounce. People who are fearful of attachment are often ambivalent, desperately wanting closeness on the one hand but deeply afraid of it on the

other hand. Thus, their relationships exist in a manic state of drawing close and pulling away. This type of person appears highly inconsistent and unreliable, seemingly unable to stick to a relationship without escaping, often for contrived reasons. Baila was caught up in this cycle and was unaware of the madness that was running wild in her mind.

Through brief coaching, Baila came to understand that the intense fear she was experiencing was irrational, and that the extreme reaction she was having was not in any way an indication of the worthiness of the *shidduch*. She was able to see that no matter who she would be dating, she would ultimately experience the same anxieties, and that it had nothing to



do with the young man in question. She now realized that if she allowed these harmful instincts to control her decisions, she would be going against her self-interest and would sabotage her own happiness. Armed with this new insight, she was ready to accept that this intense fear would dissipate, as it was not based on anything real. She recognized that in order for her to fulfill her most valued dreams, she would need to muster the courage to move forward despite her worries.

Until a person is aware that this is happening, they are largely powerless to help themselves. However, once a person is aware, the matter can be easily addressed. On their next date, Baila shared her new self-awareness and was able to indicate her willingness to take the plunge despite still struggling with anxiety. He understood and was supportive. *Baruch Hashem*, they are now happily married and raising a family together. Singles are not picky; they are stuck. If we are serious about making an impact on this issue, we need to help them become unstuck. It's that complicated and that simple.

### POOR CONNECTION

Here is another story to bring to life the kind of reasons why people are getting stuck during dating. Esti is 24 and has been dating for nearly four years. She has met well over a dozen young men, but nothing has ever gone past four dates. In almost all cases, she was the one to end it. The reason became a familiar refrain: "I don't feel any connection." Esti is charming and nice, and the men want to continue dating her, but she is "not feeling it" and says there is no chemistry or attraction. In Esti's mind, she has not yet met "her type." She is sure that when she does, it will all fall into place. But it hasn't yet, and why should we

be confident it will? So, what's up with Esti? Here is what she doesn't understand about herself.

Esti's younger years were challenging. Her mother wasn't much of a coper and found it difficult to run the home. Matters were made considerably worse by her father's frequent outbursts of rage. When he lost his cool, the whole family—including her mother—cowered in fear. No one knew when the next fit of anger would arrive. This made her mother, an already anxious person, barely able to function. Unsurprisingly, there was more than a little tension in the marriage, and there was an ever-present fear of the union collapsing.

### A MARTYR...

This was not a good way for a young person to grow up, permanently feeling unsafe, which is how Esti lived. But it got worse. Her mother would confide her fears and distress to Esti, who by age ten was her mother's closest confidante. All of her mother's fears and heartache rested on Esti's young shoulders. She supported her mother emotionally and practically, doing her best to keep the family from falling apart. She knew that causing trouble at school wasn't an option, as that would only cause more upset and risk further destabilizing the situation.

And so, mature beyond her years, Esti did the only thing she felt she

## The Power of Knowing What the Problem Is

The Torah is called *ner l'ragli devarecha v'or linsivasi*, "a candle at my feet and a light to guide my way" (*Tehillim* 119:105). The Ibn Ezra comments that this means that the obstacles can no longer impede one's progress, similar to the *passuk* (*Iyov* 29:3), *Behilo nero alei roshi, l'oro elech choshech*, "...His lamp shone upon my head, and by his light I walked through darkness."

The Meiri notes that the *passuk* in *Tehillim* first says "candle" and then says "light." This is because it only takes a small candle to produce a great deal of light. Indeed, *m'at ohr docheh harbe choshech*, "a small amount of light drives away a great deal of darkness" (*Chovas Halevavos*, *Shaar Yichud Hamaaseh* chapter 5; *Tanya* chapter 12).

Shining a light doesn't make the obstacles go away, but it does illuminate the path so the obstacles no longer pose a challenge. Now that the way before you is clear, you can stride forward with confidence. You know that any hazards are visible and can be safely navigated.

## The Right Perspective

**T**he *Mishnah* (*Taanis* 26b) recalls the great marriage fair that would take place twice a year:

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said: There were no days as joyous for the Jewish people as the 15th of Av and as Yom Kippur [after the fast], when the daughters of Jerusalem would go out... and dance in the vineyards [in search of a mate]. And what would they say? Young man, please lift up your eyes and consider what you choose for yourself as a wife. Do not set your eyes toward beauty, but set your eyes toward a good family, as the *passuk* (*Mishlei* 31:30) states: *Sheker hachein v'hevel hayofi, isha yiras Hashem hi tishallal*, "Grace is deceitful and beauty is vain; a woman who fears Hashem, she shall be praised."

The Rebbe (*Likutei Sichos* vol. 24 pp. 57-66) explains that the most important words in this story are the ones that are most easily overlooked: "Young man, please lift up your eyes— *bachur, sa na enecha*."

Here is the key to what is going on. The young women are saying, "If you don't see the beauty in me, it is because there is something wrong with your eyesight." If only the young men would "lift up" their eyes, elevate their gaze, they would realize the true value of the woman in front of them.

Yeshayahu haNavi called on us to "*Se'u marom eineichem*—Raise your eyes heavenward." If only we could look in the right way, we would see the real beauty in every person. Our eyes help us see, but they also condemn us to blindness—they allow us to see only to a very superficial degree. Using our sight, we only see that which is external. Unable to perceive what is beneath the surface, we misjudge and misconstrue.



could: she locked away her feelings and developed a very strong exterior. She needed a coping mechanism for dealing with this challenging situation. For Esti it was to close herself off from her own sensitive feelings, to prevent them from overwhelming her. She recognized instinctively that if she allowed herself to feel her own feelings, she would cave under the pressure and be unable to help those around her.

People who face this kind of challenge react (primarily) in one of three ways.

1. Unable to handle the pressure and pain, they fall apart, becoming depressed, anxious, or otherwise

emotionally disturbed.

2. Angry at the unacceptable situation they find themselves in, they begin acting out. They figure that if everyone around them is behaving in a dysfunctional manner, then that would not be a bad idea for them either.
3. Given how vulnerable the situation is, they become unusually strong and resilient. They grow up super-fast, assume an enormous amount of responsibility, and learn to protect those around them.

### ...WHO LOST TOUCH WITH HER EMOTIONS

While many young people end up on one of the first two routes, Esti resorted to the third option. She supported her mother and protected her siblings, pushed aside her own suffering, became a hero and a martyr. Without her courage, her whole family would have suffered much more. She kept up that strength all through high school and beyond, becoming an amazing young woman.

But now she is dating, and she needs to build an emotional connection with a young man. The problem is that her feelings were long locked away for their own protection. Now, she

doesn't even know where they are, nor how to access them. It is not so simple to hide them for so many years, and then retrieve them on command. She goes on dates and finds it difficult to establish a connection. *Shidduch* after *shidduch*, the same thing is happening.

### COMPASSION, NOT JUDGMENT

A communal rabbi recently provided me with his verdict: "I've come to the conclusion that most singles don't really want to get married, or they'd find a way."

Knowing the rabbi had a child with educational challenges, I responded: "Like telling a child with dyslexia that

the reason they are struggling to read is because they cannot be bothered, for if they cared enough, they'd figure it out."

Some people are single because they do not wish to be married or are disinclined to make the effort. However, the vast majority of singles I meet try enormously hard, dedicating inordinate amounts of time, effort, and money to the goal. To tell these people that they just don't want it enough is ignorant and hurtful. They need our understanding and support, not our judgment and criticism. Blaming them for their struggles is adding insult to injury.

Finding the right person is half of

the dating challenge; being the right person is the other half.

### A DATE WITH ONESELF

For many singles, what they need most is not someone else to meet but to meet themselves. Most of the singles I encounter are highly successful and attractive people, functioning well in pretty much every other aspect of their life, but for some reason they are falling down in this most crucial pursuit. What they need is the awareness and skills to successfully manage whatever internal resistance or limitations are holding them back. So long as the issues that are





at the heart of the relationship struggles remain unaddressed, continued disappointment is likely.

A man who knew about my work approached me in a restaurant: “I’m looking for a good Jewish girl; what advice can you give me?” In response I quipped: “Start by being a good Jewish boy!”

So many people would have you believe that the problem is outside of themselves, and that if only Mr. or Miss Right would show up, wedding bells would ring. If only it were so. Some of the people I work with have dated hundreds of people and it is implausible that all of them were unsuited. We need to use education and coaching to encourage people to be Mr. or Miss Right—meaning they should be helped to be in the best position to be successful at *shidduchim*. Singles should know that they can play a crucial role in improving their own success.

### THE INVISIBLE PROBLEM

There are hundreds of young men and women in Lubavitch who have been struggling for years and, of course, beyond our own community the numbers are vastly greater. In many cases, there is no obvious reason why they should be struggling. Many are truly wonderful people and a great catch, yet things are incredibly difficult. Sympathy here is insufficient. We need to understand that in most cases there are straightforward reasons, and we can help them to identify the one thing that each of them could do to better achieve their goal of marriage. It is the very first *mitzvah* in the Torah, and making this a priority would not seem exaggerated. The enormous happiness this would bring to many families is reason enough to give this matter the attention it deserves. ❧

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**Rabbi Dr. Yossi Ives** is an expert on dating. He is a qualified life coach and author of books on coaching psychology, including *Relationship Coaching*. He has worked with thousands of singles, guiding them towards marriage. He is the director of *Tag International Development*, a global humanitarian organization, and is *rav* of *Congregation Ahavas Yisroel* in Pomona, New York. He is married to Mrs. Rivkie (Metal) Ives; they have seven children and two grandchildren, *ka”h*.

Well, well...

When reading the Torah, it is hard not to notice a connection between wells and marriage. All the stories about our forefathers meeting their wives occurred at a well: Rivkah, Rochel, and Tziporah were encountered at a well. The *Midrash (Shemos Rabba 1:32)* notes: “Three [people] found their mates from a well: Yitzchak, Yaakov, and Moshe.”

A leading *posek*, Rabbi Asher Weiss, explains that the well is highly symbolic. On the one hand, a well is supplied by pre-existing groundwater. On the other hand, a great deal of exertion may be required to gain access to the water, and drawing the water out of the well also takes effort. Similarly, when it comes to *shidduchim*, even though the *Gemara* states (*Brachos 8a*) that one's *zivug* is declared even prior to one's birth, it is still described (*Sotah 2a*) as something as “*kasheh kekrias Yam Suf*—difficult as splitting the sea.”

Your *zivug* may be sitting right in front of you, but it may still require significant effort to make the connection and build the relationship.

