

## Matchmaker, Matchmaker Make Me a Match: Orthodox Dating in the Modern World

My traditional Jewish grandmother starts off every visit with the same question: “Darling, how are you ever going to find a boyfriend if you’re always busy on your cellphone?”

Every time she asks me this question, I feel a pang of guilt.

I love my babushka, but how am I supposed to find a nice Jewish boy at 20 years old? It seems impossible, even with a plethora of Jewish fraternities and clubs.

And it’s not just me. According to a study published in *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* in 2011, the bane of many young Jewish girls’ existences is the pressure, especially in Orthodox communities, to get married before they’ve even had their first legal drink.

Although I was raised Jewish, I came from a reform community in which it was the norm to see many Jewish star necklaces and big Bar/Bat-Mitzvah parties but also many empty seats during high holiday services. We may have all celebrated Passover, but it was more about seeing who could stay gluten-free the longest than truly being observant. I even recall my mom telling me that religious school was a perfect way to meet a nice boyfriend. To this day, I’m not sure if she sent me to temple to enrich my religious knowledge or to provide her with an unfounded security that in the future I would marry within the tribe.

So it came as a shock to me that one of my childhood best friends, Lauren, who started teaching me how to use makeup (among other things) at the age of 13, called me one morning to say she was moving to Israel in order to become religious.

“But what are you going to do with all of your non-frum (pious) clothing?” I shrieked into the phone, as much of our similarities stem from bad shopping habits and melodramatic tendencies.

“I’ll give them to you!” she said. “I don’t think I’ll miss my short skirts much when I will be living a life filled with purpose.”

That was one way to put it.

Lauren, like many other young women, has made the decision to abstain from casual dating in order to find a future NJB (Nice Jewish Boy) to marry. Instead of scrolling through Tinder, these women can be spotted using new Orthodox-oriented dating apps. See Grandma! I can find a husband *while* I use my cellphone!

Even though Lauren and I did everything together, this was one thing that I would not be partaking in. While I have resorted to Tinder since frequenting the Jewish fraternities has not been met with a proposal, Lauren is bulldozing her own path on the way to a religious relationship that will hopefully lead to a successful marriage.

With all this talk of Generation-Y becoming less rooted in religious beliefs than their parents, it seems contradictory that in virtually every large city, according to the Pew Research Center, Jewish Orthodoxy is actually retaining more young adults than ever.

Many young adults who choose to become more religious do so by spending six or more months studying in Israel in one of many universities dedicated to seminary programs. During this time, they must follow the rules of modesty in which they have their elbows and knees covered, and once they are married, their hair as well.

One main point of contention regarding Orthodox relationships is completely refraining from all forms of touch until marriage to ensure separation between physical and spiritual connections. It is a controversial idea for hormonal teenagers who claim it would be unwise to buy a car before a test-drive, but for those who are raised Orthodox, many have never even brushed hands with a person of the opposite sex.

The explanation behind remaining “shomer-negiah”, which directly translates to “observant of touch”, is because according to Jewish ethics (and also *Sex and the City*), physical interaction complicates everything.

“There are many paths that can lead to the same outcome in terms of meeting someone who you can spend the rest of your life with”, says Rabbi Naftali Hanfling of University of California, Santa Barbara. “Refraining from things as simple as touch allow you to really get to know someone on an organic level and do not cloud the important things, such as knowing the ingredients for a lasting marriage with minimum heartbreak involved.”

Some of the strict boundaries surely make for an unparalleled dating experience as the whole “yawning arm over shoulder” move basically leaves movie dates completely out of the question. Oftentimes, first dates are planned by parents or rabbis and the meeting places for these dates are in a crowded, public place to ensure that no temptation is present as well as for safety reasons.

Although religious values of all types are often rooted in tradition that sometimes cannot translate well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Orthodox Jewish women from around the world are finding ingenious ways to date by the book.

The Torah that is.

Navigating the laws and customs of a sacred text while trying to get to know a man or woman of college age is no easy task, which is why Orthodox Jewish dating sites, speed dating, and even the old-fashioned use of a matchmaker in some cases ensures that women like Lauren who are looking to settle down early aren't the only singles at the Shabbat table.

“For me, the appeal of orthodox dating is stability, there's no guessing game,” said Lauren, “Me and any guy I date in the future will hold the same expectations for one another before even meeting.”

Stability, amongst many other traits that young Jewish women may look for in a partner, is something that matchmakers must find as a prerequisite before even thinking to set a man and woman up for a date. Until I actually had Lauren explain it, commitment and stability in my prior

dating experiences meant that a guy would agree to pay for an entire box of Dominos and not ask to go Dutch. As the Baltimore Sun put it, “matchmaking is the favorite indoor sport of Jews”, and winning this match is not only a matter of a successful first date, but an engagement.

If a parent or matchmaker sets two people up on a blind date, the research that goes into it beforehand is comparable to that of a senior thesis. Except the light at the end of the tunnel is a soul mate rather than graduate school.

Since so much time is spent on setting an Orthodox couple up, the wandering fish in the sea of singles sometimes feel they must develop feelings for the first person they meet in fear of their biological clock ticking past Orthodox standard time, where a married couple usually has a child within the first three years of marriage.

In order to make it less stressful for religious people to find a spouse, new apps like Saw You At Sinai and Coffee Meets Bagel allow singles to save time and money on a matchmaker.

The men and women who frequent these dating apps are generally more Modern Orthodox rather than entirely traditionalist; however, many of the same standards are set. The men and women who decide to take this route are usually in college or even higher education and have trouble balancing the pressures from their families to settle down while receiving their degrees.

In statistics published by the Pew Research Center, it’s become clear that more flexible gender roles within the Orthodox community attract more young women to this lifestyle, whether they were raised around it or not. In terms of marriage for these women, 98 percent of them will end up with a Jewish spouse.

Some of the methods of meeting potential “basherts”, or soul mates, may seem like dating advice one might get from their great-grandmother, but with time and technology they seem to be receiving more attention as a possible solution to the high divorce rate in the United States.

In a national survey conducted by the Orthodox Union, 74 percent of religious Jewish women claimed they were in a fulfilling marriage. Although this is in stark contrast to the marriage rates of non-religious women, religious expectations make it especially harrowing for women to get divorced in the Orthodox community, which may affect these statistics as well as concern the family and friends of a person who is becoming more Orthodox.

Even though I felt a little miffed at first that my best friend was trading in the many matching shorts that we bought in eighth grade and still try to squeeze into for an overall more conservative wardrobe and outlook on life, it is a path that she has thought about extensively.

Lauren carries herself today as a woman who knows exactly where she's headed in life, and she is excited to be thrown into the "favorite Jewish pastime" of matchmaking, a la *Fiddler on the Roof*, while she is in Israel. She feels as though becoming more religious narrows the vast playing field of eligible Jewish bachelors to a more manageable size.

"Maybe my approach is a little Unorthodox, no pun intended," Lauren said. "At least now I can stop scouring every corner because I've narrowed down 'plenty of fish in the sea' to 'plenty of religious Jews in the holyland.'"

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