Relationships in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Chayei Sarah: Guiding Our Search for a Soulmate

How Do We Balance Effort and Trust in Hashem When Seeking Our Other Half?

How Did My Unexpected Love Story Inspire My Belief in Shidduch Dating?

I was very fortunate – as an immature 19-year-old – that Hashem sent my soulmate knocking at my door. Just starting my journey toward a Torah-observant life, I was far from ready to look for a spouse, let alone know what to look for. When I started taking walks with my future husband, I had no idea that we were dating for marriage. Surprisingly, I was blessed to discover that despite growing up continents apart, our upbringing was very similar, and we had so much in common that it was uncanny. After our initial infatuation wore off, our love deepened its roots. Every year, the love between us grows, especially lately in our 46th year of marriage.

Sadly, not all young people have been blessed as we have. They may meet casually, fall in love, and be attracted to one another due to charisma and a glint in the eye. Some become intimate without first finding deep compatibility and common ground. Once the initial obsession is over, they may wake up and realize that their spouse does not possess the qualities they need in a life partner, and from here their marriage goes downhill until it ends in divorce. This pattern is demonstrated in the statistics confirming that the divorce rates of the secular Jewish communities mirror the 35-50% divorce rate among the general population in the United States.

Interestingly, clinical psychologist Dr. Yitzchak Schechter, director of the Center for Applied Psychology at Bikur Cholim in Monsey, New York, reports that the overall divorce rate in the American Orthodox community appears to be only around 10 percent, slightly higher among non-Chasidic Orthodox Jews and slightly lower in the Chasidic community. I believe that parental involvement in suggesting suitable matches and supporting the dating process contributes to the lower divorce rate in the Chasidic community.

Although I never went out on a blind date or a shidduch, I strongly believe in shidduch dating, facilitated by professional matchmakers, volunteers, or parents, who suggest suitable matches based on background, values, and life goals. This way of dating is especially suitable within the Torah-observant community – where children trust their parents, who know them better than anyone else and who care more than anyone that their children be happily married. For Ba'alei Teshuva, especially those past their twenties, I often recommend online dating, where you can clearly read the values and goals of a prospective date, and speak with references to get a sense of whether he has the qualities you are looking for. You can also correspond with him before meeting in person. This way, you can prepare yourself and weed out those whom you might have been attracted to if you met casually, but who could turn out to be utterly incompatible as lifelong partners.

What Did Avraham's Servant Seek in a Wife for Yitzchak?

In *Parashat Chayei Sarah*, we learn about the first arranged marriage in the Torah. Avraham sought a suitable match for his son Yitzchak and appointed his most trusted servant to find her. He instructed Eliezer to journey to his birthplace rather than seek a bride among the Canaanites. This teaches us the importance of parental support in finding suitable marriage partners for their children. Although the Talmud and Rashi explain that Avraham sent Eliezer on this mission, his name is curiously absent from the entire narrative spanning no less than sixty-six verses (*Bereishit* 24:1-66). This absence may indicate that while Eliezer was the person who was sent out to actively seek a suitable wife for Avraham's son, he was completely subservient to the will and instructions of his master, Avraham. Avraham directed his

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02-993-4945 | info@berotbatayin.org
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search toward a place and family background where he was likely to find the qualities he was seeking for his son. Although considering a prospective spouse's upbringing, values, and life goals is an important part of discerning compatibility, when Eliezer arrived at the well, he did not begin by investigating anyone's family. Rather, he prayed for a practical sign that would reveal the character of the woman before him. When Eliezer chose מִדַּת חֶסֶד/*midat chesed* – 'the character trait of kindness' as his decisive test, his choice reflected his loyalty to his master Avraham, whose hallmark is chesed. Likewise, Rashi explains that a woman who performs acts of kindness would be worthy of Yitzchak and worthy of entering Avraham's household (Rashi, *Bereishit* 24:14). Since kindness was the foundation of Avraham's home, the woman who would carry his legacy into the next generation needed to embody this quality in her own actions. Eliezer therefore asked for only a little water for himself, while watching to see whether she would voluntarily offer to water his camels as well.

Rabbi Ephraim of Luntshits contrasts Rivkah's kindness with the greedy Efron who requested an exorbitant price for the purchase of Sarah's burial place. The way a person relates to money exposes qualities that gracious words can conceal. Just as silver and gold are tested in a refining vessel, a person's integrity is tested through financial dealings. Whether someone gives generously or clings to what they possess can reveal the disposition of their heart. Eliezer therefore sought a woman with a good eye, whose generosity would express itself through giving beyond what was requested. Her willingness to offer more would reveal that kindness came from within her, for chesed is the foundation of all good character traits (Rabbi Ephraim of Luntshits, Kli Yakar, *Bereishit* 24:14).

In my dating counseling, I therefore encourage women to notice whether their date is generous with both his time and his money. If he is willing to travel to a meeting place more convenient for them and offers to pay for coffee, a meal, or an outing to a museum or zoo, that is an encouraging sign that he, like Rivkah, possesses the character trait of chesed – the most important character trait for a successful marriage.

How Important is Family Lineage When Choosing a Marriage Partner?

Rivkah's response to Eliezer's test revealed not only her kindness in offering to water his ten camels but also her energy to carry it out. She hurried to lower her pitcher, ran back to the well, and continued drawing water until all the camels had finished drinking. She did not merely feel compassion or express a willingness to assist. She undertook a demanding task and completed it. How much can we learn about a prospective spouse by observing his ordinary actions! Does he notice when someone needs something? Does he wait to be asked, or does he take initiative? Does his generosity endure when giving requires time, effort, and inconvenience? A person's beauty may be immediately apparent, and their family background can be investigated, but the quality of their heart is expressed through their actions.

Rabbi Gavriel Goldfeder offers a further insight into why Rivkah's response suited Yitzchak in particular. He portrays Yitzchak as someone whose quiet presence and carefully chosen words contain more than they outwardly express. Such a person needs a partner who can recognize the depths within a small gesture and respond to what remains unspoken. Eliezer's modest request for water became an opportunity for Rivkah to perceive a larger need and expand her response accordingly. She heard a request from one thirsty traveler and recognized that his camels needed water too. This offers a beautiful perspective on compatibility: a suitable spouse can perceive what the other communicates quietly and give it room to unfold. Within marriage, such attentiveness allows us to respond to needs our spouse may find difficult to articulate.

However, the fact that Eliezer gave the bridal gifts before asking about Rivkah's family, as Rashi explains, suggests that family lineage should not become an absolute prerequisite when seeking a suitable match for one's children. Rashi attributes Eliezer's confidence to his trust that Hashem had prospered his journey in Avraham's merit. Still, it is striking that Rivkah's kindness had already inspired such confidence before her family identity was confirmed (Rashi, Bereishit 24:23). Family background may guide our search, but we

must also recognize the qualities of the individual standing before us. There certainly is room for differences in how much and in which way parents should get involved in selecting suitable marriage partners for their children. Everyone needs to find the right balance of what is suitable for them, with the aim of recognizing and nurturing the foundations upon which a couple can build lasting love.

How Do We Leave Room for Divine Providence in Our Search for a Soulmate?

With all the importance of discerning character, investigating compatibility, and seeking wise guidance, we must not forget Who truly brings two people together. Parents, matchmakers, and dating websites can introduce suitable possibilities, but Hashem is the ultimate Matchmaker. My own unexpected love story reminds me that His ways can reach far beyond our plans. Although I strongly recommend a thoughtful approach to dating, I also believe we must leave room for Hashem to surprise us. Sometimes the person He sends may come through a doorway we never thought to open.

Eliezer's search embodies this balance between הִשְׁתַּדְּלוּת/hishtadlut – 'personal effort' and תְּפִלָּה /tefilah – 'prayer.' He undertook a long journey, brought gifts, and carefully considered which qualities would distinguish a suitable wife for Yitzchak. Yet, upon arriving at the well, he turned to Hashem and asked Him to guide the encounter, demonstrating his awareness that success ultimately depended upon Hashem. When Rivkah appeared, he observed her actions, seeking to discern whether Hashem had prospered his way (Bereishit 24:12–21). Recognizing Hashem's guidance requires an inner openness. We need enough humility to consider that the right person may differ from the image we have formed in our minds.

Rabbi Chaim of Chernowitz adds a further dimension: trust in Hashem's timing. Why did Avraham receive news of the birth of Rivkah only after the Akeidah? Noting the words "after these things," he teaches that although Milkah had begun bearing children many years earlier, the news of the birth of Rivkah, Yitzchak's future wife, reached Avraham only when it became relevant, when Yitzchak – having undergone the Akeidah – was spiritually ready for marriage (Rabbi Chaim of Chernowitz, Be'er Mayim Chayim, Vayera, Bereishit 22:20–21). This teaching invites us to consider our own readiness. Although we may not need to attain Yitzchak's radical level of self-sacrifice, we still need to work on our own character. As we seek the right person and cultivate the generosity, patience, and emotional openness needed for a shared life, we must ultimately trust Hashem to bring our paths together at the right time. Perhaps this is one of the most important prayers we can offer when seeking a spouse: Hashem, guide my efforts and open my eyes to recognize the qualities that truly matter. Prepare my heart to give and receive love and help me remain receptive to the unexpected ways You may answer me. Eliezer teaches us to do our hishtadlut wholeheartedly while remaining attentive to Hashem's will throughout. As we prepare ourselves to recognize a giving heart, we leave room for the ultimate Matchmaker to bring our paths together in His time.

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