THE CULTURE OF DATING AND SINGLE LIFE IN THE MODERN ORTHODOX

JEWISH COMMUNITY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The search for a spouse can be a difficult process for many men and women. In recent

years, it has been observed that a growing number of individuals in the Modern Orthodox

Jewish community attempt to find spouses but are unsuccessful. Singles utilize a range of

support systems, including social events, online dating resources, traditional

matchmakers (*shadchanim*) and choosing to reside in singles communities. Nevertheless,

the population of unmarried adults in this community is ever-growing, and demands to be

better understood. In light of religious expectations to marry at a young age, unmarried

individuals in the community are frequently viewed implicitly–and all too often

explicitly–as second-class citizens. This is reflected, for example, in the phrase

"singles/*shidduch* crisis," a shorthand term used to describe this phenomenon, that some

view as marginalizing and pathologizing this group. The present study seeks to further

understand this situation in a systematic way via in-depth interviews with two unmarried

men and three unmarried women from the Modern Orthodox community. A semi-

structured interview schedule was designed to qualitatively capture the subjects' range

and depth of experience as single individuals. The interviews were analyzed separately as

case studies and also compared and contrasted based on four major, common topic

domains. Significant diversity was found in the sample, although common themes also

emerged. Singles communities were seen as beneficial, but somehow artificial as well.

Singles felt they were viewed as inferior by the larger community and were often

troubled by loneliness and isolation. *Shadchanim* were valued by some, but generally

criticized for insensitivity. Even with the pressures and frustrations around dating and

unmarried life, singles expressed a sense of resilience as they found sources of strength and support in their lives. Taking into consideration the implications of the case study findings, the dissertation concludes with recommended actions to be taken by the single individuals in the Modern Orthodox Jewish community, the community at large, and the mental health professionals who serve them.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years, the Orthodox Jewish community has given considerable attention to the growing number of aging single men and women who search for spouses but do not reach the point of marriage. Traditionally, the time between arriving at marriageable age and actually getting married is brief. For many individuals, however, the search for a life partner proves to be a challenging process that lasts far longer than expected. There are unique challenges both for those who find prospective partners through a matchmaker, or *shadchan* (Pl: *shadchanim*), and for those who prefer to use no intermediaries. The high levels of pressure to marry combined with a frustrating and often fruitless search, however, often leads to high levels of distress, both for the single individuals and for their families and friends.

To address this problem, a number of programs have emerged to complement or supplement the use of matchmakers, including speed dating, social mixers, community-sponsored financial incentives, and the use of a wide variety of Internet dating sites. All of the aforementioned programs were created and function with one purpose in mind: help a single individual find a partner and get married. While this is a worthy goal, there is only one definition of success: those who marry are successful, and those who remain single are, implicitly, failures.

Although there is some literature on the experience of dating and the search for a mate, there appears to be very limited information on the unique experience of the Orthodox Jewish community. The current study will begin to gather information from the Modern Orthodox segment of the Jewish community with the goal of understanding the cultural experiences in the context of dating and single life. With increased knowledge of the particular struggles, as well as sources of support experienced by Orthodox Jewish single men and women, it is hoped that all members of this community can better relate to one another. This increased knowledge will also better assist the mental health community to provide more culturally competent service to this portion of the population.

A Review of the Psychological Literature

The Orthodox Jewish Experience

The process of finding a spouse can be a challenge for many people and can provide a source of stress that cuts across all dividing lines including race, religion, age, gender, socioeconomic status, etc. As described above, however, there are unique pressures for Orthodox Jews. Levitz (1992) coined the term "mating anxiety" in his attempt to capture the specific phenomenon that he observed in this community. He defined mating anxiety as a "religiously based state of apprehension experienced by Jewish individuals who fear that they – or in the case of parents – that their children, will not marry or marry appropriately." The source of anxiety is not limited to a fear of loneliness or lack of personal fulfillment, but is directly connected to the expectation that marriage will lead to offspring who will provide a "link in the chain of Jewish survival."

Marriage is thus elevated from a personal pursuit to one with the existential weight of an entire nation behind it.

At low levels, as in all cases of anxiety, an individual can find a source of motivation to tolerate difficult circumstances in the path towards finding a spouse. At higher levels, however, mating anxiety interferes with a healthy life. In his psychological practice as well as in his daily life as a member of the Orthodox Jewish community, Levitz reported seeing the symptoms of high levels of mating anxiety in children as young as 15, 14, and 11. He added that the seeds of mating anxiety are planted in books for young children, wherein a successful marriage is portrayed as a reward for a life well lived, with the opposite consequence being single-hood. For parents, high levels of mating anxiety can influence decisions regarding where to live, which schools and camps their children will attend, and can even lead to covering up of serious illnesses, genetic conditions, birth defects, or mental health treatment (Wikler, 1986), which can all be perceived as important and potentially harmful variables when considering marriage prospects.

Regarding the process of dating itself, Levitz considered the current options regarding mate selection, ranging from very brief *shidduch* courtship to modern conventional dating, with the recent addition of "modified *shidduch* dating." Parental involvement can similarly range from heavy involvement to minimal. High levels of mating anxiety on the part of the parents and/or the children can lead to tension as parents can feel helpless and frustrated, while their single offspring can feel infantilized, angered, and pressured by their parents' involvement. Levitz noted the tension, and even cited opposing biblical sources, between parental obligation to marry off their children, and

successful individuation as a prerequisite to marriage. A successful dating experience, he suggested, would be one in which parents are sensitive to the process of individuation and developing autonomy that their children would be experiencing at this life stage. Tensions resulting from undermining autonomy can lead to negative consequences regarding dating and marriage. Examples include those who marry inappropriate partners in defiance of their parents, or who marry to ease the parental pressure, ultimately leading to a doomed partnership. With this understanding, Levitz suggests that perhaps emerging singles communities are essentially providing a place of refuge for men and women who experience rejection, a sense of failure, and diminution of self worth from the implicit and explicit messages from their home communities.

Although Levitz provided some concluding suggestions on increasing community sensitivities to the unmarried sector, there appears to be little progress in the years since his article was published. Twelve years later, for example, Bartov (2004) provided a critical analysis on the pervasive negative attitudes towards unmarried women. In her introduction, she disclosed her own identity as a single woman, but urged the reader to see beyond that into the larger social context. Bartov noted the standard expectation that women marry relatively young and express their religious identity through their husbands. A tension emerges, however, as a woman outgrows her position in her family of origin, but does not find a spouse with which she can create a new family. These women, then, lack the "standard" outlets for religious expression as long as they are single. If the interim status is brief, the impact is minor. Many women, however, view their status as shifting from temporary to permanent, and inevitably have to decide how they can develop and express their identity in the religious sphere.

Bartov referenced Shatul (2001) whose interviews of single women gave voice to these experiences. On the community's take on single women, one interviewee remarked, "they don't treat you as an independent adult until you're married." The same respondent later described her decision to buy her own *Chanukah menorah* one year, after previously relying on her father to absolve her obligation. She came to the conclusion that her single status "isn't such a temporary situation… This is now my life." These quotes point to the tension around the woman who struggles to establish her own identity, while being viewed by the community as incapable of doing so. Based on Shatul's interviews and her own anecdotal experience, Bartov noted that the community as a whole doesn't know how to relate to the religious single woman.

Bartov added that a single woman's choice to light the candles of her own *menorah* or perform Sabbath rituals such as *kiddush* or *havdalah* – typically the domain of the males in the household – is not motivated by rebellious or feminist ideologies, per se. Rather, these behaviors emerge as a consequence of the individual adapting to and accepting the reality of her present status. Even putting aside the initial motivating factor, however, these behaviors challenge the conventional practice. This, Bartov argued, triggers the larger community to label the growing numbers of single women as a problem. Mainstream attempts to address the issue, including books, articles, and lectures on the topic, as a rule focus solely on helping single women get married. Almost none offer guidance to provide satisfaction and meaning to the lives of these women while they remain single. Bartov suggested an alternate perspective. Instead of pathologizing this growing sub-population, perhaps the community can learn to accept and embrace its

members who experience this life-circumstance yet seek to develop a religious life in a positive meaningful way.

Both Bartov and Shatul wrote only about the experience of singles in Israel. It appears, though, that the issues around mate selection and single life that are experienced by Orthodox Jewish families in Israel closely mirror those found in the United States. A review of family life in the State of Israel (Lavee and Katz, 2003) found many of the same tensions and pressures as described by Levitz (1992). The authors of the review discussed a wide range of issues relating to family patterns and lifestyles. They described a common thread across the lifecycle, where families experience a tension between moving towards modernization and westernization and feeling a simultaneous pull toward strengthening traditional values. A range of dating options was described— including the modern conventional form as well as arranged and semi-arranged marriages—which generally corresponded with the range between a more modern religious identity and an ultra-Orthodox identity. There is a pervasive expectation in Israeli society that marriage will lead to children, with 60% of Israelis sharing the belief that childless couples have an "empty life." By logical extension, those young adults who are not yet married certainly bear a further degree of stigma for their life circumstances. According to the review, 95% of Israeli men and women get married at some time in their lives. As the total population is approximately 7 million, this means that approximately 350,000 men and women are never married. This number does not differentiate between religious or secular, or Jew and non-Jew, but it certainly indicates a sizeable population that deserves consideration.

Parental involvement extends for longer in Israel than in other industrialized countries, influenced in large part by compulsory military conscription at age 18. Three years after completing military service, two thirds of these young adults live at home and are economically dependent on their parents (Mayseless, 1993). It is interesting to consider this fact in light of the possible conflict between parental involvement and developing autonomy as described above (Levitz, 1992). Future researchers may consider how these families manage this tension. The authors of the review also cited an earlier study that found that marital satisfaction varied positively with the degree of traditionalism (Lavee, 1995). In other words, the closer one identified with traditional values, the higher the perceived quality of the marital relationship. In this light, the move described by Bartov (2004) of single women developing their own "non-traditional" religious identity can possibly be perceived as a threat to the health of future marriages. If the pool of future wives moves away from tradition in their religious practice, perhaps the greater community can perceive this as a predictor of future unhappy marriages. Again, further research is warranted.

In the Orthodox Jewish community, conventional dating is the expression of modernity in the context of dating, while tradition indicates the involvement of a *shadchan*. Rockman (2004) profiled a husband and wife *shadchan* team who are currently matchmakers in the United Kingdom, and have been for many years. In the past, the husband reflected, he would work to be at least 60% sure that a proposed match would be successful even before the couple meet. He added, though, that his process is growing more difficult as more young men and women adapt to modern values with increasing expectations for perfection and less room for compromise.

Rockman also reviewed the long history of the *shadchan*, and noted that they served a particularly important function during times of religious oppression and persecution. In the times following the Crusades, for example, matchmakers went beyond merely unifying two people in marriage; their purpose was to unify and stabilize dispersed communities and thereby repair the weakening links of a threatened people. In the process of learning about the marriage-eligible young men and women, *shadchanim* investigated individual traits, as well as family pedigree, academic and economic achievements, and religious behavior. To that end, families worked harder in these many aspects of their lives so their children would marry well. Rockman suggested that it was these positive pressures that contributed, at least in part, to the formation of strong stable communities in Eastern Europe.

In light of the formulation by Rockman, one can infer that mating anxiety was high in times of existential threat, and that this served an adaptive function. The families internalized the pressure to present their children in an exemplary fashion to their prospective *shadchanim*. As a result, the individuals, families, and communities as a whole grew stronger. If not for high levels of mating anxiety, the threats to Jewish continuity could have proved too strong for the people to survive. It is unclear if the present rates of divorce, assimilation, and intermarriage in the Orthodox Jewish community are existential threats on par with the destructive forces of the Crusades. If that is true, then perhaps high levels of mating anxiety is again adaptive. In addition, challenges to tradition such as those described by Bartov would justifiably be viewed as harmful. If, however, the present day threats are not as severe as those in Rockman's

historical account, then high levels of mating anxiety are not justified, and the women described by Bartov can be appreciated as well.

Cross-Cultural Parallel

The range of mate selection options as described above, primarily split between traditional arranged marriages and modern conventional dating, both have their own set of costs and benefits. The tension between modernity and tradition is not limited to the Orthodox Jewish community, however, and a study in China, for example, informs our own understanding of these two marital paths. Xiaohe and Whyte (1990) studied the impact on marital satisfaction as the people of China moved towards more Western values. The authors compared the marriages that resulted from "love matches" with those that resulted from arranged marriages; their study included women who were wed between 1933 and 1987. The authors were testing the conventional hypothesis that "love matches start out hot and grow cold, while arranged marriages start out cold and grow hot." The stated rationale for arranged marriages with high levels of parental involvement was that parents can make better decisions to judge compatibility than their immature offspring. The authors added that this argument is more effective if marriage occurs at younger ages. Notably, this is consistent with the ideas formulated by Levitz (1992) who suggested an inverse relationship between parental involvement and offspring autonomy.

In the time frame assessed by the researchers, a significant shift was observed in which the common practice changed from arranged marriages to love matches. Nevertheless, the authors did not observe the emergence of a "dating culture." This was defined as a culture wherein young people were able to link up romantically without adult

supervision in a setting that is not defined as leading directly to marriage. In such a dating culture it is acceptable for young people to 'try out' a variety of romantic partners before progressing to the stage of preparation to select a spouse." In contrast to the Chinese survey is the phenomenon of the singles community in the Orthodox Jewish world, in which a dating culture appears to be the norm. It would be interesting for future researchers to assess if such a culture has emerged in China in the 20 years since the publishing of the study by Xiaohe and Whyte.

The major conclusion of their study, however, was that the conventional wisdom was not supported. Marriage quality was seen to fluctuate irregularly for all marriage types, with some modest tendency for arranged marriages to get "warmer" over time. However, women in love matches consistently described greater marital satisfaction than women in arranged marriages at every stage. This study can provide some counter balance to the potential increase in mating anxiety as Orthodox Jewish single men and women move away from strict tradition in their expression of their own religious identity. Perhaps modern conventional dating and the move to other similar expressions of modernity can lead to greater marital satisfaction, rather than less.

Dating Variables

Just as marital satisfaction can range based on multiple variables, so too can satisfaction while dating. Thelen et al. (2000) studied the experience of intimacy among dating couples and the impact on the relationship of the anxiety experienced by one or both of the partners as assessed by the Fear of Intimacy Scale (FIS). Gender differences were observed, with men reporting higher FIS scores than women, and levels of desired

intimacy as well as actual perceived intimacy–as assessed by the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR)–reported as higher for women than men. Strong negative correlations were observed between FIS and actual intimacy in the relationship, as was logically expected. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that "opposites attract," subjects were found to be more likely to be dating someone with a similar FIS score. The authors also found that higher FIS scores, associated with greater anxiety in the relationship, were associated with briefer relationships, although this effect was more powerful for the women in the study.

Some of the findings from the study by Thelen et al. could serve to inform the process of matchmaking in the Orthodox Jewish community. It might be helpful, for example, for *shadchanim* to add a basic understanding of FIS in their matching profiles; a match would be more likely to succeed if the partners are FIS-compatible. We can also extend the idea of FIS to the mating anxiety construct. If greater anxiety with intimacy leads to briefer relationships, then there is all the more reason to challenge the pressures that lead to mating anxiety. If the stress in dating is reduced, perhaps the singles themselves could establish more lasting relationships that will ultimately lead to marriage. By maintaining the status quo that fosters anxiety in dating, the community may actually be working against the goals of marriage, and would do well to change.

Managing anxiety and expectations in dating can be a difficult task, one that many people attempt to balance with greater prior knowledge of the potential other, assuming that greater knowledge of a potential partner will lead to greater success in the relationship. Considerable energy goes into preliminary background checks, in the case of *shadchanim*, and anxious singles frequently update online profiles. Nevertheless,

Norton et al. (2007) found strong evidence that challenges the stated assumption. In both experimental and real world settings, ambiguity was associated with liking the other, and increases in knowledge of a partner – e.g. as reported before and after a first date – are accompanied by decreased sense of liking the partner, and an increase in perceived dissimilarity. The authors interpreted this main finding as follows: People tend to feel overly optimistic prior to beginning a new relationship. Once new knowledge is introduced, however, they face evidence of dissimilarity and the perspective sours, leading to a further biased attention towards evidence of dissimilarity, and further dislike.

Expectations were seen to be tempered somewhat by greater experience, but there may be an adaptive function to the early false level of optimism. Although unrealistically positive expectations may generally lead to frustration and disappointment, it also adds motivation to persevere in the search for a spouse. While one cannot hold on to ambiguity, perhaps the take home message is to be aware of the biases that can emerge in the process of developing a relationship, especially as more knowledge emerges. Additionally, in the Orthodox Jewish community specifically, perhaps less background inquiry would be beneficial to allow some ambiguity to remain while the dating begins, allowing singles to experience the benefits of their inflated optimism.

There appears to be a tension between casting a wide net for potential partners motivated by inflated optimism, and a desire to narrow the dating pool through selection criteria. A study by Eastwick et al. (2007) showed the potential cost to being too general in one's selection. Building on past research that shows reciprocity in desire, i.e. people like those who like them, the authors sought to differentiate between specific and generalized desire. In a speed dating setting, they found that specific desire was

reciprocated—in other words, two individuals only reported mutual interest if each was interested solely in the other. Generalized desire, however, was not reciprocated; participants could accurately assess that a potential partner was generally interested in everyone, and the participants would subsequently express disinterest in that individual. For the single men and women who want to optimize their chances of finding their life partner, some selectivity appears beneficial. Saying yes to a large percentage of possible partners can prove costly, and it appears that optimism must be tempered by selectivity.

Authenticity and setting the stage to build trust are additional critical components to developing successful relationships, with internet dating settings shown to be no different than relationships that reside exclusively offline in this respect (Hardey, 2004). Individuals who used the Internet as a dating resource were also shown to not have an unrealistically inflated expectation of finding their soulmate, and instead appear to have a healthy expectation of a continuum of compatibility (Houran and Lange, 2004). Although online dating is a relatively recent innovation, it appears to be a natural healthy extension of real-world dating options, and a viable resource for initiating a successful relationship.

Another variable that can impact a dating experience is the expectation of how one will relate to one's partner. In particular, a significant difference emerges between a soulmate perspective, also known as *bashert* in the Jewish construct, and the work-it-out theory. These are studied by Franiuk et al. (2004) with an eye to assess how each leads to different attitudes and behaviors in dating. The two relationship theories differ in many ways, highlighted as follows. The soulmate theorists place more importance in passion, and the idealization of the partner, and expect to consider fewer partners before finding the "right" one. The work-it-out theorists access a wider range of partners, and emphasize

the role of effort in developing a positive relationship. The theories seem to be highly stable (Franiuk et al., 2002), although different beliefs may be activated by external influences (Hong & Chiu, 2001). Franiuk et al. (2004) attempted to experimentally induce the two theories and assess the impact of receiving negative information on relationship attitudes in the two experimental groups. By controlling those variables, the authors were able to measure a causal relationship between relationship theory and relationship satisfaction rather than just correlational.

For those subjects in the soulmate theory group, and who assumed that their partner was the "right" one, all information about the partner was filtered through a lens attuned to strengths and virtues; negative information was dismissed or minimized. If the partner was previously identified to be a poorer fit, the focus was reversed. For work-it-out theorists, however, new negative information was evaluated in a dispassionate, non-defensive, and evenhanded way. This finding was not impacted by the latter group's assessment of their partners' fit. It is unclear if the response of the work-it-out theorists indicates a healthy, more mature perspective, or if the distance might hinder intimacy as they don't access the "positive illusions" about their partner. The authors offered this as a suggestion for future research. Ultimately both approaches have their pros and cons, and neither is universally more beneficial. Seeing the possibility of shifting theories, at least temporarily, implies that people have some choice in how they approach their partners at any given moment. Perhaps single men and women, and those who work with them, can learn to draw from the advantages of each, setting the stage for greater relationship satisfaction.

Attachment style, another key variable in developing relationships, is similarly

seen as generally stable but also influenced by external stimuli. Ruvolo et al. (2001) described adult attachment as a continuum from secure to insecure, and considered how attachment could be influenced by the occurrence of breakups and the way an individual handles conflict in a relationship. The authors suggested that breakups can have a negative impact on how a person trusts others in future relationships, and conflict avoidance patterns can similarly lead to less secure attachments, as an individual might not advance the relationship sufficiently to the point of developing trust. The researchers learned that after breakups women did show less secure attachment, although men were similarly impacted only if they were initially more insecure. Similarly, women who avoided conflict showed less secure attachment, while men who avoided conflict and experienced breakups actually showed no change in their attachment. For those men, the authors suggested, perhaps conflict avoidance served as a protective factor. The findings from this study suggest that attachment is more malleable in individuals in early relationships, and that the effects may be cumulative. We might, therefore, expect to see a high incidence of insecure attachment in Orthodox Jewish singles who have experienced many breakups over their years of dating. This lends strong support for greater attention to this sub-group.

A Review of the Religious and Cultural Background

Biblical and Rabbinical Perspective on Marriage

Marriage and the construction of one's family play a central role in maintaining the Jewish society, and are emphasized numerous times in Biblical, Talmudic, and Rabbinical sources. To begin, the importance of the family institution is predicated on the

first commandment given in the Bible (Genesis 1:28) as man is commanded to "…be fruitful and multiply."[1] Later in Genesis (2:24), every future generation of man is instructed to "leave his father and his mother and cling to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." This verse occurs in context immediately following the creation of Adam and Eve. In the story, Eve is created from one of Adam's ribs. In this sense, whenever a man and woman join together in marriage, they are reuniting the separated flesh as directed by the above verse.

It should be noted that there are two models in the Bible for the place of romantic love in the context of marriage. On one hand, the second Jewish forefather, Isaac, developed romantic love and attachment only after he married his wife, Rebecca. This is insinuated by the sequence of the verse that states, "…she became his wife, and he loved her." (Ibid 24:67) Chronologically, first Rebecca became his wife, and only subsequently did romantic love emerge. In contrast is the third Jewish forefather, Jacob, who first developed a romantic attachment towards his future wife Rachel (ibid 29:18), and then married her (ibid 29:28).

These two models can be mapped onto the different approaches to dating today. On one end of the spectrum, a strictly traditional, Ultra-Orthodox couple might find themselves arranged to be married and barely have one opportunity to meet before the marriage is set. These individuals are following the Isaac model. Alternatively, many singles today approach dating from the angle set forth by the Jacob model. In this respect, they feel that they could not marry the other person if they do not first experience a sense of romantic love. Dating, therefore, may be a much more protracted experience, with the

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[1] All Biblical verse translations are taken from The Stone Chumash (1981)

goal being to develop romantic love prior to making the commitment to marry. While the former model may be considered more traditional and the latter more modern, it is important to reflect on the fact that both of these models have biblical roots.

After the Biblical sources, there are a number of Talmudic and Rabbinical sources that inform us about the Orthodox Jewish culture of single life, dating, courtship, and marriage. The Talmud states (*Shabbat* 31a) that every person will be asked three questions on his judgment day: "Did you buy and sell in good faith? Did you have a set time for *Torah* study? Did you raise a family?" In this way, a person is held accountable for engaging in three priority experiences throughout his life. These can be framed as honest business dealings, a commitment to religion, and the raising of future generations. Any individual can fulfill the first two; the third, however, is dependent on a union of two individuals in marriage.

Other sources in the Talmud have strongly critical words about people who do not get married. The following three examples are taken from the tractate *Yevamot*. The text reads, "He who lives without a wife lives without joy, without blessing, without good." (*Yevamot* 62b) One page later, we find, "He who is not married is not considered a man." (Ibid 63a) Turning another page we learn that the scholar Ben-Azzai was chastised severely for choosing celibacy in order to spend his life studying *Torah*. (Ibid 63b) When we think about the three posthumous questions quoted earlier, we realize that Ben-Azzai chose to immerse himself totally in the second, while neglecting the third value of raising a family. Apparently, the three priorities are held in equally high esteem, and we are directed to do our best to balance them all.

On the topic of the identity of one's life partner, we are taught about the proverbial match made in heaven. Forty days before each person is born, the Talmud tells us, a heavenly voice declares, "*Bat ploni l'ploni*." (*Sotah* 2a) This translates to a statement that, "the daughter of so-and-so is [matched] to so-and-so." Popularly, this ideal mate is referred to as one's *bashert*, a Yiddish word relating to the concept of fate, and, in this context, one's intended. The process of dating should ideally end with the meeting of one's *bashert*. However, the actual identity of one's *bashert* is never revealed. There is no way for a single man to know if his chosen mate is his *bashert*, or not.

The concept of *bashert*, therefore, is a complex one for many singles. Each time a single woman, for example, wonders about the appropriateness for marriage of the man she is dating, she may ask herself if he is her *bashert*. Following this assessment, she can choose to continue to pursue the relationship, or she can end it. If there are any flaws in him or in the relationship, she may argue that there must be a more perfect mate—her *bashert*—out there for her and she will proceed with her search. She fears that if she does not hold out for the more ideal relationship, she might end up settling for an inferior mate. However, if she does move on and continue to look for the more perfect match, she might end up being criticized, as many singles are, for being too picky. In this way, the issue of choosing one's mate lies on a continuum wherein the potentially never-ending search for the elusive *bashert* sits on one end, and settling for a merely adequate spouse sits on the other. The challenge of finding a balanced perspective in the middle is a great one for all concerned parties.

There are sources that also give guidance as to the qualities to look for in a potential spouse. Maurice Lamm (1982) reviews several qualities of the ideal mate. These

include compassion, modesty, scholarship, piety, family background, physical attraction, and wealth. All of these qualities are desirable but no one criterion is totally necessary or sufficient for a desirable mate. As an individual, a single person must prioritize these qualities for him/herself in order to set the search parameters for an ideal mate. In doing so, a single woman, for example, can think about her own personal strengths and weaknesses and consider what she would imagine would best complement those. In the first pairing in the Bible, Eve is referred to as "*ezer k'negdo*," a helpmate opposite to [Adam] (Genesis 2:18). In some ways, a husband and wife should be similar to one another, or helpmates, and in others they should complement each other with opposite strengths.

Laws for Single Men and Women

According to Jewish laws, until a man and woman are married, there is a set of restrictions placed on them. Relating to the first commandment quoted above, "…be fruitful and multiply," Maimonides (one of the foremost codifiers of Jewish Law, 12th century, Spain) explains that the means to this end, namely procreation and sexual relations as a whole, are biblically prohibited outside of a lawful marriage (*Hilchot Ishut* 1:1-4). In addition to the prohibition of sexual intercourse prior to marriage, a number of laws exist as protective measures to prevent this transgression from taking place. These laws are outgrowths of the passage in the Bible that refers to a woman who carries the status of *niddah* (a legal function linked to a woman's menstrual cycle), and only apply under those circumstances. The text instructs Jewish males that, "You shall not approach a woman in her time of *niddah*, to uncover her nakedness." (Leviticus 18:19) The

additional phraseology of "approach," indicates the necessity of protective measures around the action of "uncovering her nakedness," the phrase used to describe the act of sexual intercourse.

It is important to note that the text does not explicitly refer to a single woman. Rather, it refers to a woman who is a *niddah*. A woman removes this status by immersing herself in a *mikvah*, or ritual bath, following a seven-day period after the cessation of her monthly period. The ability to remove the *niddah* status, however, is legally limited to married women. Unmarried women who have experienced the onset of menses, therefore, always have the status of *niddah* and, subsequently, the protective laws always apply.

One aspect of the protective laws is the set of prohibitions relating to physical contact, referred to collectively as the laws of *negiah*, the Hebrew word for touch. Forbidden under this umbrella is any physical contact that leads one to experience sexual pleasure (Maimonides, *Hilchot Issurei Bia* 21:1). These certainly include kissing and hugging, although other forms of contact may be included as well. Physical contact that does not offer sexual pleasure is not forbidden under this umbrella. Thus, on one hand, one is allowed to ride a crowded subway car where one is likely to be jostled into people of the opposite sex. On the other hand, for a couple who is in a serious relationship and, like the Jacob model, are experiencing romantic love prior to marriage, any contact at all may likely fall under the *negiah* umbrella. For this pair, even objectively benign forms of touch will likely offer some pleasure and therefore should fall under the *negiah* umbrella.

Another aspect of the protective laws is *yichud*, the Hebrew word for seclusion. This prohibition restricts a man and a woman from being alone together unless they are married or very close relatives (*Sanhedrin* 21b). Maimonides explains that, like the

prohibition of *negiah*, *yichud* is forbidden because it is a behavior that can lead to promiscuity (*Hilchot Issurei Bia* 22:1). Beyond seclusion and stimulation of the sense of touch, stimulation of the other senses bear prohibitions as well. The laws of *kol isha*, literally, "a woman's voice," have developed over time to forbid a man from hearing a woman singing live, as this is viewed as a pleasurable act. Similarly, Maimonides notes, a man is forbidden from gazing at a woman's body (ibid 21:2). One paragraph later, however, Maimonides adds that a man can look at a woman to determine if she is physically suitable and lovable as a wife. Such looking would not be considered motivated by immoral desires (ibid 21:3).

The separation of the sexes occurs on many levels, both between individuals and throughout the community as a whole. In Orthodox Jewish synagogues, a barrier called a *mechitza* is used during prayer services to separate men's and women's seating areas. The separation or mixing of the genders in schools can be found to lie along a spectrum. On one side of the spectrum is complete separation as soon as children enter schools. On the other side is total co-education throughout the years. The middle ground can consist of a gradual separation. In this way, in the earliest grades the children may be mixed, followed by separate classrooms within the same building in the early grades followed by total separation into different buildings as the children grow older. Alternatively, the students might be separated for Judaic studies, and brought together for secular studies. All of the above options have support within the boundaries of Orthodox Judaism. The decision to separate the genders in schools, summer camps, youth organizations and the like, function as a preventative measure against inappropriate sexual behavior, much like the protective laws cited above.

In light of the above-reviewed restrictions placed on single men and women, one would think the time between reaching marriageable age and actually getting married should, ideally, be rather brief. A less protracted period of single-hood would presumably make it easier for the men and women to observe these boundaries. However, considering the growing number of singles in the Orthodox Jewish population, and the fact that many of them are staying single longer, it is clear that, for many, this is not the case. Based on our review of Biblical and Rabbinical sources, it is fair to conclude that Judaism views the state of being single as less desirable than being married, leading to some of the unique stresses experienced by those involved in the process. Presently, a significant level of attention has been given to this segment of the population, coming in the form of newspaper articles, conferences on the topic, and websites offering matchmaking services. There also exist forums—online and otherwise—wherein people may share their experiences and perspectives.

A Review of Current Programs for Orthodox Jewish Singles

Several of the programs currently in place offer variations on the *shadchan* system. One of the most popular Orthodox Jewish dating website is www.sawyouatsinai.com (SYAS). SYAS was started in December 2003, and to date has over 25,000 members (SYAS, 2008). To separate itself from other online dating sites, on May 28, 2004, SYAS announced that it had been sanctioned by local Rabbis, community leaders, and heads of organizations representative of the Orthodox Jewish community (SYAS, 2004). The structure of SYAS follows very closely to traditional matchmaking. As part of joining the website, SYAS users create profiles. Unlike other dating websites,

however, users cannot browse other user's profiles to identify potential mates. As part of

creating a profile, a user chooses one or two matchmakers from the over 300

matchmakers affiliated with the site. The selected matchmaker then identifies a number

of potential matches from the other SYAS members and shares the profiles with the user.

In this way, the SYAS website, and other similarly structured sites, offers a technological

advancement to the traditional *shadchan* system. As of this writing, SYAS has matched

790 members, or 3.04% of its total membership.

The creators and users of SYAS see matchmaking as one of the essential—if not

the primary—methods of finding a spouse. By creating this website, the founders sought

to use the Internet as a tool to increase the number of weddings created through

matchmakers. Several individual communities took a similar perspective. Instead of using

the Internet, however, the tool was financial incentives. In December of 2004, a press

release by the Star-K announced as follows: "Attempting to do its part to alleviate the

universal singles crisis the American Orthodox community is experiencing, Star-K is

offering a $2,000 cash gift for the successful *shidduchim* (matches) of women in

Baltimore's Orthodox community." The Star-K, based in Baltimore, is one of the largest

Orthodox Jewish organizations in the United States that provides kosher certification for

foods. The December press release included a list of criteria to clarify eligibility to

participate. Within several months, the Orthodox Jewish communities of Queens, NY,

and Lakewood, NJ presented similar offers.

According to Jewish law, a matchmaker should get paid for his or her service.

Rabbi Moshe Isserlis (one of the foremost codifiers of Jewish Law, 16th century),

recognizing that matchmaking can often be one's profession, obligates the bride and

groom to pay their matchmaker, if one was used in setting up the union (*Choshen Mishpat* 185:10). Typically, as there are few communities with set fees for matchmaking, it is up to the single man or woman to establish the fee with the *shadchan* early on in the process, assuming the match, or *shidduch* (pl: *shidduchim*) will end in marriage. The offers described in the previous paragraph, however, are granted above and beyond any monies that are exchanged between the couple and the *shadchan* themselves. In short, what can be understood by these offers is that the communities recognized a problem, and made attempts to solve it through making the process of matchmaking more financially lucrative. The implication is that the only weakness in the current system is a factor of motivation on the part of matchmakers. By offering these monetary "gifts," motivation should increase and marriages should follow.

In addition to the set of solutions that focuses on matchmaking, there is another set of programs currently in place to assist singles in finding spouses. The common denominator here is bringing single men and women together to meet one another in different capacities so they may initiate contact and date without the direct interaction of a third party. Examples include varieties of speed dating, social mixers, singles cruises, and online dating without the use of matchmakers. One of the largest Orthodox Jewish online dating websites is www.frumster.com, founded in December of 2001. According to statistics on their website, Frumster has more than 24,000 current member listings and approximately 37,000 total members since its inception. To date, Frumster has seen 1,380 members married, or 3.73% of its total membership over time. Another example is the Israel-based website www.dosidate.com which claims 41,142 members over time, and 223 marriages since July of 2001. This represents 1.08% of its total membership.

Another resource that has emerged over the past several years is the website and associated programs of www.endthemadness.com (ETM). In 2003, Chananya Weissman, then a college student at Yeshiva University, brought together three speakers for a symposium on dating. He hoped to present a more positive approach in contrast with some other lectures in which he heard judgmental and negative messages. With minimal advertisement, this symposium received an audience of over 300 people. Shortly thereafter, www.endthemadness.com went online. Unlike the websites described above, however, ETM is not a dating site. Rather, it has a number of different functions related to its diverse goals.

The first ETM event was intended to offer healthier messages about dating to singles, and to the larger Orthodox Jewish community. Along the same lines, Weissman put together a petition of sorts which appears as "The Covenant" on the website (Weissman, 2003). On the site, readers are encouraged to attach their name to the "Signer's List," if they feel that the ideas in the covenant are consistent with their own. At the time of the writing of this proposal there were approximately 1,000 signers including both single and married individuals from around the world. The content of The Covenant essentially encourages people to approach the experience of dating with honesty and respect. One complaint that is often voiced about the *shidduch* system is the extensive and often irrelevant pre-date background inquiries, where a "wrong answer" might prevent a date from occurring. An example might include asking a late-20s single where he went to summer camp in elementary school. Weissman urges signers of The Covenant to speak out against such negative aspects—i.e. the "madness"— of the current dating system.

Another facet of the website is the bulletin boards, where anyone can post a message and discuss some of the issues that arise in dating. There are currently seven separate boards, entitled The Madness of Dating (started 2/24/03), Events (3/1/03), Comments about the Website (3/1/03), Positive Dating Experiences/Ideas for the Future (4/8/03), Finding the Right One (4/8/03), Madness Watch (12/23/04), and Do Something Good (2006). The boards are moderated by Weissman, although approximately 90% of posts get through (Weissman, 2005). Users may post anonymously or with identification, and many choose the former.

Over the past several years, a wide variety of topics have emerged on the bulletin boards, many of them areas of controversy within the Orthodox Jewish community. One example is the practice to have men and women sit separately at weddings, a topic that Weissman, among others, has written strongly against. Other topics include critiques of current programs for singles, the threat of intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews, as well as prejudice against non-Ashkenazi Jews, singles who were widowed or divorced, or those who came to Orthodox Judaism later in life. There are also discussions about revising expectations for blind dates, issues of medical and psychological problems that may emerge or be misrepresented early in the dating process, and the nature and label of the "singles crisis."

In addition to the bulletin boards, Weissman offers, along with a small volunteer staff, low-cost alternative events throughout the year. Unlike most organizations that may run events for singles alone, ETM events are often open to the entire community. This reflects Weissman's goal of greater communal integration and a reduction of boundaries that often exist between single people and married people within Orthodox Jewish

communities. ETM often works closely with local synagogues that agree to host the event, bringing costs down for ETM and for the participants. In addition, the goals of ETM's events differ significantly from most singles mixers, where the intention of the event is almost entirely to be a stepping-stone towards marriage. The individuals who meet, date, and marry have succeeded in making the most of the "typical" social mixer. For those who don't at least have a date as an outcome of the social mixer—which often reflects the experience of the majority—the event, and implicitly the individual, failed to meet the goal. ETM events, however, focus on different elements of the experience. As some of the attendees are married, it is clear that the event's objective cannot simply be to pair people off for marriage. Instead, the focus is on the quality of the event, and the sense of community fostered by this integration. Whoever attended the event can be thought of as having succeeded in some way by merely attending and participating. The concept of failure is significantly reduced.

While Weissman is critical of many aspects of the dating world as it currently exists, he does not advocate eliminating any of the currently used avenues towards marriage. Rather, he has proposed ways in which they may be improved. In particular, Weissman has focused on the *shadchan* system. A common complaint that emerged on the bulletin boards was the lack of professionalism and accountability among *shadchanim*. Single men and women would often complain of inappropriate matches, not hearing from *shadchanim* for considerable lengths of time, or inappropriate procedures during the *shidduch* process. To address these issues, Weissman worked with Rabbi Moshe Bellows, Esq., and created a contract of sorts between the *shadchan* and the

individual. The document is entitled "The *Shadchan* Code of Responsibilities", and is available for download at the ETM website (Bellows, 2005).

Another complaint that has appeared on the bulletin boards is an imbalance that exists in the *shadchan* system. All too often, a *shadchan* might propose a match, which the individual pursues to the point of one or two dates, at which point either party might decide to end the relationship for whatever reason. In such a scenario, the individuals have invested emotionally and financially, while the *shadchan* is felt to have invested little, if anything, in the process. A suggestion that emerged on the bulletin boards that received considerable positive feedback from other readers was to adjust the imbalance. To this end it was suggested that the *shadchan* pay for the first date. Shortly thereafter, Weissman added a section to the ETM website with this proposal, and an offer to freely advertise for any *shadchanim* who agree to this suggestion. To date, four *shadchanim* have signed up offering services consistent with the suggestions that emerged from the ETM organization.

The ETM approach represents a unique perspective on the experience of dating and single life in the Orthodox Jewish community. It was initially the intent of this study to act as a program evaluation of ETM, and the original proposal sought to interview ETM program participants to learn about their experiences with this program. Over the course of the initial phase of the research, however, the study obtained only one viable response from an ETM participant willing to be interviewed. Due to the inadequate response, the present study was revised to include a larger sample set, and advertised to single men and women throughout the New York City region with the intent of obtaining a cultural perspective of their experiences.

Methodology of Present Study

The cultural assessment conducted in this study has its origins in multiple theoretical frameworks as organized by Patton (2002). Primarily, this includes ethnographic, as the core research question seeks to illuminate the cultural experience of the single men and women in this sub-group of the Orthodox Jewish community. At the same time, many of the interview questions lie on a foundation of social construction, as there are multiple personal approaches to dating and single life, and this study seeks to understand how each individual constructs their understanding of that reality. The present study's approach to data collection and analysis will borrow from a narrative analysis method, utilizing the stories of the research participants as the raw data to ultimately understand their unique experiences. The outline of the methodology section below follows Fishman's (1999) approach.

Study Participants

Two male and three female interviewees were recruited through advertisements on e-mail listservs and websites catering to single men and women in the New York City area. Study recruitment was limited to those who self-identified as Orthodox Jewish. Although there was no stated age range in the recruitment material, the age range for study participants was 23-28 years old, representing a moderately diverse set of experiences. Each participant was entered into a raffle to win a $50 gift card as a financial incentive to participate.

Case Boundaries

Fishman (1999) cites Yin's typology of study designs (1989) to aid pragmatic researchers in structuring their own studies. The present study follows a "multiple-case" design on one dimension, as I recruited and interviewed multiple individuals who represent typical singles in the community. The analysis of the data follows the "embedded" design on the other dimension, wherein multiple aspects of the cases are considered. Each interview comprised one data set which was analyzed alone. This first component of the analysis (Chapters 2 and 3) follows a vertical pattern, looking at each case for emergent themes. The subsequent analysis (Chapter 4) reflects a horizontal approach, looking at four major topic domains, each of which was analyzed across the five cases.

Stakeholders' Values and Goals

The pragmatic research approach does not begin with basic science, but rather begins with a "client" and the related "stakeholders." One challenge in beginning a cultural assessment of this sort is identifying the clients and stakeholders at the outset of the study, so as to identify their goals and values in guiding the nature of the assessment. To paraphrase Weissman (2005), every Orthodox Jew is a stakeholder in the challenges faced by singles. Given the high numbers of single men and women who are directly in this set, all community members are in some way indirectly connected, be it through family members or friends. Community leaders, educators, parents, and rabbis all have an interest in improving the welfare of the community as a whole, and should, therefore, have a vested interest in the well-being of singles. On the other hand, it is far beyond the

scope of this study to include the goals and values of all stakeholders. Therefore, the

present study begins with a more limited perspective and ultimately incorporates any new

data in the results and discussion sections.

Measures and Data Collection

Subjects were interviewed over the course of one or two sessions, using a semi-

structured qualitative interview. The interview sessions lasted one to two hours, bringing

the total duration of an individual subject's involvement to two to four hours. The goal

was to collect a "thick," robust set of data on the individual participants in order to build

a full picture of their experiences in dating and single life. All interviews were audiotaped

and transcribed for subsequent analysis. The interview schedule can be found in

Appendix A.

Quality-of-Knowledge Procedures

Fishman (1999) further describes the methodology and nature of this type of

assessment. Pragmatic researchers, Fishman explains, must be aware of their own

involvement in the research. Whether the researcher is evaluating from the inside of the

organization, or as an outside party, he or she will bring positive and negative biases to

the evaluation. Rather than engaging in a futile attempt at erasing those biases, it is the

responsibility of the researcher to share those biases with the reader, and to disclose ways

in which the biases are balanced in the study design.

I, the interviewer, am the principal investigator in this study. I am a married

Orthodox Jewish male, and bring my own perspective, values, and biases into the

research. My own identity was shared with research subjects, as my religious identity is visibly evident by my clothing, and my marital status is visibly evident by my wedding ring. While I am aware that I cannot remove my identity and adopt a totally neutral stance, I have taken steps in preparing the research tool to balance any biases that may otherwise emerge. In preparing the interview schedule, I chose to write out the questions in some detail, rather than present an unstructured interview. In the context of an unstructured interview or any conversation, bias can easily enter the dialogue as a question can be unintentionally worded towards a particular response. By planning out the interview questions and following the planned script, potential areas of bias were more easily balanced and questions were intentionally composed to be more neutral in tone, offering the subjects a range of responses that best reflect their own perspectives. The interview schedule was reviewed by a number of readers, some of whom had no connection to the study and the subject entirely, while others were more connected in various ways. Input from these readers helped shape the questions towards neutrality.

Other steps were taken to plan for ensuring a high level of quality for the present research study. The interview schedule was structured to gather a wide variety of data on the experience of being single. By casting this wide net, it was hoped that a full picture was captured. This "thick" dataset for the individual research subjects should allow for possible eventual generalizability to other Orthodox Jewish singles. In light of the background of the problem as described above, it was my plan to conduct a valuable assessment of this unique cultural experience. If conducted appropriately, this study could be of significant value to the mental health field in our efforts to provide culturally competent service, as well as to the Orthodox Jewish community as a whole.

CHAPTER II

THE CASE OF SAMMY[2]

Background information

Sammy is a 23-year-old man, living in a major singles community in New York

City. He moved there after graduating college in another state, and moved primarily for

the employment opportunities, rather than strictly for social reasons. Somewhat puzzled

when asked about how he labels himself, he explained that he keeps the laws of *Kashrut*

and *Shabbat*, and is generally "modern, whatever that means." Sammy began dating at

age 17, and has since then dated five or six women, most relationships lasting for two to

three months. He has been dating a woman for the past two months, and considers this

the most serious relationship he's been in. Until moving this year, he had lived his life in

a Jewish community outside of New York, and much of his current attitudes about dating

are influenced by his upbringing there.

Sense of Community

Integration/"Single in a Married World"

Sammy lived at home during college, and only moved to New York after

graduating. He moved so he could find a job, and because he "wanted to find a potential

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[2]Pseudonym: All names and identifiable information have been changed to protect the
identity of the informants.

wife." Sammy noted a greater sense of community in his city of origin, primarily because there are fewer people. In the larger environment of the New York singles community, he sees "pockets of people." He elaborated further: "It's not as integrated here. There are so many more people, so there are so many more divisions." Although Sammy has only lived in his new neighborhood briefly, he noted his impression that while there may be some sense of integration, as there are married people and single people of similar age living side-by-side, the feeling is ephemeral. As people marry, they move on quickly and leave their single brethren behind.

Sammy described two somewhat contradictory messages that he felt were communicated in the larger Orthodox Jewish community, as reflected by the people in the community where he grew up. On one hand, with single men and women reflecting a minority group, Sammy gets a sense that the married community members "look down a bit on singles… Even if I had accomplished something…I was a nobody." At the same time, there is "some conversation or attention within the community towards singles… I think that every Jewish community does the same, because they want to see their communities stay alive. One of biggest problems in my community is a dying young population, as a lot of us move out." Sammy himself has encountered some positive attention from the Rabbi of his hometown in this respect. "The Rabbi is always asking me 'how are you?' He's concerned about my getting married, and he gives a lot of attention, which is important." Sammy reviewed the tension in attitudes. "There will always be good and bad…but there's definitely some sense of wanting to help singles."

Singles Crisis/Shidduch Crisis

Sammy's exposure to the concept of the singles or *shidduch* crisis appears to be extremely limited. Initially he denied any knowledge of the concept, with a strong reaction to the question. "I've never even heard those phrases." With some reflection he considered what might be implied. "What I understand that to mean is there is a shortage of proper matches. Is that what it means? Seems I'm not in that world." Ultimately, Sammy remained unconvinced that any crisis should exist. "There are a lot of girls out there, and there are a lot of guys out there. There is a match for every person, and even multiple matches for every person. There are ten to fifteen girls who could go with each guy, my personal feeling." Sammy appeared very confident that he would not succumb to the imbalances that may exist in some circles of the Jewish community. He had trouble fathoming why some men would have trouble finding an appropriate match. "I'm finding my own girl…I have no idea what these guys are doing. There are a lot of guys and girls out there. If people are really picky, then maybe there is a crisis, but it's a made-up crisis."

Pressure, Internal and External

Sammy did identify some sources of external pressure while he searches for a spouse, but downplayed their intensity. Sammy's mother tends to be the most curious about his status in the dating world. "If I tell my mom that I am going out with someone, every question you can think of [is somehow related to] 'what's going on?'" Rather than focusing solely on the goal of marriage, Sammy's mother would also ask "'when are the grandkids going to come?' I say, 'Mom, they will come, don't push it.'" Other family

members also ask him about his relationships, and quickly search for details if they hear that he is in a new relationship. "It doesn't take that long for them to find out the name, how is it coming, how serious is it, what's doing, etc." Sammy does his best to deflect these inquiries, and reduce the external pressure. "I tell them it's OK, and I'll let you know if something happens, if anything changes, or if there's something to talk about." All told, Sammy seems to navigate this successfully and twice stated that there's no great pressure from his family.

With regard to his internal drive towards marriage, he stated that he sees only one primary reason to get married. "The only true reason to get married, in my opinion, and the only one I've learned and believe to be true – is to have a family. I don't think there is a reason to get married if you're not going to have children." From Sammy's perspective, all other facets of marriage can be accomplished in single life as well. "If not for having children, you can do everything else without getting married." This may be true regarding companionship, caring for a partner, and other interpersonal considerations, but Sammy later clarified his own views regarding the physical aspects of pre-marital relationships. "Nevertheless, it's not proper to live with someone when you are not married, to do things when you are not married – as much as I keep or don't keep them now." Sammy's personal thoughts on physical contact in dating relationships are elaborated further in the section entitled Dating Standards.

Singles Communities

Since moving to New York, Sammy tends to go away frequently for the weekends, so his impression of the surrounding neighborhood was not totally developed.

His responses to the interview questions on this topic were based on his impression so far. Sammy contrasted his current environs with his home community—a smaller, more close-knit Jewish community. Here, in New York, there appear to be "pockets of people," as opposed to greater integration in his home community. There, "everyone knows everyone, or at least the names of people. Here, I see the separation a bit more." Sammy noted some of the artificiality of the singles community, in that "everyone is young here." There is a sense of transience that likely affects the experience of community members. "Once you get married and have kids, you don't live in the city… I would never ever think of living here with a family. If I ever did, it would be against my thoughts." Unlike in his home community where the average married couple might be 27 or 29 years old, "here you've got to be just starting out if you are married and living here. After a year or two, it's time to get a playground in the backyard in Long Island or Queens or New Jersey."

Since moving here, Sammy had some difficulty adjusting to one aspect of typical singles community life in New York City. "I'm not a big fan of how Shabbat meals work here." Sammy started to learn about the potluck nature of the experience after going to several meals with his girlfriend. "You bring salad, you bring wine, and we will have Shabbat; or I will buy and you chip in." His reaction to this was quite averse. "That bothered me very much… I felt very strange about it when I came. To be told to bring something was foreign." This structure didn't exist in his home community. If Sammy was to host guests in his home community he would do it because he loved to have guests and "I wouldn't want anyone to pay me to have them over. I would never ask anyone to bring something over." He considered a possible explanation for this structure. "People

here are on a lower budget, so it makes sense to me why it happens, but I…don't think it's proper." In light of other reports about the culture of various singles communities, however, it appears that this is a fundamental element of a sense of community, and that Sammy will likely adjust to this as time goes on.

Education/Preparation for Dating

Sammy spoke somewhat regretfully of having very little in the way of education or preparation for dating. "My upbringing didn't ever prepare me for dating. I never had the 'birds and the bees' talk from my parents. Jewish schools really don't do that either." Sammy attended a co-ed high school, and started dating when he was 17. The nature of the mixed environment set dating as an expectation for the high school students. "In a [boys-only] *yeshiva*, I wouldn't have started dating so early. It's a different world." Since starting dating, Sammy has read very little of books or articles on the topic of dating. He did recall reading one pamphlet published by the Breslav Hasidic sect. In it he recalls reading their advice that "if God gives you a match just say 'yes', and don't think about it. I definitely don't agree with that, but there were some things in there that I agree with." Given the wide range of perspectives on the topic of dating, it seems appropriate that Sammy is developing his own worldview on this complex issue.

While he was in college, Sammy developed a connection with a local young rabbi. Some of the classes he attended that were taught by this rabbi focused on the ills of intermarriage, which, Sammy said, he "would never think of." Sammy also recalled classes discussing "the right way" to live one's life, particularly as it relates to the process of finding a spouse. Sammy fondly recalled "I would often go to his house and schmooze

with him, and go to a class every week with him." Sammy shared one story he heard from this rabbi that focused on the question of suffering. In short, the message was that suffering in its varied forms has a purpose. In the context of dating, he might question the distress experienced along the way, as time passes and he remains single. Although he may not perceive it in the short term, he should have faith that there is a greater plan in place. Sammy recalled that time and again, "that one story keeps me on my feet." Unfortunately, Sammy has had difficulty maintaining his close relationship with this rabbi since he moved, and has attended no other lectures on the topic, although he indicated that he might get more involved as he spends more time in New York.

<div align="center">Process of Dating/Search for Spouse</div>

Singles Events

At this point in his dating career, Sammy appears to find singles events fairly unappealing. "I never went to one… and I know that I wouldn't want to go to one." This option falls well behind Sammy's preferred method of meeting a woman directly or, alternatively, going through a friend. "I've never needed to say 'I'm single and I want to go to a singles event.' As wrong as it might come out, people who go to these things can't find them elsewhere, so there is a reason for these events." Sammy has had times in his life when he was between relationships, and would have considered attending a singles event then, but he reflected that those breaks might have been healthy. "I understand that there you can't go from one relationship to another to another. You've got to sit back and think about what didn't go well… To go out with someone immediately after you broke up with someone or got broken up with isn't right, either." Sammy did, however,

acknowledge the potential benefit of singles events, as he has come across several advertised events, and appreciates the implicit message of support from the community. "Obviously they are paying attention to fact that there are singles who want to meet people…They have such events often, and I know they are out there. It can be a great way for people to meet each other."

Internet Dating

Similar to his attitudes about going to singles events, Sammy was quite averse to the option of using online dating resources at this point in his life. When initially discussing his dating preferences, he explained that he is simply "not in the world of online dating." He later spoke more strongly on the matter. "I've never used an internet site; I would never use one. I just couldn't see myself saying to my kids 'I met your mother online,' and I've never signed up on one of those [sites]."

Dating Standards

One element of the pre-dating experience that gets a lot of attention, both positive and negative, is the process of background inquiries of potential dates. Sammy's approach in this respect is very minimal. He explained that he tends not to ask for any specific pieces of information prior to dating a new girl. "I'm not going to dig too deep if it's something that…isn't going anywhere. There's no reason to." Rather than attempt to gather information prior to dating to determine the feasibility of any potential mate, Sammy would prefer to start the dating process and find out more details as it moves forward. "Within a week or two, or a couple of days, I know if she's a potential or not."

At this point in his dating career, Sammy's approach to dating is with marriage in mind and is "more serious," wherein he "doesn't want to date someone if I didn't think it would go somewhere." This stands in contrast to his earlier dating perspective which was more "for fun, or because everyone else was doing it."

Sammy had some trouble identifying strict criteria with which he assesses his dates. He noted that some people judge their partner's family. Sammy does his best to "look more at the girl than at the family." He explained that his own parents divorced when he was young, and his father is not religious at present. "If I would judge someone, they would have the same right to judge me." At the same time, Sammy recognized that he has a basic lens of attraction through which he views the girls he dates. "I am a little shallow. Most of us are a little shallow… I only want a certain style of girl, and I can be extremely picky on this subject." He recalled one girl who actually criticized him for being too picky, and he reflected that "I was judging her for being a little overweight." There is a tension evident as Sammy experiences both a sense of being open-minded in light of his own background, and a sense of being picky as he relies heavily on his first impressions of a woman's beauty.

Sammy had some clear views about what dating meant to him. He explained that his approach to a first date is "pretty standard. You go to a place where you can talk." This might include a restaurant or a coffee shop. Sammy would "absolutely not" go out with more than one person at a time, and finds the idea "horrible." Sammy knows of one cousin who is 38 years old who did engage in this practice, but Sammy simply thinks that attitude is unhealthy. When further discussing the matter of age in dating, Sammy added that he is 23 right now, and his preferred age range for women he would date would be

20 to 25. When asked about ideal ages by which men and women should be married, he initially posited that for men the ideal would be 20 to 21, but he then expanded that range, explaining that "I don't want to be single when I'm over 27, so I guess 20 to 28." For women, who tend to be more mature in Sammy's view, the range might be 19 to 27. Sammy reflected on the troubled state of many older singles with whom he has interacted. "I wouldn't say that someone at 30 is too old to get married… but a lot of clients I see are in their late twenties and thirties, wasting away, making a lot of money. Maybe they get so blinded by the money that they don't go out and find a family." At the same time, Sammy was conscious of some of the risks of marrying too young. On the financial side, he added further, "I wouldn't want to have a family that I couldn't support."

One core value that emerged for Sammy is that of honesty in his relationships. He does his best to represent himself accurately, and he believes the same is true for the women he has dated. Sammy shared one story he knew of in which a man told his date that he was 31, when he was in fact 37. "Three months into it, he told her the truth and it didn't work out, and it hurt her feelings… What does that really get you?" Sammy did have one direct experience of the negative consequences of dishonesty. When he was 19, he dated his third girlfriend "behind her mother's and brother's back." He thought they wouldn't approve to the age difference; she was 17 and still in high school. After approximately six weeks, Sammy wrote to the girl's mother asking for permission to continue. "Her mother said no, because she was 17 and I was 19. That was the end of it." Sammy learned from direct and indirect experience that the truth will almost certainly come out in the end.

Regarding the issue of physical contact in his relationships, Sammy explained that "things have gone far but I've never had sex, never wanted to…It's very challenging, though." Although he doesn't completely abstain from physical contact now, Sammy did indicate that he wants to observe the laws of *taharat mishpacha* when he gets married. "I'm sure that I'll be able to get there." He noted that his observance of various laws, including that of *negiah*, has been the result of gradual growth. "I went through a rebellious stage in high school…Over the past five or six years, it's been about 10% growth each year. I like where I am, but I'm continuing to grow." In addition to physical contact, Sammy described other ways in which he expressed his affection towards his girlfriend. These included sending a birthday card, for example, but Sammy did acknowledge some difficulty expressing his stronger feelings. "I can barely say 'I love you' to my mother, I don't know what it is about me…I did say 'I really care about you' and 'I love who you are,' [to my girlfriend.] I'm not going to hide that."

Sammy also discussed some gender differences he had experienced in the arena of dating. "Women, I think, are more serious about dating than most men." Sammy considered himself to be somewhat of an exception to the rule, "because I know what I want…I don't go out with girls for the hell of it…I want a normal family with a good girl, and that's it." He added that girls tend to want more attention and love, and are usually more nurturing. Again, Sammy felt like his own style is more unusual. "I'll go out of my way to make someone happy." Otherwise, though, he noted that women tend to be more sensitive and caring. "That's the usual pattern."

Concept of Bashert

Sammy's concept of *bashert* indicated a high degree of faith in God in the process of finding a mate, but without a sense of rigidity in expecting to find his one soul mate. "I think that God places multiple people for you to bump into. It's your choice to say yes or no. And eventually it is yes." Sammy explained his perception of *bashert* by likening it to the concept of the uniqueness of snowflakes. Even though no two snowflakes are identical, "I think that there are two out there that are almost identical. It's gotta be. I'm not a scientist or a weatherman, but there are too many snowflakes that two are not almost looking the same." By extension, there are many potential partners who "almost look the same," and would be appropriate matches for any given person. "There is no way, I believe, that there is only one person that is perfect for one person."Sammy's perspective, therefore, is much more hopeful than those who believe that there is only one intended soul mate per person and would despair and obsess over the possibility of unintentionally rejecting one's *bashert*. "Whether in New York, Chicago, Miami, or Kentucky…if you say no for someone who would have been good, [God] will give you another chance."

Dating vs. Relationship

Sammy's relationships have been relatively brief on the whole, and he noted that his relationship with his current girlfriend is the most serious he has been in, largely "because of my age and place in life." Sammy described his process of growth over the past few years, and noted that he imagines that as he approaches marriage, he would continue to develop and grow, both personally and in the relationship. Examples of

growth in the relationship center on verbal expressions of intimacy, as well as on physical

contact with his girlfriend. Although Sammy finds it somewhat difficult to say 'I love

you' in general, he explained that he did tell his current girlfriend that "'I really care

about you,' and 'I love who you are.'" Additionally, as had been his practice in previous

long-term relationships, approximately one month after he began dating his current

girlfriend, the two of them discussed the issue of physical contact between them. For

Sammy, this appears to be a marker of more casual dating developing into a more serious

relationship. Sammy does not abstain from physical contact with his girlfriend at this

point in his life, but during these "milestone" conversations, he typically communicates

his expectation of his observance during marriage. "Sometimes things get out of control a

little bit...but we've said several times, when we are married, the *niddah* period is off-

limits. *Taharat hamishpacha* (laws defining when and how a married couple engages in

or refrains from physical contact based on the wife's menstrual cycle) is what I want to

do."

<div align="center">*The Shadchan Process*</div>

Communication

Sammy has not been set up by any *shadchanim*, and would prefer not to have any

such experience at this point in his dating career. His impression of *shadchanim* is

generally negative, and he expects that he will meet his spouse in other ways. "I prefer to

meet women via a friend's friend. Just go out and see someone and go from there. People

I know who've tried [*shadchanim*]…it hasn't worked out. I've always been the type to tell

people that I didn't want *shadchanut*." While some family members have offered to set

him up, he has consistently turned them down; excusing himself by explaining that he wasn't ready to date. In truth, he explained, "I just never wanted to be set up. I always wanted to find someone on my own." As a result of his limited experience, he did not have much to add regarding a perspective on *shadchanim* or the *shidduch* process.

Appropriate vs. Inappropriate Questions

Although Sammy had no direct experience with *shadchanim*, he did comment that some members of the community observed poor boundaries. Upon one visit to his home community, Sammy described feeling shocked when someone asked an inappropriate question. "I had someone come to me and say straight to my face, 'So how much money do you make?' This guy was a jerk… You have people like that in all communities." Sammy's perspective was that "it has nothing to do with singles or being single", although he allowed that it is possible he was viewed with less deference because of his single status. In his current residence, people have not been rude, although, Sammy added, "no one knows me enough to be like that to me."

Sensitive Issues

Given Sammy's lack of experience with *shadchanim*, this issue was not addressed in the interview.

Compatibility Issues (With Shadchanim and Suggested Dates)

While Sammy has not had experiences of compatibility issues with *shadchanim*, he has faced some incompatibility issues with the women he has dated. As described

earlier, Sammy tends to have fairly specific expectations of the women he might

potentially date. He dated one woman briefly, and the relationship ended because he felt

they were incompatible physically. "People have definitely said that I was picky. One girl

flat out said to me 'lower your standards and you might become happy.'" This echoes the

tension between having higher standards and being labeled picky, versus having lower

standards but risking the feeling of "settling." At this point Sammy feels comfortable

with his criteria for compatibility with the women he dates, although that may change

over time.

<div align="center">

Sense of Self

</div>

Burnout

Unlike other interview subjects, Sammy's experience of burnout emerged less

from the frustration of not finding dates, and more from the intensity of the early stage of

a relationship. "Burned out from dating? I've had those times, seen a girl too many times

in a row." Sammy talked about his experience with his current girlfriend. He appeared to

feel drained from the expectation of seeing her as frequently as they were accustomed. As

their relationship developed, Sammy said, "I was contemplating, unfortunately, if I really

liked her." Sammy decided that he did want the relationship to continue, and considered

allowing himself to recover from the burnout. "I was thinking that if this is going to be

special, then maybe I shouldn't see her for a while. Separate for a week and a half or two

weeks." Finally, he communicated his concerns to her, and asked for some space, and she

responded accordingly. "She understood that I did feel a little burned out…I actually felt

much better after we had been apart for this time." Sammy drew a parallel to *taharat*

hamishpacha. "I think that Jews stay closer in marriage for that reason, as opposed to

most Americans." This acknowledgement supports the view that, both in ongoing relationships and in the search for a spouse, having some space to grow independently can be a healthy response to burnout, and may even prevent it.

Affective Impact of Being Single

      Several times throughout the interview, Sammy emphasized that his top priority in his search for a spouse was the ultimate goal of having children. When asked what worries him about being single, he identified several concerns, including the fear of not having children. "The longer I stay single, the more scared I will be that it's never going to happen." Sammy also worried about falling into a bachelor lifestyle. "I have one cousin, 44, not married, and I would never want to be like that… I don't like clubbing, drinking, and what else do you have to do? I never enjoyed those things. I never met a girl that way." At the same time, Sammy doesn't want to enter a relationship that will fail. "My parents got divorced, so I have a pretty definite predisposition. That's actually my number one fear…That's why I am very picky." The balance between being more open versus being more selective is a further source of anxiety for Sammy. "A few days ago I read an article about 50-year-old guys not married, and how sad it is – they are too picky… Then I thought to myself, am I going to end up that like? I don't think so. I don't think that I am too picky." Sammy indicated that when he would enter into various relationships, he would consider very strongly if it were a relationship that will last. "If it's not someone I believe I would stay with, I am not moving forward. I would go for it if I see that it is someone who would be with me forever." At this point in his dating career, Sammy can still afford to trust his assessment of these factors. However, he added, "If I

were approaching 30, I would be a little more scared… But I don't want to think about that."

Positive Aspects of Single Life

When asked about positive aspects of being single, Sammy focused on the financial side. "While I am single and have no kids, I want to build up a mass of funds so I can have the money to support a family… Every day my goal is to bring home x, put it away, and not spend it. I could live anywhere; living [with roommates in a cheap apartment] means saving an extra two grand a month." Sammy's job is in the financial sector and, accordingly, he does his best to be aware of the varying costs of living he will face in the future. "When you get married, it gets a little cheaper until you have kids, because you have two separate salaries. At the same time, I almost don't want to get married until I know that if, on day one, a kid was on the way – it would be OK." Sammy's job teaches him to plan for the best and the worst circumstances. "If I didn't have life insurance, disability insurance, if I didn't put money aside… I couldn't move forward as far as having a family." A core part of Sammy's value system is being prepared. "You just can't jump into things… I try to make sure that I am 100% prepared for the what-if, the just-in-case, the maybe." Sammy typically works 12 hours a day at present and could cut back, although he chooses not to. He explained his thought process. "If I was working 8 hour days, I'd probably be making a third of what I am making, and I don't want to forfeit today when I am single and have no kids." Ultimately, Sammy's intense career efforts at present are an integral part of his plan to be set up for marriage—and the family life he hopes for—as best as he could be.

CHAPTER III

THE CASE OF LISA

Background Information

Lisa is a 28-year-old woman, living in a major singles community in New York City for the past 2 years. Prior to this, she lived in another major singles community for 5 years. Although she didn't attend Yeshiva University for her undergraduate studies, she identifies herself as "Modern *machmir* [ed. note: stringent observer]… in a kind of YU little bubble." Her dating career has had a few significant chapters, beginning at age 19 with a more casual approach, and shifting to a marriage-oriented mindset at age 23. From age 24-26, Lisa pursued a Master's through Yeshiva University, and found many like-minded and similar-aged single peers in this setting. Since graduating with her Master's degree, the number of men she has dated per year has declined. In a busy year, such as when she was in graduate school, she estimated having gone out with 30 men over the course of the year. More recently, she reported having "slower years", with the number of men she's dated having decreased to approximately 12-15 per year.

Sense of Community

Integration/"Single in a Married World"

Some of the questions in Lisa's interview focused on her feelings of integration versus isolation in the context of her larger environment. Since graduating from college, Lisa has lived in two singles communities in New York City, as listed above. Over the course of the interview, she reflected on her experiences living there, as well as her experiences when visiting two other communities.

Lisa reported having single and married men and women living close by in both of her areas of residence. With regards to a sense of community, Lisa appeared to give her highest marks to her current home. "I find that…there's a lot more integration between younger couples and everybody else. I have friends who met here as singles and are now married and are living in the same building that they met in, for example." In her previous neighborhood, however, "there is more of a rift between single and married people."

Lisa also discussed some of the feelings she had when she visited her parents' home community elsewhere in New York, as well as when she visited married friends living in a large Jewish community in the Midwest. She, like many of her single neighbors, often found herself returning to her parents' home during the Jewish holidays. During these visits, she experienced an increasing sense of isolation and intense expectations from the entire congregation. Explicitly or implicitly, the attention would turn to "why aren't you married yet?" "It's very hard on *Rosh HaShana*, for example. You feel the emotion in the air…The whole shul says, nu, nu? And you have nothing to say. It's very hard."

This sense of isolation was echoed in her experience in the Midwest community where, Lisa explained, "there are hardly any single people." It should be noted that the following exchanges are most likely not indicative of anything specific to the community she referenced. Rather, these sentiments may be prototypical for any community that lacks a large single population to foster awareness and sensitivity. Lisa described two interactions that highlighted her impression that she, as a single person, was unable to fit in there. The first was a reaction by a young man, recently married and a few years her junior, after being introduced to her at a *Shabbat* table. Lisa reports his side of the conversation as follows: "You lived [in New York City]? Wow! What is that like? Wow! You've been dating for how many years? Oh my gosh." Initially, Lisa remembers feeling very upset, and afterwards realized that "I am like this tropical thing in the middle of [nowhere] for this guy." Without overtly criticizing him, she went on to explain that she felt like "there was no understanding. Not in a good or bad way…" Later, she also recalled various comments made by the children of her married friends in that community. The children would look at her and consider, "Are you this, are you that? Who are you? We don't know how to… You're not a kid, but you're not a grown-up, because Mommy and *Abba* are grown-ups and they're married." Lisa walked away from these interactions feeling like there was no place in their worldview for her to inhabit.

Lisa admitted that for better or worse, she shields herself from these critical perspectives by living in a singles community. "I feel that a singles community is like a knee protector for someone who's going roller-blading. It protects you from the outside… So it distorts my own view, I know that." She acknowledged that some married friends do appreciate her position and display sensitivity. Nevertheless, she concluded on

this issue, "I definitely think it's a great divide between single people and married people. I think that the singles crisis is not exactly on the minds of married people 24/7… It's a different life. It really is. Married people don't necessarily know how hard it is, how lonely it is, that kind of thing." While she may feel more integrated into the perhaps unique community where she currently resides, she reported a strong sense of isolation and loneliness that is not appreciated by the larger Orthodox Jewish community members.

Singles Crisis/Shidduch Crisis

In the last quote, Lisa referenced the singles crisis, also referred to as the *shidduch* crisis. Elsewhere in the interview, Lisa explained her perspective on the nature of this crisis. In short, she identified the core problem as one of unhealthy expectations in the dating process. As people develop criteria to help them select potential dates, they fall under the false impression that they can find the one mate who has all of the myriad qualities of the imagined perfect spouse. Lisa compared the process to customizing a playlist on an iPod. "You have an iPod, so you can listen to… anything you want, when you want. And just as you can go from song to song to song, people think that they can have a, b, c, d, and e [in the perfect mate]." If one's date doesn't live up to all of the criteria, then something is wrong and they are not worth pursuing. Lisa went on to say, "and I'm including myself here," that the crisis will continue until single men and women realize that "people don't work like an iPod. You have to learn to accept people's imperfections."

Lisa herself occasionally assists in running singles events, and views this as one point of intervention on the larger singles crisis. Lisa explained her rationale for running these events and focusing her energies on the individuals. "I run these events because I want people to meet…If I can stop someone from crying themselves to sleep at night, that's great, that's my job. Just one person." The concept of a singles crisis that affects the entire Orthodox Jewish community can be daunting, and the underlying causes are certainly complex. Lisa's efforts, however, show that there is a way to have an impact without being overwhelmed.

Pressure, Internal and External

Prior to moving to New York, Lisa felt that she didn't experience very much pressure to get married. She did date from the age of 19, but her mindset shifted to focus on the goal of marriage only after she graduated from college and moved. "I adapted to the pressure… It was almost like someone else's pressure, and in a sense I made it my own." Lisa gave the impression that as soon as she moved, dating took over a significant portion of her energy. "You are 21, so go out. Who can we set you up with? Who's the next thing?" Lisa later realized that her internalized sense of pressure was greater than the external pressure, leading to her move to her current neighborhood. Her previous community itself, Lisa explained, "doesn't have so much pressure there, which is why I left it. I definitely think there were awesome things about it, but in terms of dating, it wasn't really getting anywhere… Everyone just hangs out." Lisa's adopted pressure eventually evolved into a strong internal compass, pointing the way to a different community, where, she believed, she would find more marriage-minded peers.

Lisa spoke of multiple sources of pressure over time, both internal and external. While her parents wouldn't typically hassle her directly, the weight of their expectations and worry would come indirectly. "My father didn't pressure me, he pressured my sister. 'Is she dating anyone? What's it going to be?' But he will never do it to me. He knows I will get upset. My sister tells me." Direct pressure does indeed come, though, from Lisa's sister. After Lisa moved and still remained single, Lisa's sister shared some of her own anxieties. Lisa's sister would say, "I don't understand, you're going to be back [where you started], you're going to be 32 and everyone is going be away somewhere…and married. I don't understand what you are waiting for, just meet someone." Similar messages come from the community at large. "I think there's pressure coming from everywhere. You go to a random family for *Shabbat*, and there is pressure there."

The other major source of stress for Lisa is internal. "I pressure myself. If someone is good I ask how come this doesn't work, how can I make it work." Lisa described an experience in which she began to date someone based on initial positive impressions, yet the relationship ended fairly quickly. "Everything was great on paper, and I felt so embarrassed." Because of her internal sense that her dates should be working towards marriage, the end of the relationship defined a personal failure, leading to the sense of embarrassment.

Singles Communities

Lisa's time spent living in both singles neighborhoods gave her the ability to compare and contrast these two communities, and to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses. Lisa noted that both communities present excellent opportunities for

socializing, with a slight advantage to the men. "Everyone's friends. Everyone's friendly. It's a buffet for the guys. It's like a smorgasbord at a wedding. I would say for the girls as well, but I feel like for the guys it's more prevalent." There is also the common expectation in both communities for single men and women to attend co-ed *Shabbat* meals. These present an additional opportunity for socializing, and the possibility of meeting someone to later pursue for dating. "At these meals, there isn't a script or expectations. It's expected that you go to co-ed meals where there are a lot of people. Girls that go to co-ed meals, it's not a big deal."

The two communities did differ, however, in some significant ways. Her first place of residence included men and women who are starting to date, as Lisa was when she moved there, but the predominant demographic is older singles. Lisa, at 28 years old, actually represents the minority where she is now, as most of her current neighbors are younger than she is. "Here…everybody's very young, so [for me] it's like a big giant candy store but nothing's *kosher*." While this may limit her prospects for finding appropriate men to date, it has advantages as well. Where she used to live, "there was a lot of sexual frustration." Lisa attributed this to the age of the majority population—i.e. older singles. This played out, for example, as she attended "…*Shabbat* meals with sexual innuendos in the middle of [words of] *Torah*." After experiencing this several times, Lisa grew uncomfortable. "Certain good friends of mine would have meals and I wouldn't go because I knew who they've been having, and conversation they'd be having. So when it came to the fact that I was having issues with *Shabbat* meals, and I couldn't go to my friends, I decided I need to move." Lisa felt similarly uncomfortable after *Shabbat* services, and appears to feel better with her current crowd. "Coming from

there…it was like a mosh pit until I got out of *shul*. I had to jump through this whole

crowd. To me, now [everything feels] very wholesome."

Socio-economics also seems to be a contrasting factor between the two

communities. Thinking back to the first singles community in which she resided, she

reflected that the people who live there "have to be able to afford it. If you're able to

afford it, then you're working very very hard. While there, at a *Shabbat* table, someone

will be talking about the latest deal they made, the latest court case…" In her current

environment, however, "people are going to school. A lot of people are just starting out.

It's a different crowd." This may contribute to the sense of wholesomeness mentioned

above. As noted in an earlier section, the two communities differ as well in their sense of

integration. In her first neighborhood, "there is more of a rift between single and married

people; here everyone is together, for whatever reason." Finally, Lisa reflected, "here I

feel there's more of an air of hope, there there's more of an air of despair."

Education/Preparation for Dating

Lisa acknowledged that her preconceived notions about dating did not match up

to her current experience. Broadly speaking, Lisa's experience in dealing with her male

peers was much more casual and relaxed prior to moving to New York. "I spent four

years [in college] eating peanut butter and marshmallow fluff sandwiches with boys

sitting right next to me. I saw boys when I was exhausted and I had been up all night

working on a paper. I saw guys on *Shabbat*. I had a different concept of a guy." Lisa

expressed some difficulty relating to the attitudes about modesty in dating that she

encountered when she moved here. "In New York, a guy is a foreign creature…I got back

to New York and didn't understand girls who said 'I want to get another slice of pizza but there are guys who see me.'"

This would play out similarly in singles events. "It's no skin off my back to go over to a guy at a singles event. It's not a big deal." In the New York dating culture, however, Lisa faced different expectations, where her preferred approach stood at odds to the local standards. "It's a culture of – a *shadchan* comes over and says 'Oh is there anyone you want to meet?' [But] I'll just go up to him… I think it's positive because I can talk to people, but it's negative because you're not supposed to be like that. You're not supposed to be so open." Although Lisa recognized that her background didn't prepare her for this type of dating, she did begrudgingly adapt to some of the surrounding expectations. "I always felt that dating guys in New York was like a script that I had to follow… [Nevertheless,] I never had anything really so scripted or fake in my background, ever. I did follow it, but I just didn't appreciate it so much…You just have to get with the times, in that sense."

As Lisa entered more into the formal dating arena, she read a few books and attended a few lectures more in line with this new approach. Most of the content focused on strengthening one's faith in God while dealing with this difficult life experience. One of the books was entitled "Splitting the Sea," referring to the passage in the Talmud (*Sotah* 2a) that states that God's task of assigning appropriate matches is as difficult as splitting the sea. One lecture that Lisa identified as valuable for her was given by a *rebbetzin* Weitzman in Israel, and was entitled "The Seven Points of *Bitachon* (faith)." This lecture reminded Lisa that "It was important to get to the *ikar* (essence) of

everything." Lisa reviewed the message as relevant to dating, in that she must put in her efforts in the dating process, but ultimately she must have faith that she will get married.

More recently, Lisa attended a lecture targeted to the singles community. Speakers included Rabbi Herschel Shechter of Yeshiva University, as well as Rosie Zimmerman and Sheri Einhorn, authors of several books on dating and a weekly advice column in The Jewish Press. "That was OK. But I think that was aimed at a much younger crowd, people just starting to date. I felt like an advanced swimmer sitting in on a remedial class. It was good to hear them speak, but it stressed me out." Topics in this lecture included "What things are you looking for? How do you find what you're looking for? What do you do on a first date, second date, etc?" It appears that this type of lecture sets the stage for the formulaic script of standard dating that Lisa commented on above. Lisa added, "I heard Rosie and Sheri speak in Israel to only women, and they were very good. I didn't like their speech in a co-ed group. I felt that when it was only with women, it was more intimate. It was very, very different. I also read their Jewish Press column. They're smart. They have good perception. But usually, I feel like these speeches hit too close to home."

Process of Dating/Search for Spouse

Singles Events

Lisa has attended several different types of singles events, and tends to prefer those with less pressure. Some events were centered on activities, while others were oriented more specifically towards socializing. Those focused only on socializing also differed in intensity. "In general, I like things better when you mingle than when you

must sit and talk. I hate that. I feel like if I want to talk to you, then I'll find you. If I don't, I won't. I'm not sorry, but you can't make me talk to someone." Lisa had a negative experience with speed dating, for example, where the time pressure and the intense one-on-one setup felt uncomfortable for her. "I just feel like I run out of things to say." She contrasted that with an event that she attended last year in which tables were set up with "two girls, two guys, and that was good. If you don't want to talk, the other person can talk. You can just listen. That's better. You have someone else to fall back on." Lisa also didn't like an experience where a moderator posed a question to a group of attendees, and everyone was expected to answer. "They asked: what secular book would you have in your library? You have to answer it, and I was thinking, I don't know. I don't want to say. I'd rather just listen to everybody else. And if you're quiet, then why are you quiet? It feels very judged on – are you talking or not talking."

When Lisa does attend singles events, she enjoys seeing her friends there, although, she recognized that "it works for me and against me." A dense social network can be a source of support for anyone, but in the context of a singles event, this can actually be an impediment to finding someone specific to date. For example, Lisa shared, "On the SYAS *Shabbaton*, I felt like I had 50 brothers… in terms of meeting new people, there are often not so many new people to meet." Even if there are new people at an event, "you kind of hang out with people whom you know."

When asked what could be done to improve singles events, a quality of hopelessness entered into Lisa's comments. "First of all, singles events are never going to be positive for anybody. No one wants to be there." She did add that singles events that include *shadchanim* can be improved if the attitudes of the *shadchanim* are improved.

Nevertheless, Lisa said plainly, "I dislike having to go to [singles events]… I also feel

that there's this air of despair, and it's very scary."

Internet Dating

Over her dating career, Lisa has utilized various methods to find her dates,

including the internet. She became a member of Frumster approximately seven years ago,

"but I joined at a point when I felt it was really funny… I am still a member of Frumster,

but it's kind of more funny than anything." She also is a member of SYAS. The two

websites both cater to Orthodox Jewish single men and women, but they represent two

separate models of finding a date. The former entails the individual browsing through

other profiles and contacting a potential date directly, while the latter involves a

shadchan who views various user profiles and then suggests a match.

While she stated that Frumster could be "a little sketchy," Lisa has dated guys

whom she found on the site. Similar to her own *hashkafa* (religious worldview),

"everyone has been in that YU world." Lisa recognized that some might be critical of the

direct-approach model, being uncomfortable that "you're interacting right with the guy."

Nevertheless, Lisa stated that for herself, "I don't have any qualms about either [model].

They are both amazing resources."

Lisa had a generally positive review of SYAS as well, "because [the *shadchanim*]

really get to know you." While some matchmakers can suggest matches merely after

looking at the online profile, others take more time to get to know the person they are

trying to set up. Lisa explained her typical experience as follows: "The matchmaker will

call – the ones who are very into doing this – and say I'd like to speak with you a little bit,

find out more about you and how I can help you, what you are all about. I think they do, on the whole, make the effort. The phone conversations last about 45 minutes to an hour." Although Lisa would most prefer meeting "someone on my own at a *Shabbat* meal," her next choice would be through SYAS. Her last choice would be being set up by "someone random who tries to put me in a box in a span of five minutes." By Lisa's account, the time taken by the SYAS *shadchanim* stands in contrast with the tendency to rely on labels, stereotypes, and pre-conceived notions. This critique can be heeded by all members of the community who attempt to set up single men and women.

Dating Standards

Lisa engages in a considerable amount of background inquiry of a potential date prior to actually arranging the outing. This includes pertinent demographic questions, as well as where the suggested individual went to high school, college, and which *yeshiva* in Israel he attended for his first year out of high school. She would also ask about his personality, physical appearance, and his *hashkafa* (religious philosophy and identity), specifically checking if he is a *ba'al teshuva*, and if so, for how long he has been observant. Furthermore, she would inquire if he is open to *aliyah* (moving to Israel), if and how often he prays and if he does so with or without a *minyan* (quorum of 10 men for public prayer). In the middle of her review of her areas of inquiry, unprompted by the interviewer, Lisa commented somewhat defensively, "it may sound silly, but this is what I ask." Perhaps something about this exhaustive list seemed silly to Lisa, but it appears that this is her modus operandi.

She continued to build on this list when describing what attributes she hopes to

find in a desirable partner. Her acceptable age range was 24 to 34, and she has adjusted

that range every year. Her other criteria were fairly typical, including that the fellow

should be "a mentch, sensitive, with good *middot* (character traits)…deep but young at

heart. Someone who has a job…that doesn't 100% absolutely consume him…*Davening*

has to be important. *Minyan* would be nice…*aliyah*." Lisa also mentioned the value of

kovea itim, a shorthand phrase meaning a commitment to set aside time for *Torah* study.

She reflected that this is "a nice catchphrase…that I didn't think I'd be throwing around

at the age of 28…It is meaningful for me, though." Balance in many of these matters is

important, including in his attitude about his religion. "It has to be important to him…[I

need] someone with enthusiasm." She later shared her preference to date someone who

grew up observant, rather than a *ba'al teshuva*. This particular point, however, emerged

as a source of conflict for Lisa, as she further explained regarding the *ba'al teshuva*

group, "I really liked their enthusiasm…I find it frustrating that guys who grew up *frum*

(observant) do things by habit."

After reviewing her criteria for a dating partner, Lisa explained "this probably

sounds like a parrot, because I do this by rote." Presumably whenever she encounters a

new potential *shadchan*, she rattles off the above script with ease. While this has some

advantages, perhaps, in moving the conversation forward quickly, there may be a

disadvantage as well. The generic nature of the above list may indicate a net that is cast

too wide, with too little selectivity indicated. This may be counter-productive for Lisa in

her pursuit of an appropriate match.

Lisa did note some changes in her expectations over time. "I'm trying to be as

open-minded as I can be." She recalled that earlier in her dating career, she "looked very

much for a life-of-the-party person, and now I care more…that he should be a mentsch."

Although she initially added that she is "more open now…in terms of looks," she still

declines offers to date *Sepharadim*, partly because she is not interested in adopting the

alternate set of customary religious practices, but also because of a lack of physical

attraction to their typically darker skin tone. In general, Lisa has learned to relax some of

her criteria over the years, including *minyan* attendance, for example. "When you are

younger, you are hung up on certain things…then you go to a friend for *Shabbat* and they

say 'he's a great guy, but he doesn't go to *minyan*.' You realize that life is not as black

and white as you think when you're younger." When she was younger, Lisa also would

let *shadchanim* know that she had no problem with televisions. The response she has

gotten over the years has led her to change her attitude. "If you say to a *shadchan* I want

a TV in my home, it's the same as using drugs." Elsewhere she added if a *shadchan* hears

that a guy watches TV, for the *shadchan* "he [might as well] be a drug addict." It is

interesting to note that many of the changes described by Lisa over time appear to be her

attempt to adapt to the critical environment around her.

A first date for Lisa typically means going out for dinner, although, she added,

"when I was younger, I remember more coffee…Why pay for a meal if you don't know

how it's going to work out?" Lisa does date more than one person at a time, although she

indicated some internal conflict on that issue. "I do it, but I shouldn't. I compare [the two

men]…I beat myself up about it." This issue was one example of a gender difference she

observed, as she explained, "the guys I've gone out with don't do this…they prefer one at

a time." Lisa reflected that this might have to do with different pressures for men and

women. "If you say no to this guy now…you might lose an opportunity." Men appear to

have the luxury to move rapidly from one partner to the next, while women struggle more to find acceptable dates. "Guys always know there will be someone else. There will always be another girl." Lisa shared a quip that summed this up. "I've heard it said that guys need secretaries [to manage their possible dates], and girls need PR reps."

The question of her concept of an ideal age at which women and men should be married seemed to fluster Lisa somewhat. Given her age of 28, this may have touched a sore spot for her. She implicitly responded to the expectation that people marry young by saying "Not 21. I didn't want to be married at 21." At the same time, she acknowledged the increasing difficulty in finding a good partner as time passes. "As I am getting older, I think that dates are harder and harder to come by." As she further settled on an ideal range, she reflected, both for women and men, "mid 20's – 25 to 27." She tries not to focus on these expectations, however, and just believes that "it happens when it happens."

Lisa generally tries to represent herself accurately in the dating world on all issues but one. As explained above, a typical question that is included in the background inquiry for many singles is that of religious upbringing and observance. More specifically, the focus is on if the individual is a *ba'al teshuva* or if he or she was *frum* from birth. In her own self-construct, Lisa falls in neither of these categories, and in some sense conceals the truth in her experiences with *shadchanim.* "In terms of my not growing up *frum*, that's not really out there… I don't think that I am lying, but it's something that is important to me that I don't want to be judged upon." Lisa adopted her Orthodox identity in her early teens, but was educated in an Orthodox environment. For that reason, she explained, "I don't really define myself as a *ba'al teshuva*." As a relationship develops,

perhaps around four or five dates in, "if I am comfortable enough with him, I'll tell him." Unfortunately the last person to whom she revealed this found this to be unacceptable and reason enough to end the relationship.

The milestone of five dates is a significant one for Lisa in other ways. "In terms of dating for marriage, I've had no relationships that have gone more than five dates." On the topic of physical contact in her relationships, therefore, Lisa explained, "Nothing's happened…Five dates is not enough to express emotional intimacy," physical or otherwise. If the relationship would extend past five dates, "it shows that we are on the same page in life…and you would move in that direction." When Lisa was young, she did engage in physical contact with the guys she dated. At this point in her life, however, she appreciates the laws of *shomer negiah* as an "enormous ideal, incredible and beautiful." At the same time, "I'm realistic. If something happens, we'll deal with it."

Concept of Bashert

Given the varied interpretations of the concept of *bashert* and the emotions linked to it, Lisa's attempt to express her perspective on this matter was understandably complex. At the very basic level, some sources support the concept of one intended life-partner, while others lend the understanding towards multiple potential appropriate mates. Lisa had come across both messages along her dating career, but prefers the former concept. "*Bashert* is the person that you're supposed to meet. Yes, there are a few *basherts*, but I can't think like that. I just like to think about a *bas kol* (heavenly voice, per *Sotah* 2a) that goes out, and it's the person you are supposed to meet." The weakness in the one-partner interpretation is that she never can know if the person she meets is her

bashert or not. Lisa, though, definitively states that, "I haven't met my *bashert* yet…" reflecting her belief that she will eventually marry her intended.

There is an additional pressure that comes with the one intended concept. What might the consequences be if Lisa ends up marrying someone other than her *bashert*? What might happen if she unknowingly meets her *bashert*, but rejects him for whatever reason? Lisa attempts to distance herself from the explicit concept of *bashert* to buffer herself from this potential source of anxiety. "If I said to myself every time before I went out, 'tonight you're going to meet your *bashert'* I would absolutely freak myself out. I don't think about that at all. *Bashert* doesn't come into anything." Nevertheless, Lisa did recognize that she considers what her male counterpart might be going through in his dating struggles. She shared advice she heard while she was living in her first apartment. Her Rabbi used to suggest, "*daven* (pray) for the other person. *Daven* for him. It's very hard for him. I hope he finds me. Things like that. That is very helpful for me. I think about it in that context. I hope he finds me. I hope things aren't hard for him. He's probably stressing out right now. I personalize it, and that really helps me." For better or worse, Lisa holds on to the concept that there is one man, her *bashert*, who is out there for her to meet, date, and marry.

Dating vs. Relationship

Although, as reported earlier, she has dated more than 100 men over her dating career, Lisa noted that, "…in terms of dating for marriage, I've had no relationships that have gone more than five dates." This leads to the important distinction between going on a date with someone, and being in a long-term relationship. For Lisa, this distinction

emerges in one way with regards to how much of her background she shares. As Lisa presents herself to potential dates, through *shadchanim* or directly, she states that she represents herself pretty accurately. However, "in terms of my not growing up *frum* (Orthodox), that's not really out there. That's something that is personal to me… My own concept of a *ba'al teshuva* (term indicating one who "returns" to religious life) is different than most people. So that never gets out, for the most part, ever. I think that even my friends who are *shadchanim* on SYAS don't know about it." Although Lisa adopted her current Orthodox practices at age 14, she stated that, "I don't really define myself as a *ba'al teshuva*." She does recognize that this part of her background is important to share, but she feels that the preconceived notions surrounding the concept of *ba'al teshuva* would get in the way of the development of her relationships. "It's something that I feel that I want to be able to tell the person if I see that we're getting along well… I don't think that I am lying, but it is something that is important to me that I don't want to be judged upon." Lisa estimates that "around four or five dates in," she would bring it up.

Lisa also noted that she reserves expressions of intimacy for later in a relationship. When she was younger, Lisa didn't refrain from all physical expressions of intimacy while dating. In more recent years, however, she stated that, "I aim to be *shomer negiah* (observing the laws of *negiah*) as much as possible… In terms of dating for marriage, I've had no relationships that have gone more than five dates, so nothing's happened." She went on to clarify her own expectations of herself in anticipation of a relationship that develops beyond the five date mark. "I definitely think it is an enormous ideal to be *shomer negiah*. It's incredible and beautiful etc etc. But I'm also realistic.

Hopefully if something happens, if I slip up, we'll deal." In terms of other expressions of emotional intimacy, Lisa explained that "five dates is not enough to express emotional intimacy…. I assume that after five dates, if you're on the same page of life, you would move in that direction."

The Shadchan Process

Communication

Lisa has had considerable experience with a wide variety of *shadchanim*, both in the process of getting set up herself, and in other capacities. For the most part, Lisa feels that the quality of communication between her and her matchmakers has been pretty good. "People are very committed to it." One element she appreciated was an instance of quick follow-up by a *shadchan*. "I got a phone call at 8 a.m. on the morning after my date, and the *shadchan* said 'He's interested, what do you think?' And my reaction was, 'Oh, my gosh. It's eight in the morning.' Really, I think people put themselves out there." This reflects a positive experience for Lisa, personally, although she was later critical of the attitudes held by many *shadchanim* towards singles in general, insinuating that there is a lack of understanding of the latter by the former. "I think that a lot of *shadchanim* have a kind of warped view of single people. Single people don't want to be single. They don't want to be. But there's this perception, 'you're so weird, why are you… what is this?' Single people often get a bad rap, in a sense. Like, 'what's wrong with you?' There needs to be more communication between *shadchanim* and single people."

Appropriate vs. Inappropriate Questions

When asked if there are questions that *shadchanim* are inadequately addressing in the *shidduch* process, Lisa initially hesitated, saying "I don't think that there is anything the *shadchanim* are leaving out….but it could also be because I'm too desensitized to what they already ask." Eventually Lisa did indicate that she wished that *shadchanim* would pay more attention to positive and negative character traits, although she qualified her interest in these matters. "If I would get lofty, I would ask, 'what *middot* (character traits) does the person have?' It's not as looked upon as other things."

On the topic of irrelevant or offensive questions, Lisa again pushed off the question initially, saying, "I don't think about relevant or irrelevant any more. I just kind of go with the flow. I don't even think about the questions…" Lisa generally answers all questions that she is asked in the *shidduch* process, because, "that's what people want to know." This represents a difficulty faced by many single men and women, as well as by their parents and others acting as references in the *shidduch* process. While many people may be asked questions that they perceive as inappropriate or uncomfortable for whatever reason, they "just go with flow," and don't feel able to challenge these questions.

Later in the interview, Lisa did identify several examples she had experienced personally. She wondered about the often-asked question of "'What do your parents do?' That's not the most important thing, but maybe someone wants to know that for whatever reason." The question she identified as most irrelevant was "'materialistic or non-materialistc on a scale of 1-10?'… I don't exactly know what she was getting at." After her initial shock upon hearing the question, she shared her possible understanding of the thought process behind the question. "A specific person was asking that for someone who

was heavily into *chinuch* (education) or *semicha* (rabbinical training), and she was asking that because she wanted to know if you're high-maintenance. If you're very high-maintenance then this guy is probably not for you."

Lisa also talked about feeling offended by some of the questions and expectations that emerge around physical appearance. This may emerge as comments by *shadchanim*, or from some of the men themselves. "A guy I know is interested in a particular girl, and says, 'Is she fat or skinny? Does she have this or that? I want a girl who looks like this or that.'" Lisa recalled talking with a *shadchan* about a certain guy's profile. "The first thing he said when he described what he was looking for was, 'I want someone who is easy on the eyes.' Then, good *middot* etc. but it was very hard to get past that phrase." Again, Lisa wished that the priorities were reversed. Lisa also acknowledged that physical appearance and attraction are important, and that both men and women may inquire about it, but her impression is that men tend to consider it more strongly as a prerequisite than women do when researching and considering potential mates. "I thought that is important to a guy more…but I think girls are more subjective when it comes to these things. Guys ask those questions [in advance] to know if it's someone they want to go out with."

Sensitive Issues

A *shadchan's* sensitivity and tact can be tested as he or she encounters delicate factors when considering a match. This often emerges around the issue of physical appearance. Although Lisa never encountered insensitivity towards her own appearance, she did experience it more overtly while she acted in the support position for a friend. "About four or five years ago, I went with a friend to meet a *shadchan*. My friend is a

little on the heavier side. The *shadchan* started listing people for me, but for my friend she said, 'I don't know.' 'Kind of voluptuous' were the words that she used. And I was thinking, 'oh my God, oh my God.' I was literally scraping her up when we got back [home]. Here I think people can be a little more tactful. Definitely." The question referred to above with regard to materialism struck Lisa as "a little weird, but not hurtful in that sense."

Compatibility Issues (With Shadchan and Suggested Dates)

Lisa would generally prefer her friends to act as the agents suggesting potential matches, "even if that friend is a *shadchan* on SYAS and married." This sort of person "knows me more than just a list of credentials." In contrast is Lisa's experience with *shadchanim* who do not know her well and may tend to rely on rapid assessments based on minimal information. "They might hear one thing and judge you on it. For example, I'm OK with the guy watching TV, and the *shadchan* hears, he [might as well] be a drug addict." These rapid assessments have also been made by the men with whom Lisa has been set up. "One guy said to me, 'oh, you went to a co-ed school? What kind of crazy things did you do?' And he was imagining…what? I did my homework, went to library. Yep, those were the crazy things." Preconceived notions are pervasive throughout the Orthodox Jewish world, and Lisa stated, "I think that might be messing this entire system up."

Sense of Self

Burnout

Given the considerable resources—emotional, physical, financial, etc.—that go into dating and the extended length of time that is often spent in finding a spouse, many single men and women can experience a sense of burnout at some point along the way. Lisa identified two separate facets of her own burnout: burnout from dating, and burnout from looking for dates. Burnout from dating appears to typically follow the end of a relationship. "You meet someone, it's an awesome person and for whatever reason it didn't work out. Thank God, most of the dates I've been on have not been bad, disgusting, horrible, get-me-away-from-here-right-now dates. I think burned out from dating is, I just want to sit in my pajamas and eat Chinese food. I don't want to get dressed. I don't want to go out. I don't want to meet someone new."

Lisa contrasted that experience with feeling burned out from looking. "You try Saw You at Sinai. You try Frumster. You call people you know. If nothing happens you say, Why is nothing happening? I don't get it. I've done everything I could do. How long will this last? When will it end?" Lisa stated that the second experience occurs more frequently for her than the first, as she currently spends more time looking than actually going out on dates. Lisa did, however, have a diverse list of coping strategies in response to her experience of burnout. "When I feel burned out from looking, I think it's important to do other things besides dating. I might go to a *Shiur* (torah class or lecture). I like older movies and foreign films. I'd spend time with friends. Just do things that will enhance myself in an area other than just dating. It's good to concentrate on something else."

Affective Impact of Being Single

When asked why she wants to get married, Lisa stated that she wants to share her love with someone else. She added that "I definitely also feel lonely being a single person... you live in a different world… it's a very alone feeling." Lisa has a unique burden of responsibility, as she was not raised in an Orthodox household, and feels that it is her responsibility to repair that interruption in religious continuity. "A chain in my family was broken, and I want to put it back together with someone else. A chain of tradition that I want to perpetuate."

In contrast, Lisa recognized that the switch from being a single person to a married person would entail "a life upheaval." In particular, Lisa identified the change in freedom from living only with herself in mind, to caring for a family. "You have responsibilities – cooking, cleaning, taking care of the kids. You're not just living only for you." Even while single, Lisa does her best to buffer herself from a completely self-centered perspective, recognizing the risk involved. "The longer you're a single person, you're living longer and longer for yourself… I have friends…who moved into their own apartments, and I would never ever want to do that. I think it's so important to just always do things with at least one other person... It's good practice."

The tension between feeling isolated, versus her internal defense against becoming too self-centered is just one factor that contributes to the emotional toll Lisa experiences after remaining single for several years. Multiple times throughout the interview, Lisa described the "air of despair" felt by herself and many other singles, be it at singles events, or going home for the holidays, for example. Lisa's own efforts to coordinate singles events stem from her desire to help single men and women like herself

who may be feeling hopeless. "If I can stop someone from crying themselves to sleep at night, that's great, that's my job. Just one person."

When asked to elaborate about some of her worries about being single, Lisa said that being single is "all worry… I Worry – oh my God, I'm not going to get married. When am I going to get married? I'm…28. The guys across the hall are 23 and 24. Everybody here is old. Everyone is too young. [Elsewhere], everyone is more modern, but they're 38. Where should I be, what's my place?" Besides the general anxieties that she shares with many other single men and women, Lisa identified a unique worry that she considers. "For myself, where's *Yom Tov* (Jewish holidays)? Where should I be next *Yom Tov*? Where am I going to be for *Pesach*, *Shavuot*, *Sukkot* (3 major Jewish holidays)? That's my personal, on top of everything else. What will be? What's going to happen?" As she is the only Orthodox member of her immediate family, she has no easy destination for the major holidays. This presents a difficult decision for her many times throughout the year. Lisa also presents a set of anxieties from the opposite perspective. "At the same time, I like my apartment. I like my roommates. I like this and that. But, uh-oh, am I too comfortable? I worry about me. I like to just lie on my couch on *Shabbat*…reading the Jewish Press. Is it bad? Am I too comfortable?"

Lisa extended her negative line of thinking towards her faith as well. "There's a lot of questioning yourself, questioning *HaShem* (God), and asking, I don't get it, I don't understand. Look at how far I came, and why would He do this to me?" Maintaining her faith in light of these conditions does sometimes present a struggle. On one hand, Lisa strives to be the best person she could be, and accept her life circumstances as they are for now. "On the other hand you also say, 'Another year? Another *Pesach*, Another

Shavuot?' It's hard. It's very, very hard. You don't want it to get to you that much, and you don't want your relationship with *HaShem* to take…" Lisa was unable to finish this sentence, and clearly feels a powerful religious component to her struggles as a single person.

Positive Aspects of Single Life

Although most of the interview with Lisa focused on the challenges of being single, she did discuss some of the positive elements. On an interpersonal note, Lisa commented that "I've definitely made great friends and been able to sustain my friendships with the friends that I've had." She also noted her development of herself over time. "Over the years I've become more open. I've become louder. If you would have said five to six years ago that I would run a singles event with 50 people, I wouldn't have believed it, because I had no public speaking experience whatsoever. I've just become louder in a sense over the years, anyway." There appears to be an aspect of Lisa's confidence that has emerged over the years that she spent living independently since moving to New York. "At these events, as much as they were a lot of work, I really enjoy it. To help other people, and really going out of myself, because believe it or not, that is not my personality to do that. That has been the most incredible thing." Lisa has also developed some of her personal interests, and appears to enjoy the ability to be more spontaneous. "On a daily basis, I've been able to be part of things that…I wouldn't be part of otherwise. On a whim, for example if I want to see this film at such and such place, I'll go." As described earlier, engaging in these positive pursuits also appears to protect Lisa from dating burnout.

CHAPTER IV

THREE ADDITIONAL CASES: SAUL, ROSE, AND HANNAH

Saul

Saul is a 27-year-old man who has lived in New York City all of his life. He was approximately 20 years old when he started dating, and differs most significantly from Sammy in his preferred method of finding dates. Unlike Sammy, Saul feels most comfortable with *shadchanim* facilitating the dating process, whether they work face-to-face or online. Sammy is a long-standing member of the major online dating websites, including SYAS and Frumster, and feels most comfortable with *shadchan*-oriented sites due to his shyness. These settings also allow Saul to control what information he reveals before the date, and to view sufficient background information about the women before he chooses to date them. Over the years he has adjusted his various profiles through frequent feedback from the women he has dated and the *shadchanim* with whom he has worked. He is also close with several Rabbis and has consulted with them about his dating experience.

Saul is a *ba'al teshuva* and, like many other singles with similar backgrounds, has faced some tension in developing his own expectations about dating in light of his non-religious upbringing. This may be a factor in his comfort with and seeking out of third-

party input. Nevertheless, Saul has faced some bias, he feels, based on his background. Although he fully identifies himself presently as Modern Orthodox, he has been told at various times that he could only be set up with other *ba'alei teshuva*, or he has spoken with *shadchanim* who have questioned his current level of observance because of his background. Broadly speaking, Saul has been disappointed with the quality of communication between the *shadchanim* and himself. On SYAS, for example, Saul noted that he was "surprised at how removed it seems." Although he expected that the *shadchan* would at least speak with the individual on the phone before suggesting a date, most didn't. Saul's experience can provide a valuable lesson for *shadchanim*, many of whom take a passive, distant role once a match is suggested. For single men and women with some social difficulty including shyness, or uncertainty about dating expectations, having a facilitator or mentor of some sort to help them navigate these experiences might be helpful. Mental health professionals who serve the Orthodox Jewish community should take note of this as well. Saul has sought the services of a psychotherapist over the past several years, and reports benefiting from some of the perspectives on dating that he gained there.

As the only interviewee in this study to have been an active participant in End the Madness, Saul was able to share his unique perspective on the program. He described his involvement as "off-and-on," ncluding attending more than one *Shabbaton*, and reading and posting on the various bulletin boards over the years. He generally appreciated the efforts involved, although was somewhat critical of the tone of many of the people who write comments. He did note ETM's positive perspective on singles events. Saul explained that there can be different ways to have a successful experience at such an

event. One measure of success is if the attendee ends up with a date, and, ideally, a spouse, after the event. As the former is somewhat rare, and the latter even more so, Saul appreciates the ETM perspective that a successful singles event is one in which the participants enjoyed themselves while at the event itself. Saul has also gathered from the ETM model, as well as from some messages from his parents, that the process of dating itself should be enjoyable and not strictly for marriage. These perspectives are intended to take some of the pressure off, and allow for a better psychological experience for all those involved.

Most of Saul's dates have come through SYAS, but he appears to have some difficulty with giving feedback to the *shadchanim* with whom he works. He noted that he has been disappointed with many of the suggested dates, either because he hasn't found them physically attractive, or because of personality mis-matches. He has trouble explaining that to his *shadchanim*, however. Regarding one *shadchan* he has used, he explained that "the girls she sends me aren't that good actually, but I like her as a person and keep her on as my *shadchan*." He went on to say, "I don't want a *shadchan* to think that I'm too focused on physical appearance," while at the same time noting that this was very important to him. Saul also noted that he sometimes feels he is too focused on dating in general, and attributed this largely to both the self-directed and social pressure to get married. He does his best to balance the negative experiences of rejection and burnout with more healthy perspectives, but this is an ongoing challenge. Saul did note that he would appreciate a more integrated community, wishing, for example, that married people would host their single peers for *Shabbat* more often. Although he does his best to

stay active and positive in his pursuit of a spouse, Saul appears to be weighed down by the burden of single-hood.

Rose

Rose is a 24-year-old-woman living in a singles community in New York City for the past 3 years, having moved there after graduating college. She noted that her parents moved out of New York when they retired, and she certainly considers her current community her home. After beginning dating at age 19, she was engaged at age 20 but broke it off shortly thereafter. All told, she has dated approximately 17 men, but reduced that number to somewhere between five and seven when asked to evaluate the number of men with whom she had a higher quality and more long-term relationship. While in college, she generally dated her peers whom she met through student events. After graduating, she recognized that the nature of her socializing had changed, and she joined Frumster and SYAS, much like Lisa. As these sites have established themselves in the mainstream over the years, Rose noted that there was less stigma associated with membership.

In addition to the websites, Rose has had some experience with singles events, mostly negative. To improve them, Rose considered, "I wouldn't make them singles events, just events that would attract people." This distinction is important as it relates to the measure of success for the event. If it is exclusively a singles event, success would be considered achieved if the single attendee walked out with a potential date in mind. Rose noted that this one measure of success increases the pressure and sense of being judged. In contrast is Rose's expectation for her own success at an event. "[An event is]

successful for me if I got interested in someone whom I met there, or a new idea or new organization. You meet all different kinds of people at these events, and that is interesting. Hearing different life experiences, what people go through, that is enjoyable." Most of the social events in her community do not identify themselves as strictly singles events. These may include game nights and ice cream socials, as well as *Shabbat* meals, which attract single and married members of the community. Different people take turns contributing to these, and Rose notes that there is no stigma associated with participation. Rose added later, though, that she has never attended a singles *Shabbaton*, as "there's no backing out. If it's bad, you can't do anything."

Like Lisa, Rose also talked about her experience going on dates suggested by matchmakers, and reported mixed results. She described some misgivings about the path that *shadchanim* take in preparing to set up a single man or woman. "Instead of asking what you want, I think they should be asking about who you are… People should have a conversation with you to see how you interact and speak, and then they could say 'I can think of someone for you.'" Rose noted that *shadchanim* sometimes push you "beyond your comfort zone," and she has accepted inappropriate dates for fear of being perceived as close-minded. Rose does her best to remain positive, but reflected on her experience in dating over the years as an "emotional rollercoaster."

In response to the emotional intensity of the dating experience, Rose has adopted a "casual" strategy to help her cope. "I think I'm more laid back than other people about dating." Most of her first dates are at a Starbucks, as she wants it to be "as casual as possible. That's my goal…It's more natural. There's less pressure." She also noted that there is a lot of tension around physical appearance, even adding that some girls she sees

look "starving and emaciated." Although Rose noted that, on a date, "I am very self-conscious about my weight," she actually prefers spending less time on the phone with a potential date, and more time in person, as that tends to let a more honest relationship evolve. Rose also has a consistent summer job that allows her to step away from the dating scene for approximately 3 months. This offers significant relief from the potential sense of burnout that can develop. She reflected that she has felt burned out twice a year on average, and has taken time at those points to be with good friends and step back from dating. These breaks usually last at least a week.

Over the course of the interview, Rose described feeling multiple sources of pressure to date and marry, including internal expectations, as well as pressure from peers, family, and other community members. Rose found some relief by increasing her own privacy in these matters. "For the past few years, no one [in my community] knew who I dated." This was true for her peers as well as her parents. "I stopped telling my parents about dates several years ago." Rather than having to justify herself when a relationship ends, she chooses to strongly limit any dating information that she shares with her parents, one of the most significant sources of external pressure. Along the way, Rose has also made some other difficult decisions. She spoke of one instance, for example, in which she turned down a large cash offer from a concerned family member who suggested that she could use the money to improve her physical appearance.

Elsewhere in the interview Rose elaborated on some of the sources of internal stress and anxiety that were prevalent in the dating experience. She noted a concern of "losing herself" in a relationship, though that concern is alleviated by her "casual and slow" approach to dating. She also touched on more universal worries. "Everyone's

scared that they're not going to get married. At one point, though, I was more scared of marrying the wrong person…I hope I don't settle...I can't rush into marriage." These fears were a source of internal pressure that contributed to her decision to break off her engagement, but they remain ever-present for Rose and many other single men and women. For now, Rose is confident that she will marry and tolerates the stress associated with dating and single life. She did add, however, "I don't know how you can be Orthodox and 40…I don't know how you survive and not lose faith if you reach 35 or 40 and you're still single…there is a point where you break."

Even at 24, Rose reports facing discrimination as a single person. This happens particularly on occasions such as going to another community for *Shabbat* or a holiday. Rose recalled one instance when someone commented, "you seem happy, are you seeing somebody?" She found this question offensive, as it assumes that dating would be the sole source of her happiness. Rose feels that the general attitude of the community towards singles is that they are "unfinished or imperfect." In her view, this attitude is reflected by the use of the phrases "singles crisis" and "*shidduch* crisis". "When they use the word 'crisis', they imply pity a little bit. They think that you are not fulfilled, happy. And they are scared for you, thinking that you are wasting your time." Although she is living independently and actively developing her professional identity, her marital status is the foremost variable when people consider her. "Is a 20-year-old who is married more mature than me? I don't think so." She added that going to communities that don't have a large singles demographic can be really hard on a single person. In anticipation of the negative attitudes from the community, Rose noted that "a lot of people hate going home," possibly leading to the ubiquitous *Shabbat* meals in the singles communities.

After graduating college, Rose made the decision to pursue a doctorate, and live with roommates in her New York community. Although Rose describes herself as "very social," seeing every *Shabbat* meal as an opportunity to increase her dating network, she recognizes that she does not want to be solely defined by dating. She explained that "independence is an important value for me." She has taken advantage of her time as a single woman and pursued some leadership opportunities in her school and work which she may not have done if she were married. She expressed some disappointment that other single men and women don't share her perspective. "You also want to have fun… Not enough people take advantage of this time. People don't enjoy it."

Her confident attitude has occasionally worked against her, though. She recalled hearing the words "intimidating" and "emasculating" used in reference to herself and some of her friends, as well as being told by a guy in college that she was a "tough" person, and that some men might not date her because of that. In the generally conservative, male-oriented Orthodox Jewish community, Rose's strong female personality has faced some resistance. She also faced assumptions based on other factors. "Because I wore pants…and held hands in public…people assumed that I did much more than I did." Specifically, Rose mentioned one instance when another girl asked her about her sexual experience, assuming that she had had more experience having been engaged and presenting as she did. In light of the not-uncommon experience described by Rose regarding the tensions surrounding her complex identity, *shadchanim* and mental health practitioners would best serve the singles community by recognizing and appreciating the heterogeneity that exists within it.

Hannah

Hannah is a 26-year-old divorcee living in one of the outer boroughs of New York City. After graduating from college, she lived with roommates in a singles community for 3 and ½ years, lived outside of New York while she was married for 2 years, and has been in her current neighborhood for 6 months since her divorce. Given this life experience, Hannah has some additional perspectives that build on those of Lisa and Rose. Additionally, although Hannah identifies herself as somewhat modern, she has pursued dates through more traditional matchmaker settings and organizations, and has exposure to the *yeshivish* experience. In this way, her contribution to the present research broadens the scope of the other interviewees.

All told, Hannah has gone out with approximately 40 men in her dating career, 5 of whom she dated since her divorce. As most of these dates came about through *shadchanim*, formal or informal, Hannah had substantial experience from which to report on the poor quality of the matchmaking. Hannah complains that too often, she feels, *shidduchim* are suggested based on "formalities instead of personalities." This might mean that in the past Hannah might only be set up with other *ba'alei teshuva* as she is now religious but came from an irreligious household, or presently might only be matched with divorced men. On SYAS, Hannah has occasionally felt that the *shadchanim* may not have a strong reason to propose a match, but would expect singles to consider a profile "just to try it out." For example, Hannah is currently pursuing her PhD, and she recalls getting suggested men who never went to college; she certainly has been discouraged by those mismatches. Since her divorce she has joined a matchmaking

service and was set up with two men so far. While she appreciated the haste in which the *shadchanim* made suggestions after meeting her, she reluctantly noted that these two suggestions were poor choices. Her impression of the first suggestion, the man in question a *shadchan* himself, was that they "set me up with him because they know he sets up people… They set him up with everybody at the center." She also noted that he was 10 years older than she, and clearly was not suggested to her based on any strong rationale. There also appeared to be some miscommunication that led to the second *shidduch*. While she intended to indicate in the *shadchan* interview that she would be open to certain criteria, they understood that she was specifically interested in those criteria. Later, the *shadchan* accused her of misrepresenting herself, and Hannah has since learned to choose her words more carefully.

Hannah identified a lack of honesty in dating as another problem. If she is set up with someone inappropriate, for example, she finds little room to explain to the *shadchan* why she didn't pursue the suggestion further. "If you turn down a guy, you may not necessarily give your true opinion of him because you don't want anything to impact you negatively in the future… I don't think it's safe to be totally honest." Hannah fears being labeled as too picky or closed-minded, thereby forgoing possible future suggestions. Even on the dates themselves, Hannah finds an undercurrent of dishonesty. Hannah is particularly concerned by the apparent covering up of mental illness in the Orthodox Jewish community at large, and particularly in the dating process. "There are a lot of psychological disorders… but there is a general covering up of it because a lot of people look at it negatively." Due to the private and delicate nature of this matter, Hannah is unsure how it could be better addressed, though. Additionally, the sense of keeping up

appearances extends beyond those with psychological dysfunction. "I don't think people on dates present themselves accurately… A person is much more complex than a first date." To that end, Hannah almost always goes out with someone twice to form a more accurate picture. Her impression, though, is that "guys make a decision within the first hour."

Hannah appreciates that the *shadchan* could potentially alleviate the concern of dishonesty, as part of their role is to consult with references and perform a basic background check of the suggested match. "People can put on an act… I would prefer someone who can check things out because people can present themselves in a certain way that isn't reality." Nevertheless, she recognizes that the references themselves will likely present the individual in the best way possible, indicating that this is not a true solution to the problem. Hannah acknowledged other benefits of *shadchanim* as well. If a singles event includes the presence of a *shadchan*, for example, Hannah may feel more comfortable informing the *shadchan* of her own interest in a guy, and initiating contact in that way. The discrete way that the introduction can be handled by the third party helps the process. After the *shadchan* gets word to the person of interest, "he won't necessarily know if it was the *shadchan* or the girl who suggested it." This takes some of the pressure off of both parties, which can foster a smoother introduction. When Hannah went for her interview with the *shidduch* organization she added that there were 4 or 5 *shadchanim* meeting with her at once. Supposedly this networked approach will increase the likelihood of her getting set up, as multiple matchmakers can have a wider range of potential matches.

Although there are certain advantages to *shadchan* involvement, Hannah described double standards and a set of unhealthy expectations that taint the *shidduch* process. She finds, for example, that men are much more able to voice their expectations regarding physical appearance, while the women don't have room to do the same. "Guys can say they want a certain hair color, certain weight, certain height. But if a girl says that, she may be branded materialistic… If it's not acceptable for a girl to ask a guy about [weight], then it shouldn't be acceptable for a guy to ask a girl about that." As the single men and women lack a sense of empowerment to challenge the current system, the responsibility should fall on those in power, i.e. the *shadchanim*. Presently, however, this is not the case. "The guy's… pickiness is supported. Rather than the *shadchan* saying 'this isn't important in the dating process,' they'll ask me." When she is asked questions around what she feels are irrelevant criteria, she has little room to protest. "I usually answer and then feel bad afterwards." She wonders if these judgmental inquiries are a significant factor in preventing many single men from marrying.

Hannah, like the other interviewees, described a sense of burnout that may arise from different frustrations in the dating process. She recalled one instance in which she had accepted a third date from a guy, and concomitantly was offered another match by the same *shadchan* who suggested the first person. Although she initially declined the second offer, explaining that she was still dating the first guy, the *shadchan* disagreed, and encouraged her to accept the second offer as well. At this point Hannah still planned on going out on the third date, but knew that she wasn't going to take it further. "You get burned out easier if you know you are going to reject the person but you are just going out for the formalities." She has spoken with friends about the common frustrations, and

shared that a lot of friends "are sick of it… they won't go to *shadchanim* any more. They're sick of *shadchanim*." Hannah herself doesn't actively take breaks, though, when she feels frustrated. "Sometimes there's a natural break… like 2 weeks or a month." She once took a 2 month break after feeling burned out, but didn't find that to be helpful. "You may just feel more hopeless about the situation. I feel like I'm doing [my full effort] if I'm not taking a break." Later she added that instead of stepping back, "I try to take up more *shadchanim*, try to keep going, go through the motions, go to friends." Hannah had a laundry list of potential frustrations she has encountered in her dating, however. These include, but are not limited to, "inappropriate comments, annoying questions, being sick of the dating scene, getting rejected by someone too picky, getting stuck at a singles event with someone cornering you, or going out with people entirely inappropriate."

The process of dating is further marred by community pressures. Because of her divorce, Hannah perceives that her status as a single has been lowered, and that she is expected to relax her criteria for the men she might date. In addition, she feels that there is pressure for all singles to lower their standards. This message is most explicitly communicated at lectures for single men and women. "The dating lectures communicate that there is something wrong when you've been dating for so long… They send the message that you have to settle." Like Rose and the other interviewees, Hannah lamented the community's generally negative attitude towards singles. "My friends have been criticized that they didn't do all they can or are rejecting too quickly." There is little appreciation for the complexity of single life, and Hannah feels that the community is too quick to judge. "When you go somewhere and you're not married, people say, 'Oh, poor

girl. Let's set her up.'" She recalls that when she was married she tried to support her single friends. "I would empathize with them about the struggles they were going through." She feels that this was an unusual attitude, though, and that most married people forget the challenges of being single. "Singles are having a hard time with it, hurting from it, and people are too judgmental."

These negative perspectives are further reinforced, in Hannah's opinion, by the lack of integration of different groups in the community. In Hannah's circles, "there isn't much by way of co-ed friendships," making it difficult for friends to make dating suggestions for one another. This informal *shidduch* approach would be ideal for Hannah as her friends know her best. Unfortunately, her single friends don't have a dense co-ed network, leading to the default of formal *shadchanim*. In Hannah's current neighborhood, there is also very little integration among singles themselves, and between these individuals and their married peers. This is one significant factor that pulls unattached men and women to the various singles communities. Looking back on her time living in her singles community before she was married, Hannah noted that the people there were more modern, many attending graduate school, a value that she shared. Hannah also recalled that, "in the *shul* it was integrated…There were a lot of singles events. Married people will have singles over on Shabbat. There was a lot of mingling." At the same time, Hannah commented on the drawbacks of living in that environment. "There is an artificiality about it… The whole *shul* there is like a singles event when you go… I consider myself outgoing, but in those settings I am more shy." Furthermore, Hannah struggled with balancing her preferences for her surrounding environment. She would like to have a full sense of community that extends beyond just other single men and

women. However, in the singles community, "there aren't a lot of families there. Whereas if you want [a community with more] families, you're stuck being the only singles."

Hannah described a few additional instances in which she felt a tension between competing values. Hannah often thinks about her competing religious and secular values, particularly around dating. In the secular world, for example, "there is much less push for marriage at a certain age." Hannah recalled being in college watching many of her friends get married, and feeling anxious about her own status. "When I was 20, I probably felt more pressure than when I was 23." She reflected upon her changed attitude. "I used to think, I'm supposed to be Orthodox, but I was 20 and not married. It's a bad thing… Now I think [the 20-year-old brides] are so young. That's more in line with how I grew up… People need a certain amount of life experience to get married." Even though she has been dating for several years in the Orthodox context, she still has some difficulty with some of the standards. "I wish it would be more casual. Also, the things I like to talk about are more secular… I like to talk to non-religious people. Not everyone would consider that acceptable." Other aspects continue to be challenging as well. "I wasn't prepared for this – the constant rejection, or this reference thing… I didn't know that people could hide things so easily." She sometimes wonders if the non-religious approach would lead to more positive outcomes, particularly regarding more open-mindedness, and less pressure. Additionally, Hannah noted that she experiences a personal conflict regarding her participation in her current community. The *Shabbat* experience can be quite powerful in fostering a sense of community, particularly around the *shul* experience. Hannah would like that to occur for her, but observes a failure in this respect,

in light of her single status. "I always go to *shul*… When you go to *shul* here, though… people don't talk to you or try to get to know you." Unlike in singles communities, there is "no particular shul for singles… so lots of single girls don't go to shul." This is a weekly source of stress for Hannah, as her own values conflict with those of her current community.

In response to the negative pressures in her life as a single woman, Hannah has worked hard to develop a set of healthy expectations for herself. When she first starts going out with a new person, she keeps her own expectations grounded. Rather than conforming to the expectation that a future can be decided on a first date, Hannah's view is that "a first date is just getting to see if you can talk to one another… It's more to see if someone is sociable and communicative, and if there is an even flow of conversation." She also shared how her concept of *bashert* has evolved in a healthy direction, particularly in light of her negative experience with her first husband. "I used to think it was true – that people have one person made for them… I now think that people can become *bashert* as they grow with each other, learn from each other, and work on things together." Hannah has also worked to challenge some of her negative beliefs about her divorce, thanks to some positive advice she received along the way. Instead of presenting this as defining her as a person, she instead tries to view it as only one facet of her life. "You have to present yourself not that 'I'm divorced,' but that it is a bad thing that happened to me." There is a quality of passivity in this statement, but it does seem to be a positive step in her understanding her life experience. Generally speaking, Hannah has been glad to see that there was less stigma around her divorce than she initially anticipated.

At various points in the interview, Hannah voiced some concerns over her current status, including her frustration with her transient living situation. When her roommate got married, Hannah was forced to find another apartment, and wishes that the move would be a matter of her choice instead of a byproduct of someone else's actions. Like the other interviewees, Hannah also worries that "I will never get married, and would never have kids." With a touch of irony she added, "I also joke around that [at least] I will never be 30 and never married, because I was married once!" As she begins to date after her divorce, she brings a unique set of concerns to the experience. In light of her history, she is "much more aware of what could go wrong and what could be possible... I was made to feel very bad abut myself. There was a lot of verbal abuse and I wouldn't want to be put in that situation again." Although she didn't report peers who were in similar abusive relationships, she recalls hearing other divorced men and women express similar fears of repeating the negative experience. Hannah also worries about getting married and then getting divorced again. While she hopes never to repeat her poor marriage experience, she also doesn't want to repeat her experience as a divorcee.

As described above, Hannah spends considerable energy finding her future spouse. Nevertheless, she struggles with her present position as a single woman, and described some of the drawbacks to this. "I had a certain lifestyle when I was married… I want to have that lifestyle." This lifestyle entailed stability and a sense of community, and involvement in a shul. Hannah misses that as a single woman. She added, "there is a lot of loneliness that goes on with singles… " She notes that she has a lot more free time, and has attempted to reengage with friendships and classes, but doesn't feel a significant sense of fulfillment from those, wondering if they were "just a way to fill up time and not

to feel lonely." She has also found it harder to access a Rabbi for guidance. "In terms of religious development, there are certain things that can only be accomplished if you are married."

While she was married, Hannah read books and attended lectures to help her develop her marital relationship. These typically focused on the concept of *shalom bayit*, referring to a sense of peace in the home that should emerge when both partners work together according to a consistent value system. Hannah noted that these lectures and books "prepared me more for dating now than the dating lectures – to know what is involved in marriage and what a spouse should be." Typical dating lessons, however, focus primarily on the means towards achieving the goal of marriage, but stop there. Hannah put it simply, "what happens once you find the right person?" As she begins to date again, she draws more from lectures on having a successful marriage, over those that discussed the process of dating itself. As noted earlier, dating lectures often imply that single men and women should lower their standards and settle. Hannah feels that this message is not only inaccurate, but also reflects a limited view. Hannah's added perspective having been married and now single again, suggests that lectures targeting single men and women should consider expanding the content offered to include the development of higher quality interpersonal relationships. This would shift the focus to the ends over merely the means, and potentially be one further step in improving the way the community relates to its unmarried members.

CHAPTER V

CASE COMPARISON AND DISCUSSION

Sense of Community

All five respondents lived in singles communities either at the time of the interview or prior. Over the course of the interviews, they shared their feelings about their own sense of community, and those will be reviewed here. There is some variability in the respondents' demographics, including but not limited to gender, age, religious background and identity, and dating history. In light of the heterogeneity that exists even in this small sample, some of the common and the contrasting themes will be highlighted to help the readers understand the diversity involved.

The interviewees were asked about their sense of their own integration in their communities, and of the general integration of the single population in the larger Orthodox Jewish community. Sammy, the youngest of the 5 subjects and the newest resident in his singles community, perceived far greater integration in his community of origin. His new home, as he perceived it, featured "pockets of people." The impression he described was one of transience, with the single people living in the singles community only as a stopover until they marry and move away. As a result, he perceived very little

sense of integration between the majority group of singles and the married neighbors in the minority. Saul similarly felt a lack of integration between the two groups, and wished, for example, that married people would host their single friends more. Hannah may have voiced the strongest sense of isolation, as she had previously lived in a singles community, but at the time of the interview did not. In her current environment, she reported a divide between singles and their married peers, but also a lack of connection among singles. Hannah reflected that the sense of loneliness that emerges likely leads to the ongoing growth of singles communities, where people go to seek a greater sense of connection.

Rose and Lisa reported a somewhat more optimistic view. They both had lived in singles communities most of their dating lives, and focused more on the positive elements in this respect. Rose went so far as to explicitly endorse her current residence as her home, indicating a level of personal investment that was not as apparent in the other reports. Rose noted that she feels a strong sense of integration in her neighborhood, citing the example of local social activities whose participants were balanced between those who were single and those who were married. Lisa similarly reported the greatest sense of integration in her current singles community with a natural expectation to socialize, often mentioning the *Shabbat* meals as an example of positive integration.

Nevertheless, all of the respondents noted that the singles communities that may foster greater integration actually act as an artificial buffer between the singles and the larger community. When single men and women leave the comfort of the singles community, there is a sense that their marital status is the only aspect of their identity that warrants attention. Rose explained, "A lot of people hate going home," as they will have

to face judgmental negative attitudes. Sammy has the sense that because he isn't married, he is perceived as "a nobody." Lisa bears a sense of failure and a lack of identity when she enters other communities as a single woman. She recalled one instance when she was unable to answer some children who asked, "What are you?" as they didn't perceive her as a true adult due to her lack of a spouse. When people realize that Hannah isn't married, she immediately hears the never stated but always present, "Oh, poor girl." Rose has been stopped by an acquaintance who observed, "You seem happy. Are you seeing someone?" She elaborated that there is a sense that singles are unfinished or imperfect until they find their partner.

Negative community attitudes may contribute to use of the term singles crisis, or *shidduch* crisis, as an attempt to capture the phenomenon of the growing numbers of men and women who grow older but remain unmarried. Regarding her own understanding of the term, Hannah stated, "I think it is true to an extent," as she highlighted the different expectations regarding the age of marriage in the religious and the secular worlds. Lisa understood the underlying cause of the crisis as one of faulty expectations in the dating process. "If people don't learn to…accept people's imperfections…then I think there will continue to be a singles/*shidduch* crisis." Sammy, relatively new to the New York dating scene initially denied familiarity with the term. "Seems I'm not in that world." If the meaning of the crisis was that "there is a shortage of proper matches," as he understands it, then he feels that this is an inaccurate assessment. "There is a match for every person, and even multiple matches for every person…my personal feeling."

Rose, however, finds the use of the word "crisis" ridiculous and offensive. She reflected on the possible mixed attitudes reflected by the concept. "They imply pity…that

you're not fulfilled. And they are scared for you, thinking that you are wasting your

time." If people perceive that she is actually enjoying some aspects of her single life, she

meets another set of reactions. "It's off-putting for them…they get scared. Some [people]

are even jealous." Saul's perspective was similar, as he noted "it creates a sense of

desperation…I don't like it." Whether or not the current state of affairs warrants the label

"crisis" is certainly up for debate. The use of such terminology, however, certainly has an

impact on the participants as highlighted by Rose and Saul. As suggested by Bartov

(2004), the intended or unintended outcome is a further pathologizing and marginalizing

of a significant sub-population, a trend that may well deserve to be reversed.

Identifying the experience of singles as a crisis is one way in which the pressure

to marry is expressed. The interviewees also spoke about sources of pressure in their

closer circles. Rose perceived a significant level of pressure from her parents that she

found increasingly intrusive over time. As a result, she consciously curtailed the level of

information she would share with them about her dating. This has helped her manage the

shared anxiety around the issue. Sammy was more ambivalent about his family's

influence, as he acknowledged that his mother, for example, would ask him "When are

the grandkids going to come?" while he minimized the impact of the family pressure in

general. It is possible that Sammy's relative youth and early position in the dating world

may temper his family's level of anxiety.

The other three respondents noted that their parents are more secular and less

connected to the Orthodox Jewish dating world. The parental attitudes, as a result,

actually offer a counterpoint to the larger community pressures. Lisa noted that her

parents don't pressure her much, but her sister replaces them. Her sister, it should be

noted, is older, married, and Orthodox. Lisa paraphrased one such conversation, with her sister commenting, "I don't understand what you are waiting for, just meet someone." Saul explained that his father encouraged him to date without the specific intent to find a wife, and focus more on the dating process itself. Hannah similarly indicated that the message from her parents was strongly in the "work-it-out" category, as they attempted to transmit a more relaxed approach to dating.

Other than from family, the interviewees described an internalized source of pressure to marry as well, similar in some ways to the source of mating anxiety as described by Levitz (1992). Sammy noted that while many of the positive elements of being married could be achieved while single, one key factor that would remain absent, though, is children. "The one reason I want to get married is to have a family… I don't think there is a reason to get married if you're not going to have children." Saul similarly focused on this element from a slightly different angle, emphasizing the religious restrictions on single people. He quoted the verse in Genesis (2:18), which states, "It is not good for man to be alone." While Saul acknowledged that marriage does provide the only sanctioned outlet for sexual urges, he also expressed a desire for a life partner in general.

Hannah had a more acute sense of pressure to marry, as she recalled the benefits she experienced in her first marriage, and contrasted them with her present circumstances. She described a lifestyle that she misses. "I want more stability. Now I go places for *Shabbat*…I don't cook. It's more temporary." When she had her own home, and functioned as a host rather than as a guest, she added, "I felt like I was where I was supposed to be in life based on my age." The other key factors she discussed are her

desire to be a wife and mother, and to be involved in a family-oriented community. Lisa and Rose talked about both the personal and the communal impact of shifting from single to married. Rose certainly sees the attraction in getting "married for the sake of getting married," but also added that it would let her better "contribute to society." Lisa added the religious pressure as described in Levitz (1992) where marriage functions as a strengthening link for the survival of the Jewish people. Lisa's family did not actively follow Jewish law, and the generations immediately prior to her therefore represent broken links. Lisa explained that she feels "there is a chain of tradition that I want to perpetuate…There was a chain in my family that was broken. I want to put it back together with someone else."

Process of Dating/Search for a Spouse

The five respondents also represented a range of experiences with regards to their process of dating. The following represents some highlights of common and contrasting content. To begin, the comments about singles events focused on two primary factors. Events were seen as more positive when the focus was on something other than dating and meeting new people per se. When the experience shifted to a higher-pressure focus on finding a potential date, the interviewees consistently described this as aversive. Presumably an activity-oriented program can be a source for enjoyment, which Sammy, for example, endorses as more valuable than strictly meeting new people. "For me…it's more important to have a good time." Rose also perceived the potential value in not simply becoming interested in a new person, but also in learning about "new ideas, or a new organization." Hannah also finds it "interesting to see people in more of a setting

where they're socializing more…" as opposed to following the usual dating routines. She

added that singles events allow her an opportunity to "interact with people beyond what

the *shadchan* considers appropriate."

Aside from these endorsements, however, all of the respondents spoke critically

of singles events in total. Lisa put it most strongly as she stated, "I dislike having to

go…Singles events are never going to be positive for anybody. No one wants to be

there." This thought was echoed by Saul, who has never gone to one, and added, "I

wouldn't want to go to one." Rose also talked about the pressure and the sense that

"you're being judged…I hate the dressing up and the expectation that you have to look a

certain way." Hannah similarly feels very uncomfortable at the "meat market" scene that

she feels is "entirely inappropriate." Sammy recalled the source of discomfort as many

singles events attract clientele who are "old, or weird."

Part of Lisa's hesitation to attend singles events is also the sense that she is being

judged regarding whether or how she participates in the icebreakers, for example. When

discussing the usual expectation that all present interact with one another, she revealed

her irritation by insisting, "You can't make me talk to someone." Rose considered that

improving singles events could only be done by changing the very nature of the event. "I

wouldn't make them singles events, just events that would attract people." Sammy hoped

that people could be "more comfortable" at the events, with some of the pressure

removed. Hannah had not attended many singles events herself, but represented a

minority view. She shared her understanding that the purpose of such gatherings is

strictly to foster future dates. To that end, she wondered if it would be helpful to have

shadchanim or married peers present in an informal capacity at the events to facilitate

introductions and help singles who may need it. Once again, the variety of experiences does lead to multiple recommendations so that all members of the community can be served appropriately.

The respondents also ranged on their comfort level of using Internet dating sites, specifically discussing the two most popular sites, www.frumster.com (frumster) and www.sawyouatsinai.com (SYAS). On one side, Sammy explained, "I have never used an Internet site (for dating), and I would never use one." He views this resource with some disdain, going on to say, "I just couldn't see myself saying to my kids 'I met your mother online.'" Saul, takes the opposite perspective, and views these websites as his preferred resource for finding a partner. "The Internet is the most comfortable method for me because I am shy. Maybe it's not logical, but I'm afraid of rejection. Maybe it would be more hurtful if I got rejected personally."

The three women shared a more neutral attitude, citing some benefit to these resources, but not necessarily choosing the Internet as their primary venue. In the process of looking for a spouse, Rose feels "I should be pretty much out there, whatever way it is." In fact, she added, going online can mitigate some of the pressure of utilizing social events only. "Sometimes you get tired of fact that you are going to social situations; it always marks you as looking for someone." She recognizes that some people may view online resources negatively, but, "as time has gone by, there's less of a stigma in my view." Notably, this may refer to the years that these websites have been in existence, or the extended time of her own dating career. Lisa similarly has "no qualms about them. They are amazing resources." She has had mostly positive experiences with the *shadchanim* on SYAS, as she feels like they put in an appropriate effort in getting to

know people before suggesting matches. Hannah prefers this model to the direct

connection of frumster and related websites, but has had mixed reviews of the

matchmakers on SYAS. "*Shadchanim* can check [background] records…giving you a

wider ranger." Ultimately, however, the "*shadchanim* really don't know the people so

well, even if they check references."

 Over the course of the interview, the respondents also discussed how some of

their attitudes and expectations could impact the process of dating. One particularly

salient example was the soulmate versus work-it-out expectation. When discussing the

concept of *bashert* (the soulmate construct as described above) the five interviewees

again shared a range of perspectives. Lisa, the only one to embrace the soulmate

perspective, did refer to the multiple potential partners opinion, but rejected it. "I can't

think like that. I just like to think… [*bashert*] is the person you are supposed to meet."

When pressed further, she was consistent with her viewpoint, stating, "I haven't met my

bashert yet." At the same time, she holds back from consciously assuming that new

partners might be her *bashert*, as, she explained, "If I said to myself every time before I

went out, 'tonight you're going to meet your *bashert*,' I would absolutely freak myself

out." Interestingly, there is some sense that Lisa is missing out on the optimism often

associated with the soulmate perspective, as described by Franiuk et al. (2004). It is

possible that her lengthy dating history has tempered her hopefulness in the soulmate

concept, although she did endorse it as her understanding. The evolution of such a

perspective may be an area for future research.

 The other respondents all leaned to the work-it-out side, some even presenting a

cynical approach to the soulmate perspective. Sammy stated his opinion that, "there is no

way, I believe, that there is only one person that is perfect for one person… There is a match for every person, and multiple matches for every person." Rose also indicated a similar view, explaining, "I think that there are different levels of what could work…I think you can marry people at different levels." Hannah's view developed somewhat over time, from a soulmate perspective in her first stage of dating, to a wider perspective for now. "I used to think it was true, that people have one person made for them…Before, I thought that from the beginning you have a natural person that you are destined to be with." Since her divorce and re-entry into the dating world, however, she has reconsidered her view on the one ideal partner. Now, she reflected, "I don't know if I would agree with that. You could have multiple people and through time you become bashert." Saul also spoke about his understanding of *bashert* as a product of the effort to "develop a relationship with a person." Ultimately, however, he shared a rational commentary. "I think that you really can have no idea who your bashert is, so practically, it may have no bearing."

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The Shadchan Process

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Much of the interview included questions about the individual's experience with *shadchanim*. Once again, Sammy's perspective was somewhat unusual, as he denied any direct experience with *shadchanim*. This was based on his stated preference, as he explained, "I just never wanted to be set up. I always wanted to find someone on my own." Given his relatively young age at the time of the interview, it is possible that his attitude about this may have changed over time if he remained unmarried as time went on, although that information is not within the reach of the present study. Rose was more

ambivalent about the topic, explaining that she believes that "the guys that I am interested in wouldn't go to a *shadchan*." At the same time she had joined SYAS, noting that the involvement of the third party forces people to be "more honest, and there are more people on it." In general, however, she herself feels that the "concept is stupid… I feel that sometimes it is so wrong." In Rose's experience, there was often a communication gap between her and her *shadchanim* as they would make recommendations that were inappropriate. "Sometimes they push you for something you didn't even want. Then they say 'go a little bit beyond the comfort zone and it could be fine.'" Hannah similarly got the impression from SYAS suggestions that "they would send profiles just to try it out," rather than approaching it more thoughtfully.

The respondents all expressed some appreciation for certain elements in the *shidduch process* before sharing their criticism. Lisa reflected on her experience with a follow-up phone call from the *shadchan* early the next morning after one first date. "Really, I think [*shadchanim*] put themselves out there." Saul noted that many matchmakers seem to be generous in their efforts to set up single people, and he has received useful feedback along the way from various *shadchanim*. Hannah, the interviewee with the most experience with *shadchanim*, expressed appreciation for the structure of SYAS, as she had a steady rate of suggestions, and "it was getting at a wider range of people whom you wouldn't necessarily meet." After her divorce she went to one *shidduch* group, and was pleasantly surprised at the tactful way they responded to her divorce status, without any criticism or stigma apparent.

Nevertheless, each interviewee expressed significant dissatisfaction with specific experiences, and the process of matchmaking in general. While many members of the

greater Orthodox Jewish community may have a negative view of the single status, the implicit criticism of singles may be much more apparent from those who work directly with singles, i.e. *shadchanim*. Lisa shared her sense that "a lot of *shadchanim* have a kind of warped view of single people. Single people don't want to be single…But there's this perception, 'you're so weird. Why are you single?'" Lisa, like some of the other respondents, has also come across negative messages from *shadchanim* regarding her selection criteria. In particular, she noted that men are afforded much more latitude to have high expectations regarding their date's appearances, while she is not. Hannah also spoke at length about the double standard in dating where the woman may be branded materialistic or shallow if she indicates certain preferences of her partner's appearance, while the man is expected to do so. Furthermore, according to the women interviewed, a man is well within his rights to end a *shidduch* if he finds the woman unattractive. If Hannah, for example, would like to end a relationship with a man solely due to a lack of physical attraction, however, she would refrain from sharing her true feelings with the *shadchan*. "I don't think it's safe to be totally honest," Hannah explained. "If you turn down a guy, you may not necessarily give your true opinion of him because you don't want anything to impact you negatively in the future."

Several of the respondents also noted that *shadchanim* appear to come to conclusions based on very little data. Saul recalled one matchmaker who read his profile in which he wrote that he is "modern Orthodox and very careful about *halacha* (Jewish law)." In her phone call with him, she dismissed his comments, saying, "That is almost a paradox." Rose wishes *shadchanim* would look past the "what are you looking for" checklists, and actually "have a conversation with you, to see how you interact and speak

and then they could say 'I can think of someone for you.'" Hannah has had *shadchanim*

suggest dates merely after hearing that she is divorced or a *ba'al teshuva*, or they might

dismiss her out of hand when they learn that she didn't study in a seminary in Israel

before starting college. As Lisa stated, "They might hear one thing, and judge you on it."

It appears that for many singles, the quality of communication between them and their

shadchanim is generally poor. If *shadchanim* are interested in improving their craft, then

they might do well to increase tact and sensitivity, while reducing the air of criticism and

judgment that appears to be present in the matchmaking relationship. Additionally,

although the process of getting to know a single in more depth would certainly take more

time and energy, it may lead to more successful matches, or at the very least, a more

positive process of matchmaking in general.

Sense of Self

As time advances and the process of searching for a spouse continues without

marriage in sight, the experience can exact a toll on the individual. Each of the

interviewees was asked if and how they have experienced burnout over their dating

career. The term wasn't explicitly defined by the interviewer, and each of the respondents

shared their subjective experience. Saul, for example, experienced burnout in the past

after feeling overwhelmed by the sense of rejection along the way. He eventually pursued

psychotherapy, which helped him come to the conclusion that it's "best to just…put that

behind me, and…date someone else." For Sammy, having a relatively short dating career,

he spoke about the burnout of dating his current girlfriend too intensely. "I was thinking

that if this is going to be special, then maybe I shouldn't see her for a while – separate for

a week and a half or two weeks." Although the other respondents focused on burnout in the process of dating in general rather than dating one individual specifically, the concept of overdoing it was the same.

The respondents most commonly reported stepping away from the process when they were affected by burnout, some experiencing better results than others. Hannah once actively took a break from dating, though this was not helpful as a sense of hopelessness crept in that urged her to get back to dating. She did add that there are "natural breaks of two weeks or a month," and those serve to stave off burnout. Rose also has a built-in break from dating, as she has a summer job that takes her out of the dating scene for approximately 3 months. Nevertheless, she reports feeling burned out "twice a year at least." For her the experience emerges from an imbalance in the emotional investment in a relationship, and can lead to self-criticism. "You feel so old…You get so sick of it. If you liked a guy, you wonder 'why did it end?'" When Lisa is burned out, she tends to withdraw and, like Rose, questions herself. "Why is nothing happening? I don't get it. I've done everything I could do. How long will this last? When will it end?" Lisa actively rounds out other aspects of her life when she feels burned out from dating. This may include attending classes, or indulging in her interest in old movies. For Rose, burnout may last a week or more. To counteract the effects, and even prevent burnout, she similarly has to actively introduce enjoyment into her life. "You need to be with friends, enjoy things… [The process of dating] can be fun and interesting."

Although each interviewee maintains a set of strategies to help them cope with the frustrations of dating, they all described considerable anxiety, ranging from the mundane to the existential. One source of stress for Saul is the way his background will be

perceived in the dating world. He recalled one *shadchan* who inquired about how he observes the laws of *kashrut* at home, as his parents are not religious. He fears that some people misinterpret his circumstances "They might assume that you don't keep kosher. I am nervous about that… explaining how that works." Although he has been taught that it is ok to date more than one person at a time, he is unsure about his own comfort level with that option. "It has happened that I've been on a date and then someone suggests a second person. I'm very nervous about that." Hannah also touched on this topic as a source of anxiety. She generally chooses not to date more than one person at a time. "It could get very confusing. You don't want to form an attachment with one, and then worry if you're going to get caught with another person."

Hannah also spoke about worries about dating itself, with her prior divorce an added factor. After her divorce she feared that she would face greater stigma from *shadchanim*, which she had been happy to see wasn't the case. Nevertheless, Hannah worries a great deal about repeating her past mistakes. For her, two primary fears emerge: that of never getting married again, and that of ending up in another bad marriage. She also fears the potential added pain of being divorced twice. "Like the other people I go out with who are divorced… I'm aware much more of what could go wrong, and what could be possible."

The other respondents all shared common fears about never marrying. For some, like Sammy and Hannah, a key factor is the fear of never having children. Sammy added, "The longer I stay single, the more scared I will be that it's never going to happen." Sammy and Rose echoed Hannah in another way, as they shared the fear of "marrying the wrong person." As Rose put it, "Just because you're married does not mean that you are

happy." Lisa and others shared another worry of becoming complacent in her lifestyle. At the same time, many of the respondents worried what their future holds if they remain single. This is of particular concern as they perceive little position in the Orthodox Jewish community for single adults. Hannah remembers being part of a community when she was married, and notes this as another sense of loss as a single person. "I don't have a Rabbi or shul – to never have that experience worries me." She is also currently busy with a graduate program, and doesn't see a clear future after she completes the program. "What will I do with my time if I'm not married and I graduate from my Ph.D. program? Or if my friends get married and I am left – what am I going to do?" Lisa shared yet another layer of distress, as she grapples with her faith while enduring the frustrations of dating, year after year. "There's a lot of questioning yourself, questioning *HaShem* (God), and asking, I don't get it, I don't understand. Look at how far I came, and why would he do this to me?"

Although most of the interview focused on the struggles of being single, the interviewees also shared some of their thoughts of the positive elements. To some degree or another, all of the respondents developed some aspect of themselves due to the increased freedom and flexibility of being single. Examples included developing financial stability, education, social opportunities, and personal interests. Rose and Hannah both acknowledged that their pursuit of graduate study would likely be far curtailed, if not extinguished entirely, if they were married. Rose imagined that if she were married, "I never would have applied, done it, and gotten a Ph.D." Hannah actually began graduate school while she was married, but, she reflected, "I don't think that I could have had kids in graduate school." If Hannah remains single after graduate school,

she would likely take advantage of the increased flexibility to pursue post-doctorate

training. She highlighted a few other ways that she currently enjoys greater flexibility as

she socializes more, attends more *shiurim* (Judaic studies lectures), and travels for

Shabbat.

Saul expressed appreciation for the decreased financial burden while he remains

single. Sammy similarly highlighted the financial angle, as he has been able to build a

savings in anticipation of being married. As a single person, he has had the flexibility to

immerse himself in his work, and earn as much as possible, to plan for the future. Other

respondents focused on their ability to be spontaneous and enjoy themselves in ways they

believe would be difficult to do with a spouse and family obligations. "On a whim," Lisa

offered as an example, "if I want to see this film at such and such place, I'll go." She also

has developed other aspects of herself, as she has grown more confident with her social

abilities, and even runs singles events on occasion. Rose also embraced other

opportunities such as her summer jobs that have helped her grow in different ways. "I've

met so many different types of people. I've learned a lot, and gotten to know myself

better."

Limitations of Present Study

Although the data as reported above did provide some interesting and meaningful

findings, the present study included some significant limitations that could be addressed

in future research. As this was an exploratory study, only five interviews were conducted.

As diverse as these five were, they do not represent an adequately large sample to truly

capture the range of experiences in the sizable, heterogeneous Orthodox Jewish singles

population. Further sampling limitations include age, religious identity, and type/location of residence. In the present study, the oldest respondent was 28; data collected may not be representative of older singles. Additionally, all of the respondents self-identified as modern Orthodox, while no other groups were represented. Finally, the present study only included singles who lived in singles communities in New York City. Different findings may emerge from future studies that include single men and women who live with their families of origin, or who live in less singles-oriented communities.

The design of the present study attempted to capture the culture of dating and single life by interviewing singles themselves. As stated above, however, this issue impacts, and is impacted by, all members of the community. The present study is additionally limited, therefore, as it did not gather information from other relevant community members, including parents, Rabbis, and/or *shadchanim*. This is another area ripe for future research. One further design limitation was the nature of the interviews as qualitative instead of quantitative. While the present study was able to capture the experience of each respondent in depth, this necessitated a smaller sample size, thereby limiting the breadth of coverage. A future study that is designed quantitatively could report greater breadth from a large sample size. A final design limitation is the identity of the interviewer. The author of the present study, a married Orthodox Jewish male, conducted all interviews himself. While none of the respondents explicitly indicated that they were affected by the author's identity positively or negatively, it is possible that these and other aspects of the interviewer's identity impacted the reports of the five interviewees. Although such an impact may be difficult to accurately monitor in future studies, the identity of the interviewer should be considered as a potentially confounding

variable. In spite of these limitations, however, the promising nature of this study provides encouragement and shows the need for further studies like this one.

Concluding Recommendations

For Mental Health Professionals

Failure to achieve an expected milestone is an understandable source of stress. Part of the goal of the present study was to show how remaining unmarried as a young adult represents a unique cultural stress in the Orthodox Jewish community. Psychologists and other mental health professionals should strive to provide culturally competent treatment. To that end, studies such as this one are a valuable resource to better understand the target population. Mental health practitioners can attend to the fact that the desire to marry in this group represents not only a personal value, but a communal one as well. The resultant pressure can add to an internal sense of failure and sense of isolation from the successful members of the community. High levels of stress around dating in this context can lead to instances of depression and/or anxiety, i.e. "mating anxiety" as described by Levitz (1992). Therapists may discover symptoms of mating anxiety even in children and adolescents who are not yet dating themselves but are affected by the pressures inherent in the system.

Mental health professionals can use their refined awareness to better serve clients who are struggling with the stresses of dating. Clients may include singles themselves, or other community members who are concerned for someone close to them, i.e. a parent's concern for single offspring. Therapy with an unmarried individual can include work to help the client move from isolation to integration, be it in their family, social network, or

in the larger communal framework. Practitioners can also utilize skills-oriented

approaches specifically targeting the dating experience. For some singles, this may mean

looking at an individual's online dating profile and helping the client best present him or

herself through that medium. Additionally, in some cases, therapists may benefit from

collaborating with a *shadchan* who already is working with the client. Similar to the

behavioral health approach of integrating services with a primary care provider, therapists

could work with *shadchanim*, the professionals already in place working with mutual

clients. All practitioners are in a position to improve their clinical interactions, but some

may be in a unique position to utilize multiple aspects of their identities. A clinical

psychologist who is also a member of the Orthodox Jewish community, for example,

could have access to both the religious and psychological components of this complex

picture. Someone in this position could potentially serve to educate community leaders

such as Rabbis or *shadchanim* and provide sensitivity training on matters relating to

singles. Finally, mental health practitioners could benefit from recognizing the resilience

factors that exist on individual and communal levels, e.g. in singles communities, and

help their clients recognize and develop their personal areas of strength.

For the Individual

At several points throughout the various interviews, the respondents indicated that

they wished that they would be seen as more than just their marital status. This

perspective seems to be important, not only for the community at large, but also for the

single men and women themselves. When the pursuit of a spouse becomes the primary

focus, burnout follows. All of the interviewees noted that they felt most positive when

they were developing other aspects of themselves. In this case, the goal is to strike a balance as one divides limited energy between dating and other pursuits. A balanced approach to being single also speaks to tolerating the tension between two apparently conflicting ideas: accepting one's current single status, and working to change that status. While the latter includes accessing all of the wide range of resources in place to facilitate dating, the former idea frees one to develop one's self in other areas. For some men and women, these other areas may include education, travel, social opportunities, hobbies, and the like.

In the transition into adulthood, many people see marriage as a goal that defines success if achieved, and failure if not. Single individuals may benefit from restructuring their thoughts about marriage and changing their focus from this all-or-nothing thinking. Instead, singles can identify the values that they look forward to in married life, and work to embrace those values even while single. For example, many of the respondents shared their thoughts that a true sense of community will evade them until they marry. The perception exists that Rabbis are only accessible to married congregants, and single men and women can only find their place in "artificial" singles communities. Although much of the responsibility for change falls on the greater community, single men and women can also take charge of their own fate. "Make for yourself a Rabbi," says Joshua ben Prachya (Avot, 1:6), instructing each Jew – man or woman, single or married – to play an active role in developing a relationship with a spiritual and practical guide. If a relationship with a community Rabbi is valuable, single men and women can include it in their lives. The value-oriented thought process can even be drawn to the matter of children. Rather than viewing success as a binary variable, i.e. being a parent or not,

singles can identify the relevant value and apply it to their current lives. Regarding

parenting, the value may be caring for the child and sharing one's life experiences. To

that end, a single man or woman can apply those values towards teaching, or volunteering

for a program like Big Brothers Big Sisters. Once again, by accepting one's present status

to a certain extent, and shifting the focus from merely searching for a spouse, one can

incorporate meaningful experiences, and live a valuable life.

Even while accepting the status quo, most single men and women do want to

change their status. To that end we can take a cue from the five interviewees in the

present study. There exists a wide range of options for men and women who are looking

for a spouse, including but not limited to websites, *shadchanim* and singles events. These

various options exist to best serve the diversity as found in this sub-population. As we see

even from a sample of five, there are some people who find online dating absurd, while

others find it the ideal way to connect. The same can be said of the other forms as well.

Ultimately each individual should reflect on what works best for him or her and utilize

the resources available.

For the Community

As stated in the introduction, the experience of singles should be considered a

relevant concern for all members of the Orthodox Jewish community. Given the

widespread nature of this phenomenon, it is reasonable to consider that the overwhelming

majority of community members are closely connected to at least one unmarried

individual, be it through family or friendship. To that end, all Orthodox Jews could

benefit from an improved outlook on how to relate to singles. Just as singles need to

strike a balance between accepting the status quo and working to change that status, the married population must also be conscious of both of those facets. Facilitating change appears to be a concept already in place, with the larger community offering singles events, for example, and many people and organizations offering services as *shadchanim*. Based on the interviews collected in the present research, it seems that these efforts are largely appreciated. The interviews collected in the present study, however, add some layers of feedback that reflect the diversity in the singles community.

The range of social ease experienced by daters is one example of diversity in this population. Some people thrive on the pressure of speed dating, or on singles events focused solely on mixing with the goal of finding a date. Others crave the comfort and guidance of an active *shadchan* to help them through the stressful process of dating. Others still may vacillate between both extremes, perhaps as a function of time or life experience. A similar diversity exists even within the sub-sample of singles who utilize the service of a *shadchan*. Some, like Rose, perceive the value of a third-party facilitator as promoting honesty prior to dating. After the introduction, however, she expects the *shadchan* to leave the two parties to continue on their own. Others, like Saul and Hannah, expect a more hands-on approach, as *shadchanim* can help them get on a positive track before backing off. *Shadchanim* themselves could benefit from assessing the expectations early on and establishing a collaborative relationship with their clients, to best serve the needs of a heterogeneous group. Ultimately, all members of the community need to respect that there is no panacea to this complex phenomenon.

Outside of offering a range of supportive measures to facilitate changing single status to married, married members of the community could benefit from strengthening

their acceptance of singles on various levels. Critics may respond that acceptance implies "giving up the fight" and that this defeatist attitude is unhealthy. Based on the argument above, however, the response is straightforward. Acceptance of the status quo is an idea that can be held simultaneously with the idea of changing. Furthermore, by spending more time and energy accepting the current circumstances, the struggle to change can be lessened and some of the pain and pressure involved can be reduced as well. It is unfortunately rather easy in the Orthodox Jewish framework for singles to be viewed as second-class citizens, as they represent a failure to achieve a basic goal. This attitude, however, whether communicated explicitly or implicitly, leads to the feelings of alienation, rejection, isolation, shame, and/or depression that are experienced by countless individuals. In a sense, the search for a spouse can represent a double whammy, as the individual struggles with the frustrations of dating, and the frustrations of the community. Thus, the community could learn to better appreciate the challenge of dating, and not blame the man or woman for not yet finding his or her mate.

For the interviewees in the present study, acceptance also means that married individuals can look at a person who isn't married, and see beyond the single status. Just as singles are encouraged to develop themselves beyond the dating routine, so to the community can learn to look beyond the experience of dating only. When members of the community interact with their friends and family in the dating world, it is critically important to remember that dating represents but one aspect of their lives. By showing interest in these other aspects, the married population can communicate a new message of acceptance that can strengthen relationships, build connections, and develop mutually beneficial supports among the various members of the community.

A final component is the understanding that some single men and women will never marry. Although this may be the most difficult idea to accept, it is an important element in this complex phenomenon. Especially in light of the religious attitudes about marriage as described in the introduction, remaining single throughout one's life represents an undesirable outcome. Nevertheless, there is a value to having a figurative space for singles in the larger Orthodox Jewish community. At present, the overwhelming message from the community is that singles have to change their status one way or another. For the majority of singles who actively date and remain hopeful of finding their mates, this is a useful message. Nevertheless, there exists a growing number of singles who themselves are coming to the conclusion that they will never marry. If the message from the community remains unchanged, the growing population of permanent singles may grow increasingly disillusioned, and may reject the community entirely. Change will arise once there is a valued position for never-married members of the Orthodox Jewish community. Although the precise method is unclear, community members and leaders must, at the very least, begin to ask the question of how this goal is to be achieved.

It has been the hope of the present study to shed greater light on the unique and complex phenomenon of the singles experience in the Orthodox Jewish community. Through the review of literature, psychological and religious, as well as through analyses of the five in-depth interviews of a small but diverse sample, a few key ideas emerged. While each reader may take something different from the chapters, the final message is one of encouraging respect, in this case for the singles, but extending to all individuals who fall somewhere outside of the mainstream. Increasing such mutual respect can benefit us all.

Postscript

Between the time of the interviews and the time of publication, only Rose is known to have married. Hannah's status is unknown, and the other three interviewees remain unmarried.

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APPENDIX A

Semi-structured interview:

Pre-interview warmup: Currently in relationship? Tell me a little about it/last

relationship.

+ Intro/Overview of interview

Alright, let's begin.

History

    1) How old were you when you started dating?

    2) Since you first began dating, how many people have you dated?

Shadchan Experience

    3) Different people find dates in different ways. Some people prefer to meet other

       singles directly and others prefer to use a *shadchan*. I know that recently, more

       and more single men and women use Internet matchmaking sites as a resource.

         a. How do you go about finding potential dates?

         b. What methods do you find most comfortable for you?

             i. Why?

         c. What do you find to be least comfortable for you?

             i. Why?

If only uses friend/peer as informal shadchan, continue here:

"I'm going to ask the following questions, considering your friends who set you up as

informal *shadchanim*"

If uses formal shadchan, continue here:

4) Can you tell me about any experiences you may have had with *shadchanim* who do not share your values?

5) What do you think about the quality of communication between you and your *shadchan*(*im*)?

6) Do *shadchanim* generally show you a picture and/or describe the physical appearance of the individual they are suggesting?

   a. Do you feel comfortable asking for it, if it is not offered initially?

   b. How do you feel in general about the way that the issue of physical appearance is handled in the *shidduch* process?

7) How does your *shadchan*'s own identity impact the process of *shadchanut* (e.g. age, single vs. married, *hashkafa*, personal dating experience etc.)

8) Have you found that there are questions that *shadchanim* are not asking that they should be asking about, or looking into.

   a. What are they?

9) Have you ever been asked irrelevant questions in the process of background gathering for you or for someone you know?

   a. How about questions that you found offensive?

   b. (If yes) What about those questions did you find irrelevant or offensive?

   c. How did/would you respond to such a question?

   d. Why do you think the *shadchan* asked those questions?

If no shadchanut experience, continue here:

Dating Standards

I'd like to hear about some of your personal standards in dating:

10) Do you have specific criteria that you are looking for in a man/ woman?

    a.   What are those criteria?

11) What information do you ask about a man/woman before you date him/her?

12) How do you feel about dating more than one person at a time?

13) What is an acceptable age range for your potential dates?

    a.   Do you consider this age range absolute, or does it depend on the person and the circumstances?

14) What do you think is an ideal age by which a woman/man should be married?

15) …A man/woman?

16) How have your views changed over time in terms of who you would potentially date? (e.g. *gerim/sfaradim…*)

17) How have your expectations changed over time regarding what is important for you in a man/woman? (e.g. *hashkafa*, appearance, age, etc.)

18) Where do you usually go on a first date?

19) When dating, to what extent do you represent yourself accurately?

20) To what extent have you felt that the people you date represent themselves accurately?

21) With regards to physical contact before marriage, I've heard of a wide range of practice, from people who are sexually active, to people who completely abstain, to everything in between. When your relationships develop, what are your personal standards regarding physical contact?

    a.   (if yes) What other ways do you use to express intimacy?

    b.   (if no) In what ways do you express intimacy in your relationships?

22) What are some reasons that you might end a relationship?

Gender Differences

23) In your experience, what are the differences between how men and women

approach dating?

Burnout

24) Have you ever felt burned out from dating? And, if so, what do you do about it?

Culture/Terminology

25) How do you feel about the phrase "singles crisis/*shidduch* crisis?"

26) How do you understand the term "*bashert*?"

Sources of Pressure/ Goals vs. Values

27) Some people have told me that they experience a lot of pressure to get married,

while others have told me that they approach dating without feeling pressured.

What has your experience been like in that respect?

28) Why do *you* want to get married?

29) Are there any reasons why you would not want to be married?

30) How do these together affect your dating experience?

Let's come back to the beginning of your experience…

Feelings of preparedness/education

31) Did your social/cultural background encourage certain forms of dating?

32) Did you find that dating system successful or flawed?

33) How did your social/cultural upbringing prepare you for dating?

34) What books have you read or lectures, or workshops have you attended on the

topic of dating?

      a.   What did you learn from these sources?

Let's go on to some other questions.

Singles Events

    35) What has been your experience of singles events that you have attended?

        a.   What do you think can be done to improve singles events, and make them more positive for single men and women?

    36) What is considered a "successful" outcome for a singles event for you?

    37) What do you enjoy about singles events?

    38) What do you dislike?

    39) What do you think about the fact that some events are open to all members of the community including married people as well as single people?

Now I'd like to ask you some questions about your experience of your environment.

Integration in Community

    40) From the time that you started dating until today, where have you lived?

        a.   Were there other single men and women living nearby?

        b.   Were there married couples of your age living nearby?

    41) How would you describe the culture of your singles community?

    42) If you had the power to change things about how the community views and interacts with singles, what would you change?

    43) What do you think about the level of attention given by the community to the experience of singles? (Too much? Too little? Enough?)

    44) What do you think about the quality of the communities involvement?

Just to let you know, we're coming to the end of our interview.

Positive aspects

45) Coming back to your personal experience, I have heard some people say that they experience single life as a positive thing in that they can more fully develop themselves as individuals through career, travel, and development of hobbies. What has been your experience regarding the positive side of being single?

Final question

46) Finally, when you think back on what you shared with me today, do you think that your perspective is unique, or do others share your views on the current state of dating? → How do you know?