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FINDING THE *BASHERT*: WHY IS IT SO DIFFICULT TO HEAR THE *BAS KOL*?

The *Gemara* (*Moed Katan* 18b) quotes Rav Yehuda in the name of Shmuel that “Every day a *bas kol* proclaims that the daughter of so and so [is the match] for so and so.”¹ One would therefore imagine that singles need only to sit back and wait for a *bas kol* to guide them to their *bashert* (intended). If only it were so! Instead, countless *frum* singles are frustrated in their sincere efforts at finding a *shidduch*. There are, undoubtedly, many sociological factors, some affecting the Orthodox community at large, while others impact only specific subgroups, that can make the *shidduch* process more difficult than it needs to be - but those issues are beyond the scope of this article. Often, however, there are individual emotional issues that make the process especially arduous for particular individuals. This article will focus on some of the more common emotional issues that I have encountered in working with singles who have asked for help in the *shidduch* process.

I will explain how certain personality characteristics can severely hinder the *shidduch* process, and how early childhood experiences contribute to the development of these personality characteristics.

The *Bas Kol*

I have often wondered what purpose the above mentioned *bas kol* serves if no one can hear it. In most cases where *chazal* discuss a *bas kol*, those who were in need of the information heard it (e.g., *Rashi, Bereishis* 38:26; *Berochos*, 3a), while this *bas kol* seems to be heard by no one.²

¹ הגרסא המוכרת יותר למדרש זה (סוטה ב.) קובעת כי "ארבעים יום קודם יצירת הולד בת קול יוצאת ואומרת בת פלוני לפלוני". רבינו חננאל במועד קטן (יח:) משלב את שתי הגרסאות ("מ' יום קודם יצירת הולד, בכל יום בת קול יוצאת ומכרזת..."). ונראה שהוא סובר כי בתחילה יוצאת הבת-קול 40 יום לפני יצירת הוולד, ולאחר-מכן היא חוזרת ומושמעת מדי יום ביומו.

² (אח"כ ראיתי שוהרש משה, בויקרא א:א, מעלה שאלה זו). רש"י (מכתב יד) במועד קטן (יח:) אומר כי הבת-קול נשמעת "בישיבה של מעלה". אם כן, זו בת-קול מיוחדת במאוד (השווה עם רש"י, דברים כו:טז). יש לציין כי הרמב"ם באיגרותיו (מובא ב*קובץ מאמרים* לרבי אלחנן וסרמן, עמ' מ-מא) טוען כי דברי רב יהודה אודות הבת-קול אינם על פי ההלכה. רבי אלחנן מסביר את הרמב"ם: "דנשואי אשה הן בכלל המצות והרשות נתונה לאדם לישא אשה או שלא לישא כלל". למעשה, קיימות דעות שונות בקרב הראשונים לגבי המידה בה שידוכים נקבעו מראש (כפי שמרומז על פי הרעיון של בת-קול) ועד כמה תלוי הדבר בהשתדלותו של האדם עצמו. (ראה ספר *שידוכים ונישואין*, עמ' 275, שם מופיע סיכום של אותן דעות שונות). כמו-כן, אנשים רבים סבורים כי המושג של "בת-קול/כאשרט" קיים רק בנוגע לשידוכים. למען האמת, באותם מקומות בגמרא בהם מובא עניין הבת-קול בנוגע לשידוכים (לדוגמא, מועד קטן יח:), מובא גם אודות בת-קול הגוזרת מראש את פרנסתו של אדם.

After being bothered by this question for many years, I found that Rav Wolbe quotes the *Chazon Ish* on this topic. The *Chazon Ish* stated that “when a person meets the young lady he is considering for his *shidduch* and his heart tends to the positive, this is considered hearing the *bas kol*.”³ This implies that it is imperative for singles to (1) be “tuned in” to their feelings so that they can hear the *bas kol* (i.e., the feelings in their hearts) and (2) they need to respect those feelings so that this *bas kol* can help them make a decision. Those who never learned to identify their various feelings or never felt that their feelings were important and deserving of serious consideration may find that they are unable to tune in to this channel or will find it blocked by “static.” The need to make this decision will fill them with unbearable anxiety or even paralyze them with fear. They will find themselves plagued by such questions as, “How can I be sure?” or “Maybe the next girl I meet will be better?” and the like.

Let us now examine some of the common emotional impediments that some singles face in their sincere efforts to finding their *bashert* and my understanding of the developmental roots of these problems.

Is It Necessary to Understand the Historical Causes?

Many people react negatively to the idea of trying to understand the historical causes for emotional difficulties. Some are concerned that this will minimize the person’s sense of personal responsibility. It is interesting to note that few people have this concern when it comes to objective factors that can inhibit a person’s range of choices at any given moment. For example, if a recent *ba'al teshuva* became upset with himself for not being as proficient in his religious observance as others who are *frum* from birth; would anyone object to reassuring him by pointing out that, because of his history, it is understandable that this is more difficult for him than for others? Of course not! If the reasons for a person’s difficulties are emotional in nature, however, people become concerned that giving recognition to these reasons will somehow undermine his sense of responsibility.⁴

Others question whether there is any need to spend so much time and emotional energy digging up the past when all they want to do is to solve their current problems. They suggest that, perhaps, they only need to focus on identifying the troublesome patterns and then try to change them.

This trend of seeking short-term solutions to emotional difficulties is found even among many mental health professionals. In recent years, the trend in the field of psychotherapy has been toward Cognitive-Behavior Therapy (CBT), which focuses only

³ עלי שור, כרך א, עמ' שי"ג – שמעתי בשם החזון איש נ"ע שבגשת אדם לשידוך ולבו נוטה לחיוב וזהו שמיעת ההכרזה. (וכן ראה מעשה איש, כרך א, עמ' רי"ב – "הרגשות המה שלוחי דרחמנא להצביע על מה שהועידו לו מן השמים"). בדומה לכך, מביא רבי וולבה את דברי רבי אליהו דסלר, בהקשר שונה, לפיהם תחושותיו של אדם כמוהם כשמיעת בת-קול. רבי דסלר (מכתב מאליהו, כרך ד, עמ' 289) מביא גם את דברי הבעש"ט, כי אותה בת-קול ש"אחר" שמע, המכריזה שהוא לא יזכה לחלק בעולם הבא (ירושלמי, חגיגה, ב.), היתה בעצם קולו של התת-מודע שלו עצמו "בגלל שבעומק לבו לא רצה אחר לעשות תשובה." (ראה גם מכתב מאליהו, כרך ה, עמ' 222-220 ועמ' 248).

⁴ I have addressed this issue at length elsewhere, based on Rav Dessler’s concept of *nekudas ha'bechira*. See, Benzion Sorotzkin. “*Bechira*: How Free is Free Will?” *The Jewish Observer*, April, 1996, 17-21.

on challenging the faulty beliefs and attitudes underlying many emotional difficulties. As a result, many people believe that it is no longer important to uncover or discuss the original historical causes of these problems. There is much evidence, however, that it is necessary to understand the developmental roots of emotional difficulties in order to achieve durable change even when using CBT.⁵

Only by fully understanding how problems, with all their emotional nuances, developed can a person hope to discover the most effective means to overcoming his problems. This is what I call “fighting smarter, not harder.”

I often relate how I was once trying to nail a board for a succah onto a brick wall. I knew enough to use a cement nail but no matter how hard I hit the nail it wouldn't penetrate the cement. Finally, a neighbor, who happened to be a carpenter, happened by and observed my plight. Instead of spending the time explaining what I was doing wrong, he just knocked in the few nails I needed with minimal force. I watched him closely and after he left I tried it again, doing exactly what he did. Again it wouldn't penetrate at all. It was obvious to me that it wasn't a lack of trying hard enough that was causing the problem. I was doing something wrong. If this were an important skill for me to learn, I would have to find an expert to observe me and help me figure out what exactly I was doing wrong. I'd have to try smarter not harder!

Another important reason for a person to understand the historical reasons for his difficulties is in order to counteract the feelings of inborn defectiveness and self-blaming that often paralyze those who struggle unsuccessfully over a long period of time to overcome a problem⁶ (e.g., dating countless girls in a futile attempt to find a *shidduch*).

What are some of the common impediments faced by many of those involved in the *shidduch* process and what are the underlying causes of these difficulties?

LACK OF DIRECTION

Many would-be *shadchonim* feel stymied and frustrated when they ask a *bochur* what type of girl he's looking for and it becomes clear to them that he really isn't sure what he's looking for.⁷ It's difficult to suggest a *shidduch* for someone who doesn't even know what he wants. Even more troubling than these problems with the *shadchen* is that the person himself can't feel comfortable with deciding on a *shidduch* if he's not sure what he's looking for.

⁵ See D. Weston, C. M. Novotny, & H. Thompson-Brenner. “The Empirical Status of Empirically Supported Psychotherapies: Assumptions, Findings, and Reporting in Controlled Clinical Trials.” *Psychological Bulletin* 130 (2004): 631-663. Weston cites compelling evidence, that for many, if not most, typical clinical situations, short-term therapies, such as CBT, produce only short-term gains. See also my article “Chemical Imbalance or Problems in Living?”

⁶ J. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.

⁷ I write mostly from the masculine perspective only because I usually work with young men. Most of what I will be writing, however, applies equally to females.

Rav Pam once related in a Parshas Chayei Sorah drosha on the topic of shidduchim that bochurim who are starting to date often ask him what type of girl they should look for. Rav Pam chuckled as he related his response: "Imagine that you met me at the Port Authority and, seeing so many buses, you ask me 'Which is a good bus for me to take?' You first have to decide where you want to go, and then you will know which bus to take. You first have to decide where you are heading in life and then you look for a girl who shares your goals and aspirations."

Why is it so difficult for some young men to know what they are looking for in life, whether it's in their spiritual aspirations, academic direction, vocational future or choice of spouse? There are many possible reasons for this. However, I will focus on a few that I found to be most common.

Deficient Sense of Self

As elaborated upon in my opening comments regarding the *bas kol*, someone who doesn't take his own feelings seriously will be missing one of the basic tools necessary for making important decisions. This is especially true regarding those decisions relating to matters of the heart.⁸ He will find it nearly impossible to even **relate** to the question, "How do you **feel** about that?" to say nothing about actually being able to answer such a question. If he dates a girl and discovers that he doesn't particularly like her but he can't find anything specifically wrong with her, he may feel incapable of saying "no." "What will I tell the *shadchan*?" he will lament. The thought that he is entitled to say no simply because he is not comfortable enough with this specific girl is foreign to him. His anxiety may compel him to embark on a frantic round of advice seeking. However, when advice is not integrated with a person's own thoughts and feelings, the person most often doesn't feel comfortable with the advice. This route, therefore, rarely provides the reassurance he is seeking.⁹

Early childhood experiences that often result in an underdeveloped sense of self include the following:

Being treated like an object rather than as a subject. Some parents "objectify" their children, i.e., they relate to them as if they were objects without an emotional life rather than as people. Francis Broucek¹⁰ relates that when a child tries to get his mother to treat him as a subject, yet she objectifies him, he will experience deep shame "as a response to having [his] status as a subject ignored, disregarded, denied, or negated [p. 8]." He recounts the following illustration:

⁸ ראה מהרי"ק, *שורש קס"ג*, הפוסק כי בן אינו חייב לשמוע בקול הוריו כאשר מדובר בשאלה מי עליו לשאת לאישה. אחת הסיבות לכך היא, שחז"ל הקפידו על כך שהאדם יבחר אישה בהתאם לרצונותיו, כדי שתמצא חן בעיניו. (ראה *קובץ תשובות* לרבי י.ש. אלישיב, כרך ג, סימן קס"ג, הפוסק שהסיבות אותן מביא מהרי"ק נכונות גם לגבי נשים).

⁹ See more on this below, under "The Frantic Search for an Outside Expert."

¹⁰ *Shame and the Self*. New York: Guilford, 1991.

A small child approaches his mother excitedly wanting to tell her about something he has just experienced. Mother looks at him and says with a frown, "Your shirttail is hanging out" and proceeds to tuck him in before attending to his communication.... To be continually objectified by a [parent] is to have one's very sense of self negated.... (p. 47)

For parents who relate to their children as objects, how their children behave is of crucial importance while how they feel is totally insignificant. These parents are often overly critical, since they are mostly focused on correcting their child's behavior with little concern for the emotional cost of such interventions. They seem to be oblivious to the fact that how their children feel will sooner or later have an impact on how they behave. Indeed, even when the behavior of the children begins to deteriorate the parents are often unable to see the connection between their past treatment of the child and his current difficulties.

The cornerstone of Torah *chinuch* - *chanoch la'naar al pi darko*¹¹ - treating each child as an individual, is the antithesis of this attitude. While everyone agrees in principle that children should be related to as individuals, in practice it is the exception rather than the rule. All too often, children are treated as objects that require direction and improvement with little regard for their emotional life. If this wasn't the case then the following scenarios wouldn't be as common as they unfortunately are:

- *A father forces his son, who dropped out of yeshiva, to submit to a daily one hour seder with a chavrusa, by making his son's much desired driving lessons conditional on maintaining this learning schedule. I find it troubling that most people to whom I tell this story agree with the father's course of action. To believe that forcing a child to do something he so strongly objects to will lead to a positive outcome, requires one to be oblivious to a child's emotional life.¹²*
- *A young man once related to me how his relationship with his mother had deteriorated to the point where they hadn't spoken to each other for months. Yet his father became outraged when he heard that he wasn't planning on sending his mother a Mother's Day card. This demonstrates both how parents can emphasize form over substance and insensitivity to a child's emotions.*

¹¹ ראה הגאון מווילנא, משלי (כב:), ובעלי שור כרך א, עמ' רס"ב-רס"ג.

¹² In a conversation I had with Maran Harav Michal Yehuda Lefkowitz on 20 Sivan 5767, he told me that anyone who believes that there was some useful purpose to what this father did "doesn't understand very much about *chinuch*" ("אינו מבין כלל בהיגיון").

I can anticipate some readers' objections based on the *chazal* (*Nazir* 23b), "*metoch sh'lo lishmah ba lishmah*" (if one does something because of extrinsic motivations, he will eventually acquire the intrinsic motivation). It is commonly believed that this is an automatic and guaranteed process without a downside. However, this is not the case as Rav Chaim Freidlander makes clear - - "לימד החינוך יסוד גדול בעבודת האדם - המעשה החיצוני משפיע על הפנימיות. ואולם זה ברור ופשוט שכאשר האדם אינו מזדהה עם המעשה החיצוני, אז אין שום יכולת השפעה פנימית לאותו מעשה" (*שפתי חיים*, מועדים ב, עמ' שמ"ו). (This issue is also addressed later in the "Prevention" section and discussed at length in my article on "Rewards and Competition").

- *Yisroel*¹³ was a 7th grader in a yeshiva that had two levels for each grade. He was very bright and had always been in the “Aleph” class. However, in the past two years, as a result of family turmoil, he had lost his motivation to learn. The 8th grade “Aleph” class Rabbi was a talmid chochom who was very aloof from the students. The “Bais” class Rabbi, in contrast, was not as great a talmid chochom but was much warmer and more involved with his students. He was known for his ability to interest his students in learning. Yisroel wanted to go to the “Bais” class, since he was certain that he would do much better there. His father, however, insisted that he continue in the “Aleph” class. “Clearly,” he told me, “the “Aleph” class is a higher level class than the “Bais” class.” He couldn’t fathom how anyone could suggest that it would be better for his son to go to a lower level grade. I tried to explain that considering his son’s emotional state, he would probably do much better in the “Bais” class. He was incapable of comprehending how a lower level class could ever be better than a higher level one. In his mind, something that is objectively better has to be better for everyone. There is no room for subjectivity.

Parents who emphasize appearance (*chitzonious*) over substance. Some children grow up in homes where the emphasis is on impressing others rather than doing things because of their intrinsic value. Even spiritual acts are done for superficial reasons. In these homes, the question always is, “What will others say?” “What will others think?” The reason not to do something is not because of its inherent inappropriateness but rather because it may harm *shidduch* prospects!

One patient related that when his parents’ frequent fights broke out in his house, their first concern was to close the windows so that the neighbors wouldn’t hear. This seemed to concern them much more than the impact of the chronic discord on their children!

This over-emphasis on appearance can affect everything a child does. He will find it difficult to enjoy activities for their own sake. Rather he’ll only enjoy the public relations benefits that may ensue. The overemphasis on the approval of others obviously negates the development of a sense of self.

Someone who grew up in this type of environment will often judge compatibility based on very superficial criteria. An extreme example was someone who asked a girl on a date if she likes his new tie. She responded that she liked the one he wore on the previous date better. This caused him much anxiety. After all, if they don’t have the same tastes how will they get along? Another young lady who was concerned that her strong opinions would cause strife in her marriage was told by her parents to only date boys with no opinions.

¹³ All names and stories have been altered to protect confidentiality.

In contrast, Rav Moshe Soloveichik¹⁴ stressed that as long as a proposed couple were capable of an open and mature discussion of their differences, then these differences do not necessarily signify that it isn't a good match.¹⁵

The Pressure to Provide Parents with *Nachas*

Many children in our community grow up with the idea that their main purpose in life is to bring their parents *nachas*, rather than to be successful, to serve *Hashem* etc. To them, the problem with doing something wrong is not because of its inherent wrongness, i.e., it negates the *rotzon Hashem*. No! The main issue is that it will aggravate and disappoint their parents. In fact, that is the most common *brocho* that people give to a *bar mitzvoh bochur* – that he bring *nachas* to his parents.

What's wrong with a child trying to bring *nachas* to his parents? Don't they want what's best for him? From a *hashkofo* perspective there is serious problem with parents feeling that their child's purpose in life is to bring them *nachas*.¹⁶ Rabbi Yissocher Frand recounts the following story that he heard from Rav Moshe Shapiro.¹⁷

A man came to visit his nephew in Yerushalayim. This nephew was a young talmid chochom with a large family. The uncle was impressed with how attentive and patient his nephew was with all the children. "How will your children ever repay you for what you have done for them?" asked the uncle. "By giving me a measure of immortality, by carrying my name forward" answered the nephew. Later the nephew asked the Brisker Rov what he thought about the question and his response. The Brisker Rov shook his head in disapproval. "The answer you gave is close to apikorsus. Children have nothing to do with repayment. They are not an investment for future nachas. You can daven for nachas, just like you daven for health and prosperity, but that is not why you have children. Children are about giving. It's the way Hashem wants us to emulate His ways."

Growing up with the idea that your main purpose in life is to bring your parents *nachas* is certainly not conducive to developing a sense of self. And a deficient sense of self is detrimental to the task of decision making.

Someone who always focused on doing things to please and to impress others (in this case his parents) will find it difficult to suddenly focus on what type of girl he's looking for, and with which girl he thinks he would be happy with. He never realized that his personal opinions and happiness were even important! When a mother, who relentlessly criticizes her son, proclaims "no girl is good enough for my son," she can

¹⁴ *והאיש משה*, עמ' רט"ז - ... הבחינו בפגישות שיש ביניהם חילוקי דעות בכמה נושאים, ואינם מגיעים לדעת משותפת ולהסכמה... אין זה סיבה למנוע את השידוך... רק פרט אחד יש לברר היטב, אם יש באפשרותם להדבר וללבן נושאים ביחד.
¹⁵ ראה *מהר"ל*, (*חידושי אגדות, שבת* כ"ג), שם הוא קובע כי גבולות ברורים של הבדלים מביאים לידי שלום ("זהו השלום כאשר יש הבדל בין הדברים"). הוא אף מדגיש שגם כאשר שני אנשים אוהבים זה את זה, עדיין הם ישמרו על זהותם הנבדלת ("ואינו דומה אל שני [אוהבים] אע"ג שהם דביקים ומתחברים זה לזה, יש לכל אחד ואחד מציאות מפני עצמו").

¹⁶ See also *Alei Shur*, Vol. 1, p. 255, where he emphasizes that parents have a responsibility to the children rather than the reverse.

¹⁷ Rabbi Yissocher Frand, *Listen to your Messages*. NY: Mesorah, 1999 (pp. 105-106).

only mean; “No girl is good enough to be my daughter-in-law.” Rabbi Ephraim Wachsman¹⁸ relates that the Satmar *Rav zt”l* once said “Since I came to America, I barely know anyone who did a *shidduch* for the sake of his children.” *Shidduchim* have become a means for the parents to proclaim their social status.

DIFFICULTY COMMITTING

Difficulty committing is the most popular explanation to the phenomenon of older singles. In my experience, this problem doesn’t even exist as an independent factor. Rather, it is a result of other emotional deficits, conflicts and concerns. (Many of these conflicts and concerns are subconscious).

One major deficit is the one mentioned above, namely an underdeveloped sense of self. It is difficult to commit regarding a decision that is so much connected to one’s emotions when the person feels disconnected from his feelings. There are other factors as well, most of which are interconnected.

Difficulty making decisions is a major obstacle to committing. This problem can often exist in children long before they come to the age of being “accused” of the inability to commit. They may have found it excessively difficult (as compared to peers) to make decisions regarding what clothes to wear, what food to eat, which *chavrusa* to learn with, and other such daily decisions. It stands to reason that such people would be even more paralyzed with indecision when confronted with such a momentous decision as choosing a life-long mate. When the pressure mounts to make a decision regarding a *shidduch*, they may react with “How can I be certain?” Or, “What if I see someone ‘better’ later on?” This is often described as a commitment problem, but it is usually a reflection of the inability to resolve the many fears and conflicts aroused by the *shidduch* process. Following are some of the frequent underlying causes for the difficulty making decisions.

Being terrified of making a mistake. One of the most powerful forces that inhibit the decision making process is an intense fear of making mistakes. An excessively self-critical person will often strive for perfection as the only means of avoiding self-criticism.¹⁹ Since any mistake on his part is totally intolerable - and any result that is less than perfect is defined as a mistake - he can only be comfortable marrying a girl who is absolutely perfect, and if he can be 100% certain that she is his one and only, preordained *barshert*. Since neither of these conditions is ever possible to

¹⁸ “The Path to Happily Ever After,” *Jewish Observer*, Jan. 2002, p. 11-12.

¹⁹ See the *Sefer Mekol Melamdai* (5765) in the chapter on “Perfectionism” from Rabbi G. T. Greenberg (pp. 174-198). See also: B. Sorotzkin. “The Quest for Perfection: Avoiding Guilt or Avoiding Shame?” *Psychotherapy* 22 (1985): 564-571: “Understanding and Treating Perfectionism in Religious Adolescents. *Psychotherapy* 35 (1998): 87-95: The Pursuit of Perfection: Vice or Virtue in Judaism? *Journal of Psychology and Judaism* 23 (1999): 179-195. See also David H. Barlow, *Anxiety and Its Disorders: The Nature and Treatment of Anxiety and Panic* (2nd Edition). NY: Guilford, 2002, p. 534.

meet, he finds it impossible to make such a decision.²⁰ Now, any person would worry if he thought he may have made a mistake in his choice of a wife. The question is, however, how does one define mistake? People who are self-critical and perfectionistic have a very wide-ranging definition of mistake. If **anyone** would think critically of their choice for any reason - e.g., if their mother would think that the girl is not pretty enough for her (for the mother!) - that would mean that it was a mistake. If there is any possibility that the next girl they go out with might have even one advantage over this girl, it would be an unforgivable error. If there is a possibility that there exists, somewhere in the world, a girl who is “better” in any way than this girl, then that is a major mistake. If they see that someone else found a girl who is smarter, prettier, from a higher status family etc., they would never be able to live with themselves. The fact that that particular girl may not be suitable for them and/or also has major deficiencies would not mitigate their anguish.

Studies have shown that people who feel the need to always make the absolute best possible decision suffer when there are many choices. As one researcher put it:

Those who suffer most [from an abundance of choices] are the “maximizers” [what I call perfectionists]... - people whose goal in making decisions is to get “the best” Maximizers must check out all the alternatives in order to feel they got the best. And in a world of [countless choices], that’s just not possible.... [so they] make a selection and end up miserable, convinced that if they had looked a little longer, they would have done better.... At the opposite [and healthier] end of the scale are “satisficers,” who seek only what is good enough. (p. 16)²¹

The world of *shidduchim* is certainly one of countless potential choices, so perfectionists are likely to feel miserable regarding their choice. Since it is impossible to find someone with every possible advantage - especially since some positive traits are mutually exclusive (as will be discussed below) - it is almost impossible for them to find a mate about who they can feel certain that she is the best possible choice. If they contemplate the possibility of compromising, they would consider that to be “settling,” something that a self-critical person can’t afford to do.

For the “satisficers,” in contrast, the abundant choices is experienced as an advantage since it increases their chances at finding a mate who is “good enough” for what they need. Someone who grew up in a healthy, non-critical environment would not consider marrying an imperfect girl or compromising on minor issues a form of “settling” since it has always been clear to him that imperfection - both his and others - is part of the human condition.²²

²⁰ This misunderstanding of the concept of *bashert* - that there is supposed to be a way for a person to be 100% certain that he found his one and only *bashert* - will also be discussed later in the section on “Therapeutic Help.”

²¹ Barry Schwartz, “Too Many Choices.” *AARP Bulletin*, April 2005, pp. 14-16 (based on his book, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*, HarperCollins, 2004).

²² ראה מהר"ל, גור אריה, בראשית א:יא; ורבי שלמה וולבה "קונטרס הדרכה לכלות", עמ' נה' ("האכזבה היא הדדית: גם בעלך יגלה אצלך סימנים ברורים שאת 'רק' אדם ולא מלאך. אכזבה הדדית זאת היא תהי' המבחן הריציני הראשון לאהבה שביניכם, שתדעו להשלים, ותהי' זאת בחינת 'על כל פשעים תכסה אהבה'"). - פעם שמעתי "וורט" נפלא על הפסוק בקהלת (ז:כו) "ומצא

Most people view the dilemma of the “maximizer” as a problem with jealousy, i.e., that the person can’t tolerate the idea that someone else will have more than they have. On a superficial level this may indeed be the case. Jealousy itself, however, often has a deeper meaning - that of excessive self-criticism. The fact that someone else managed to get more than them is experienced as an inherent self-indictment. “Why wasn’t I able to do as well? It must be that I was too lazy, too stupid, too impulsive, etc.”²³

Conflict over what type of girl he should look for. Sometimes, the difficulty making a decision regarding a *shidduch* reflects deeper conflicts that are difficult to resolve. A young man may feel more comfortable with a certain type of girl but may also believe that he **should** want a different type. For example, he may feel more comfortable around a girl who is more outgoing, but perhaps his mother was always critical of girls who were outgoing, seeing them as lacking in proper *tznius*. He, therefore, insists on going out with girls who are more reserved, but he isn’t comfortable enough to make an emotional connection. The result is a stalemate where he can’t marry either type of girl.

Needing qualities in a spouse that are inherently incompatible. Children who are raised in a critical environment usually grow up to be insecure and lacking in self-confidence and self-esteem. These characteristics will cause them to be fearful and apprehensive, especially in novel situations (like getting married). As a result of these insecurities, the person may end up needing two qualities that can’t exist in the same person (e.g., an extremely “*frum*” girl who is “fun-loving”). Since these needs are driven by fear and anxiety rather than by wishes (e.g., a fear that he won’t remain *frum* enough if the girl won’t demand it of him and fear that he won’t enjoy her company if she’s not fun-loving) there is little possibility for a reasonable compromise, because compromise can’t alleviate anxiety.

THE FRANTIC SEARCH FOR AN OUTSIDE EXPERT

The indecisive person attributes his inability to decide regarding a *shidduch* to a fault in his observational and analytic capabilities, and to his difficulty in being objective. He therefore, searches for an outside, objective “expert” with better analytic skills (*Rebbi*, *Mashgiach*, therapist), etc. who will **tell** him whom he should marry.

There is, of course, a mature way to ask advice from a *Rebbi*, etc. A person can seek advice in order to enlighten his own understanding of the situation. Perhaps he can be made aware of aspects of the situation that he was not aware of before, or

אני את תאשה מר ממות. אם אדם מרגיש שהוא חייב למצוא את תאשה המושלמת, האחת והיחידה, אזי חיינו יהיו מרים מאוד. לעומת זאת, “מצא אשה, מצא טוב” (משלי, יח:כב) – אם הוא מאושר עם אשה (מושלמת בשבילו, אבל לא בהכרח מושלמת מבחינה אובייקטיבית), אזי הוא מצא את האושר.

²³ I am indebted to a perceptive patient for this insightful explanation for his extreme feelings of jealousy.

ramifications that he was blind to. At the end of this process, the person is then better able to make his own decision.²⁴

The indecisive person tries to avoid making his own decision. He thinks he'll be happy to have someone else make the decision, but, to his dismay, he finds that this isn't so. This is true for a few possible reasons. First, because most advice givers do not want to make a decision for someone else. When they realize that the person asking for advice is not engaging his own mind and feelings in the process they often become hesitant to give advice. Second, in matters of the heart, most people feel uncomfortable going into something without their feelings being engaged in the process. Although they truly believe that they want someone to make the decision for them, if they actually find someone who is willing to do so they are often surprised to discover that they are not comfortable following through with the advice.

Many people believe that there is an objectively correct decision for every situation. They feel that for some unknown reason they are not good at getting at this objective truth. If they could only find someone wise enough who cares about them enough to tell them this truth, then they'll know what to do. The reality is that, most often, there is no objective, correct decision. The correctness of the decision is usually dependent on the person's individual characteristics, feelings and attitudes. It is important for the advice seeker to openly share these points with the advice giver so that together they can come up with the best advice for this person at this time.²⁵

Early childhood experiences that often result in difficulties making decisions, excessive fear of making mistakes and over-dependence on the opinions of others include the following:

The number one culprit is **excessive parental criticism**, resulting in a number of interrelated personality features, each one of which can cause serious impediment to the *shidduch* process:

²⁴ Harav Shach (לולי תורתך, עמ' רמ"ב) stated that in previous generations people didn't run to *gedolim* for advice and *berochos* for every minor matter. The fact that many people do so today, he said, is because "they are too lazy to think and *daven* for themselves." ("שכיום מתעצלים לחשוב לבד ולהתפלל לבד"). Perhaps I can add that they often don't sufficiently trust and/or value their own thoughts and feelings.

²⁵ The *Vilna Gaon* in *Mishlei* (16:4) states that during earlier times, a person would ask a *novi* for advice. Since the advice was based on prophecy, it was tailor-made for the person's personality, abilities, tendencies and interests. Now that we no longer have prophecy, says the *Gaon*, each person has his own internal "*ruach hakodesh*" to help him sense which path is right for him - ואיש עצתו. "יש רוח הקודש בישראל. ורוח הקודש יש לכל אדם ואדם." (see *Chidushei HaLev* from Rav Henoch Lebowitz, *Bamidbar* 20:11 for his comments on this and see footnote 3 above). See also *Chidushei HaLev*, (*Bereishis* 12:1 and 49:10, and *Shmos* 4:10) where he states that *Hashem* does not desire mindless robots.

Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer (cited in *Be'er Miriam*, *Devarim* 17:11 and in the *Otzar HaYedios*, Vol. 1, p. 129) gives a remarkable explanation on the *chazal* (*Rashi*, *Devarim*, 17:11) that one has to follow the rulings of the *chachomim* "even if they tell you that right is left and left is right." Why do *chazal* use the example of right and left? Why not north and south? Rav Isser Zalman explains that unlike north and south, which side is right and which is left depends on the perspective. If I am facing you, for example, your right is my left. The *chachomim* are not going to say that north is south but they can show you a different perspective so that you yourself can see that what you thought was left is really right.

Adults who were excessively criticized as children will often react to the need to make a decision with paralyzing fear. This is true even if in their current environment they are not exposed to excessive criticism, because they have internalized their early experiences, thus becoming excessively self-critical and critical of others. They worry, therefore, that they are going to end up being harshly critical of their own decision and/or their choice of a mate. Their early experiences have also made them excessively sensitive to even mild and constructive criticism, or even the helpful advice of others.²⁶

Let's take Yehuda. His mother was a very demanding and critical person. She rarely praised him but was very liberal in pointing out to him the deficiencies in his behaviors and accomplishments. She also predicted dire consequences that would result from his deficiencies (e.g., "Who will want to marry you if you don't hang up your jacket?"). As a result of these experiences, Yehuda internalized the attitude that even minor deficiencies and imperfections are considered major personal defects and are reason enough for one to be very disappointed with oneself. Likewise, he has learned to believe that any imperfections in a decision are, by definition, catastrophic. Is it any wonder that he became paralyzed with fear and indecisiveness when he had to make a decision?

Low self-esteem is the logical result of chronic criticism. Poor self-esteem is a major factor in many, if not most, emotional difficulties. People who see themselves in a very negative light would find it difficult to believe that someone would like them if they really knew them. When they date they will try their hardest to make a good impression by hiding what they consider to be their true, deficient self. They suffer from an "imposter phenomenon," i.e., feeling that although the girl they are dating thinks highly of them, it is only because they are presenting a false front.²⁷ This can easily result in a fear of getting married, as they are convinced that anyone living in close proximity with them will certainly uncover the fraud and unmask them.

Striving to impress. Dating couples who suffer from poor self-esteem will often strive to impress each other rather than get to know each other. While it is normal to care about what others think about you, when one worries about it excessively it is a sure sign of low self-esteem. This excessive need to impress can wreck havoc on the *shidduch* process. First and foremost, it undermines the two primary purposes of dating; (1) getting to know each other, (2) developing a (preliminary) relationship. Rather than seeing if the girl he is dating has the qualities that he is looking for, a young man with low self-esteem will focus on impressing her. He will also be overly cautious, fearful of being spontaneous and incurring the risk of saying something that gives a less than sterling impression. This approach is often promoted by well-meaning advisors, who may caution this young man to be very careful with what he says on the dates, so as not

²⁶ Often, the very same excessively critical parents, who made their children overly sensitive to criticism, will then criticize them for being "too sensitive."

²⁷ J. Langford & P. R. Clance. "The Impostor Phenomenon: Recent Research Findings Regarding Dynamics, Personality and Family Patterns and their Implications for Treatment." *Psychotherapy* 30 (1993), 495-501.

to make the wrong impression. He may indeed win the battle (by avoiding saying something less than brilliant) but, alas, he may, as a result, lose the war, as the relationship dies out due to a lack of honest and open conversation.²⁸

The importance of openness in developing a close relationship was emphasized by Rabbi Yitzchok Kirzner:

The strength of any relationship depends largely on the trust between the parties. A relationship between two people might originally be based on the enjoyment of one another's company. But unless each partner trusts the other, the potential for developing the relationship further is limited. For an intense emotional bond to develop between two people, they must be open with one another and not have to hide their true selves.²⁹

A person with low self-esteem will also often feel a need to impress his friends by marrying a girl who is "glamorous" in some way (looks, money, *yichos*, etc.). For him, on a subconscious level, a wife is an ornament to show off and not necessarily a life partner.³⁰ His attitude seems to be that a regular girl is not good enough for him. What may seem to others like haughtiness may, in fact, be the result of a poor self-image (i.e., the need to marry a high status girl in order to compensate for the low opinion he assumes that others have of him). Unfortunately, this young man would likely also find it difficult to marry a glamorous girl, because the same low self-esteem that drives his need for such a girl also makes him feel totally intimidated in the presence of someone he perceives as high status.³¹ He can't move either way.

Seeking a spouse who is "guaranteed" not to reject or even criticize. A person with low self-esteem will often anticipate criticism and rejection.³² He may subconsciously try to avoid this possibility by seeking a girl with serious issues of her own. The underlying thought is "she would never reject me, after all look at her

²⁸ רבי פנחס שיינברג ב-"מאמר שלווה בארמנותיך" (תשס"ג, עמ' ה') אומר ש-"כשנפגשים... מחפשים איך למצוא הן אחד בעיני השני... כל אחד רוצה להראות שהוא הבחירה המושלמת, אבל אי אפשר לחיות כל החיים בהצגה".

The excessive need to impress is a powerful source of insecurity and anxiety. It is difficult to accurately interpret the reactions of others. Even if someone compliments you how can you be certain he isn't just being polite? For someone with healthy self-esteem this is not a major problem, since he appreciates his own accomplishments with only minimal concern for what others think. To a person with low self-esteem, in contrast, the fear that someone may be thinking critically about him could be a source of intense apprehension.

²⁹ *Making Sense of Suffering: A Jewish Approach*, Mesorah, 2002, p. 6.

³⁰ The Steipler says regarding the Chazal (*Yevomos*, 62b) that a person should love his wife like himself – "Obviously they are not referring to the natural love that a man has for [any] women, rather they mean love that is similar to the love a person has for his friends, because she is his friend and confidant..." באגרות קודש מהסטייפּלר, הוא מביא מה שחזו"ל אומרים (במנות, סב): כי האדם חייב לאהוב את אשתו כגופו – "וברור שאין כונת חז"ל לאהוב אשתו מצד אהבה הטבעית לנשים אלא לאהבה מסוג אהבת חברים כי היא חברתו ואשת בריתו..." [עמ' יא]. Rav Pinchas Scheinberg similarly states, "The husband and wife should be comfortable discussing their mutual and personal problems.... Husband and wife are meant to be partners in marriage and best of friends in life [p. 22]." ("Husbands, Wives, and Children," *Jewish Observer*, Oct. 2002, pp. 18-23).

³¹ See *Kedushin* 49a.

³² One can find evidence for the pervasive fear of rejection among young men, in the common use of the term "dumped" in describing the ending of a *shidduch* relationship.

problems.” (In actual fact, this is not a safe assumption).³³ But here again, when he actually dates such a girl and her deficiencies become more apparent, he may become incapable of moving forward – another impasse.

Indecision and inability to commit is thus a result of unsolvable dilemmas and conflicts fraught with anxiety. The young man who fears that no girl in her right mind would ever want to marry him unless he makes a supreme effort to impress her (i.e., by not being himself) is in such a no-win situation. If he succeeds in impressing her, he feels a surge of excitement. This excitement sustains him through the early stages of the dating process, giving the girl the false impression that a real connection is developing. As the girl responds to what she sees as the boy’s serious intentions, he begins to panic. First of all, he’s certain that once she marries him (or even before) she will see through his façade and quickly get rid of him. Second, he suddenly realizes that his positive feelings were the result of the excitement of someone liking him, and not necessarily of his liking her. Even if he does like her as a person, he may realize that they are not suited for each other. The thought of dropping her, however, also induces panic because he can’t believe he’ll ever find another girl who’ll like him, and so he keeps procrastinating, going out and saying nothing. When the girl or her parents begin to pressure the young man to make a decision, he will either cut-and-run or he’ll feel compelled to get engaged despite his trepidation, perhaps only to later break the engagement. This unfortunate ending will often be seen as an example of an “inability to commit” when the problem is really an inability to develop a relationship and an inability to be open about one’s feelings.

BEING “TOO PICKY”

Many older singles are accused of being too picky. It often seems to others (especially well-meaning *shadchonim*) that older singles are excessively critical of prospective mates and are unable to overlook even minor flaws. The older singles are likewise frustrated, as they very much want to get married but find it impossible to say yes to a girl when they have serious misgivings. Everyone becomes irritated.

Levi was an older single bochur. He grew up in a very critical home where people were categorized in a very rigid and negative manner. “All Hungarians..., All Chassidim...etc.” He heard from his parents much criticism of himself, the Rov, the neighbors, his relatives and a host of other people, both for their individual “deficiencies” and for their group shortcomings. Not surprisingly, he also became afflicted with overgeneralization. This was reflected in his approach to shidduchim. Although he came from a Litvishe family he insisted on only dating girls from Chassidische backgrounds. However, he couldn’t find one that he felt comfortable with. After much discussion and introspection, we finally succeeded in “breaking the code” of his subconscious fears. Levi internalized all the criticism directed at him from his parents. He therefore, perceived himself in a very negative light. He was terrified that whoever marries him will sooner or later realize how deficient he is and leave him. He also believed - due to the over-generalized and stereotypical

³³ See Rashi, *Bereishis* 41:2 and *K’li Yakar Bereishis* 24:14.

comments he heard at home - that Chassidische girls are so docile and subservient that they would never complain about their husbands. He insisted on only dating girls from Chassidische backgrounds in order to feel safe, but since his background was so different he could never feel comfortable with these girls. Indeed, a stalemate.

Early childhood experiences that often result in becoming “too picky” include the following:

Children who grow up in homes that are excessively critical will often develop a poorly-articulated sense of self. They will therefore need constant approval and become overly concerned with the critical reactions of others. As a result, deciding on a *shidduch* will be extremely difficult for them. Even if they like a girl, they will be excessively concerned (often subconsciously) that their overly critical parents and siblings will disapprove. They may also worry that their friends may be disappointed with their choice. Even if their friends are more accepting, they are likely to project their own internalized critical perspective onto them and therefore assume that they also will likely be critical of them for getting engaged to an imperfect girl. Just thinking that someone has a critical thought (even unspoken) about their choice is often more than they can tolerate. These concerns make it almost impossible for someone like this to overlook even relatively minor imperfections. They can't help being “too picky.”³⁴

Critical parents also tend to believe in overgeneralizations, as both of these tendencies reflect a lack of an in-depth and comprehensive perspective. These parents will often say to their children, “You always.....” or “You never.....” They will overreact to their children's misbehaviors because at that moment they see all black, forgetting all the good things their children do. These attitudes are then internalized by their children, with an unfortunate impact on their dating experiences.

Young men who grew up in this environment tend to overreact to isolated comments a girl will make on a date, jumping to conclusions based on very little data. Because there was often a lack of open communications in their early life experiences they are also incapable of clarifying their concerns and assumptions through open conversation. They continue dating the girl but their worrisome assumptions does not allow the relationship to develop. Eventually the relationship falls apart without anyone really understanding why.³⁵

In contrast, when a child grows up in a home that is tolerant and accepting, he internalizes these positive values. This makes it possible for him to relate to others as

³⁴ A particularly cruel variant of this reaction to growing up in a critical environment is where the child tries to compensate for low self-esteem by developing a forced sense of superiority (narcissism). This can result in a “narcissistic paradox” – “wanting to receive praise and applause from others while thinking that those others are stupid and worthless” (E. Banai, M. Milulincer, & P. R. Shaver, “Selfobject Needs in Kohut's Self Psychology.” *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 22 (2005): 224-260 [p. 255].

³⁵ Another cause of lack of open communications is discussed later in the “Unresolved Issues” section

whole people; that is, to overlook their minor deficiencies. Once he meets a girl and he likes her, her minor imperfections become unnoticed or irrelevant.

There is a fascinating explanation by the Steipler Gaon that illuminates this issue.³⁶ The Steipler cites a discussion in the Gemara that implies that one is permitted to be less than totally forthright when it comes to shidduchim (a common example would be the precise age of the candidate - where a year suddenly takes more than 365 days). Yet the Shulchan Aruch clearly rules that one is prohibited from misleading a business customer in any way (even if the issue is not important enough to invalidate the sale). For example, it is clearly forbidden for someone trying to sell his car to misrepresent his 2001 Chevy as a 2002 Chevy. Why is it not similarly prohibited by shidduchim? The Steipler explains the difference as follows: If a person finds a minor imperfection in an object he bought he will certainly accept an offer to cancel the sale and replace the object with a different, perfect one, even if the defect was so minor that he wouldn't have demanded such a move. By a marriage, in contrast, once a person has developed a loving relationship with his wife he wouldn't agree to get divorced just because he discovered, for example, that she is a year older than he thought. The reason for this difference is because a person develops a relationship with a person but not with an object. Therefore, says the Steipler, not to inform a prospective spouse up front regarding a minor imperfection that one can assume most people wouldn't care about, once they liked the person, it isn't considered being deceptive. The love for the person allows one to relate to the totality of that person, rather than to a collection of features.

When a person grows up in an overly critical environment, in contrast, it will inevitably cause his own perception - of himself and of others - to become overly critical. He is literally missing the capacity for having imperfections fade into the background. In his eyes the girl's imperfections remain lit up in bright neon even if he likes her. The concept of *al kol p'shaim techase ahavah* ("Love conceals all deficiencies," *Mishlei*, 10:12) was never practiced on him, and so he can't practice it on others either. To insist that he not to be so picky is tantamount to demanding of a blind person to see.

Developing an overly critical eye. As we discussed above, when a child is excessively criticized it not only makes his life miserable but, even more significantly, it causes serious systemic damage. It affects his perspective of himself, of others and of the events he experiences. He sees everything with an *ayin ro'oh* (an overly critical perspective). While almost everyone agrees in principle to the saying that children learn from what they see and not from what is preached to them, in practice many parents (and teachers for that matter) deal with the children as if they believe the opposite. They will

³⁶ קהילות יעקב, יבמות, סימן מ"ד (סימן ל"ה בהוצאות הראשונות). וכן ראה הסבר דומה מאת הרב שך ב"משולחנו של רבנו", עמ' קמ"ז וב"אורחות הבית", עמ' יב-יג. (ראה גם כתובות דף עג: רש"י ד"ה "בטעות שתי נשים").

say hurtful and insulting things to a child and then they will react with shock and horror when the child does the same to a sibling or a friend.³⁷

How can we expect a person who grew up in such an environment to feel comfortable getting engaged to a less-than-perfect girl?³⁸

In the beginning of their child's *shidduchim* experiences, critical parents will often be very critical of every girl he goes out with. The criticism will often be said as an off-hand comment. When the son asks his parents straight out if this means that they want him to drop the girl they will demure, "We didn't say that, we just said...." leaving the son with anxiety and without guidance. Later on, when the parents realize that their son is saying no to everyone and he's getting older, they begin to criticize him for being "too picky." They don't realize that they never helped him develop the tools to say yes comfortably.

At times, I have found the difficulties discussed above among young men and women who were not exposed to overly critical parents. Rather, their parents were not involved in their emotional life in any meaningful way, so that they felt neglected. The parental lack of interest indicated to the children that they were not worthy of their parents' interest or concern. This, in itself, is tantamount to criticism.

LACK OF SUFFICIENT PHYSICAL ATTRACTION

It is somewhat surprising how often the lack of sufficient physical attraction turns out to be the reason why a young man can't make the "yes" decision regarding a girl he really likes.³⁹ At times, someone who sees himself as a very spiritual person will sheepishly and very reluctantly "confess" that the reason he's having such a hard time getting married is because so many of the girls he dates are not attractive enough for him (even those that are considered by most to be very attractive).

It is unfortunate that even among those who value meaningful qualities in a person there persists the belief that physical attraction is a value that exists independently of the quality of the relationship. This is clearly not true.

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky (Emes Le'Yaakov, Devarim 24:1) uses this reasoning to explain a difficult ruling in the Talmud, where one authority rules that a person can divorce his wife because she burned his meal and another authority rules that he can divorce her because he found a prettier woman. Rav Yaakov wonders why

³⁷ B. Sorotzkin. "Developing Character: Learned or Experienced?" In N. Wolpin, ed., *Timeless Parenting: Raising Children in Troubled Times – Understanding, Coping, Succeeding*, pp. 149-159. New York: Mesorah, 2000.

³⁸ According to Rav Noach Weinberg "Judaism defines love as: the emotional pleasure a human being experiences when he understands and focuses on the virtues of another human being." (*What the Angels Taught You*, Shaar Press, 2003, p. 162 [With Yaakov Salomon, CSW]). Similarly, Rabbi Yitzchok Kirzner defines love as "the product of each person bringing out the dignity and integrity of the other person".

³⁹ A lady who is involved in a *shidduchim* service for older *frum* singles reports that many young men specify that they are looking for a "stunning girl" or a "model."

the Torah would permit a person to divorce his wife on such trivial grounds! Rav Yaakov explains that if a person had a proper emotional connection with his wife (i.e., as a subject and not as an object) he would think that she is the prettiest woman to him, and he wouldn't mind the burned food. If he is bothered by these things, it is indicative that the relationship is not worth preserving.

It is important to explain to a young man that the quality of the physical aspect of his future relationship with his wife is more dependent on his emotional connection to her than on her physical appearance.⁴⁰

When someone has a close, positive and healthy emotional relationship with a girl then she will look pretty to him. When they first meet he will, of course, be more aware of, and influenced by, her external appearance, because he hasn't had a chance yet to develop a relationship with her. If he gets to like her, then he will very likely get to a situation where her inner qualities become more important than her external appearance. As a young man once told me "After each date her nose got shorter."

Early childhood experiences that often result in becoming overly concerned with physical attraction include the following:

As we discussed above, there are children who were related to as if they were objects rather than subjects and they therefore find it difficult to relate to others in a different manner. As a result, when they date, they may find it very difficult to overlook any shortcomings regardless how minor. This is particularly true regarding looks. After all, it is certainly reasonable for a person to desire a pretty object.

Many years ago I encountered a situation that illustrates many of these points and how they can directly impact the shidduchim process. "Chaim" was a young man married for three years with two children. He related to me that he finds it very difficult to look at his wife because of her looks. He readily acknowledged that, objectively speaking, she was considered very attractive, but there were minor flaws in her appearance. He couldn't understand why, but he just couldn't bear looking at her because of these imperfections. Interestingly enough, he himself was nothing special to look at, especially because he was at least 30 lbs. overweight. He was very aware of this discrepancy but that only served to make him feel more miserable and guilty. He especially felt guilty because he recognized that, aside from this one "deficiency," his wife was a very good wife.

After much exploration and discussion, we were able to unravel the mystery of his symptom. He had been a chubby child. His mother was very critical and very concerned about external appearance. She could not tolerate having an

⁴⁰ For a profoundly insightful discussion of how the many *halochos* that govern the physical relationship between a husband and wife are all geared toward enhancing their emotional bond, see the *sefer, Mishkan Yisroel (Yerusholayim, 5764/2004)*. For a similar treatment of this topic in English see, *Marital Intimacy: A Traditional Jewish Approach* (2005, see esp. Chap. 7), by Rabbi A. P. Friedman (Compass Books, 1605 Orchard Terr. Linden, NJ. 07036). See also *Megeed Yosef al haTorah (3rd ed.)*, *Lech Lecho* (12:11), "*hinai noh yodati ki isha yefas toar at*" – *Rashi*.

overweight child. Throughout his childhood and beyond she would berate him for not losing weight and predict that no girl would ever want to marry him. Even after he got engaged to a wonderful girl who was attracted to his fine qualities in spite of his being overweight, his mother kept telling him that “Your wife will leave you before the end of the first year if you do not lose weight.”

As a result of his mother constantly emphasizing external features at the expense of substantive character traits, he became hypersensitive to external appearance and was simply incapable of overlooking imperfect external features. His wife, in contrast, grew up in a house that gave much more weight to substantive factors and thus her husband’s external features were much less noticeable to her than his internal qualities.⁴¹

It is most tragic that many children in the *frum* community hear their parents give undue weight to physical appearance. A teenager will be at a wedding with his parents where the *chosson* is better looking than the *kallah*. The parents, who know nothing about the *kallah* will exclaim, “I can’t imagine what he sees in her!” As if she can’t possibly have any meaningful qualities that would motivate her *chosson* to want to marry her! Is it any wonder that this young man will become obsessed with looks when he starts dating?⁴²

Inability to overlook minor physical imperfections: As discussed above, a child develops the character traits that mirror the manner in which he was treated. Were **his** minor deficiencies seen in context? Or was he made to feel that his imperfections were unforgivable and totally overshadowed his positive attributes. Perhaps if asked directly, his parents would have conceded that he was basically a good boy with minor deficiencies, but that didn’t make his deficiencies any more forgivable in their eyes. When he was criticized, he heard in the parental voice only harsh and unmitigated anger, undiluted by the memory of his positive attributes. Is it any wonder then, that he is also incapable of overlooking, or at least seeing in context, the deficiencies of others? It is because excessive criticalness is often at the root of the lack of attraction problem that a young man who is obsessed with looks will be the same person to reject a girl because she doesn’t live up to his very stringent (as compared to his peers) standards of *tznius*.

Difficulty with being honest and open in a relationship: If someone was severely and unreasonably criticized, he learns to be ashamed of his essence. Everything about him will seem to be defective. His imperfections will be unforgivable in his own eyes. He will then project these attitudes on to others and he will therefore live in terror

⁴¹ An extreme example of the separation of looks from relationship (i.e., seeing a person as an object) is the incident with the *asorah harugei malchus* (*Otzar HaMidrashim*, *Asorah harugei malchus*, #28) where the ruler’s daughter had her father order Rav Yishmoel’s face skinned so that she could enjoy his beauty!

⁴² When a famous actor recently broke up with his girlfriend, the news reported his friend’s “explanation” for the break up: “He’s surrounded by girls who are hotter, taller, cooler, etc., and he wants to trade up.” Unfortunately, this attitude (if not these very words) are not foreign to our community. Witness the increasingly prevalent “*minhag*” for the mother of the boy to insist on first seeing the girl before agreeing to a *shidduch*. This is usually at the parents’ initiative and not the boy’s!

Another example of *frum* parents giving undue importance to looks is a discussion I was having with a father of a troubled teenage girl. I told the father that it sounds to me like she may be feeling depressed. “She can’t be depressed,” he insisted, “she’s beautiful.”

that someone will discover his shameful essence. He will likely be very defensive with what he reveals about himself to others. In his mind, the more he hides his true self from others, the more likely that he will be liked. Of course, the problem with that is that even if he is liked, he assumes that it's only because they don't really know him.

Moshe's parents had a very contentious divorce when he was a young boy. He was now a 20-year-old young man learning in an out of town yeshiva. He related to me that he has two "very close friends." I ask him, "Do these friends know that your parents are divorced?" He was horrified by the mere thought. "Of course not! I want them to treat me like a normal person." It took him some time to realize that in his mind, these "close friends" only treated him "like a normal person" because they didn't know the truth about him. He was convinced that if they did know they would most certainly reject him. What did he really gain from this friendship? After working up his courage, he finally told his friends. He was then pleasantly shocked to discover that they still treated him like a normal person. But now it was so much more meaningful.

A person who feels compelled to hide his true self in order to be accepted will be unable to develop an emotionally meaningful relationship with the person he's hiding from. A real and meaningful relationship can not develop in this type of atmosphere. Therefore the girl will remain like an object in his eyes. Can he be blamed for preferring a pretty object to one less pretty?

UNRESOLVED ISSUES

Feeling a need to hide one's true self is only one factor that can inhibit the development of an open dialogue. Being **excessively** concerned with not hurting the girl's feelings is another. In the course of dating, the girl will say something that raises concerns on the boy's part. He will want to clarify the issue but he will be concerned that asking directly might hurt her feelings. Instead, he will hint at the issue as a means of addressing his concerns. However, since he can't ask his question directly and he doesn't feel comfortable asking follow-up questions, the issue remains frustratingly unresolved. In addition, his unclear and confusing questions will likely raise questions and concerns on the girl's part. She will often also feel that it's improper to ask direct questions, so her concerns will also remain unresolved. Neither of them will want to end the relationship because nothing explicitly unacceptable has been said. They can't get engaged, however, because their concerns haven't been resolved either. Instead, the relationship may drag on for a long time until it finally sinks under the weight of unasked questions and with much more hurt than if the questions had been asked.

Shimon was a young man who planned to devote many years to learning. He was dating a girl who was aware of his plans. She mentioned in passing that she was very close to her brother, who happened to be a lawyer. The young man took this to mean that she probably really wanted to marry a professional (although she agreed to go out with him) and this made him quite anxious. Yet he was too

intimidated to openly ask her about this issue. His unresolved concern hindered the possibility of developing a relationship.

Early childhood experiences that often result in becoming overly concerned with hurting others include the following:

Believing that the feelings of others are deserving of much more consideration and respect than one's own. The young man mentioned above ("Shimon") couldn't ask the questions that would have resolved his doubts, and perhaps would have allowed the relationship to progress or come to a clear and definitive end. Most likely, the reason for this is because he grew up with the demand that he must be vigilant not to hurt the feelings of others (especially his parents), while his feelings were not considered important at all. Therefore, if he asked the girl a question and it made her even slightly uncomfortable he would see this as evidence that he did something wrong (even if it would be for such an important purpose).⁴³

A mother once described to me how her daughter dreads the phone ringing when she's home at night. She was the top student in the class and every night she would get countless phone calls from her classmates asking for her help with school work. "She is too honest to come up with creative excuses, so she doesn't have a minute to herself all evening." "Didn't you ever teach her to say no?" I asked. The mother was horrified by the thought. She understood how important it was to teach her daughter the importance of chesed. But teaching her how to say no!? I pointed out to her that most of the girls who call for help are probably quite capable of doing the work themselves, and are just conveniently relying on her daughter. Perhaps her daughter could set aside a reasonable amount of time daily to help the few weak students who truly need extra help. As for the others, her mother should teach her how to politely and firmly say no. Otherwise, her daughter will believe that everyone's feelings are important except her own!

HELPING, IN AND OUTSIDE OF THERAPY

Perceptions and attitudes rooted in early childhood experiences are very resistant to change. Besides the obvious reason of the difficulty overcoming well-ingrained habits, there is an even more potent impediment to change. Young children are not capable of reflecting upon the events they experience. So the "psychic structures" that are created in reaction to these events exist outside of their awareness. For instance, a child may react to an overbearing parent by becoming withdrawn. This all happens outside his awareness. At first he won't even realize that that he is different than others. When it

⁴³ In her outstanding book on forgiveness, Dr. J. A. Spring points out that children reared by authoritarian or needy parents learn at an early age to stifle self-expression and to be overly responsible. They are unlikely to do anything that requires forgiveness – in fact, their modus operandi is to behave in ways that increases the chances that they will be appreciated. Those who deal with them will often not know what they really think or feel – they themselves may not know either – they are more likely to find them annoying or boring than troublesome. There may be a basic inauthenticity in their relationships.... Deep inside they resent others for making them feel marginalized and subjugated. (*How Can I Forgive You? The Courage to Forgive, the Freedom Not To*, HarperCollins, 2004, p. 225).

finally becomes obvious in his daily functioning, he will assume that he was born that way (an assumption that his parents will most likely share). The erroneous belief that this trait is an inherent part of his personality is certainly not conducive for feeling confident in his ability to change it.⁴⁴

How can friends and relatives help someone facing these challenges? Making accusatory comments and insinuating that he is bringing the problems on himself is obviously not the helpful response of choice. (Of course, this is also true of helping a person of any age who is struggling with any type of problem). Accusing an older single person of being “too picky” implies that he consciously decided to be so picky and/or that he can quite easily choose not to be. Hopefully, by now the reader will agree that this is hardly likely to be the case. However, since these are the types of accusations that many older singles are frequently confronted with, it is very understandable that they are hypersensitive to any suggestion that there is some personal factor that is contributing to their difficulties. They feel criticized and blamed.

Friends and relatives can be most helpful by assuming (as logic itself dictates) that the single person is trying his hardest to get married, and that there is nothing he can **easily** do to make things better. Simplistic advice, even if it is logical and well-meaning, is not likely to help. Trying to be empathic to the frustration he feels is always helpful. If you are close to him and he is comfortable being open and honest with you, you can encourage him to try and develop a deeper understanding of his difficulties. For example, understanding the fears that constrict his flexibility in *shidduch* situations would help him focus his efforts better. Having a deeper understanding of the frustrations he faces may, in itself, improve the situation to a significant degree.

Often, it is only in psychotherapy that a person will find the safe environment where he can explore these issues without feeling that his self-esteem is being assaulted. However, those friends and relatives who have criticized him in the past should not be the ones to suggest psychotherapy, because it will certainly be experienced as criticism. Only someone who has always been supportive can safely bring up the suggestion of trying therapy.

Therapeutic Help

What can a therapist do to help a person overcome impediments to finding his *bashert*?

A therapist will focus on helping his patient improve his self-esteem. This is a central focus of most psychological therapies. This is not achieved by simply

⁴⁴ The latest discoveries in neurobiology reveal that the brain itself is shaped by life experiences. As Daniel J. Siegel and Mary Hartzell write in their illuminating and inspiring book on parenting (*Parenting From the Inside Out*, NY: Penguin, 2004), “Clearly, the ‘nature versus nurture’ debate needs to be reconfigured to embrace the view that genes **and** experience interact to shape ongoing development” (p. 116). The authors, he a world renowned psychiatrist and expert on neurobiology and attachment, and she an expert on early childhood, begin their book with the comment “How you make sense of your childhood experiences has a profound effect on how you parent your own children” (p. 1).

complimenting the person incessantly. There are underlying psychological structures that have to be modified so that healthy self-esteem can develop. If someone internalized the severe criticalness and unreasonable expectations he grew up with, for example, he will reject compliments as either being insincere or as being insufficient to undo his inherent badness and defectiveness. He will probably think to himself “If only he knew the truth about me, he wouldn’t compliment me” - what I call, “Snatching defeat from the jaws of victory” (i.e., finding what to self-criticize in every step of progress). The therapist would first have to help the person modify these attitudes as a prerequisite for the development of healthy self-esteem. As should be clear from the above discussion, improving self-esteem would go a long way toward alleviating many of the impediments to successfully finding one’s *zivug* (mate).

A therapist can assist the young man in focusing on what he sees in the girl he is dating, rather than obsessing on the girl’s impression of him or on trying to impress her. This will alleviate much of the anxiety and allow him to act more naturally and spontaneously.

A therapist will encourage the young man to gradually become more open, both about himself and regarding what he would like to know about the girl (in a sensitive manner, of course). If there is something bothering him about the girl, he should ask her about it rather than coming to far-reaching conclusions about her based on limited evidence. Otherwise, he will remain with the concern eating away at him and this will certainly negatively impact on the developing relationship. There is certainly an element of risk in being more spontaneous. After all, one can say the wrong thing, or make a wrong impression. It seems to me, however, that there is a far greater risk in not expressing one’s self and thus inhibiting the developing of a comfortable relationship.

Helping a young man learn how to reveal information about his shortcomings will be most helpful in the *shidduch* process. When a person is not accepting of himself, he projects these feelings onto others. As a result, he feels a strong need to keep every one of his imperfections hidden. He can’t imagine anyone accepting him if they would know. If he’s dating a girl who likes him, he gets anxious worrying about her reaction to discovering (what he considers) the terrible truth about himself. If he doesn’t tell her, he feels the pressure of her finding out and guilt over keeping the information from her (especially because he feels that this information is so central and significant). At some point, the pressure of keeping the secret may become too burdensome and intolerable, so he unburdens himself by “dumping” the information on the girl’s lap without any context or preparation. In fact, he tried to present himself as perfect before this sudden revelation. Under these circumstances, it is no wonder that the girl would likely be severely taken aback and fear the worse (e.g., why would someone who had a perfect life need therapy?)⁴⁵

⁴⁵ A. E. Kelly makes an important distinction between **privacy** which connotes the expectation of being free from unsanctioned intrusion, and **secrecy** which involves the active attempt to prevent such intrusions, in part because the person perceives that others may have some claim to the hidden information (*Psychology of Secrets*, Plenum, 2002).

If a person is more accepting of himself and is more accepting of his own imperfections he tends to slowly reveal these aspects of himself as part of his life narrative which he doesn't feel compelled to present as perfect. The girl then hears about the challenges he faced and how he dealt with them within the framework of a personal life narrative which makes it more understandable and acceptable. Another advantage of this more natural process of revelation is that you don't go to the next step unless the girl's response to the current step makes you comfortable to reveal more of yourself. If not, you can either explore the issue further or end the relationship. In my experience, the majority of young men who discussed these issues in this manner were not rejected by their dates as a result. Certainly not any more frequently than dates are rejected for many other reasons

A young lady once expressed, what I imagine to be, one of the most insightful ideas to be articulated on a date. The young man she was dating asked her, "How do you feel about the fact that my parents are divorced?" She responded, "How you feel about it is far more important than how I feel about it." He was focused on his fear that no girl would want him because of this "flaw," yet the girl understood that the real issue was: Did he work through the divorce and its impact on him?

Some people look for a prospective spouse like they look for a car. What options does she come with? Perhaps leather seats or a moon roof etc. Helping a young man to develop the capacity to look at prospective mates as whole people, rather than as objects is an important aspect of therapy. Without this capacity, it is not reasonable to expect him to be able to overlook even relatively minor imperfections.

Therapy can help a young man evaluate prospective *shidduchim* on the basis of needs rather than of fears. If a particular girl isn't able to meet his basic needs than he should feel comfortable saying no. That means not being **overly** concerned - beyond reason - with pleasing others or hurting their feelings. Surprisingly, I have found that helping a patient say no comfortably to an inappropriate *shidduch* is often the first step to helping him say yes toward an appropriate *shidduch*.

Therapy needs to focus on the young man's paralyzing fear of making a mistake. Many older singles understand the concept of *bashert* to mean that somewhere out there is a specific girl whom *Hashem* chose for them and they have to find her. If they find that one preordained girl, then their married life will be one of endless and effortless bliss. If they don't find that specific girl then they are doomed to a life of living hell, no matter how wonderful a young lady their "non-*bashert*" wife is. Is it any wonder that they feel a desperate need to be 100% certain that they have found that needle in the haystack? Is it their fault that this isn't possible? Any imperfection in the girl will feed into their terror that this can't be the one and only *bashert*.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ It is always instructive to consider the type of experiences with early authority figures that would cause someone to believe that *Hashem* (the ultimate authority figure) would put him in such a predicament. As Rabbi Yitzchok Kirzner said: "The strength of our relationship with *Hashem* depends on the degree of our trust that He seeks only our good." (*Making Sense of Suffering: A Jewish Approach*, Mesorah, 2002, p. 7.)

I often find it helpful to relate the following story from the *Steipler Gaon*:

*The Steipler Gaon described how older singles would often cry to him “Where is my bashert?” He would answer: “You met her years ago, but because of unhealthy reasons you turned her down. She long ago married someone else.”*⁴⁷

Did the *Steipler* mean that the young man who married this girl won't be able to have a happy marriage with her because she is not his *bashert*? Did he then suggest to this older single person that he has no hope of ever being happily married because his *bashert* was no longer available? Certainly not! Rather, the lesson to be learned is that *Hashem* gave us a mind and a heart in order to use them. We have to find a girl that both our (reasonable) mind and heart can feel comfortable with. That is all. That is the *bas kol*!⁴⁸ There is no possible way to achieve 100% certainty. And no matter whom one marries, he will have to work on developing and nourishing the relationship.

In their book “Direction,”⁴⁹ psychotherapists Rabbi and Mrs. Feuerman, make the following perceptive comment regarding this issue, “Even the most ideal marriage has problems every day... On a date you need to ask yourself, ‘Is this person someone I can work with to solve problems?’ ”

*In his sefer “Planting and Building in Chinuch,” Rav Wolbe states that: Shidduchim is the most personal decision a person has to make and there **should be no coercion** involved. Many problems start when a person makes decisions based on external pressure rather than following his feelings.... If a young man met a girl a few times and says that he doesn't have feelings for her he most definitely shouldn't be urged or pressured to get engaged in spite of his misgivings. If he has doubts, give him as much time as he needs to think it over. If he remains uncertain, then the answer is no. It is forbidden for any responsible person to pressure him or to decide for him to get engaged.*

That said, I think one can distinguish between pressuring someone or making a decision for him versus helping him broaden his perspective on issues so that he will feel different regarding the subject than he did before. For example, some people, as part of a desperate need to avoid self-criticism, will fantasize that there is some way that they could find someone to marry where they won't experience any doubts and they won't need to overlook any minor imperfections. (In their minds, any minor imperfection will inevitably result in a disaster). When we understand this dynamic, we can be more sympathetic to their inability to move forward with the relationship. It can be helpful to help these young men understand that there is no such thing as a risk-free or cost-free decision. It can likewise be helpful to help them understand that the fact that they are more anxious than most people regarding a *shidduch* is not in itself proof that there is

⁴⁷ *Peninei Rabbeinu HaKehilos Yaakov*, 1986, p. 36.

⁴⁸ See the discussion regarding the *bas kol* on pages 1 and 2.

⁴⁹ *Direction: Finding Your Way in Relationships, Parenting and Personal Growth*. L'chaim Publications, 2005, by Rabbi Simcha Feuerman, LCSW & Chaya Feuerman, LCSW

something wrong with the match. If they are so much more anxious than their friends about all their decisions (e.g., buying a tie), then it is to be expected that they will be considerably more anxious about this decision also.

One thought I often share with people who can't overlook even relatively minor imperfections is the following. How can they decide if an imperfection will likely continue to bother them even if the marriage otherwise works out well? When is it worth trying to overcome an internal obstacle to moving forward with a *shidduch*? When does it make sense to consider a deficiency a "deal breaker?" I suggest that they ask themselves if this is a type of problem that people go to marriage counseling for or get divorced over. How often does a person come to marriage counseling or ask for a divorce because his wife has red hair or is 5 lbs. overweight? How often does a person come to marriage counseling or ask for a divorce because his wife is extremely critical and controlling? While the answer to the first question is "hardly ever" and to the second question "quite often," many young men would be more troubled by the first imperfection than the second deficiency. People can often be helped to develop a healthier perspective and attitude so that they can move forward in finding a mate. As long as they feel considerable uncertainty, however, it is extremely risky to pressure them.

Another way of putting this is to differentiate between imperfections in a girl that can be balanced out by other qualities, and character flaws that will bring misery to her husband regardless of any other sterling qualities she may possess.

It is also important to help conflicted young men distinguish between different underlying causes for their uncertainty in the *shidduchim* process. Often a young man will admire a certain quality in a girl and he will therefore find it difficult to drop her even though he doesn't particularly like her. He may feel that he is required to override his feelings. Such a person may need the therapist's help to feel confident that he is "permitted" to take his feelings seriously. This is very different from a young man who feels very positive about his date, but is anxious about having to take on the responsibilities of marriage and the like. He will have to deal with this no matter who he marries. The therapist may need to help him develop the necessary confidence in his ability to handle marriage.

Some older singles are hesitant to get married because of emotional issues. It is a complex and delicate question as to exactly how emotionally stable one needs to be before taking the step of getting married. Some troubled singles are told that marriage will solve all their problems. In response I tell them that marriage was never intended to solve all problems. It was only intended to solve the problem of not being married.

I was once treating a young man who was severely depressed. His father, a public figure who counseled many troubled people, was pressuring his son to start dating. I asked the father how he expected his son to deal with the challenges of married life when he was so depressed. "Marriage will cure him of depression" he responded. "You of all people should know better," I said.

“You counsel countless troubled people who are married. Most of them have been troubled from before their marriage. Why didn’t marriage cure them?” He didn’t have an answer.

A therapist can assist a young man in expanding his understanding of his own feelings and emotional needs by helping him learn from the *shidduchim* experiences that didn’t work out. Declarations such as; “She wasn’t for me” and the like do not help the young man come closer to discovering what he needs. By understanding more clearly what it was that made him not feel comfortable enough with a specific girl, he can better fine-tune his search. There are often difficulties in this process related to what I discussed in my opening remarks. If someone grew up without sufficient appreciation to his emotional needs, it will be difficult for him to identify or give legitimacy to these factors in the dating process. Rather, he will desperately search for an objective deficiency in the girl so that he can get off the hook with the *shadchin*, and more importantly, with himself.

Lastly, a therapist will encourage the young man to focus on finding the girl that he would be comfortable with, rather than one that will impress others. She only has to be perfect for him, not objectively perfect.⁵⁰

PREVENTION

There are many things parents can do in a child’s formative years that would make it more likely that he will find the *shidduch* process less stressful and drawn-out. Even if the child is already older and these recommendations were not followed, it is usually not too late to reverse course.⁵¹ In this section I will touch upon some general principles of parenting that I believe can be extremely helpful for a child’s wellbeing in general and for his future *shidduchim* endeavors in particular.

⁵⁰ A *Rosh Yeshiva* was approached by one of the guests at the *Rosh Yeshiva’s* granddaughter’s *vort* (engagement party) -“You don’t know what a *metziah* (find, catch) your granddaughter got” he enthused. “I wouldn’t want her to marry a *metziah*,” he responded, “because a *metziah* doesn’t necessarily reflect the needs of the finder. I’d rather that she found someone who is *tzugipased* (appropriate) for her.”

Likewise, a reader of the *Yated* related in a letter to the editor (11/18/05) that when his friend asked Rav Shach *zt”l* what he should look for in a *bochur* for his daughter, Rav Shach answered “*Her zul zein a normaleh*” (he should be normal). “What about *yichus*, etc.?” asked the father. Rav Shach just kept on repeating that the most important thing is that the boy should be normal.

⁵¹ Some parents react to such suggestions by protesting that they are being “blamed.” In response I recall an incident years ago when a father of a rebellious teenager came for a consultation. After he described some of the history of his relationship with his son - including a description of a very negative and punitive parenting style - I asked him what he thought was the cause of his son’s rebelliousness. “His pediatrician suggested it was probably caused by a chemical imbalance,” he informed me. I responded with some hesitation that perhaps his parenting style may have contributed to the problem. He noted my concern not to offend him and reassured me: “You don’t understand, I rather you tell me that it’s not a chemical imbalance. If it’s something I’m doing, I can try to change my approach, but if it’s a chemical imbalance what could I do?” I found this to be a refreshingly healthy attitude.

Give Recognition to Emotions

Decisions are difficult because there are no perfect decisions. After all, in a situation where one option is all positive and the other is all negative then it would be a “no brainer” and wouldn’t merit being called a “decision.” It is because there is usually more than one good option and each possible decision has both positive and less positive aspects that decision making is difficult. Often, there is no objective manner in which to resolve the question. Rather each person has to listen to his unique and subjective heart in order to see what is right **for him**. Young people have to grow up in a particular type of environment in order to be comfortable with such a process.

Some families overemphasize the mind, while totally neglecting the heart. This can manifest itself in many ways. The emphasis in these families is on proper **behavior**, where it is assumed that if you get a child to perform a certain behavior often enough, he or she will automatically continue doing it in the future out of habit. They understand the Talmudic dictum of *metoch she’lo lishmah bah lishmah* to mean that proper behavior will inevitably lead to the proper motivation regardless of any other factors. Therefore, even if one has to coerce or “bribe” children to behave in the proper way and even if the means of coercion induces very negative emotional reactions we do not have to worry, as we can be certain that they will eventually internalize the values we are attempting to impart.

It is somewhat amazing that so many people still believe this even after they have so often witnessed youngsters going off the *derech* after years of behaving properly. Rav Dessler, citing the *Alter* from *Kelm*,⁵² states that *she’lo lishmah* only becomes *lishmah* if the person is striving to reach the level of *lishmah* (i.e., striving to develop internal and intrinsic motivations). Such a person will make temporary and minimal use of *lo lishmah* as a tool to reach *lishmah*.⁵³ If, in contrast, parents pay, bribe or threaten a child in order to get him to learn, assuming that the act of learning will automatically create an internal value of learning, they are sadly mistaken. The lesson they are actually teaching is that money is so valuable that it is even worth learning for. They come to appreciate the value of money, rather than the value of learning.

When parents focus on their children’s behaviors while ignoring their emotional lives, one can say that they are treating their children as “objects” rather than “subjects.” If someone is trying to get a car to run smoothly, he certainly does not have to concern himself with the car’s feelings on the issue. Children, however, are subjects and not objects. When they are treated as objects (e.g., when they see that their feelings are not

⁵² *מכתב מאליהו*, כרך א, עמ' 24 "שמתחילת עסקו בתורה שלא לשמה תהי' מחשבתו להגיע לידי לשמה" (וכן ראה שם בעמודים 135, 157, 230). See also footnote 12.

⁵³ The Lakewood *Mashgiach*, Harav Matisyahu Salomon *shlit" a*, explained in a *vaad* (Winter, 2000 - based on the story of *Yossi ben Pazi* in the *Zohar*, *Parshas Lech Lecha* 88:1 – translated to *loshon hakodesh* in the *Tzror Hamor*, *Parshas Vayeira*) that the purpose of a reward is to make a child happy so that he associates the desired behavior with positive feelings. It is **only** when the reward brings the person to associate the desired act with happiness that the *lo lishmah* can become *lishmah*! Therefore, one should give the reward as close as possible to the beginning of the behavior. The purpose of rewards is not to **bribe** him to do something he doesn't want to do. (וכן ראה ב-*אור יחזקאל* מאת רבי יחזקאל לווניגשטיין, עמ' סא-סב'. ו-של"ה *הק' בראשית* ל:א:ד).

considered important), they learn to internalize this attitude and begin to relate to themselves as objects.

*When a patient told me years ago that he was afraid to try out a particular yeshiva “because it might work out” I was quite perplexed. How can someone fear trying something because it might work out?! After much exploration I came to understand that for him being happy and satisfied in the yeshiva was not included in “working out.” Who says he has to be happy or satisfied? “Not working out” means that he couldn’t get chavrusos and the like, i.e., objective reasons that do not require emotional explanations, while “working out” could include being miserable as long as there was no **objective** problem.*

When these children try to make decisions (often even mundane decisions), they search for **objective** criteria that would prove conclusively what the right decision is. As this most often does not exist, they become paralyzed and incapable of making a decision.⁵⁴

Children need an education to understand and respect their emotions just as much as they require education for gaining intellectual knowledge. As a first step, parents need to help a child develop the vocabulary to articulate their various feelings. Being able to understand the difference between anger, frustration, embarrassment, shame, etc. and feeling free to express these feelings freely will have tremendous mental health benefits for the child in general,⁵⁵ and will put him or her in a position to navigate the *shidduchim* process with relative ease.

Education for Relationships (be yourself rather than sell yourself)

Children need to learn that relationships are more important than making impressions. Rav Matisyahu Salomon describes the negative consequences to a *bochur*'s spiritual and emotional life when he becomes obsessed with making an impression on others rather than focusing on impressing himself with his own growth.⁵⁶ As elaborated upon above, focusing on **selling** yourself rather than **being** yourself is very detrimental to developing a relationship.

Emphasize *Penimious* over *Chitzonious*

Children need to see that their parents value substance over what is impressive to others. Telling a child not to do something because it will hurt his *shidduchim* prospects rather than because it is intrinsically improper sends the wrong message. Forcing a child

⁵⁴ Rabbi Ben Tzion Kokis writes regarding the attitude of *baalei teshuva* to *shidduchim*: “What often surfaces is a tendency to think that one’s personal instincts are not part of the decision-making process.... The role of personal connection... is thought to be a concession to secular values, instead of a vital component of the *Hashgacha Elyona*’s design to bring two *neshamos* together (*Jewish Observer*, Dec. 2001, p. 35).” I would add that this attitude is found among FFBs as well.

⁵⁵ See Chap. 3 in the superb book on parenting by Daniel J. Siegel and Mary Hartzell: *Parenting From the Inside Out*, NY: Penguin, 2004.

⁵⁶ *Matnas Chaim, Kinyonim*, Vol. 1, pp. 68-69.

to sing *zemiros* in order that he should appreciate the beauty of *shabbos* also sends the message that the external manifestation of an act is more important than the internal truth.

Avoid Excessive Criticism

A child who is raised with excessive criticism and unreasonable demands is likely to grow up to be overly self-critical and perfectionistic. Although many people assume that someone who suffered from unwarranted criticism would be less likely to become critical, the opposite is true. Research has clearly shown that children who are abused, for example, are **more** likely to become abusive parents.⁵⁷ Likewise, a child is much more likely to develop the *middos* (character traits) he was treated with than the ones that were preached to him.⁵⁸

If parents are careful to avoid excessive criticism, their children will find it easier to see the positive in potential mates. The negative attributes that they notice will be seen in context. They will be able to judge the situation both emotionally and logically. They will then be able to make a comfortable decision without excessive self doubt.

The most effective way for parents to promote a non-critical perspective in their home is by setting an example of being *dan le'kaf zechus* (judging others favorably).

Decision Making

For some young people, choosing a mate is the first decision they are being permitted to make on their own.⁵⁹ If their parents were controlling they probably strived to guide their children in the proper path by instruction and not by inspiration. The focus was on behavior and not on internalized values. The child's feelings and wishes were not considered to be important issues. Then it came time to get married. At this point even controlling parents are usually aware that they can't make such a decision for their child. So now the unfortunate young man is thrown into the pool without any experience swimming. He is expected to make one of life's most momentous decisions without any practice. Is it any wonder that he panics? Giving children age-appropriate opportunities to make decisions, and making it clear that all decisions are imperfect, would avoid much of this grief.

Make Your Children Feel Special

As we discussed above, perfectionistic tendencies can wreck havoc on the *shidduch* process. Underlying the need for perfection is the need to feel special. It seems

⁵⁷ F. Briggs & R. A. Hawkins. "A Comparison of the Childhood Experiences of Convicted Male Child Molesters and Men Who Were Sexually Abused In Childhood and Claimed To Be Nonoffenders." *Child Abuse and Neglect* 20 (1996), 221-233.

⁵⁸ Benzion Sorotzkin, "Developing Character: Learned or Experienced?" In N. Wolpin (Ed.), *Timeless Parenting: Raising Children in Troubled Times - Understanding, Coping, Succeeding*, 2000, pp. 149-159. Mesorah: Brooklyn, NY.

⁵⁹ The noted Israeli *mechanech*, Rabbi Yechiel Yacobson, has noted that many children never receive a *chinuch* for *bechira* because they are never permitted to make decisions.

to me that everyone is born with the need to feel special. When this natural need is satisfied in childhood it will not remain a central focus of a person's daily life. If this need is denied in childhood, then it persists into adulthood.

*The Chayei Adam states that in order to fulfill the mitzvah of kibud av v'eim properly one needs to think of his parents as being special people, even if the rest of the world considers them to be plain and simple people. I heard Rav Matisyahu Salomon shlit" a ask: Is a child required to be delusional in order to fulfill this obligation? He explained that the Chayei Adam doesn't mean that the child has to think that that his parents are objectively special. Rather, **in his eyes** they should be special. It seems to me that this is only likely to happen if the parents first treated their child as a special person, not because he was objectively special, but simply because he was their son. To paraphrase a quote I once saw, "You may be only one person in the world, but you should be the world to your parents." This in itself would make the son feel that his parents are special to him because they are the only ones who see him in this manner.*

Growing up with this feeling of being special in his parents' eyes would help a child be accepting of himself even if he is less than perfect. As long as he is special to them, he can accept being average to the rest of the world.⁶⁰ As discussed above the need for perfection can have a very detrimental impact on the *shidduch* experience. One area of difficulty would be the ability to feel confident with decision making inherent in the *shidduchim* process.

Rav Matisyahu Salomon shlit" a was asked in a chinuch vaad if helping a child develop confidence would turn him into a ba'al gaivah. "It's the opposite" he answered, "feeling confident means that you feel you can do something as well as the average person, and that's o.k. for you." A ba'al gaivah feels he has to do things better than everyone and it's impossible to be truly confident about that.

In conclusion: I have described some of the issues that the older singles that I have tried to help have struggled with. I have also explained how these problems can develop out of childhood experiences. I have not attempted to present a definitive and exhaustive treatment of this topic. Rather I have shared my experiences and understanding. I also discussed how one can help singles who are struggling with these issues, and preventive steps parents can take while their children are still young so that their children can avoid these problems when they come of age.

⁶⁰ Rav Dessler states that people have a need to feel unique and special in some way which drives them to find some unique quality in themselves. It seems to me that by children who grow up in emotionally nurturing homes, the need to be special is less extreme - (כרך ב, עמ' 133) . *מכתב מאליהו* .