

Frum Bridalplasty? Thoughts on Shidduch Dating and Bean Counting

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There has been much talk about Yitta Halberstam's [Jewish Press article](#) about the crisis of shidduch dating. That such a crisis exists is nothing new, as psychologist [Michael J. Salamon](#) makes [eminently clear](#). What is new about Halberstam's article is the suggestion that women would get more dates if they made themselves more attractive through make-up or even surgery.

There has been an outpouring of indignation towards Halberstam's suggestion; most recently, Rabbi Shmuly Boteach wrote a strong [reply](#) (more aptly, a rebuke), arguing that we need to teach men to look below the surface rather than teach women to redo theirs. Although I am in overall agreement with Boteach about the importance of combating the objectification of women plaguing our society (both frum and secular), as I wrote about in "Desexualizing Public Space" (*Morethodoxy* 2012), I am afraid that he misses a core problem with Halberstam's piece – and the world of shidduch dating that it represents. Speaking as an outsider who has never shidduch dated, I will offer my tentative thoughts.

I believe that the problem lies not in frum-women's looks or in frum-men's shallowness, but in the system of shidduch dating itself and the yeshivish world's approach to interaction between the sexes. To explain: The core idea behind shidduch dating is that since men and women in the yeshivish world do not meet or socialize in any informal way, they require some assistance in meeting potential partners when they decide that they want to get married. In some cases people are set up by friends or family who know of a suitable member of the opposite sex, but

¹ Morethodoxy shut down, so I am posting my previously published articles as PDFs here. They have not been revised.

the number of possibilities offered in this pool of potential mates is rather slim. Hence, many people use a shadchan or shadchanit (matchmaker) to get dates.

Here is the rub: How does one explain to one's shadchan what it is one is looking for? When a shadchan (or anyone else for that matter) asks a man what it is he is looking for in a potential mate, the man will inevitably begin to make a check-list. Let's assume that the list does not, in fact, begin with looks but with the intangibles: the man may say he wants a woman who is kind, intelligent and with a good sense of humor. This is not much of a help for narrowing down options; my guess is that there are not a lot of self-described "mean, dense and humorless" women for the shadchanit to cross off her list. These personality traits are too intangible.

Looks, on the other hand, can be quantified. A man can say that he wants a woman who is young, thin, blond and busty. Now we have the potential for a checklist: age can be specified, bodies have weight, hair and eyes have color, dresses have sizes. Since the man has never met any of these women and cannot possibly meet all of them, he does the shadchan a favor by being specific and designing his dream girl on paper.

This check-listing has been perfected over the years. Now many men automatically fill in requests for 19-year-old women, even if the men themselves are 30, and size 2 for preferred dress size, even if the men themselves are less than "fit." Most men, of course, have no idea about women's dress sizes; nevertheless, most young men do have mothers and said mothers can help their sons weed out the undesirables. Some checklists have even become "sophisticated" enough to include the potential bride's *mother's* dress size – a sort of insurance policy for the future.

This commoditization is very disturbing and the practical question of what to do about it inspired Halberstam's controversial piece. Halberstam believes that there is nothing to do about this commoditization; it is just the way men are. Hence, for a woman to succeed in the shidduch dating world, Halberstam claims, she needs to be as physically attractive as possible. This means make-up and nice clothing in the

best of cases, and Botox®, tummy tucks and plastic surgery in the more difficult ones. To this, Boteach responds that the men can be changed. What is needed, Boteach claims, is to teach the frum men to stop commoditizing the women. “Tell the Yeshiva students that the Torah they are learning is supposed to actually change their hearts,” he writes.

Let me offer an alternative analysis. Of course, Halberstam is right that dating is primarily about attraction. And, of course, Boteach is right that the commoditization of women in the frum world reflects the basest form of disrespect towards women. But here is where I disagree: unlike Halberstam, I don’t think that this bizarre check-listing phenomenon is the natural way men – frum or secular – relate to women. And unlike Boteach, I don’t think this commoditization is the fault of frum men simply giving in to misogynistic impulses. Put another way: I do not think that frum men are more looks-focused than men in general; this check-list mentality is unnatural, even for them. In my opinion, the checklist mentality is actually the (virtually) inevitable consequence of the shidduch-dating system and results from a fundamental misunderstanding of attraction.

It is true that attraction is extraordinarily tied to looks, perhaps even more so for men than women. What is *not* true is that a person’s looks can be objectively quantified with some sort of “attractiveness quotient.” What attracts people to each other is often hard to discern; even for the couple themselves it may be mostly subconscious. There are physical characteristics; there is body language; there is rapport; there are personality traits.

Each person is an amalgamation of traits and each person is attracted to a certain overall blend of traits in a potential mate. I would venture to guess that most people could not actually articulate what it is about a person that attracts them such that this person would be distinguishable from hundreds of others that *seem* to fit that description, but don’t actually attract them. A person’s conscious mind is just the tip of the iceberg and a person’s subconscious is little understood – even by him- or herself.

By attempting to select dates for a man based on a checklist of criteria provided by him, the shidduch system *forces* the man to quantify the unquantifiable. Inevitably, the process of quantifying commoditizes that which one is quantifying, in this case women. It is my belief that if these same men had get-togethers with women from their community, and the two groups were able to meet each other and get to know each other, the men and women who were attracted to one another would begin to gravitate towards each other and nature would take its course.

To take Halberstam's vignette as an illustration: She speaks about a get-together she attended with single young women and the mothers of single young men. Halberstam was shocked that these girls were not dressed-to-kill to impress the mothers. Didn't they know that looks mattered? My guess is that of course they knew, and if the get-together had included the young men they would have dressed differently. What they did *not* know was how to be attractive to said young men's mothers. I assume the young women intuited, as most of us do, that attracting a mate requires the mate to be there. Since inevitably the mother will not find the girl "attractive," the most she can do is to compare her feature by feature with her son's checklist. It is an unfair test and an irrelevant one, since the checklist is most probably wrong and artificial.

Sadly, this checklist culture feeds on itself. The lists get more and more specific and the women become only the sum of their parts. As Boteach says correctly – and this cannot be emphasized enough – such a culture leads to women developing depression and eating disorders, with a significant percentage dying, literally, from anorexia or bulimia.

To be fair, Halberstam is not only speaking from the place of a concerned elder. In the article, Halberstam describes her own memories of feeling dissatisfied with her looks when she was younger to such an extent that she took "some cosmetic steps that changed [her] life: a diet, hair-straightening, and most significant of all: a 'nose job'." She writes that doing so gave her "newfound confidence." I am sorry she had confidence issues when she was younger and I believe that she had every right to diet, change her hair and even her nose if she felt a yearning to do so.

These are personal decisions and they may very well have been the right ones for her, considering the emotional issues she describes that were eroding her self-esteem.

However, if a woman is not suffering confidence issues, it would seem to me to be more than a little ethically problematic to cause her to suffer them by telling her that she will never get married without an hourglass figure and a button nose. To quote Boteach: “I have never even heard it suggested by the most superficial relationship expert that we should take young women for plastic surgery in order to attract a husband.” The reason Boteach has never heard this suggested is because it is false. It is the commoditizing tendency of shidduch dating that creates the twisted impression of its truth. Even the horrifically commoditizing reality TV show [Bridalplasty](#) begins with the premise that all twelve women competing for the plastic surgery are *already* getting married regardless. Can it really be that the world of yeshivish men has dropped to even below the standards of the basest of reality TV shows? I cannot believe that. It is not the men; it is the shidduch system.

In short, I agree that there is a crisis in the shidduch-dating world and that the commoditization of women has reached such an extreme that one kind-hearted frum plastic surgeon is now offering [pro bono plastic surgery](#) for Orthodox Jewish singles. For my part, I do not believe the crisis can be solved either by surgically creating a race of frum Barbie-dolls or by telling men that only inner beauty counts and not attraction. The crisis is caused by shidduch dating itself and the culture of check-listing endemic to it. Men and women will be attracted to each other for a mix of physical, emotional and intellectual reasons. What they need most is the opportunity to meet and sort it out on their own. Perhaps a new model of frum dating is in order.