

# Matchless

## *An Observant Jew Searches for Love*

Viva Hammer

I came to America in the hope of a husband, leaving my birthplace and my parents' loving home ten thousand miles behind.

Not a man in Australia ever asked me on a date. I was the only observant Jew at the University of Sydney, with girlfriends of all stripes, but having a male friend would have caused a scandal and dating out of the faith was unthinkable. In Australia being a Jew was eccentric, but being an Orthodox feminist Jew was impossible. So two days after finishing law school, I escaped to New York City. In the carnival of New York I would (without doubt) find soulmates: interweaved, interlocking nests of comrades. In New York I would be *normal*.

I slept on the couches of friends, of friends of friends, and then of anyone who'd have me. While I studied for the Bar Exam I rented a room from a rebbetzin (rabbi's wife) on Manhattan's Lower East Side. All day she vacuumed while rattling on the phone about *shidduchim*—marriage matches. My arrival caused a tumult, as she now had in her fist an exotic specimen to launch. Before the first date she yelled because I didn't wear stockings and when I ran out in a rain shower to buy a pair she yelled that I didn't have a blowdryer. Nevertheless she introduced me to a man she thought suitable because he didn't wear a hat and I was barelegged. We both liked hiking and we stayed together two months.

After I moved out of the rebbetzin's orbit, I lived single for three glorious years. Without a network of family or school friends, I still managed to make a list of about fifty men I'd been set up with. (Lists were so you wouldn't—perish the thought—date the same person twice). This was the 1990s; the internet was a decade away. We communicated by phone and left voicemails or sent faxes.

I was a terribly nervous dater. I had no brothers and had never had an intimate conversation with a man. My aim was to find favor in someone's eyes, like a piece of inventory in

a shop window, hoping someone would pick me out. Most of the fifty men I met only once; a few lasted two months each, which was considered long-term. Whether I rejected a suitor or he rejected me, I was despondent. All I wanted was to get the process over with and go back to being part of a loving family. So when a charming rabbi from a distinguished family asked me to marry him, I accepted.

The rabbi and I dated for fourteen weeks and were engaged for nine. Before our first night alone, we had not touched.

Upon emerging from under the marriage canopy, I became a rebbetzin. All my dreams for New York were fulfilled: ring, headscarf, parsonage.

Jewish law obliges a man to marry. “And whoever lives without a wife lives without well-being, without blessing, without a home, without Torah, without a protective wall, without peace...whoever has no wife is not a man...” (Yakov ben Asher, *Arba'ah Turim*, Even Ha-Ezer, Ch 1). A woman has no such obligation, but the rabbis were not concerned. “A woman wants to marry more than a man wants to marry,” (Yakov ben Asher, Yevamot 113a), so much so, that “a woman prefers to be impoverished and married than wealthy and unmarried” (Talmud Sotah 20a).

In traditional Jewish circles marriage is almost universal. Single life is a shame, a sorrow. The matchmaker is no mere vacuuming busybody; she is an agent of national survival.

Twenty-one years after I stood under the wedding canopy, I was divorced. For almost half a decade, I lived in limbo: separated but not divorced. Now I was free.

Divorce has always been permitted in Jewish law, but even today it is rare. The 2014 Pew Religious Landscape study finds that only 9 percent of adult Jews surveyed are divorced and currently unmarried while 14 percent of Christians are. Symmetrically, 52 percent of Christians are married whereas 56 percent of Jews are. Naomi Schaefer Riley's *'Til Faith Do Us Part: How Interfaith Marriage Is Transforming America* finds that Jews married to Jews have half the divorce rate of any other religious group surveyed, although Jews married to non-Jews divorce at the average rate.

For observant Jews, the couple is the unit of participa-

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tion in a community; a single person is an extra digit, a misfit. Observant Jews do not divorce because married life is uncomfortable or even unpleasant; they divorce only when they are desperate.

At the beginning of my second singlehood, I was jubilant with freedom. In America, as much as among religious Jews, marriage is celebrated and coveted, and I was afraid I would be shunned as a divorcée. Far from it! Friends were so supportive; neighbors I had never noticed congratulated me. A colleague I hadn't seen in a decade told me I looked years younger.

And I was determined to try again. The loving people who had carried me through the marriage and its dismantling were distressed, and asked *why*? Why couldn't I just enjoy life alone and free?

How can I justify starting this risky journey again? Simply, I don't want to be alone. I want someone to look after me and someone to look after, to live in mutual striving and support, to be co-mentors and peer coaches for one other. Someone to whisper to at 4 a.m. when the night won't pass.

I'm a single woman in my forties with grown children, stimulating work, and a network of friends, living in a home I built. This time around I will choose my partner, not capitulate in a panic for the process to be over, but with the hope that I will find someone fitting. Astonishingly, confusingly, I am much more popular now than when I was young.

This time, my network is trolling their networks for me. As soon as I was free, I was inundated with names. I never say no. And I am never nervous. The exercise is simple because in a partner I require only two things: that a man be righteous and that he be intelligent.

I am an immigrant, and an optimist. Every horizon is an enticement to my curiosity. If I need to put food on the table, I go through a process called earning a living. Similarly (I reasoned), to find a partner I would go through the dating process and out of it would come a soulmate. "Nothing stands before the human will," our tradition teaches.

So I went down the list of men, who are mostly nonreligious. A wider net would yield better results, I decided, and if we came to love each other, all differences would be smoothed out.

The men arrived, gray-skinned from indoor work, with eyes dulled from sleeplessness and a diet of coffee. It only takes my asking a couple of questions. And then! What they pour out to me of sibling suicides and breech births, money troubles and death out at sea. Brothers disappeared and recovered as French chefs, families jagged by crisis.



Edvard Munch, *Two Human Beings* (also known as *The Lonely Ones*), circa 1899

Ending with, "I've said too much," after which I smile encouragingly and say, "You can never tell me too much," and I wait for them to ask something about me, which they rarely do, and when they do, they do not listen to the answer. They do not want a conversation but to unburden themselves to a smiling face.

Half the men I meet have no loving person within five thousand miles. Their temperaments vary, but the dates do not. They speak their stories and I listen, breathless. They don't want to know anything about me, and then they want to go out again and again. They become *infatuated*. For a girl who didn't have a single date through her whole young life, this is unfathomable. Men tell me women are hard and mean and looking for glamor. They want my empathy (which I willingly give). And then they want other things too.

I was celibate till I married and have been celibate since I separated more than a half decade ago. Secular friends ask if it's because I have a low sex drive, and I raise my eyebrows. Do I have no appetite or thirst today, as I write this, on a long religious fast over a hot holiday weekend in which the rest of the country is reveling? Do I never wish to jump in a car or make a phone call or turn on the dishwasher on the Sabbath? Do I not itch to share a word of gossip with a friend? All these tempt me, and I resist them. That is the nature of religion: choosing to live your life by the law, whatever everyone else does, and contrary to what your heart desires.

Premarital sex is not considered adultery in Jewish law. Adultery is a capital crime defined as sex between a married woman and a man who's not her husband. Sex outside of marriage is not a capital crime, but proscribed nevertheless, and I keep those rules, just as I keep the kosher and Sabbath

rules, even when it's excruciatingly hard to do so. I am not a masochist; I love my religion as I love life. The moments of struggle are overwhelmed by the pleasurable ones.

In dating nonreligious men today, I discover we're meeting with different purposes. Even if some claim they wouldn't mind a partner, the time till they find one is indeterminate and by the time they meet me, they have failed to reach that goal.

Involuntary singlehood in the middle of life is the symptom of something else. It is the result of one set of maladies and the cause of another set. Between the ages of thirty-five and sixty-five, the majority are partnered. Those who are not, are not waiting to have their needs met. Why would they?

"Ninety-five percent of men are prepared to sleep with a woman on the first date, but only 5 percent of women are willing," a friend of mine who's been at this for a long time informs me (providing no source). "But by the fourth date, 65 percent of women are ready." I am aghast. What's the difference between the first and the fourth date in terms of knowing someone, feeling safe with him, or even comfortable? Forget religion, forget physical health, forget even emotional health: how can a woman feel safe getting naked in front of a man after a fourth date?

No doubt some women have the psychological power to go into combat with men, but I am not one of them. By any measure I am of the weaker sex. Although physically active I am petite and have no martial arts. Even without religious observance, it would behoove me to check out the men I want to be intimate with before making myself vulnerable to them.

Women friends frown when I explain my philosophy. Isn't sex the purpose of dating? I respond: If you want to turn a date into a partner, how is sleeping with the date before you know him going to get you to partnership? Isn't sex a signal of intimacy? The outcome of trust, and caring? Is the sex-first approach an effective path to permanence?

Women then confess that sex has a paradoxical effect on unattached couples: it makes women desiring of more intimacy, and men less. A woman's body no longer has any value in encouraging a man into a lasting relationship. Which is fortunate, because I'm not offering it.

Today people date for sex, with partnership a distant possibility. I date for that distant possibility, of which sex is a part.

After eight months of intensive dating, I took a break while my parents visited from Australia. Reminded of what a family looks like, and what its purpose is, I began again with a different method: the religious matchmakers. Even if a religious man isn't celibate, he's not expecting sex on the fourth date.

There are few religious Jews in America, or anywhere in the world. We have always relied on middlewomen and men to help us join demand and supply, and this generation is no different. In the dating world, a matchmaker can encourage an unlikely couple, or smooth the jitters. The best ones have connections to outposts in regions holding that singular jewel we're seeking.

Jewish law mandates that a matchmaker get some reward for a match that turns to marriage, but no one does it

for that, and some absolutely refuse reward. The work required and the failure rates are so high that a matchmaker must be driven by obsession. Last week I was honored to be taken on by the most famous matchmaker in the world, a woman featured in the secular press, who has made hundreds of matches and spends all her time on it. I drove half a day to visit her and together we scrolled through her inventory.

This matchmaker is more than I bargained for. She is available on demand, to give coaching and encouragement. She tells me how to move things along and how to slow things down. But she does not do background checks.

For that I have to tap into my

worldwide network. There are no six degrees of separation for Jews, and it doesn't matter where they live; I'm surprised if there are one-and-a-half degrees of separation.

The matchmaker sets me up with men in those far flung places. An observant Jew serious about getting married has to be willing to communicate using every medium, and to get onto planes for the short or the long haul. A first date on the phone is so inferior to one in person that it might take me ten minutes to get a feel on a person as opposed to ten seconds. But the principle is the same: Does he ask a good question? Or does he talk without ceasing about himself?

That is, can he *communicate*?

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So far, the most interesting dates have been with the matchmaker. On our first messaging exchange she jokingly offered to marry me herself, assuring me her husband would be thrilled. She's not a sheltered lady; she's selling fur coats in the Sahara.

I've been divorced a year now, and haven't come across anyone worth meeting more than a few times. Some have been predators awaiting their next chance; some have been dull. A couple were intelligent. Not one was righteous, nor interested in hearing anything but his own voice. Nevertheless, I feel privileged to have listened to a few dozen who gave me a deep immersion into manhood.

I feel now the necessity and inevitability of being alone, and the image that comes to mind is a bud unfolding leaf by leaf. Becoming me without aids, without anyone to lean on, to support me and encourage me, to take care of me as I take care of him.

That is, I will unfold by myself.

Somehow I feel the relentless love-looking my dates and I are engaged in is a metaphor for something larger. Perhaps it is an attempt to alleviate the essential aloneness of all humans. We are looking for the completion of ourselves, or the perfection of the self, and the person on the other side of the table is someone who hasn't shaven or showered that morning, who can't make eye contact or pronounce our names.

Singlehood describes a social status, but it is also a facet of the mind. The internal sense of singlehood cannot be fixed by dating, even if it culminates in a ceremony under a wedding canopy. Many married people feel aloneness even though society views them as attached. Singlehood is the human condition, and the ceaseless search to end it is the search for that which will shelter us from the unknown. No living being, however beloved, can achieve that for another person.

This past Sabbath as torrential rain fell I felt enveloped by a canopy of love, from my children and my parents, my workmates, a new neighbor who sends homemade challa—braided bread—over on Sabbath eve, friends at every corner of the earth.

I might well settle down in that space and bless the Lord who sent me here and not go chasing after love I cannot have. ■

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