



My single status would have been a mystery, if not for the fact that so many bright, kindhearted, pretty, talented older girls like me were also single. And I might have stayed single forever, had I not met *him*. No, he was not the marrying type, as he was already very much married. But it was a wonderful day when I met him, because he gave me a whole new perspective on how to approach *shidduchim*.

He was Rabbi Mann, a high school *rebbe* who had made a number of *shidduchim*, mostly with older singles or people with medical or cosmetic issues. I met his wife Leah at a *shiur* in our community, and she finagled me into eating a Shabbos meal at their house. After the meal, when the Mann kids had left the table, the conversation turned to *shidduchim*, as it invariably does when there is an older single in the room.

"I have a theory about older singles and *shidduchim*," Rabbi Mann remarked.

"And what's that?" I asked.

"I only share it with people who are able to hear it," Rabbi Mann said. "Some people get very upset when they hear my theory, so I'm careful with whom I share it."

Now, my curiosity was piqued. "I'll try not to get upset," I said. "Can I hear the theory?"

"Okay," he said, "here goes. My theory is based on a story in the Gemara, a story that you've probably heard. During the time of the Churban there was a severe hunger in Yerushalayim, and the wealthy Marta bas Baisus sent a messenger to bring her fine flour from the market. By the time the messenger arrived at the market, there was no fine flour to be had, so he returned to Marta and said, 'There's no fine flour, but there's white bread.' She told him to bring her that, but by the time he reached the market, the white bread was gone, too. He came back and reported, 'The white bread is gone, but there's coarse bread.' She sent him back to the market to buy the coarse bread, but by then there was only barley flour, and he returned to Marta and duly reported that. Marta decided to go to the marketplace herself to see what was available, but she died before she reached the marketplace.

"This story is the story of the older singles," Rabbi Mann continued. "Marta is a girl in *shidduchim*, and the messenger is the *shadchan*. Marta didn't read the map right — by the time she lowered her expectations a little, it was too late. She didn't quite grasp that she was living in a time of famine."

Rabbi Mann pushed his chair back from the table. "When a young girl enters *shidduchim*, she can, and should, look for the best of everything — *middos*, learning, family, personality. This is Plan A, the 'fine flour' approach. Plan A lasts for a certain number of years. After that, a girl has to draw a line in the sand and

realize that it's time for Plan B: barley flour. In Plan B, all that matters is that the boy has to be stable and committed to living according to halachah, and that the couple has to have some degree of compatibility. Nothing, but nothing, else makes a difference — not marital history, not moderate medical issues, not family, not religious background, *nothing*. It's a famine! You either take what's available, or you starve!"

Rabbi Mann let out a long sigh. "Unfortunately, schools don't teach the girls anything about Plan B, parents don't usually suggest it, and many girls cling to Plan A well into their late 20s and beyond. The *shadchanim* dutifully follow orders, and try valiantly to locate the right type of boy, but as girls wait anxiously for the right one and slowly, slowly lower their expectations, all the good boys disappear.

"So that's my theory," Rabbi Mann concluded. "Lots of people don't like it, and some people even find it insulting. But I know a few older girls who took what I told them to heart and went on to build beautiful Jewish homes. Not the type of homes they originally wanted to build, but beautiful homes nonetheless."

I listened silently to what he was saying, trying to digest the import of his words. I was feeling quite agitated, but since I had said that I'd try not to get upset, I forced myself to respond calmly. "So what you're suggesting," I said, "is that an older girl should just settle for anyone and take whatever she can get?"

"I'm not suggesting that anyone settle," Rabbi Mann clarified. "I'm suggesting that people broaden their horizons to include possibilities that didn't fit into the Plan A/fine flour mold. There are many wonderful boys out there who are kind, honest, and dependable, and who would make terrific husbands and fathers. They may be *baalei teshuvah*, they may have moderate medical issues, they may have learning disabilities, their appearance might be compromised, and they may be divorced. Many of these guys are practically illiterate in Torah, but they are fine, *ehrliche* people nonetheless. A girl who is serious about building a Torah-dig family can do it even with a barley flour husband, and she can go on to raise children who are true *bnei Torah*. But without flour, you can't bake bread at all."

I argued, I resisted, I fought Rabbi Mann fiercely. But he stuck to his guns, telling me that the Yiddishkeit in the home is dependent mostly upon the woman and not the man. "There is at least one *gadol* today whose righteous mother married a fellow who kept his store open on Shabbos," he said. "They produced a family of great *yirei shamayim*."

While I certainly could not stomach marrying someone who wasn't *frum*, I got the point. I took a deep breath, and let go of the Plan A helium balloon.

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I contacted the *shadchanim* I knew, most of whom had long since given up hope on me, and I apprised them of my new, abbreviated wish list: a boy who lives according to halachah and is eager to grow in his Yiddishkeit. “Family background is not an issue,” I told the *shadchanim*. “Actually, nothing else is an issue.”

I was quite surprised to discover how many nice boys there are out there who are interested in marrying a Bais Yaakov girl and are looking to grow. All these boys want, I learned, is a good girl who will say yes to them despite their background and whatever baggage they bring to the table.

From then on, I would agree to a brief but immediate online date with any boy who met my minimal criteria. A few of the boys I met this way were obviously incompatible, but because I hadn’t wasted a whole evening on a date, there was no harm done. Sometimes, I agreed to go out with a boy after the online date even though I doubted that anything would come of it, and I was usually right — except once, when I agreed to go out with Nathan, a recent *baal teshuvah*.

Nathan was a couple of years younger than me, and also a few inches shorter than me, a fact that I did not notice during our online date. He worked as a salesman for a software manufacturing company, and during his travels, he had been invited to spend Shabbos at the homes of Jewish families in many different cities. Eventually, he had decided to become observant. But he still couldn’t read Hebrew fluently.

I could hardly imagine myself marrying a guy who couldn’t pronounce the letter “*chaf*,” but I reminded myself that my new marriage criteria didn’t include the ability to pronounce a *chaf*, and I agreed to meet him despite his status as a newly minted *baal teshuvah*.

There was nothing remotely *yeshivish* about Nathan — which wasn’t surprising, considering that the only yeshivah he had ever studied in was the local branch of Ohr Somayach. Yet beneath the striped shirts and crocheted black *kippah*, I could see that he was deeply committed to Yiddishkeit, and that he truly desired to advance in his learning and build a Torah home. He was someone I could respect — if not for his scholarship, then for his sincerity.

My parents were stunned when I announced my intention to marry Nathan. I think it was harder for them to get past the Plan A paradigm than it was for me, and even now, some time after my wedding, they are still struggling to come to grips with my choice. As for my Hungarian bubby, I doubt she’ll ever recover from the shock and shame of having a grandson-in-law whose mother showed up to our *vort* in a *straw hat*! “In the middle of the winter,” Bubby lamented. “If she would have at least put some velvet on it ...”

The reactions of people outside the family were mixed. Many people tried to hide their pity, but I suspect that some of the older singles who came to my wedding actually envied me. “You’re so brave,” my friend Shira, 37, whispered in my ear.

I’m married to a man who can barely make Kiddush, never mind learn a Tosafos, and I have no doubt that there will be significant challenges ahead. But I now have a loving husband, someone with whom I can finally look forward to building a family. Together we are working to create a home for the Shechinah and lay the foundations for the next generation of *bnei Torah*. ■

To have your story retold by C. Saphir, e-mail a brief synopsis to lifelines@mishpacha.com. Details will be changed to assure confidentiality.