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# Matchmaker, Matchmaker, Make Me a Match

By Hannah Jackson



Photo: Courtesy of Netflix

For thousands of years, generation after generation of Jewish singles have relied on the *Shidduch*, the traditional Jewish matchmaking system, to find their *besht* — their destiny, which some consider a soulmate. Marriage brokers (called *shadchanim* in Yiddish) are highly respected in traditional communities, for creating a successful match is seen as not only a mitzvah but an act of God. Veneration for matchmakers was left behind in the Old World, though. Nowadays, matchmakers draw to mind Yente, Fiddler on the Roof's resident busybody, or Crossing Delancey's Hannah Mandelbaum, who thrusts

photos of young singles into the faces of concerned grandparents and unwitting bachelors.

Recently, the ancient practice has trickled back into the Zeitgeist. In spite of the unflattering stereotypes, matchmaking has caught a surprising second wind, finding a new audience in both popular media and real life. As films like *Fiddler* and *Crossing Delancey* continue to captivate decades after their releases, people are sourcing potential matches on TikTok and matchmakers are seeing more young clients than ever before. And with the recent release of Netflix's *Jewish Matchmaking* — an offshoot of the *Über*-successful *Indian Matchmaking* — the practice has been granted a new level of visibility. But why now? Is the stupor of dating-app fatigue wearing off? Are we all really just that tired of pandemic isolation? Is an old-school matchmaking service exactly what the next generation of 20-somethings needs to find love?

When Susan Sandler wrote *Crossing Delancey*, which premiered in 1988, she had no idea that a story about a young, cosmopolitan Jewish American woman whose Bubbe conspires with a matchmaker to set her up with a pickle vendor would be so prescient. For Sandler, the story was autobiographical. “There was a matchmaker who worked the benches with my grandmother, and I was a prime target,” she recalls. Regardless of how relatable the film may be to some, Sandler brings it back to the concept of *beshert*. “I think the film has a hold on a lot of imaginations because there’s something very magical about feeling that there’s a destiny that you’re being led to,” she says. That might also explain why the concept transfers so well to reality television, like on *Jewish Matchmaking*. “It’s wildly entertaining, the idea of someone handing over their fate,” she says. “It has a fairy-tale nature — someone reaching into the big basket of humanity and finding that one for you.”



*Crossing Delancey*. Photo: Warner Bros/Courtesy Everett Collection

Aleeza Ben Shalom, matchmaker and star of *Jewish Matchmaking*, doesn't mind if people refer to her as a "Yente," the name of the gossipy *shadchan* in *Fiddler*. "It's a badge of honor," says the matchmaker, who is Orthodox but works with clients across the spectrum of Judaism. Matchmaking is a common practice within the Orthodox community, but Ben Shalom, 46, has found that in recent years, the secular community is beginning to see the appeal. "I always say: 15 million Jews, 15 million ways to be Jewish."

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One of Ben Shalom’s onscreen clients, Dani Bergman, is a 27-year-old Los Angeles native who moved to Miami during the pandemic and felt disappointed in the dating scene. When *Jewish Matchmaking* came calling, she jumped at the chance to appear on the show. “Dating here is definitely harder. It’s Party City,” she says of Miami. Bergman aligns more with the cultural aspect of Judaism than the religion itself, but finding a Jewish partner has always been top of her list: “It’s

always been very important for me to marry within the Jewish culture, to keep that going.”

Bergman isn’t alone in that desire. Only 28 percent of American Jews report religion as paramount to their Jewish identity. “When you hear a Jewish person say they’re secular, it doesn’t mean the same thing as a Christian not going to church. It’s a very, very strong identity,” says Rabbi Rochelle Robins, vice-president and dean of the Chaplaincy School at the Academy for Jewish Religion. “It’s often a very strong affiliation toward politics, culture, music, the arts through a Jewish cultural lens,” she adds. But even though religiosity is on the decline, preserving Jewish tradition has become an increasingly important desire for the younger generation, especially in the face of rising antisemitism, which the Anti-Defamation League reports has reached an all-time high in the United States.



Dani Bergman on a date in season one of *Jewish Matchmaking*. Photo: Courtesy of Netflix

Robins, 55, also notes the Jewish population worldwide still has yet to achieve pre-Holocaust numbers. “I wonder how that’s impacting young people and what that does to the psyche,” she says. “Whatever is going on sociopolitically right now, it could be that younger people are feeling more attached to keeping that chain going because they’re seeing that it’s more at risk, whereas maybe ten years ago it wouldn’t have mattered as much.” Robins also acknowledges that while the vehicle of a Netflix dating show is new, the Jewish traditions remain steadfast. “In some ways, this is a brand-new phenomenon because of contemporary culture,” she says. “But it’s also potentially a recapitulation of this historical phenomenon, of Jews feeling a connection.”

That search for common ground is exactly what Simone Grossman, a 29-year-old matchmaker with the company Three Day Rule, has noticed with her clientele, too. She has gained a following on TikTok thanks to her dating advice and dubbed herself an “internet yenta,” a nod to the *Fiddler shadchan*. Grossman estimates that 90 percent of her Jewish clients strongly prefer a Jewish partner. “I think that it makes such a difference for other people to see their own cultures reflected back to them,” she says.

But it isn't the looming specter of violence that Grossman believes is encouraging them to carry on their lineage. Instead, she thinks many people just want to bond over positive experiences in their early lives. "I most often hear [from Jewish clients] that they had a really happy childhood. There's something that they want to impart onto their future generations," she says. "It's really about replicating the good parts of their childhood, which I find really sweet." Jana Davidoff, who met her second husband, Jeff, through Three Day Rule, seconds Grossman's anecdotal evidence. "I always wanted to marry a Jewish guy," she says. "There's a foundation of similar upbringings. Even if nothing else is the same there's some commonality. You feel like you've known each other for a long time."



*Jewish Matchmaking*. Photo: Netflix/Courtesy of Netflix

It's not just young Orthodox Jewish people who've been leaning on *shadchanim*. Ben Shalom has noticed a rise in secular clients, too. "Over the last 15 years, we have seen a lot of young people in this more secular world more open to the concept of using a matchmaker, a dating coach and getting a lot of support along the way," she says. Davidoff, a Reform Jew, always thought of matchmaking in relation to *Fiddler on the Roof* and was hesitant to try it. "I think there's a lot of judgment that's placed on *why* you hired a matchmaker. Like, *What's wrong with you?*" But she was willing to give it a go

when her matchmaker helped her reframe her thinking. “People use headhunters for jobs all the time; why not use a headhunter for your dating life?” she says.

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What was once seen as desperate is slowly becoming de rigueur. Dating apps evolved in a similar way. But today, there is no shortage of reporting on how online dating mostly just frustrates young singles. The lack of courtesy and seemingly endless choices of dating-app culture has bred a Prisoner’s Dilemma of sorts, fostering an environment that punishes sincerity and rewards indifference. It’s a concept that can feel completely antithetical to finding a real partner. But using a matchmaker could

make things easier. Instead of questioning your date’s intentions, you already know that they’re getting drinks with you because they really are looking for something romantic — not just sex or even an ego boost. And if you both used the matchmaking service to find each other, it can feel like permission has been granted for both parties to act with earnestness.

Sandler recalls feeling depressed after attending a matchmaking party in her single days. But when considering the era of online dating and isolation, she changes her tune: “If I were you at this moment now, I might be tempted to put myself in the hands of a matchmaker.” The minds behind dating apps are beginning to take note of this tone shift and are adjusting their advertising accordingly. “I was sitting on the subway yesterday looking at the ad campaign for Tinder. It’s so shocking,” she recalls. “It’s all about tenderness and continuity and being able to park your toothbrush in someone’s bathroom for endless nights. It’s all about love and permanence.”



*Jewish Matchmaking*. Photo: Netflix

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*live like this?”* Grossman also saw a significant increase in matchmaking interest during the pandemic. “When you’re forced to reckon with uncertainty, you want to hold people close,” she says.

If navigating dating apps wasn’t already hellish enough, the isolation (and Zoomification) of the pandemic cemented a sense of disillusionment for many singles. Ben Shalom, like many *shadchanim*, cites the global event as a major inception point of dating consciousness: Not only did many people have seemingly endless free time to watch dating reality shows like *Indian Matchmaking* or *Love Is Blind* and live vicariously through the contestants, but “people were introspective, and they started to look at themselves and say, *Do I want to*

But has the pushback against digital-forward relationships led to a crisis of



faith? “We’re still figuring out how to date as a culture. There’s no right way at the moment. We’re in this transition point, which is really exciting,” Grossman adds. “I think that’s where the fascination [with matchmaking] comes in and why so many people are really serious and a little bit more open-hearted.”

Anybody in the Jewish community can become a *shadchan*. All it takes are pure intentions, which pair well with the tight-knit values of Jewish community. Whether matches are made formally or informally, “they have a vision for your happiness, and it pushes aside everything that is the performative business of dating,” Sandler says. “To sweep all of that away and have someone come to you and say, ‘I have a beautiful person that I’ve looked at for you and that I think is a good match for you that I bless as someone that can enter your life with great joy’ is such a big relief.” Relief is also the operative word for Davidoff, who met her now husband at the height of the pandemic. “I almost didn’t realize how much I needed that [support] because I am an independent woman and I’ve been doing it on my own for so long, that to have that support feels incredible,” she says. “It’s easy to lose faith. [My matchmaker] kept my faith for me, even when I couldn’t keep it for myself. And here I am married with the most amazing daughter ever. I feel so lucky.”

Reporting this story, I found that fielding personal questions from *shadchanim* — both professional and amateur — was quickly becoming an occupational hazard. I was (for some reason) surprised to find myself on the receiving end of quandaries from my sources asking me where *I* go to meet people, if *I* was single, if *I* would ever let a matchmaker set me up. There is an innate love that radiates from that kind of audaciousness, a true embrace of Jewish community. I was reminded of my beloved late grandmother, Dolores, who, up until her last days, was chiefly concerned with her grandchildren’s happiness — even if that meant always asking, both lovingly and probingly: “Are you seeing anyone?”