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Shidduch Narratives: “Disclosing,” or Sharing a Life in Context

A dilemma faced in many *shidduchim* is how much and when to reveal less than positive aspects about oneself. On one hand, there is a realistic concern that revealing too much too early will doom the relationship before it gets off the ground. On the other hand, not revealing pertinent information creates its own problems. The person feels like a fraud and will question whatever positive feedback he is getting from his partner. “How positive would she feel about me if she knew the truth about me?” “She likes the person I'm pretending to be and not the real me.” Likewise, the truth often comes out later, and even if the person had a *psak* that he wasn't *halachically* obligated to disclose this information - and even if the partner would have accepted the shidduch if they had been told, now they resent having been deceived.

This article does not address the issue of what or when a person is obligated to reveal to his date any particular negative aspect of himself. That is an issue that each person needs to discuss with a *posek*. However, besides asking for a *halachic* ruling of what one is **obligated** to reveal it is also strongly recommended to ask for advice as to what would be **advisable** to reveal. Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, for example, was asked by parents of a young man if they are obligated to reveal a certain family issue to his date. He responded that although *halachically* they may not be obligated to do so, he advises them to do so anyway because otherwise the other side will feel deceived and resentful when they later become aware of it. This will likely negatively impact the relationship.¹

This paper focuses on the next step, after the decision is made to reveal negative information. I discuss the **process** and the **manner** in which this type of information is revealed. I am proposing a process that allows the development of the relationship and the revealing of the details of one's life to go hand in hand. This gradual process is more likely to result in a successful outcome than deception or an abrupt disclosure.

¹ בספר חכו ממתקים (ח"ב עמ' קלה): נשאל רבנו (רבי שלמה זלמן אויערבאך) האם יש צורך לספר על בעיה משפחתית ואמר "הדבר הגרוע ביותר הוא, כאשר האשה מגלה את הדבר לאחר הנישואין. במקרה כזה, האשה חשה מרומה, והדבר עלול להעכיר לחלוטין את אורת שלום הבית. לפיכך כדאי לספר על הבעיה לפני סיום השידוך".

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Chazal tell us that one is permitted - or perhaps even required - to “change from the truth” for the sake of peace.¹ When *Hashem* informed Sarah that she would have a child, she wondered how this was possible when “my husband is old.” When *Hashem* repeated her comment to Avrohom, He “changed” her comment to, “when I am old.” There was a concern, *Chazal* tell us, and that if Avrohom heard Sarah describe him as being “old” it would perhaps – to a slight degree – impact negatively on their harmonious relationship.² Therefore, for the sake of peace, *Hashem* “changed” what she said.

I have always wondered why *Chazal* use the euphemism of “changing” for the sake of peace, rather than calling a spade a spade. Why don't they describe *Hashem's* action as "שקר" כביכול?

I would like to suggest one possible way to understand this. Perhaps it is **more** accurate to characterize what *Hashem* did as having “changed” Sarah's specific words rather than characterizing it as distorting her intentions as would be implied if we said *Hashem* “lied.”

When Sarah wondered how she could possibly have a child when her husband was so old, she did not mean to say anything derogatory about him. She was just being factual. But there was a possibility that Avrohom would understand it with some connotation of negativity. To eliminate the possibility of such a misunderstanding and to make sure that Sarah's statement was understood as it was **truly** meant, *Hashem* “changed” her actual words. This is why it is called “changing” and not lying.

This idea has an important application to the Shidduch process. Being factually honest without context can result in painting a **false** picture. *Bochurim* burdened by their (often exaggerated) perception of their shortcomings will often react in one of these two subconscious defensive maneuvers: 1) Dump and dread, or 2) Evade and pretend.

In the first, the *bochur* dreads the rejection he is certain will come his way as soon as his date discovers his true shameful self. This often prompts him to immediately address this fear with a preemptive strike: “Hello I'm Shimmy and I sometimes sleep through *davening*.” This opening remark gives the false impression that this deficiency is his most salient feature. It leaves out important facts that may mitigate the negativity of his actions and certainly leaves out the context of his complete self.

In the second, more common, defensive maneuver, the *bochur* will strive to avoid rejection by avoiding topics related to his weaknesses and pretend that all is perfect in his life. There is an understandable reluctance for people to reveal to their dates some of the challenges and difficulties they have faced in their lives. For example, they will ask their Rav if and when

¹ רש"י וירא (יח:ג): ואני זקנתי - שינה הכתוב מפני השלום, שהרי היא אמרה ואדוני זקן [ב"מ פז.]:
² ראה שיחות מוסר (רבי חיים שמואלביץ), מאמר י', "גדול השלום".

they are obligated to “disclose” to their date that they have been in psychotherapy for a number of years.

Let us say that the Rav rules that they are obligated to reveal this information by the 5th date. The person will then try to put on their best face before that point. They will paint a picture of being a perfect person, with a perfect family and a perfect life. On the 5th date, when they reluctantly drop the bombshell that they have been in therapy for a number of years, it is so incongruous with the picture that they had painted up to that point that it will inevitably make their date suspect everything she has been told. They will often also resent having been misled.

The question remains, how and when to reveal information of this sort? We seem to be stuck with a difficult dilemma. If one reveals the problem before the relationship develops it will usually result in a “no.”¹ If one waits until a relationship is already established then the shock of the incongruous revelation and the resentment over the deception can lead to an angry break up or a resentful acquiescence.

The Framework of the Process

Rav Ahron Kotler writes that people, in general, tend to be more aware of - and give more weight to - their deficiencies than to their accomplishments.² (I find this to be especially true for those who grew up in a critical environment.) This, understandably, is a source of much anxiety in the *shidduch* process where they find it hard to believe that someone will be accepting of a seriously deficient person such as themselves. This may be exacerbated by another phenomenon common among those with impaired self-esteem - putting others on a pedestal. This combination creates an illusion of a tremendous gap between them and their *shidduch*, when there may really be no gap at all or a minor one at most. In an attempt to compensate for this perceived gap, they try to present themselves as more positive than they believe they truly are. This makes them feel like a fraud³ and undermines the development of a true relationship.

Before young people start dating, it is imperative that they be at least as aware of their positive attributes and accomplishments as they are of their negative attributes and challenges. Likewise, they should be aware that their dates are not likely to be flawless human beings (regardless of what it says on the resume). It is always two imperfect people who need to see if

¹ See my article “Hearing the Bas Kol” for an explanation from the Steipler as to why a person is more accepting of a shortcoming in the context of an existing good relationship.

² בספר משנת רבי אהרן (רבי אהרן קוטלר, פר' ראה יד:א) ... "חביב אדם שנברא בצלם, חביבים ישראל שנקראו בנים למקום" (אבות ג:יד), עם קדוש, ועם סגולה, ומ"מ בדרך כלל אין האדם מכיר חשיבותו הנוראה הזאת, והוא מכיר את עצמו אך מצד הפחיתות שבו ... וממילא הוא פחות ונבזה בעיני עצמו, וע"י כך הוא באמת הולך ומתקטן ... [This self-deprecation can lead to a compensatory inflated ego -see my article on “Self-Esteem and Gaavah”].

³ This has been called “The Imposter Syndrome.”

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they are suitable for each other. When a date says no, it's usually because they feel that it isn't a good match rather than a rejection of the other person's essence.

The fact that so many young people use the expression “she dumped me” to describe being told “no” indicates that they experience it as a total rejection of their essence! It is to avoid this shame that compels them to be so defensive and evasive. This is besides the advice they often get, emphasizing everything they shouldn't do or say. Advice that reinforces the idea that if they are themselves no one will accept them.

A Life in Context

The tendency to be overly self-critical impacts how people relate to the context of their actions. They will minimize accomplishments by attributing them to favorable circumstances (e.g., “someone helped me”) but won't cut themselves any slack when lack of accomplishment or misbehavior can reasonably be attributed, in part, to extenuating circumstances. They disparage such explanations as “excuses” and claim that it is unacceptable from a *hashkafic* perspective.

This attitude of giving more weight to our negative behaviors than to our positive ones is an unfortunate distortion of *hashkafah*. In fact, *chazal* tell us that *Hashem's* measure for reward is five hundred times greater than His measure for punishment.¹ Likewise, our aversion to evaluating and judging our behaviors in context is also incongruent with *hashkafah*. In fact, Rav Chaim Volozhiner explains that the statement found in the beginning of the *zichronos* in *musaf* of *Rosh Hashana*, that *Hashem* remembers את כל המפעל - the complete enterprise, is referring to the context of the positive or negative act. The very same *aveira* can be considered more or less egregious, depending on the circumstance. For instance, says Rav Chaim, eating *treif* because one is very hungry is less serious of an *aveira* than one who does it because the food is tempting.²

How people view themselves - including their ability to view their history in context - obviously impacts how they present themselves to others. Someone who is acutely aware of his deficiencies and imperfections while downplaying and minimizing his achievements will understandably be terrified of the *shidduch* process. In his own eyes, his only hope to find someone who will marry him is by pulling the wool over her eyes.

¹ סוטה יא. ותוס' שם.

² בספר "שיחות לוי" (רבי יעקב יצחק הלוי רודמן, תשנ"ה) בפר' נצבים תשל"ה - ...בתפילת מוסף דר"ה [בתחילת סדר זכרונות] "אתה זוכר את כל המפעל וגם כל היצור לא נכחד ממך". וביאר הנחלת דוד בשם רבו הגדול הגר"ח מוולאז'ין ז"ל: זכירת המפעל היינו המצב של החטא, דיש חטא שהוא יותר חמור מאחר, אע"פ ששניהם אותו המעשה, למשל כמו אכילת חלב אם הוא רעב ואכלו או אם אכלו להכעיס ולתאבון, שהשי"ת זוכר מצב החטא... ונוסח כל היצור פירוש האיש, מה היה חינוך האדם שעשה את החטא, ולמשל שאין טובעים מאחד שישב בברוקלין כמו לאחר שישב בקעלם (בשעתו) מפני השפעת הסביבה עליו או שאר חינוך האדם. ובהוספות לספר [הובא בסוף ספר "משאת לוי", תשנ"ח, עמ' שכז'] מובא על זה "כי הקב"ה דן את האדם לפי כוחותיו שלו והמצב שהוא שרוי בו". [וכן ברור מדברי המכתב מאלהיו, ח"א, "קונטרס הבחירה". ראה גם בן יהודע פסחים נד: "עומק הדין".]

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Those who see their lives in context are usually more cognizant and appreciative of their accomplishments. Even when it comes to their deficiencies, they appreciate the particular challenges they faced and are therefore less overwhelmed with shame over them and are also proud of the significant steps they have taken to improve. They are also more likely to realize that others probably also had to deal with challenges, so they don't automatically put their date on a pedestal. This is important because putting them on a pedestal creates an even more extreme perceived gap between their perfect date and their own inadequate, shameful self.

The Process of Letting One's Self Be Known

As emphasized above, the first step in this process is viewing yourself in a balanced manner and in context. That means being at least equally aware of your fine points and accomplishments as you are of your limitations and shortcomings. Likewise, when considering your shortcomings make sure to be aware of extenuating circumstances that may have made your life particularly challenging. This can be especially difficult for people to do when it comes to less obvious circumstances that can negatively impact a person's life. If someone lost a parent or his parents divorced, everyone understands that this made his life more challenging. If “all” that happened was that his parents had no *sholom bayis* or he was consistently and unfairly criticized, he is not as likely to see the connection between those facts and his current difficulties. This narrow perspective is often reinforced by respected people in the community who share this limited vision.

A high school principal once asked me for advice in dealing with a 15-year-old student who was seriously underperforming, both academically and behaviorally. In describing the background, the principal related that there was extreme conflict in the parents' relationship. Yet, when I asked the principal for his understanding of why the student was so deficient, he responded: "I guess he must be lazy."

This is in contrast to *gedolei Yisroel* who have emphasized the crucial impact of early family relations on a child's future development. For example: Rav Matisyahu Salomon, writes the following:

It is not an easy thing for anyone to sit through a whole day of school, especially a child, and the mother has to be waiting to shower him with *rachmanus* when he comes home.... If, however, the home to which he returns is stressful and judgmental, if he goes to sleep with resentment and frustration... his resentments will be directed toward his parents, his brothers and sisters, his *rebbeim* and teachers, the Torah and even the *Ribbono Shel Olam*, Heaven forbid. And then we're surprised when some children become dropouts. I don't call them dropouts. I call them pushouts. How can we blame them when they were pushed out by the way we treated them, albeit without malicious intent?¹

¹ *With Hearts Full of Love* (Mesorah, 2009) p. 73. [See my article on “off the *derech*” youngsters for more similar quotes].

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Mindset

I suggest the following as a general frame of mind that increases the likelihood of a relatively smooth *shidduch* process.

- I am a valuable human being with much to offer in a relationship.
- I am not perfect, and my date is not likely to be either.
- The purpose of dating is to ascertain if we like each other and if we are well suited for each other.

If my date decides not to continue dating me, it is not likely to be because she thinks I'm a terrible person, rather it's simply because she decided that we are not suited for each other.

“Disclosing” or “Sharing”

When someone has negative information about themselves that they have to share with their date, they will tell me that their Rov said they have to “disclose” this information by the fifth date (for example). To me, the term “disclose” seems more appropriate when selling an object, such as a used car. The seller is obligated to disclose to the potential buyer that the car often overheats on hot days, for example. It seems to me out of place when discussing a person. One “shares” information about himself. Or as someone once put it: *Share to be known not to unburden.*

When a person views himself as a commodity for sale on the *shidduch* market, and he perceives himself as suffering from a shameful flaw, he will often try to compensate by presenting himself as flawless. He will describe himself, his family and his history in an idealized manner. Then at the point in the dating process when he was told he is required to “disclose,” he informs his date, somewhat abruptly, that he has been in therapy for two years or that he is taking medication for anxiety, or anything else of that nature.

The date understandably reacts with shock. This was so unexpected! It is so incongruous with the picture of him building in her mind. What else is he hiding? She wonders. While this method ostensibly has the benefit of holding off the negative information until the date gets to know you, the fact that it's done in this abrupt manner throws the date and the parents off and increases the likelihood of their backing out of the *shidduch*.

It is preferable to begin at an early stage of the dating process to gradually speak about the challenges one faced in life. It should be presented as a positive attribute of facing and overcoming challenges. (I compare it to how someone would speak of arriving in America as a penniless immigrant and having to initially work as a janitor. Then, by dint of hard work, he learned English and learned a trade and became successful etc. He would tell over the story with pride and not with shame). The story unfolds in a gradual and integrated manner and creates less of a shock because the narrative flows smoothly and is told within a positive framework. Sharing the causes and history of one's challenges, how one learned to cope with his challenges

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and his accomplishments in the face of adversity is more meaningfully informative than a dry description of his symptoms. It also provides the necessary context to get an accurate picture of the complete person.

The fact that the person didn't react passively to the challenges in his life, but rather took the initiative to improve himself by developing a close relationship with a *rebbe*, undertaking psychotherapy, etc. will be seen by many dates as admirable qualities.

The positive manner the date reacts to earlier stages of relating to the challenges he faced (which he shared with his date) will increase his level of confidence to further share details of his life. This process of gradually sharing more details of one's life is a compressed version of what happens between close friends. They didn't share all details of their lives when they first met. Rather, over time, they gained confidence to be more open with each other based on the empathic reactions they received to their earlier revelations.

If the fact that one faced these challenges is unacceptable to the date, then at least it will become apparent at an earlier stage and the person can conclude that it's not a suitable match without divulging too much information.

I also suggest that after the person discusses the challenges he faced in his life he should ask his date if it's ok for him to ask what might be some of the challenges she had to deal with in her life. This serves to make the relationship deeper and more meaningful and also equalizes the two sides; both imperfect humans who should take pride in their efforts to grow in the face of challenges.

There is a particular difficulty when discussing the challenges of emotional difficulties. In a well-intentioned effort to reduce stigma many mental health professionals proclaim that emotional disorders are basically medical/biological conditions (“a chemical imbalance”). There are two problems with this approach. First, the research shows that this “biological model” actually **increases** stigma. When a condition is seen as biological it is viewed as inherent and unchangeable. If it is seen as resulting from life conditions, in contrast, then it is more likely to be viewed as changeable and thus not create as much stigma. Second, the biological model of emotional difficulties is simply not accurate. There is ample evidence that the chemical imbalances found in emotional disorders are the **manifestations** of the anxiety and distress the person is experiencing rather than the **cause** of the condition.¹

When the narrative of a person's life is told in a gradual and integrated manner during the dating process, as suggested above, it will become clear to the date how the difficulties are the result of life experiences and not inborn disorders. The person can also articulate what he has

¹ See my article on "Chemical Imbalances" for documentation.

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done and is doing to deal with, and even grow as a result of, those difficulties. While this is most certainly not a magical formula that eliminates painful rejection, it does increase the likelihood of success.

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