Orthodox Singles: Breaking Myths

View PDF



Dr. Jennie Rosenfeld holds a PhD in English from the CUNY Graduate Center. She is currently a Junior Fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute, where she is working on a book, Between Law and Desire: A Modern Orthodox Sexual Ethic. The Myth-Breaking section of this essay has been excerpted from the book. Prior to making aliya, Dr. Rosenfeld was the co-founder and director of Tzelem, a Special Project of Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future, whose mission was to bring educational resources in the realms of intimacy and sexuality to the Orthodox community. This article originally appeared in issue 5 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

I'm smart, successful at my career, and fun to be with. I've worked out many of my "issues" in therapy. Here I am, eminently eligible and ready for a relationship, but somehow all of the guys I meet just aren't there yet. I feel like prescribing them a course of therapy, life-skills, and relationship-skills, and telling them to return in a few years, though hopefully I'll have found someone by then...
Sarah, age 27

I really want to get married and build a "bayit ne'eman b'yisrael" and all that other good stuff, but sometimes life gets in the way. I'm struggling really deeply with my conflicting sexual and religious needs, while trying to move forward in my career, and still make it to minyan-all this under the watchful and critical eye of my parents and community. Spending Shabbat with my parents is the opposite of relaxing. I wonder whether they would have gotten married as young and as happily as they did had they had the same challenges to contend with when single as I do.
Avi, age 31

I hesitate to take up my pen and write about the broad topic of Orthodox singles. It's a topic on which much ink has been spilt and to little effect. I generally confine myself to the topic of singles and sexuality/religious conflict, which has been much less explored and where there are perhaps more constructive things to be written. However, I want to write briefly about some of the broader challenges faced by singles and by the Orthodox community. The issues are manifold and complex-spanning the religious, psychological, phenomenological, existential, physiological, and halakhic realms, among others-and my goals are limited. If I can succeed in making you question your assumptions about singles, or in breaking some of the myths that you hold dear, and shaking your sense of certainty about anything relating to singles and their place in the community, then I will have done enough. Deconstruction is easy compared to reconstruction, but it often needs to come first-I leave the rebuilding to the future.

We often hear mention of the "Shiddukh Crisis" or "Singles Problem" that currently plagues the Orthodox Jewish community. Various groups, organizations, synagogues, and individuals have given much thought to finding the "solution" or a range of "solutions" to this "problem." I don't want to enter into the fray of searching for solutions, partly because some

of the "solutions" I've seen have been worse than the problem itself and have augmented the problem rather than solving it, and partly because I disagree with the entire construct of problem-solving that has been set up around Orthodox singles.

Let's start with some definitions: Many today would define the "Shiddukh Crisis" as the fact that today, more than ever before, large numbers of Jews are remaining single for longer, marrying later, or not marrying at all. This definition assumes that the mere status of married or unmarried is how we define success, and the quality of a person's married or single life doesn't matter to us. For many people, the "Singles Problem" is something that needs to be solved simply by getting everyone married as quickly as possible.

I want to suggest a different definition of the "Singles Problem": the crux of the crisis is, on the one hand, deeply personal, surrounding the individual issues that prevent people from either desiring or achieving a meaningful and committed relationship. And on the other hand, there is a wider communal dynamic in which the Orthodox community simply doesn't know how to include the unmarried individuals in its midst and often alienates singles, forcing them to either form their own singles communities or to leave Orthodoxy.

In this article, I want to focus on the intersection between the single and the community and on some of the myths that prevent mutual understanding.

Beginning the Myth-Breaking

The line between straining at truths that prove to be imbecilically self-evident, on the one hand, and on the other hand tossing off commonplaces that turn out to retain their power to galvanize and divide, is weirdly unpredictable. In dealing with an open-secret structure, it's only by being shameless about risking the obvious that we happen into the vicinity of the transformative....
Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet, p. 22

Before we can move toward a productive conversation about singles and their place in the community, I need to clear the ground from some of the many and often contradictory myths that currently prevail regarding singles. The very act of generalizing-of making statements that are relevant to "all singles" or "everyone"-does violence to the individual and his or her experience. Individuals come in different shapes and sizes; physically, emotionally, intellectually-and they relate differently to this period in their lives. We simply can't make any general assumptions about people.
I have chosen five common myths that I want to break systematically, though there are many more. I begin with the sexual realm because I think that it is the proverbial elephant in the room, which often hovers in people's consciousnesses but is not mentioned in polite conversation. Since halakha does not permit pre-marital sex or any physical contact with the opposite sex ("negiah"), singles either are not sexually active, or their sexual activity is illegitimate. Therefore, they are either grappling with sexual denial or repression, or they are violating the halakha. Either way, their situation is one that the wider community cannot easily identify with. The prevalence of assumptions and dearth of real information about people's sexual beliefs and practices-the confusion between myth and fact-may contribute to suspicion mixed with awkwardness in interactions between singles and members of the wider community. In this vein the myths can be especially damaging.

Myth #1: Everyone is "shomer negiah" /No one is "shomer negiah."

These myths, though they contradict each other, are both quite prevalent within the Orthodox community. Each comes from a totalizing perspective that seeks to reduce all singles to the same experience so that we don't need to give the matter further thought. If all singles are shomer negiah, then the system works-everything is fine, there is no conflict to be reckoned with, and we need not concern ourselves with the personal toll that this halakhic observance may be having upon the individual. On the other hand, if no singles are shomer negiah, then there is also no conflict-singles simply don't care about the halakha and thus they aren't part of the community. Each of these totalizing perspectives is detrimental and each ignores the uniqueness of the individual and the fact that people are different and that they cope with singlehood in different ways. Although sex and sexuality are universal phenomena, they are experienced differently by different individuals and even by the same individual in different stages of life. For some, sexuality is a major challenge during the single years. For others, sexuality is a non-issue, or a minor issue. Some observe negiah with ease, others with difficulty, others not at all. Some are shomer negiah in some relationships and not in others or with some people and not with others. For others, the status changes with time. The endless permutations make stereotypes worthless. There are people who don't look the part who are completely shomer negiah, and people learning in yeshiva who visit prostitutes. A friend of mine recently asked two male friends of hers, of similar age and profession, what they were looking for in a wife in terms of her sexual experience-the

answers they gave were diametrically opposed. One would only date women who had never touched men, because "If I waited, why couldn't she?" and the other would only date women who had had some physical contact with men, because, "I don't want someone who's not having sex just so that her ketubah [marriage contract] can say betulah [virgin] (which it can either way)." Leave the stereotypes behind and look at the person who is facing you.

Myth #2: Anyone who engages in premarital sexual activity is totally fine with it.

This myth is particularly damaging because it allows us to ignore the pain and conflict that many Orthodox singles are experiencing. Although there are certainly singles who are not conflicted about their premarital sexual activity, all of the singles with whom I have spoken have struggled very deeply with these issues-either overtly or beneath the surface-and while some eventually made their peace with the choices they made, others continue to struggle.

An extension of this myth is that those who engage in premarital sexual activity simply don't care about the halakha. Most of the singles that I have spoken with cared deeply about the halakha, and it was precisely because they cared so much about the halakha that they were thrown into such a deep existential conflict in its violation. However, the guilt surrounding premarital sexual activity is not purely due to halakhic violation. For many people feelings of guilt are a complex combination of many factors, the halakha being one, and communal or familial expectations and social pressures being another. For women especially, society's double standard of sexual behavior adds onto the halakhic layer the feelings of being "damaged goods" once one engages in premarital sexual activity, and raises questions about one's larger identity as a good girl, a good person, and a good Jew. Even those singles I spoke with who chose to leave the halakhic lifestyle retained a lingering sense of guilt and discomfort about their decisions in the sexual realm.

Myth #3: Singles are happy the way they are-they don't want to be part of the "broader Orthodox community."

"Community" means different things to different people. Here I am using this term in an intentionally ambiguous way, though on a basic level I am referring to the community that forms around a synagogue or a neighborhood. In either case, families are generally the building block of the community. Depending on the specific community, singles may have formed their own minyan, or in places with fewer singles, singles may be either invisible within the communal framework or may be full members of the community.

If we take this myth in the specific context of the community that forms around a synagogue, then the exact opposite is often true as well: Many singles feel so alone and isolated that they are often thirsting to be a part of the larger community, if only the community would let them. Especially in the absence of a spouse-who, among other things, provides a regular companion for Shabbat meals-singles often appreciate the sense of belonging or of being part of something larger than oneself.

However, not all singles want to be involved in the community to the same extent, and the community should be sensitive to the range of needs that individuals might have. Some singles might appreciate an invitation to a Shabbat meal, others might appreciate being set up, others might just want a smile and greeting after prayer services, and others might want a more active role on the synagogue board or on various committees. And beyond these concrete actions, there is the ineffable; the sense you get when the person in front of you is being perfunctory in conversation, scanning the room for someone else to talk to, the sense you get when "How are you" is a statement rather than a question. Married people: Be open to singles the same way you would be open to a new family that joins your community, and allow the situation and the person standing in front of you to guide your actions.

Myth #4: Any attempt on the part of the Orthodox community to grapple openly and deal seriously with the challenges and conflicts that singles face will help to legitimize perpetual singlehood and make singles even less likely to marry.

In 2009, when the numbers of unmarried Orthodox Jews in their twenties, thirties, and forties have reached an unprecedented high, and when the percentage of Jews who end up never marrying is increasing, failure to confront the issue constitutes an act of burying our heads in the sand, and further alienating those singles who remain part of the Orthodox community. At this point, the question of legitimization of singlehood is almost moot, as the numbers speak for themselves, with the message that people are remaining single, with or without such legitimization. We as a community need to get over the fear of raising questions, and singles are just the tip of the iceberg here.

Several years ago, when single, I was part of a committee of both married and single individuals (which included rabbis and communal leaders) that was dedicated to thinking through the "singles problem" and trying to offer "solutions." Even after a

couple of years of conversations, and countless suggestions, this committee was not able to take any definitive steps. We had finally realized the complexity of the issues involved and realized that the proposed "solutions" were merely band-aids that didn't get to the heart of the problem. At one point this myth surfaced and the committee began to question its existence-was the very fact of our open conversation going to somehow legitimize singlehood? Aside from the fact that none of this committee's deliberations were public, I felt impelled to point out in an email that, "To assume that communal pressure [for marriage] will help the matter is misguided.... Please trust me when I say that no amount of communal acceptance and welcome will ever make any of us forget that we are not your ideal and never will be until we are married with children" (1/2/05).

Sylvia Barack Fishman puts the issue in more extreme terms, which are perhaps reflective (or perhaps not) of the threat that the community construes in its singles:
The question facing Orthodox communities today has some similarities to Jewish communal questions about how to treat intermarried families: Outreach activists urge inclusiveness-"why not accept the singles community as it is"-while others counter that total inclusiveness would be tantamount to legitimating singleness as an alternative lifestyle for Orthodox Jews. Thinking about the treatment of Orthodox singles thus demands coming to terms with deep philosophical, sociological, and communitarian issues. (Gender Relationships in Marriage and Out, p. 111)
Perhaps the extremity of the comparison is illustrative of how deeply threatened the community feels by the existence of singles.

Myth #5: The sexual restrictions of yihud and negiah have the teleological purpose of ensuring that people have only one sexual partner in life (namely, their spouse); these halakhot are rooted in an awareness of the psychological and spiritual damage that even casual premarital physical contact can cause.

This myth is perhaps the most detrimental myth of all, in that it breaks out of the communal sphere and speaks to each and every single who has ever had even accidental physical contact with a member of the opposite sex, and tells them that they will suffer for this act and it will impact their ability to form a happy marriage; how much more so the individual who has had intentional sexual contact. This idea comes from those popular Jewish authors who, in their quest to convince teenagers to become shomer negiah have-without any use of Jewish texts and sources-read their own pop-psychology into this law.

Although I cannot fully break this myth in the context of the present article, suffice it to say now that the existence of biblical polygamy, concubines, and prostitutes-categories that are all difficult to reconcile with Judaism as we currently live it-and, on a more normative plane, the encouraging of remarriage for those who have been widowed or divorced, serve to dispel the notion that lifelong monogamy is the root of these prohibitions. There is no authoritative source that I am aware of that discusses the psychological or spiritual damage that will ensue upon violating these restrictions, any more than the spiritual damage that results from any sin that can be healed through repentance. In fact, a cursory reading of Maimonides (Hilkhot Issurei Bi'ah, chapter 21) and the Shulhan Arukh (Even haEzer 25, Orakh Hayyim 240) reveals a very different root to these prohibitions, which is perhaps more disturbing to our modern sensibilities; namely, a striving for asceticism, even within marriage!

To promulgate myths of this nature under the banner of "Judaism," "Torah," and "halakha" has a detrimental effect because it compounds the guilt and anxiety of many singles who are committed to Judaism but for psychological, emotional, or physiological reasons are not observing all of the sexual restrictions mandated by halakha. Although there is certainly value in encouraging abstinence among teenagers, we cannot achieve this at the price of being dishonest about Judaism and halakha.

A corollary of this myth is the assumption that there is no difference between teenagers, and those in their twenties, thirties, and forties who are single. Not distinguishing between adolescent sexuality and adult sexuality reflects a failure to see singles as adults who, among other characteristics, are also fully developed sexual beings, with needs and desires that are substantively similar to those of their married counterparts. There is nothing natural about being a "40-year-old-virgin"-and the halakha itself recognized this and therefore encouraged early marriage. Even if halakha today constrains us from endorsing premarital sexual activity, we as a community need to adopt a more empathetic and understanding stance to those who engage in it; the thirty-year-old woman who is physical with her serious boyfriend is different from the adolescent whose hormones have overtaken him. It is time we stop infantilizing singles under the banner of halakha.
***

The topic of singles in the Orthodox community is complex and is comprised of many different issues and questions, which are often lumped together into the same category. There are the personal crises that individuals are forced to navigate, the

interpersonal issues involved in the process of seeking out and building intimate relationships, the family dynamics that arise during singlehood and the wider communal issues, as well as the religious and sexual issues, to name but a few. We are still a long way from fully understanding any of these issues, let alone knowing how to address them. However, I hope that this exercise in myth-breaking will have helped clear the way toward increasing understanding between singles and the broader community and toward opening the conversation.