



Yismach
IS MAKING
Matches

BY RHONA LEWIS



We all have family members and friends who are looking for the other half of their souls. Two years ago Professor Shmuel Neumann set up Yismach, a confidential database for professional shadchanim, to ease what often becomes a long and painful search.

Sima* from Beitar, a 30-year-old single mother of nine-year-old twin girls, had been dating men up to 10 years older than her in an effort to get remarried. “Since most divorces happen either shortly after marriage or in the later years, there were few available men my age,” she says.

Uri,* recently divorced, was an exception. The day he signed up at Yismach, Hindy,* a Yismach shadchanit, saw his profile and jotted down his details. The next day, ready to contact him about Sima, she decided to double-check her facts. To her surprise, his profile had disappeared! Uri had asked for his profile to be removed so that he could make some adjustments. Using the contact information she already had, Hindy arranged to meet Uri right away, before he could disappear further. The next day Sima and Uri met; shortly after, a “mazel tov” permanently deleted two more names were from the database.

What Is Yismach?

Yismach is not an online dating site; it’s essentially an electronic filing cabinet with search options. When Professor Neumann recognized the challenges faced by overwhelmed shadchanim who often receive numerous calls a day and work with resumés written on hundreds of pieces of paper, he put together a database on one CD and handed it to one shadchanit.

With the CD loaded, Professor Neumann went on to create Yismach. Heartbreaking stories had pushed him to seek a solution. “To stand by, callously insensitive to the emotional pain of numerous singles, should cause us to not have our heads examined but our hearts,” says Professor Neumann, explaining his motivation.

The hashgachah pratis behind Yismach is plentifully evident. Professor Neumann is particularly suited to understanding the human soul. His background includes serving as a clinical psychologist in New York, teaching psychology, researching how we form impressions of other people and in interpersonal attraction, sensitive work at Zir Chemed in Yerushalayim with couples facing the trauma of fertility issues, and years of private practice.

But more than that: Professor Neumann isn’t a man who shies away from seeking solutions. His recent involvement in a high-tech group introduced him to much more than the world of electronic databases. At Strategic Solutions Technology Group, Professor Neumann brought together scientists and professors to find a viable solution for raising the level of water in the Dead Sea. For Professor Neumann, the current shidduch crisis is a calamity that has to be solved. Today Yismach offers 114 shadchanim (62 in Israel, 51 in the U.S., and one in the U.K.) the ability to quickly search through the 1,500 candidates registered so far, and to suggest the best possible matches.

Yismach has two primary premises. “We want to protect the dignity of those in shidduchim,” says Professor Neumann. “And we want to maintain the element of secrecy because the segulah for a successful shidduch is

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secrecy,” he says.

With this in mind, Professor Neumann set up a system that protects the client’s dignity by compiling information that is accessible only to established, trusted, professional *shadchanim*. “People can feel safe that their information is not accessible on the internet,” says Professor Neumann candidly.

A Wider Scope

By putting your profile on Yismach, you are in effect introducing yourself to more *shadchanim* who will see you there and keep you in mind. “I made a *shidduch* for a neighbor who lives down the block. Even though I hadn’t known she was in *shidduchim*, when I saw her profile on the site, she was on my mind,” says Rebbetzin Malka Kaganoff from Yerushalayim.

In a similar situation, Tova Kellerman, who had signed up with Yismach, says, “Although my parents and in-laws share the same Jerusalem neighborhood, no one thought of bringing my husband-to-be and me together. It took a Yismach *shadchan* to suggest the *shidduch*.”

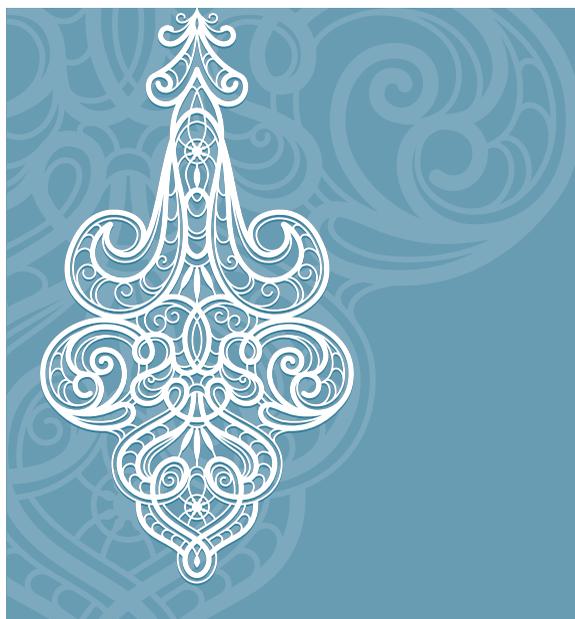
Yaakov,* who is in *shidduchim*, shares the same view: “Thanks to Yismach, I’m contacted by *shadchanim* that I wouldn’t have had the chance to turn to,” he

says. Then he adds a contrasting point: “At Yismach, you can choose which *shadchanim* you want to work with. If you prefer not to work with certain people, you can make your profile inaccessible to them.”

Yismach *shadchanim* aren’t making suggestions using only profiles on the database. Every *shadchan* knows of hundreds of other available possibilities, so everyone who signs up could potentially be matched with any one of the people that every *shadchan* knows — which is exactly what happened to Batsheva.*

“I was signed up, but my husband-to-be hadn’t heard of Yismach. But a Yismach *shadchan* knew Avraham,” she says with a lilt in her Australian accent. Once Avraham was approached with the idea, he left Israel for London to meet Batsheva, who was living there, and the international *shidduch* came about.

“While the majority of Yismach *shidduchim* are between regular boys and girls, there are the exceptions,” says Professor Neumann. “Like the convert from Finland who married the convert from Germany, or the divorcée with several children who married after signing up even though her relatives, friends and neighbors hadn’t made the

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When Prayers Come Together

One night last Chanukah Professor Neumann invited two Yismach *shadchanim* and their spouses to be his guests, together with another couple, Yossi* and Goldie,* neither of whom was a *shadchan*. During the meal, Goldie's friend Shana* called.

Shana, who had made Goldie's *shidduch* over 30 years before, after she had met an incredible number of boys, was now in Israel with her 28-year-old daughter Miri. Professor Neumann invited them over. Despite the fact that Shana and her daughter Miri would be leaving Israel in four days, the three Yismach *shadchanim* each thought of an

idea for Miri.

One of the *shadchanim* insisted that Shana meet the mother of a boy she had in mind and set up a meeting for the next morning. While Miri spent the morning at the Kosel and at the *kever* of the Zhviller Rebbe, zy"á, the mothers set up a date for their children the same night. Five days and five dates later, Miri was engaged.

Miri was happy to add a postscript to the story: "On a trip to Israel the previous year, the proprietor of a store in Geulah had yelled at me and called me a *nudnik* for saying that I wasn't going to badger Hashem for a *shidduch* because if it would be good for me, Hashem would send it.

He told me that Hashem wants our *tefillos* because these create a relationship. He argued that I was wrong, and that *tefillah* can change everything for the good.

"When I came back to Israel almost a year later, I stepped into his store. He had written my name on his *shtender* and was *davening* every day for me."

Says Professor Neumann, "The Chazon Ish says that these days you rarely see the Hand of Hashem, except in *shidduchim*. Miri's mother had made Goldie's *shidduch*, and now Goldie had helped to make her daughter's *shidduch*." And don't forget the power of prayer.

effort to offer a single suggestion for seven long years. And like the girl with a degenerative lung disorder who isn't expected to live past 40. The *shadchanim* involved were sensitive and their optimism was contagious."

In the Beginning

Yismach was originally created primarily for the Anglo-Israeli *chareidi* community in Israel. Not surprisingly, Chana Lapidot Goldstein, who helped Professor Neumann publicize the site in its initial stages, was Yismach's first successful *shidduch*. Chana hadn't yet signed up on the site when she met Tzvi at Professor Neumann's suggestion. "A second Yismach *shadchan* also suggested the *shidduch* (this was before the site included a feature that shows if the person is available or not). He was happy to hear we were already dating and told me he also sells candlesticks," says Tzvi with a laugh. A few weeks later, the couple was engaged.

With over 250 matches made, Professor Neumann has expanded Yismach's services both internationally and to non-Anglos. With *haskamos* from, *shlita*, Harav Aharon Feldman, *Rosh Yeshivah* of Ner Yisrael, Baltimore, and Harav Chaim Walkin, *Mashgiach* of Ateres Yisrael, Yerushalayim, people signing up at Yismach can be assured that the site is reliable and confidential.

Storming the Heavens

Yismach does much more than use technology: Yismach sends representatives to beg the righteous to intercede on behalf of every single person in the network. In Israel,

representatives have *davened* at the Kosel, Kever Rochel, the *kevarim* of the Zhviller Rebbe, the Chida, the Baba Sali, Rav Yonasan ben Uziel and Rabi Shimon bar Yochai. In Europe, Yismach has visited the *kevarim* of the Vilna Gaon, Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzensky, the Chofetz Chaim, Rav Itzele Ponovezher, Rav Chaim MiVolozhin, Rav Naftali Trop and Rav Yerucham Lebovitz, *zecher tzaddikim livrachah*.

Ruthie* from Yerushalayim shares her experience: "When I first heard about Yismach, I was taken aback by the fact that you *daven* for everyone and even go through the *hishtadlus* to *daven* at holy sites. I know that a lot of prayers were said to help me merit a miracle. My *chassan* and I met on Rosh Chodesh Kislev and were engaged the first night of Chanukah. I truly believe your *tefillos* were a part of it."

Next on the list, when the funding comes in, Yismach plans to travel to Prague to the *kever* of the Maharal and others.

It's All About the Person

"When I signed up at Yismach, Professor Neumann and his wife took the time to speak to me," says Aliza* from Florida. "In contrast, when I signed up at an interactive dating site [totally different from Yismach's format] a while ago, I felt that the *shadchanit* was simply processing me through her computer. There was no human aspect."

In order to avoid mechanical responses and at the same time expedite the dating process, Yismach holds separate events for men and women every few months where new sign-ups can briefly meet about a dozen *shadchanim*.



“Meeting *shadchanim* in a group setting is less pressured than meeting them one-on-one,” points out Tova Kellerman. The meetings are followed up with longer one-on-one meetings, which the *shadchan* and the individual arrange themselves.

“At the event, the *shadchanim* had time for everyone,” says Hennie,* who attended one of the first events. “I felt that their priority was to arrange *shidduch* meetings for me, and only me. Of course, everyone feels exactly the same way!” After the event, Hennie received three suggestions about the same boy. “My *shidduch* wasn’t a question of throwing two names together,” says Hennie. “Professor Neumann took the time to explain to my father why the *shidduch* was suitable.”

Hennie’s father adds another plus about Yismach. “Since there were several *shadchanim* on the site who had recommended the *shidduch*, Professor Neumann had to check the *halachah* to determine which *shadchan* would get paid,” he says, pointing out that all questions get addressed to a competent *posek*.

More About the Person

While the database facilitates bringing people together, this is only the first step. “In *shidduchim*, for an accurate appraisal it is important to reassess the situation using effortful, valid, thoughtful and accurate analysis that properly allows for the complexities we face, and employs critical thinking and work to understand reality, what is possible,” says Professor Neumann.

Employing critical thinking isn’t as easy as it seems. Using his extensive knowledge of clinical psychology, Professor Neumann points out where faulty interpretations can creep into the *shidduch* process.

- **The falsity of first impressions:** Using his master’s thesis, Professor Neumann discusses how first impressions

are *reliable* but not *valid*. This means that your first impressions of someone and another person’s first impressions of that same person will be highly similar. And if you both got to know this person over a long time, you both would agree about certain aspects of the person. However, looking back at your first impressions, you would both agree that they were false!

- **Confirmation bias (a.k.a. “myside” bias):** This is the tendency to search for information that confirms your beliefs. When you first meet someone, you are likely to evaluate that person according to the preconceptions that you already have. Some research shows that dating someone you know nothing about is likely to be more successful than dating someone about whom you were given detailed information before the date.
- **The peak-end rule:** People typically judge an experience by its most *intense* point and its end, not by the average of every moment of the experience. The judgment happens whether the peak is pleasant or unpleasant, and it makes no difference how long this peak lasted. When people date, they tend to remember this peak (whether it was a moment of disagreement or a fun moment) and the end of the date, and rate the date according to these two factors.

Two Halves of One Whole

In *Taanis* (ch. 4) we read about the daughters of Yerushalayim who, on Tu B’Av, went out into the vineyards dressed in white to find a *shidduch*. Some of the girls claimed beauty, others wealth, and others a distinguished lineage. Some of the girls, however, could boast of none of these. They called on the men to claim them for marriage for the sake of Heaven. “These were the marriages that led to beauty, wealth and family,” says Professor Neumann.

Today decisions on whom to marry are swayed by the value

we place on appearances and financial stability. “We need to believe that a *neshamah* recognizes its lost half,” says Professor Neumann, referring to the conclusion of the son of the Abarbanel, Harav Yehudah Abarbanel, in his Italian-language work, *Dialoghi d’Amore*. Harav Yehudah Abarbanel writes that true inner beauty is perceived by the *neshamah* and true affection hinges on the interconnection on the soul’s level.

What the Shadchanim Are Saying

For some *shadchanim*, the Yismach database is still part of a learning curve. “Databases are a great way to learn about new people who are out there looking to get married,” says *shadchanit* Esther* from Toronto. “Good search mechanisms help narrow down options for people by focusing on those who meet the most criteria for each other. Although I don’t use the search mechanisms at the moment, I still look at the resumés of boys and girls to learn about more people and try to think of ideas for them.”

Others, already familiar with the database, are reaping the benefits. “It’s so easy to show a change of location or to update references,” says Professor Neumann. As an aside, he adds, “References should be updated for two reasons: After being called for a few years, your references are likely to sound tired, and sometimes, references actually convey negative information.”

While Yismach offers its services gratis, people who sign up are expected to pay the *shadchan* the fee that is the norm in their area. “When I was 18, I suggested my first *shidduch*,” says Rebbetzin Rivka Moore of Yerushalayim. “But my input was never acknowledged. Forty years later, the girl admitted that she knew I had made the suggestion but neglected to make any gesture of thanks. In contrast, a different couple I brought together calls me every year before

Rosh Hashanah. Years later, when they realized that they had been remiss about *shadchanus gelt*, they righted the matter,” she says. “Hashem could make *shidduchim* on His own; He certainly doesn’t need our input. But *shidduchim* are an opportunity to do *chessed* and to earn a *parnassah* at the same time,” she adds.

What About You?

“Were you busy with *pru urevu*?” The *Gemara* (*Shabbos* 31b) tells us that this is a question we will all be asked. The Maharsha says that the question includes making *shidduchim* for widows and orphans. “I was told that Harav Yitzchak Zilberstein, *shlita*, says this now applies to everyone, because we all have to rely on others to help with our *shidduchim*,” says Professor Neumann. “Everyone can — and should — make *shidduchim*. It’s an act of *chessed* that is not limited to those professional *shadchanim* who are often overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of singles.”

This act of *chessed* becomes even more significant when searching for a *shidduch* for women in their 50s. “Men in their 50s and 60s by and large refuse to date anyone close to their age, and many ask for someone 20 to 30 years younger. In addition, to avoid problems of *yichud* with [a woman’s] children, some older men want only women who have no children at home,” explains Professor Neumann. As a result, women in their 50s are often passed over. These facts make it incumbent upon everyone who knows them to help.

The Chazon Ish, who had made many matches, viewed making a *shidduch* as a *mitzvah* of returning a lost object. “If I am the *shaliach* and this is your lost object — take it,” he would say. Just as we are obligated to make every effort to return a lost object to its rightful owner, we are all obligated to help our family, friends and community members find their *zivug*. ■

*Starred names are pseudonyms

The Last Shidduch of the Chazon Ish

The Chazon Ish, *zt”l*, while not blessed with children of his own, was a prolific *shadchan*. When Rabbi Yaakov Schechter came to the Chazon Ish seeking a *shidduch* suggestion for his daughter, he told the Rav that he was looking for a boy who was immersed only in Torah learning. The Chazon Ish suggested “the *iluy* from London.” Although Rabbi Schechter hadn’t heard of this *iluy*, he was intrigued by the suggestion. However, since it was close to Shabbos, their meeting was cut short. That Friday night, on 15 Cheshvan 5314, the Chazon Ish suddenly passed away.

At first, Rabbi Schechter thought that the Chazon Ish’s last *shidduch* suggestion would never come to fruition because he did not have a name to pursue. However, he consoled himself by thinking that a *shidduch* suggested by the Chazon Ish was not something to be taken lightly.

At the funeral, after the *hesped*, Rabbi Schechter asked if anyone knew about the *iluy* from London. One of the people he asked pointed out to him a tall *bachur*. Rabbi Schechter immediately introduced himself and told the *bachur* about the Chazon Ish’s suggestion. The *bachur*, Moshe Sternbuch, then told him that the Chazon Ish had called him in England with the suggestion a few minutes before Shabbos. Shortly afterward, Yaffa, Rabbi Yaakov Schechter’s daughter, married Harav Moshe Sternbuch, *shlita*, who now heads the *Beis Din* of the Eidah Hachareidis. (Heard by Professor Neumann from a neighbor of Rabbi Schechter’s granddaughter.)