

Getting Married... Without Parental Consent?!

Matchmaking—how does it really work? Do religious Jews do arranged marriages? Is that even allowed? What does our parshah say about it?

The Matchmaker

Good Shabbos!

This week, I'd like to talk about yentas.

Most Jewish people have an image in their minds of what a “yenta” looks and sounds like from the matchmaker in the play “Fiddler on the Roof.”

Everyone who sees that movie comes away convinced that that's how relationships in the religious community work—the matchmaker comes along and speaks to the parents alone, and they alone decide who their children should marry. The groom and bride have no input in the matter—they meet each other for the first time under the chuppah, and so in the “Orthodox community,” you can marry a young girl to an old man, and other such nonsense.

Every time your average Jew hears “shidduch,” he or she sees Yenta, the matchmaker of “Fiddler on the Roof,” pulling the strings behind the scenes.

But that brings us to this week's Torah portion, in which we read about the first Jewish shidduch in history.

Yitzchak and Rivkah

Avraham calls his trusty servant and right-hand man Eliezer, whom today would be known as the chief of staff, and has him swear that he'll travel from Canaan to Aram Naharayim (which is somewhere in today's Iraq), and find a match from his ancestral clan for his son Yitzchak.

Well, Eliezer sets out on the road. At night, he arrives in Aram Naharayim, where he makes his way to the public well at which everyone gathers every day. That's the place you go if you want to meet the locals.

But how is he supposed to find Avraham's clan? You have to remember that Avraham left the place 65 years before that! And that was before people had last names, too!

So Eliezer prays to G-d and sets a sign for himself: The girl whom he asks for a little water and who then offers of her own free will to also water his camels will be "she whom You proved for Your servant Yitzchak."

And indeed, that is exactly what happened. Rivkah comes out, and Eliezer asks her for a little water, and she waters his camels, too. Eliezer was so sure that he had found a match for Yitzchak that he gave Rivkah jewelry right then and there, and only after that asked her, "Whose daughter are you?" and discover that she indeed was from Avraham's clan.

So Eliezer gets invited to her house, where he then tells her

family everything that had happened to him. And then, the Torah tells us, “And Lavan and Besuel replied and said, ‘The matter has come from G-d... here is Rivkah before you; take [her] and go!’ ”

It’s an amazing story. But what’s strange throughout the whole story is that you never hear Yitzchak saying anything. The Torah doesn’t record that they consulted with him over what kind of bride he was looking for, or if he wanted a bride in the first place. Maybe he hadn’t finished school? Not one word! Avraham just calls in Eliezer, gives him instructions, and Eliezer, like Yenta of “Fiddler on the Roof,” goes looking for a maiden and makes a match.

What really is the opinion of halachah (Jewish law) on whether one can marry off a child against his or her will? In many parts of the world today, and especially in the Middle East, parents force their kids to get married to whoever they decide. Is that appropriate behavior from a Jewish perspective? Just like Tevya the Milkman tried to do in “Fiddler on the Roof”?

Obeying Parents

To answer this question, we need to first consider a bigger issue.

In the Ten Commandments, we are commanded to “Honor your father and mother.” To what extent is a son or daughter obligated to obey his or her parents? True, you have to honor them—meaning, to take care of them and not embarrass them or contradict them.

But if Mom tells her daughter to put on a sweater because it's cold outside, and the daughter is a teenager and is embarrassed to wear a sweater in front of her friends or class, does she need to listen to her mother?

You can ask the same question with regards to a more fateful decision: Does a son need to listen to his parents and go become a doctor because that's their dream and if he doesn't, they will die in misery—even if he wants to study music?

The answer, my friends, is that according to halachah, honoring one's parents only applies to things that pertain directly to parents. With regards to the child's personal life, they don't need to obey.

Now, you can have a more serious problem here: What if, one fine day, your son comes home and announces that he wants to make aliyah—he wants to leave his family and settle in Israel. You and your spouse go crazy when you hear that, and you oppose it with all your might.

In this situation, halachah states that a son is not obligated to obey his parents. Furthermore, since settling in the Holy Land is a mitzvah, parental opinion does not override it, as halachah teaches that parents cannot instruct their children to refrain from performing mitzvos. The Torah commands, "Every person shall revere his mother and father—I am the L-rd" (Vayikra 19:3). On this, halachah (Yoreh Deah 240:15; Shach, sif katan 17) clarifies that "everyone is obligated to honor Me [G-d]."

Similarly, if he joins the army and wants to sign up for a combat unit, and his parents try to convince him out of it—since it's a

mitzvah to defend Jews, the parents certainly cannot stop him.

That brings us to another example: If your parents are having a feud with another Jewish person because he embarrassed them and they've never gotten over it, and they order you to never dare to speak to that person... in such a case, not only are you not obligated to listen to them but even more so, you're not allowed to listen to them! Because, according to halachah, "You're not allowed to hate any Jew" (Shach, sif katan 18). And so you are obligated to speak to that person.

And that brings us to the subject of shidduch—which, by the way, means arranged introduction, not arranged marriage. In our day, it would be called a blind date.

Did They Ask Yitzchak?

The story is told about a famous rabbi from a very distinguished rabbinical family (Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik) who in his youth studied at the University of Berlin. There, he met a young Jewish woman and decided to marry her. He wrote to that effect to his parents who at the time had already immigrated to the United States.

His father wrote him back that he was fiercely opposed to the match.

A short time after that, the father, who was a Rosh Yeshivah in New York, showed up at his yeshivah and told his students the entire story—how his son had met a Jewish girl and wanted to marry her, and how he was opposed to it. And then, he related how his son had written back that, according to halachah

(Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 240), when it comes to a shidduch, a son is not obligated to listen to his father. As the Rama writes, “If the father protests against the son marrying whichever woman he so desires, the son need not listen to the father.”

And then the father declared: “My son is right!”

And so, in our saga here in our Parsha, how is it possible that they didn’t ask Yitzchak what he thought?

The answer to this question can be found at the end of the story, after Besuel and Lavan declared that “the matter has come from G-d” and that they consent to the match. We then read that the next morning, Eliezer said, “Send me forth and I shall go to my master; and they said, ‘Let us call the girl and ask what she says!’ And they called Rivkah and said to her, ‘Will you go with this man?’, and she said, ‘I will go.’”

In other words, after all that—after they themselves admit that “the matter has come forth from G-d,” meaning that the Divine Providence is so clear here that even these idol worshippers saw that it was G-d’s Hand, they still say that it depends on Rivkah’s will. Rashi (Bereishis 24:57) adds and says, “From here [we learn] that you don’t marry a woman without her consent.” (See Likutei Sichos Vol. X, pg. 65.)

And, if they asked Rivkah, they certainly asked Yitzchak!

So we thus have it that even from the first shidduch in Jewish history, the halachah is established that it is forbidden to marry a person without his or her consent. Two thousand years before the “enlightened” world arrived at that conclusion, the Jews

were already doing that.

But the halachah goes on to say that true, you don't have to listen to your parents when it pertains to your personal life—but if you *do* listen to them, then you are doing the mitzvah of honoring your parents. And the reward for doing so is long life. So while it's true that you're not required—but one who “desires life” should try to grab the opportunity.

(See Encyclopedia Talmudis Vol. XXIV, kol echad v'echad, pg. 407, et al.)