Looking for Love in All the Right Places

Older adults are increasingly going online to find their (second) bashert

By Fredda Sacharow

Elizabeth Sloan had one wish as she contemplated the future while in her mid-50s: an emotionally and financially stable partner who shared her commitment to Conservative Judaism. Sloan, a marriage therapist from Glendale, Md., had been married once, for three years. After her divorce in 1995, she realized she was looking for someone who wouldn’t roll his eyes at the idea of going to shul.

She joined dating sites and also considered a matchmaker, but was reluctant to shell out the several thousand dollars most charge. Then, in July 2014, Match.com, one of those online sites, brought Michael Stein into her life.

Stein and his late wife, also named Elizabeth, had been married for nearly 30 years and had three kids together. She died of uterine cancer in May 2013, a year shy of Michael’s 60th birthday. Her death left the corporate lawyer from Northern Virginia adrift.

“I missed the companionship, security, friendship, love—just being able to share life with each other,” says Stein. He hadn’t dated for over three decades and didn’t know current protocols. Starting over in the dating world is never easy. Starting over when you’re old enough to be a grandparent and Medicare is your primary insurance—that can be downright terrifying.

But as dating-site administrators, professional matchmakers, sociologists and couples themselves acknowledge, older adults are more and more willing to try. As life expectancy hits new highs, members of the 50-plus set are looking for a new or second or even third bashert with whom to share those bonus years, increasingly turning to the internet to make it happen.

There are about 1.2 million Jews 60 or older in the country, says Harriet Hartman, a professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Rowan University in Glassboro, N.J., and co-author of Gender and American Jews: Patterns in Work, Education, and Family in Contemporary Life.

According to the 2013 Pew Research Center Survey of American Jews, some 43 percent of that demographic is either divorced, separated, widowed or never married. Pew also reported, in 2015, that 12 percent of all adults ages 55 to 64 have used an online dating site or mobile dating app—a big leap from the 6 percent reported just two years earlier.

“I’ve seen a massive increase in the number of seniors reaching out to me for help,” says Lori Salkin, 36, a matchmaker and dating coach with SawYouAtSinai, a site that employs actual matchmakers to work with the online profiles of its 40,000 largely Orthodox members. “SawYouAtSinai has seen between 50 to 100 couples in the senior range marry over the past 10 years.”

She attributes the growth in part to the willingness of older adults to embrace online dating as a way of finding companionship.

Indeed, Stein dated about four or five women from Match.com before the site led him to Sloan. After an initial online connection, the two met at a steakhouse halfway between their offices.

“The conversation was very easy and free flowing,” he recalls of that first encounter. The second date took place the next day, and the third that Shabbat, when Sloan invited Stein to tour her synagogue, Adas Israel Congregation in Washington, D.C.

“I wanted to make sure he would be a good fit,” says Sloan, 58. “I did not invite him to services, because my friends would start asking too many questions, but I gave him a tour after Kiddush and we had lunch later in the afternoon.”

Two weeks later, when Stein was gearing up for a hiking and biking outing in Alaska—the first vacation he had planned since his wife had died—he impulsively asked Sloan to come along. She said no, worried it was too early in the relationship.

Instead, she sent along an iPod loaded with a playlist of favorites—jazz standards, classic rock—so he’d think of her on the plane and during his wilderness travels.

“It worked like a charm,” says Sloan.

But she has since gone on other trips with him, including a January 2016 visit to Ireland, where they became engaged after climbing Slieve League, Europe’s highest sea cliff.

“We don’t have a wedding date, but we are looking for venues somewhere in the Northeast U.S.,” says Sloan. Meanwhile, she advises peers to “give a relationship time to evolve, because at our age we have become accustomed to being with a former spouse, or if we’ve been single for a long time, we’ve learned to live a certain way that is comfortable and familiar. Being with someone new requires a lot of flexibility and openness to change.”

Being open to change helped Bonni Rubin-Sugarman navigate the online dating world after she was widowed in her late 50s. She had been part of a couple for a quarter of a century—a terrific marriage, she says, with two wonderful kids—when her husband, Richard Sugarman, died of cancer at age 55.

A former director of special education for the Haddonfield, N.J., school district and currently a special education consultant, Rubin-Sugarman, 66, says she felt upbeat from the outset of her online quest. But still, there were “disastrous dates”: Her daughter once bailed her out with a well-placed phone call 20 minutes into one. And there was the endless evening she suffered through at a sports bar watching a football game—definitely not her thing.

Then a year and a half after she was widowed, she met Gerald Faich through JDate.

“I got a gem,” Faich, 75, says about Rubin-Sugarman, without any prompting. The retired physician had come to JDate after his marriage of 26 years fell apart.

The two navigated their early, tentative dating steps online and then met for coffee in February 2009 at a Bahama Breeze restaurant in southern New Jersey. What was supposed to be a quick date turned into a four-hour dinner.

“We started out talking about what we do, our paths through our careers, our families, where we lived, our spouses, our kids, his grandkids,” recalls Rubin-Sugarman.
Finding That Spark Linda Diamond and Donald Light on their wedding day

“I knew I was in trouble the minute we started talking,” jokes Faich, president of a Philadelphia-based drug research and safety consulting firm. Four years later, they were married before their combined six children and five grandchildren on what Rubin-Sugarman calls “the magical day” in 2013 when Hanukkah and Thanksgiving converged. Their brood has since expanded to nine grandchildren.

Finding matches for an older demographic is different than for those in their 20s and 30s, says Salkin of SawYouAtSinai, who has 33 marriages to her credit and works with over 1,000 clients after reading their online profile and communicating with them via phone or email, she looks at religious observance, socioeconomic backgrounds and lifestyles: Does he read The New York Times and visit museums? Is she an outdoorsy type who prefers hiking to reading? All anyone wants is a prince charming who’s perfect in math and literacy training. When you’re older, she adds, “you don’t have fantasies; you’re not looking for a prince charming who’s perfect in every way.” Like Rubin-Sugarman, Diamond lost her first husband, Richard, after a long marriage. Their daughter, Danielle, is married and living in Israel. Diamond was 64 when Richard died and had no desire to live the rest of her life alone. “I wanted a companion, somebody with whom I had things in common and who was financially independent, someone who shared my values and my religious views,” recalls Diamond, who is Modern Orthodox. And it wouldn’t hurt if he shared her passion for Beethoven and her delight in the movies My Cousin Vinny and Groundhog Day. Diamond, now 68, was close to giving up on JDate. “I was ready to cancel because strange people were popping up, a lot of them weren’t truthful about their circumstances,” she says. But then Donald Light’s profile appeared. He fit all her categories—and he lived just 40 miles down the freeway.

Light, 71, a computer professional with an adult daughter and son, had been divorced for 10 years after a 25-year marriage. Diamond and Light communicated online for a time, then met at a local Starbucks. The two married on August 23, 2015, just over a year after meeting. “Having those feelings ignite again was wonderful,” says Diamond. “We were shocked that we could feel that romantic, loving relationship at this point in our lives.”

And she has this piece of wisdom for her contemporaries: “Be persistent and don’t give up on the Jewish dating sites.” And, to cover all your bases, “ask friends!”

PurPurFreed Sacherow is a freelance writer and former managing editor of the Jewish Exponent in Philadelphia.

MARC GOLDMANN, co-founder and CEO of SawYouAtSinai, views his enterprise not merely as a business but as a mitzvah. He echoes his colleagues’ optimism that there are advantages to having a few more summers under your belt in the dating game. His site includes several gray-haired couples pictured on its home page, and Goldmann notes that in recent years, he has seen close to 3 percent growth in clients in the 50 to 59 age bracket. “Things that might have felt important at age 25 are quite different at 60,” he says. “There’s definitely something to the saying that with maturity comes wisdom.”

Linda Diamond would likely agree. “I think it’s harder for younger people,” says the education consultant from Menlo Park, Calif., who works with public schools to improve

she says, they expand their dating pool to non-Jews, since they’ve already raised Jewish children.

And, the Philadelphia-based Salkin adds, “a lot of times, it’s their children who urge them to create an online profile.”

Salkin uses her parents’ lifetime marriage as well as her own 13-year marriage as a template when creating a match. As she seeks to pair SawYouAtSinai clients after reading their online profile and communicating with them via phone or email, she looks at religious observance, socioeconomic backgrounds and lifestyles: Does he read The New York Times and visit museums? Is she an outdoorsy type who prefers hiking to reading? All anyone wants is a prince charming who’s perfect in math and literacy training. When you’re older, she adds, “you don’t have fantasies; you’re not looking for a prince charming who’s perfect in every way.”

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