

# Women's Sex-Objectification during the Matchmaking Process in Israel

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## Abstract

According to Jewish traditional thought, there is great concern that beauty and external appearances can lead to manifestations of evil and promiscuity; this attitude is expressed in the proverb "Grace is deceitful and beauty is vain." Women's beauty is considered a positive phenomenon only when it is subordinated to the higher goal of finding a mate and maintaining a harmonious relationship with a husband. This article is based on findings from a qualitative study that sought to explore the way national-religious Jewish matchmakers act toward the issue of beauty. These matchmakers face a beauty dilemma as they try to comply with their male clients' exacting and steep demands regarding the desired bride's beauty, while at the same time they wish to adhere to this Jewish religious ethos. Twenty-five national-religious Jewish matchmakers in Israel were interviewed. Findings show that they tend to cope with this dilemma by using two complementary strategies: On one hand they try, albeit unsuccessfully, to persuade their male clients to decrease the importance they attached to the appearance of the desired bride. On the other hand, they demonstrate a kind of pragmatic acceptance and compliance with the demands of their male clients; most of them tend to advise their female clients on how to improve their outward attractiveness in accordance to generally accepted standards of beauty, in order to promote their female clients' chances of finding a groom. In doing so, they unconsciously contribute to the perpetuation of the double standard of beauty and the sex objectification of women.

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## Key words

Backlash, beauty standards, Jews, Israel, matchmaking, objectification

## Introduction

This article explores the ways in which Jewish matchmakers treat the issue of physical attractiveness of their clients, in light of the Jewish cultural ethos of “Grace is deceitful and beauty is vain”. The religious Jewish matchmakers face a beauty dilemma as they try to comply with their male clients’ exacting and steep demands regarding the desired bride’s beauty, while at the same time wishing to adhere to the religious ethos and educate their clients to ignore this factor when choosing a life partner. Similar to other traditional societies, the Jewish-Israeli society has been tremendously influenced over the last decades by the Western cultural beauty imperative (Bokek-Cohen & Davidovich, 2009; Zalberg, 2009). This article begins with a literature review of feminist studies of women’s beauty, and then continues with an overview of various Jewish sources that relate to women’s outward appearance. The role of the matchmaker in Jewish society is examined, historically and in light of current social issues in Israel; in-depth interviews with amateur matchmakers are reported in order to answer the research question of how do the matchmakers negotiate the dissonance between their religious views and the demands of their clients within a society that is being impacted by Western standards of beauty. It is reasonable to expect that the findings regarding the Jewish matchmakers’ beauty dilemma may have implications for other non-Western societies impacted by Western cultural dominance. Finally, the matchmakers are seen as partially subservient to the Western standard of beauty in that they must please their clients, and partially subversive of it, as they attempt to replace it with an ideal of pairing based on shared worldviews and non-superficial personality traits.

## Theoretical Background

### *Beauty and Physical Attractiveness in Western Society: A Feminist Perspective*

Attractiveness is the perception of the physical traits of another human being as pleasing or beautiful. Judgment of the attractiveness of physical traits is common to all human cultures, partly dependent on culture or society or era, and partly a matter of individual subjective preference

(Martin, 1992; Hill Collins, 1991; Hooks, 1990; Seigelshifer, 2006).

People tend to judge other people based on their perceived attractiveness, and this tendency is particularly pervasive in western society. This phenomenon can be summarized as lookism, i.e., treating people in ways that are biased by their level of physical attractiveness, with benefits to individuals higher in physical attractiveness and disadvantages to individuals lower in physical attractiveness (Patzer, 2007; Hamermesh, 2011). Despite professed ideals, people do judge others by their looks. The physical attractiveness of a person impacts every individual in every community, throughout the United States and around the world (Bull & Rumsey, 1988; Dipboye, Arvey, & Terpstra, 1977; Hamermesh, 2011; Morrow, McElroy, Stamper, & Wilson, 1990; Stewart, 1980). The reaction of the environment to the individual is affected by his/her physical appearance, and may impact the constructing of his/her self-image and self-esteem (Abell & Richards, 1996; Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999; Nell & Ashton, 1996). Studies show that this variable bears more significant implications for women than for men. It has been found that structuring self-image and self-esteem in relation to external appearance is an orientation that is particularly characteristic of women (Abell & Richards, 1996; Nell & Ashton, 1996). This orientation is a result of cultural structuring in Western culture, which places an emphasis on the importance of women's beauty and the profound significance of their external appearance in general (McFarquhar & Lewis, 2000).

Wolf (1991) argues that to be accepted in the world of the liberated and independent new woman, one had to meet rigid standards of slimness, beauty, and fashion. According to her view, an ideology of female beauty keeps women down; this ideology is expressed in a generalized atmosphere rather than an organized conspiracy:

The rites of beauty counter women's new freedom by combating women's entry into the secular public world with medieval superstition, keeping power inequalities safer than they might otherwise be [...] the rites are archaic and primitive so that part of the core of female consciousness can be kept archaic and primitive. (pp. 86-87)

Benjamin and Kamin-Shaaltiel (2004) present the way femininity is structured in Western society as normative dissatisfaction with one's appearance. This normative imperative becomes a central component in the system of female identity, as women ignore their inner world, personality, system of morality, values, and intelligence, and instead make their body the basis of their self-identity.

It has been found that the desirable measurements of the female body vary from one culture to the next, but cultural changes in non-Western communities include an internalization of modern Western norms related to body weight and shape (Latzer, Tzischinsky, & Gefen, 2007).

It seems that the issue of women's beauty standards carries with it far-reaching social and political meanings, far beyond any aesthetic significance. Let us now examine the perceptions prevalent in Jewish culture regarding this issue.

### *Jewish Cultural Ethos regarding Women's Beauty*

A review of various ancient Jewish texts reveals a negativistic attitude to women's beauty: beauty represents what is threatening, seductive, and forbidden. Early in the story of the creation of the world, the beauty of the daughters of Adam is described as an obstacle and an antecedent to the flood ("the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were fair; and they took them as their wives, whomsoever they chose," Genesis 6:2). In contrast to the clear acclamation of physical beauty in Song of Songs, the Book of Proverbs, with its moralistic orientation, follows a line of disdain and scorn for beauty, especially when beauty is not accompanied by a corresponding internal essence ("As a ring of gold in a swine's snout, so is a fair woman that turns aside from discretion," Proverbs 11:22), yet applauds inner virtues ("but a woman that fears the LORD, she shall be praised," Proverbs 31:30).

The negative, seductive aspects of beauty are also reflected in the Book of Samuel, in the description of King David's adulterous conduct with Bathsheva ("the woman was very beautiful to look upon," Sam II 11:2). The book further recounts the rape of Tamar by her brother Amnon, who falls in love with her external beauty (Sam II 13:1).

Jewish tradition acknowledges the myth of woman as Eve, embodying the power of life, or as Lilith, the personification of a destructive, captivating seductress who defiles life.

The traditional family woman became taken for granted...no longer was she [Eve] an erotic objective, but rather a woman of the home, responsible for sustaining the family and its continuity...In contrast, Lilith is described as a beautiful, powerfully loved woman, who arouses irresistible passion... (Abarbanel, 1994)

The Eve-Lilith contrast illustrates the contradictions and contrasts in the Jewish attitude toward beauty - on one hand as pure and divine, but on the other threatening and superficial. Na'ama, Zilla's daughter, is mentioned in the Book of Zohar in a similar fashion ("Why was she called Na'ama, which means 'pleasurable' in Hebrew? Because she accompanied idolatry by pleasantly playing on a tambourine..." Bereshit Rabba 23:4), and was described as stoking the fires of passion and giving birth to demons (Mishna Zohar, 1 p. 363). Women's beauty has negative repercussions for both men and women-Not only does women's beauty promote promiscuity and national betrayal on the part of women; it also constitutes an enormous source of temptation for men to commit adultery and therefore is a threat to family integrity.

Beauty also has an experiential effect and a potential to cause uncontrolled behavior, due to its tendency to evoke total fascination. Beauty can stimulate a whirlpool of senses, passions, and irresistible urges. Although authentic Judaism contains no coherent treatment of beauty, demonization of beautiful women such as Lillith or Na'ama reflects an implicit attempt to express a negative attitude toward women's beauty in cases when their beauty is not involved with traditional family life or when they disobey the masculine dominance, or challenge the traditional patriarchic structure of the community.

In light of this religious ethos, the research question is: How do contemporary religious Jewish matchmakers treat the issue of beauty during the matchmaking process? Before offering an answer to this question, a brief review of matchmaking as a traditional institution in Jewish Society is presented in the next section.

*The Institution of the Matchmaker and Its Role in Jewish Society*

The family is considered a sacred institution in Jewish society, and establishing a family, is a central objective in the life of every Jew. In traditional Jewish society, the parents used to marry off their children at a young age through arranged marriages. This was done with the objective of preserving the sexual purity of the society, ensuring its moral and demographic status, and guaranteeing the continuity of the life of the community (Shiloh, 2001; Grossman, 2004).

However, in the beginning of the 19th century, many people in European Jewish communities followed Reformist Judaism in the areas of faith and Halakha observance; this trend had begun as a response to the Jewish Enlightenment Movement, which was popular among European Jews in the 18th-19th centuries. It advocated adopting values of the Enlightenment, pressing for better integration into European society, and increasing education in secular studies, Hebrew language, and Jewish history. The Enlightenment in this sense marked the beginning of the wider engagement of European Jews with the secular world (Katz, 2000).

Therefore, from the 19th century until the present we have been witnessing a process whereby young adults in the Modern Orthodox community in Israel have been gaining more and more freedom in choosing a marriage partner. Concurrently, the age of marriage in this sector is steadily rising (Zalcberg & Almog, 2009b). The rise in marriage age has led to the phenomenon known as protracted singleness in Modern Orthodox society (to be referred to hereinafter as this sector). Many in this sector are troubled by the phenomenon and see it as a “social problem” (Shtul, 2000; Bartov, 2004; Nahari, 2007; Engelberg, 2009). According to the mainstream conservative Rabbis’ attitude, this trend delays, if not outright prevents, the observance of the Biblical command to increase and multiply, imperils the sexual purity of the community, and undermines the desired social order.

The arranged marriage as an institution is generally accepted in societies with a conservative collectivist orientation (Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990; K. Dion & K. L. Dion, 1993; Katz & Lehr, 2007; Buunk, Park, & Duncan, 2010) and in societies characterized by social norms that prohibit meetings between men and women (Monger, 2004).

In general, matchmakers may be categorized as two types: professional matchmakers - those for whom matchmaking is both their art and their livelihood - and amateur matchmakers - who may be family members, friends, acquaintances, or functionaries and key figures in the community and for whom matchmaking is a sideline. Among the amateur matchmakers are those who made a successful match only a few times and those who do it frequently. Professional matchmakers charge expensive registration fees of \$200-500 and take an additional \$1000 fee from each partner if they succeed in bringing the couple all the way to the wedding canopy. Amateur matchmakers do not charge any fee, yet it is customary for the new couple to visit him/her after the wedding and bring a present, usually a modest, symbolic house gift or ritual object such as a set of candlesticks or an elegant ritual wine cup.

In the world of Jewish tradition the institution of matchmaking is well-known, and calling upon a matchmaker to pair off couples has been accepted in Jewish society throughout the generations (Lewittes, 1994). Until the twelfth century, people worked as matchmakers without payment, and the appearance of the professional matchmaker is only known from the twelfth century. In Judaism making a match is considered a great mitzvah [good deed], yet despite this, it is customary to pay a fee to the matchmaker. Changes in the process of selecting a life partner in modern society and the transition from traditional marriages - based primarily on economic status and family lineage and generally arranged by the parents - to modern marriage - based on a personal relationship between the members of the couple (Burgess & Wallin, 1954; Goshen-Gottstein, 1966; Murstein, 1974, 1980; Hetsroni, 2000) have led to a waning of the status of the institution of matchmaking in Jewish society, except in Ultra-Orthodox society, where the institution has been preserved to this day (Friedman, 1988; Heilman, 1992; Shai, 2002; Zalberg, 2007). Nonetheless, the status of the institution of matchmaking in national-religious society is different than in ultra-Orthodox society. The national-religious society is identified with Modern Orthodoxy, and it advocates combining traditional religion with modernity (Sagy & Schwartz, 2003; Cohen, 2004) in building up the State of Israel together with observing the religious precepts, studying the Torah [the corpus of Judaism's legal and ethical texts], and religious education under the banner of "Torah together with work" (Cohen, 2004). The

educational institutions in this sector are characterized by separation of the genders; in fact, from the age of adolescence (sometimes as early as elementary school) until marriage, there is a separate social network for boys and for girls. The only place boys and girls can meet is during some activities held in the religious youth movement "Bnei Akiva." Singles in the national-religious society, like national-religious society as a whole, are positioned at the intersection between traditional Judaism on the one hand, and the modern secular West on the other, and they live in tension between the two extremes while trying to find a balance between them (Seigelshifer, 2006; Hartman & Samet, 2007).

Accordingly, the singles in this sector get the worst of both worlds: on the one hand, they have fewer opportunities to meet members of the opposite sex than they might have in secular society; while on the other, the institution of matchmaking is not as well-established, well-greased, or respectable as in Ultra-Orthodox society. Many national-religious singles use Internet dating services and meet potential candidates through this powerful medium. However, these technological advances do not fill the enormous need for assistance in matchmaking. Therefore, many people have begun to take a hand in match-making in an informal manner, for the sake of the religious ideal. Accordingly, it is widely accepted that old singles (over the age of 25) turn to these informal and non-professional matchmakers who are well-known in their communities. It is also accepted that parents, if they are worried about their child's chances for marriage, might themselves contact a matchmaker to seek their help in finding a match, although some of the matchmakers insist on talking and meeting with the applicants themselves.

We shall now turn to the methodology that was used in order to answer the research question that was stated in the Introduction section: How do the matchmakers negotiate the dissonance between their religious views and the demands of their clients within a society that is being impacted by Western standards of beauty?

## Method

Data gathering was accomplished through in-depth interviews (Patton, 1990) conducted with 25 amateur matchmakers (16 women and 9 men). The amateur matchmakers receive no financial rewards and they help



singles without charging any payment (except for one female matchmaker who charges about \$50 as a registration fee). They contribute a lot of time to matchmaking because of their deep concern for the “problem” (in their own words) of a growing number of singles who have difficulties in finding their life partner. As a result, their guidance, as well as the potential mates they offer to introduce, reflect their own genuine viewpoints and attitudes and are not motivated by economic interests. Therefore, for the purpose of exploring matchmakers’ practices regarding the beauty issue, the amateur matchmakers are preferable to the professionals as the study population for this research.

The Jewish population in Israel is divided into three major sectors: (1) The Ultra-Orthodox or *haredim*, who are characterized by strict observance of halacha [Jewish law] and a conservative halachic and cultural outlook, religious piety, and deliberate separation from non-haredi society, with the aim of preserving their own traditional values from the incursion of values which are not acceptable to them. This includes separating themselves from Western culture, as well as shunning national, patriotic events which have secular manifestations. (2) The national-religious sector, known in the Western world as Modern Orthodox, sees observance of halacha as a central value and at the same time supports Zionism and active integration into general society in the State of Israel. (3) The secular sector consists of people who do not systematically observe Jewish law and its commandments, although some do observe various fundamental commandments such as circumcision, Jewish wedding and divorce rites, Jewish burial ceremonies, and customs related to Jewish holidays. Each of these sectors has its own separate educational system in Israel. All of the interviewees belong to the national-religious sector, most of them are married, in their late 40’s-50’s, possess an academic degree, and live in different parts of Israel. Many of them are educators, rabbis, and rabbis’ wives, or engaged in therapeutic professions; some of them began to do matchmaking after the rabbi of their community talked to them and suggested they could help the non-marrying singles to find a life partner (for detailed information on each of the interviewees, see Table 1 in the Appendix). The typical process of matchmaking in the national-religious sector differs from the process in the Ultra-Orthodox sector as well as from matchmaking among secular clients. Usually, in the national-religious sector the procedure follows this

pattern: the matchmakers meet the applicants in a face-to-face meeting and conduct an introductory conversation with each one. They usually collect data about the applicant's age, educational attainments, occupation, level of religious observance, and health. All of the matchmakers record these data during the meeting using pen and paper; none of them uses a computerized dataset. Then, the clients are asked to describe their desired traits in a potential mate. Some of the matchmakers ask the applicant to give a photo (either printed or an electronic file) and promise to show it only to candidates who seem to them truly suitable. When they have an idea for a match, the matchmakers all tend to turn first to the man, by phone, and describe the potential bride's traits and characteristics, including her physical description. If he is interested, he will go to the matchmaker's office and look at her photo (if available). Only after the man agrees to meet the woman do they proceed to talk to the woman about the potential match and give her information of the same sort that they told him. According to the matchmakers' explanation, the reason is that if they first obtain the woman's consent, and then the man refuses to meet her, the woman tends to be hurt by such a rejection much more than the man. The women can also ask the matchmakers to show them the man's photo. If the woman is also interested in the meeting, then the matchmaker calls him again and gives him the woman's telephone number. It is not accepted that a woman is the first to initiate contact, and women are generally expected to play a passive role in the process.

The interviews consisted of open-ended questions that related to the personal characteristics of the matchmakers and their *modus operandi*; to the characteristics of the people who apply to them and their requirements with respect to a mate; to the personal experiences of the matchmakers in this work; and to the difficulties they encounter and how they cope with them. The interviews were documented in writing during the interview, after obtaining the consent of the interviewees.

The method of sampling was based on the snowball method: The information about the matchmakers was obtained from acquaintances of the author and from the interviewees themselves who in turn referred the author to additional matchmakers.

The study emerged from the qualitative paradigm that claims to gain an understanding of a phenomenon by studying it in its daily natural

environment (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Within this, the analysis is based on the phenomenological approach which strives to bring information about reality as it is perceived by those being studied, in an attempt to construct a mapping of their experiences and their world of concepts, and in this way, to obtain an insight about their experiences and the significance of them (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Geertz, 1973).

An analysis of the data was based on the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). An analysis based on this approach is appropriate when there is a general research question, as is the case in the present study. The premise of grounded theory is that people with shared life circumstances also have shared social and psychological patterns which grow out of shared experiences. Accordingly, the analysis consisted of two stages: first, an analysis of the general topic which seeks central themes and patterns which emerged in the interviews, and second, giving an interpretation to the motifs that emerged in the first stage and their significance.

### **Findings**

An analysis of the interviews reveals the ambivalent attitude of the matchmakers toward the issue of physical appearance. On one hand, they disagree with the obsession for beauty, as one of the interviewees called it, and tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to persuade their clients to decrease the importance they attached to the appearance of the desired spouse. On the other hand, they demonstrate some kind of pragmatic acceptance and compliance with the demands of their male clients. Moreover, most of them tend to advise their female clients on how to improve their outward attractiveness in accordance to generally accepted standards, in order to promote the chances of finding a groom. In doing so, they unconsciously contribute to the perpetuation of the double standard of beauty.

Accordingly, two types of findings will be presented: the first relates to the attitude of the matchmakers to beauty as a characteristic of minor importance, and the second relates to their tendency to conform to the beauty obsession and to guide and direct the clients regarding their personal appearance. These two seemingly contrasting attitudes toward beauty help the matchmakers decrease the gap between their male cli-

ents' fantasies of a slim and beautiful bride, and the fact that most available women do not fit these fantasies. Therefore, these two attitudes serve as complementary strategies to achieve the goal of marrying off as many couples as possible.

*The Critical Attitude of the Matchmakers to the Beauty Issue*

The comments of the matchmakers reveal that most of the religious men want to meet only a pretty partner; this requirement corresponds to the requirements of men in general society. A pretty girl for them is a thin one, with a fair complexion and symmetrical facial features and body. However, the matchmakers indicated that in their opinion, the significance attached to this demand among religious men is exaggerated. Some of the matchmakers expressed their criticism of, not to mention disagreement with, this requirement by the men, as Shifra said:

The guys have requirements that are so well-defined as to be disgusting: she should be 'aristocratic,' she should be 'tall and willowy.' Many say, 'I just need her to be charming.' - they hang all of their irrational demands on this.

As mentioned above, one of the matchmakers, Daniel, defined this phenomenon as an "obsession with beauty." He said this obsession is particularly serious among religious guys as compared to non-religious guys. That is because the non-religious have already had girlfriends, have been in relationships, and know that external appearance is not the main component in a relationship. He contends:

The obsession with beauty is especially strong among the religious guys who look less good, because they have an inner feeling that they have to supplement their own looks through a wife. What happened in religious Zionism to the saying "Grace is deceitful and beauty is vain." - it's just the opposite and it's sad. It's a real obstacle that causes people to miss out on possible matches.

Meir, another matchmaker, who was seated next to a table piled high with application forms filled out by his clients, each with a photo attached, explained: "I show the boys forms with photos of about 500 girls, and they always pick two of them - the most beautiful; it is insane."

Isca added: "That is why they cannot find a match, because there is always a more beautiful girl."

Similarly, Hanna contended: "The boys look for sex. They look at the girl and decide immediately whether they want to have sex with her, or not. Some guys tell me: 'I gave her one look and I realized she's not for me.'"

Eliasaf described typical answers or reactions of his male clients when he shows them a picture of a homely girl. The boys do not try to hide their demand for beauty in the candidate, and it seems that they do not feel uncomfortable nor are they embarrassed to tell the matchmaker that they refuse to meet a girl who is not a beauty queen...

And I ask them whether these qualities are really important to them. Many say, 'I just want her to be attractive.' or 'I want to feel that she is attractive to me.' They hang all of their irrational demands on this. The guys disqualify someone within 20-30 seconds based on external appearance. "That's not the kind of build I like.' 'It won't work because there was no attraction at the beginning and if there wasn't at the beginning, it won't work later on.'

One of the common requirements relates to the candidate's skin color, which is related to ethnic origin. The Jewish population of Israel is composed of two major ethnic groups: The Ashkenazim, who they or their ancestors emigrated from Europe and American, and the Sephardim, who come mainly from Asia and Africa. The Sephardic groups are seen by a significant percentage of the Israeli public as possessing a lesser status in comparison with the Ashkenazim.

Most of the clients express a clear preference for light skin. David explains:

There are men, for example, who say that even if she is Sephardic, then it shouldn't show in her skin color. The Sephardim also ask for 'a skin color that is not mocha'...they want 'light'- no one said that they wouldn't marry a Sephardic girl, but they don't want her to look Sephardic...

Ayala told me that her male applicants are aware of the fact that skin color is not a good reason to rule out a potential mate, but they cannot overcome their arbitrary preference for light-skinned girls:

Many guys say that they don't care what her ethnic origin is but they want her to look light. Many said that they tried going with dark-skinned girls but it doesn't work. Many of the more religious also said this; they say that they know it isn't right, but they just don't connect with a dark look.

Shifra said in a similar vein: "Many say that if she is Sephardic, it shouldn't show. They want skin that is not mocha-colored."

In light of this attitude held by her clients, Ronit decided:

...If I see that guy ruled out a girl three times on the basis of her external appearance, I'm not going to deal with him - If a person wants a blonde with blue eyes, don't come to me. It is something that I have developed in my work over the years.

Analysis of the data gathered in the interviews reveals a basic inherent paradox in the men's demands regarding their future brides. One line of demands deals with the beauty and attractiveness of the girl; men explicitly express their preference for a slim and good-looking girl, and do not feel they have to be ashamed of these demands or hide them. At the same time, they wish to conform to the social norms of modesty in their society; that is why they insist on meeting a girl who is not rebellious, a girl who follows the mainstream social norms of dressing with long sleeves and long skirts, a girl who expresses her willingness to cover her hair after the wedding. Indeed, it is difficult to combine

these two contradicting demands but it is not unrealistic. Recent studies explore how Ultra-Orthodox and Modern Orthodox Jewish women find creative solutions for these paradoxical expectations: they look for clothes, accessories and jewelry that highlight their beauty and femininity but are restricted to the religious imperative of modesty (see Seigelshifer, 2006; Zalberg, 2006; Zalberg & Almog, 2009a).

### *Conforming to the Obsession with Beauty*

In spite of the education and moralizing about “Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting,” it seems that charm and beauty have a significant importance during the matchmaking process. All the matchmakers who were interviewed, without exception, noted that the boys are interested in meeting a beautiful girl, while beauty from the boys’ point of view means a slim figure. This beauty ideal has been formed as a result of the influence of Western culture on Israeli Jewish society (Katz, 2000); this “cultural imperative” has penetrated both secular and religious Jewish sectors (Bokek-Cohen & Peres, 2006; Zalberg, 2006; Bokek-Cohen & Davidovich, 2008, 2009; Zalberg & Almog, 2009a).

Wolf (1991) argues that to be accepted in the world of the liberated and independent “new woman,” one had to meet rigid new standards of slimness, beauty, and fashion. The following quotes demonstrate the difficulties that the matchmakers experience when they try to find a match for obese or even moderately overweight clients. Ahuva, for example, told me she does not have debates with men regarding this preference; she just accepts this as a given fact, anticipating that the heavier girls would have difficulties in finding a groom. She explained:

You can cross out the heavy girls. The boys from all the subdivisions in our sector do not want someone who is chubby or fat, and many of them say ‘only slim,’ no matter how they themselves look. I have nothing to offer to a heavy girl who has a lot of other advantages.

Ayala takes a direct and open approach with her full-figured clients and shares her difficulties with them over finding candidates who are willing to meet a girl who is not slim enough:

I tell the heavy girls gently that unfortunately, the guys put an emphasis on appearance- a product of Western influence, it's what they see on television and the movies and it's not your problem, it's theirs. But- if we want to be realistic, something has to be done about it and it's doable. I get two kinds of reactions: A. 'I don't agree; whoever wants me, will take me as I am.' - But after a year or two, they go on a diet ... It takes them time to digest but eventually they get it. Or, B. There are those who say thank you and start to deal with it immediately.

Moshe said that he tends to match the heavy girls to the overweight boys, so the issue of obesity becomes the future couple's shared challenge:

If a very fat guy comes in - here you see all of these applications [shows a pile] - these are of heavy girls. So when he comes in, I show him this group and tell him with a smile that they should go on a diet together, that she will cook him good food, that he should do some athletic activity.

Ilana precludes the difficulty of dealing with heavy girls and says: "I only deal with those who are normally 'full', not those who have to lose 30 kilo." She does not try to advise them to lose weight nor does she try to convince any guy to meet them. She goes on to recall one incident:

A very fat girl called me and said that she wears a size 12. I said, that's a problem and we ended the conversation... but that is an example of a very great dilemma; on the one hand, I want to be frank and don't want to give them any illusions; on the other hand, I hurt them...

Nirit added:



It's very hard for me. I have someone who is overweight, a young woman of 25, dirty-looking, not aesthetic, with bad breath, and I am not arranging her a match. I'll wait until I find someone who has no sense of smell... I allow myself to be selective. I wouldn't do it to my own reputation, and not to another person, poor guy.

Similarly to Ilana, Nirit also avoids trying to find a match for very unattractive girls; she says she may feel sorry for the boy, for being disappointed by his date's looks. Introducing an unattractive candidate can damage her good reputation and image as a good matchmaker; she cares a lot for this reputation although she never asks for any payment for her services. The matchmakers' unique abilities and talents in finding suitable matches become meaningless if the matches they propose are not considered "beautiful enough" by the client. Accordingly, keeping one's good reputation as a "good matchmaker" is a factor that leads a matchmaker to refrain from introducing less attractive girls.

#### *Active Guidance regarding a Person's External Appearance*

The interviews showed that external appearance has a significant role in the dating-introductions process, and that men in the national-religious community, like men in general society, unequivocally prefer women who are slim and well-groomed (Feingold, 1992; Hatfield & Rapson, 1995; Bokek-Cohen & Peres, 2006). Since that is the case, many matchmakers tend - as subtly as possible - to direct the girls toward improving their appearance. Ziva, for example, said: "There are those girls I tell to take care of themselves, to go on a diet so that the guy can approach." Orna explained:

You can cross out the heavy girls. I try to tell them gently that 'Unfortunately, guys are into external appearance, and if you want to be realistic, you have to do something about that - and it can be done.'

Likewise, Zippora commented that she told a girl who applied to her who was overweight: "Look, you have a lot to offer. You're smart; you have a doctorate - just one thing. You have to go shopping for good clothes, and you have to lose weight."

Zippora and other matchmakers like her do not ignore the external appearance of the men, either. In her words: "It has already happened to me that I told some guy to go on a diet." In a similar vein, Orna said: "I said that he had enormous sores near his eyes. I told him: 'I can't offer you any girl until you take care of the sores near your eyes.'" Natan added: "I told the guy to take care of his appearance - that he should examine himself head to toe and that he should be sure that he doesn't have any unpleasant odor." Obviously the way people dress has an impact on the impression they make on other people. That is why many matchmakers try to guide their clients in how to dress, especially the young girls who are expected to look both modest *and* attractive at the same time. Sarah doesn't hesitate to help applicants when it comes to dress. As she says:

There was one guy whom I accompanied for many years. His mother was dead, so I went with him to buy clothes. I also took a girl to a good clothing store - so that she could see how she could make herself look different.

Eyeglasses may sometimes diminish a person's attractiveness; therefore, Ilana, for example, believes they should be removed in order to enhance a girl's look. She said: "I called someone and suggested that she get fitted for contact lenses. She said that she couldn't and that 'whoever wants me will take me as I am.'"

Shoshana foresaw the difficulty in finding a match for one of her heavy clients. Therefore she instructed her to spend many hours speaking on the phone before she agreed to a first date, in order to allow the young man to get to know the girl's personality first. At the same time, she also prepared the man for the fact that he was going to meet a heavy girl:

...Once I had a very fat girl and I knew that it would be hard

to find her a match. So I told the guy, “She’s full-figured.” I told the girl, “Even if he wants to meet you, don’t go. Speak to him on the phone for three weeks, get to be friends, open up to each other, wish each other Shabbat shalom, try to get into family background, ask about brothers and sisters. If he says he likes to go hiking, say ‘Wow! So do I.’ Then after you have been friends for three weeks, dress up nicely.” and... He sees that she is really fat. I told him, “Sometimes a person marries a person who is slim and she gets fat after the wedding. Tell her, ‘Let’s make a weight-reducing plan together for the coming months.’”

The matchmakers instruct both the boys and the girls how to look better, but it appears that they do it more intensively when talking to their female clients. This asymmetry corresponds to the universally stronger significance attached to women’s beauty, which is accompanied by a wide range of beauty and beautification norms for women (Tolmach Lakoff & Scherr, 1984; Wolf, 1991; Rothblum, 1994).

### Discussion

National-religious matchmakers have ambivalent feelings and attitudes regarding their male clients’ demands for attractive mates. They tell the young singles their personal opinions and express a negative opinion of their obsession with beauty, yet at the same time they try to accommodate the beauty imperative, mainly by advising and guiding the clients about how to change their looks and how to dress in order to come closer to the ideal. The matchmakers make much more effort in dealing with the girls as compared to the boys. In that sense, the matchmakers are aware of the lookism phenomenon; but they are not passive regarding this kind of discrimination; instead they play an active role in maintaining it. Furthermore, they adhere to the worldwide double standard regarding the outward appearance of men and women.

Along with the matchmakers’ tendency to educate the female clients about how they should look, they concurrently try to shape the de-

mands of the male applicants regarding the desired match, as well as advising them to reduce their overemphasis on the beauty factor. Using these patterns may reflect that the matchmakers see the process of matching as a kind of barter between the man's resources and those of the woman; as a result, they see the single woman as a kind of product who must be marketed and who must try as much as possible to convert her personal traits into traits that are perceived as desirable ones by the potential match. This pattern is not unique to matchmakers in this study but corresponds to the marriage market theory proposed by Becker (1973) and Mincer (1962), which sees marriage as a barter transaction, with the value of a person in the marriage market being reflected by the sum total of the resources, services, and goods that he or she can contribute to the future family cell. Zalberg (2007) defined these resources as "matchmaking values" and among them she included personality and social and family characteristics as well as characteristics that relate to external appearance.

Since the process of matchmaking posits a kind of barter transaction between personal characteristics and types of capital, this practice might be considered the *objectification* of singles, a process whereby an abstract concept is treated as though it were a concrete or physical object (Nussbaum, 1995). A broader definition for this concept also includes people as subjects of an approach that considers the human being as merchandise or an object for use without sufficient regard for his personality (Bartky, 1990; LeMonchek, 1997). According to Nussbaum (1995), something is objectified if one of seven factors exists: (1) *Instrumentality*. The objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes; (2) *Denial of autonomy*. The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination; (3) *Inertness*. The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity; (4) *Fungibility*. The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type and/or (b) with objects of other types; (5) *Violability*. The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into; (6) *Ownership*. The objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.; (7) *Denial of subjectivity*. The objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account.

Two of these do exist in the way matchmakers treat their clients: *fungibility*, i.e., the object is treated as something of such nature or kind as to be freely exchangeable or replaceable, and *denial of autonomy*: i.e., an object is treated as being devoid of identity or self-determination. The matchmakers relate to the client as an object which must be marketed and sold, and they try to give it a trademark, as they advise the client to accentuate his/her positive traits. The matchmakers also tend to a certain extent to deny the client's autonomy in the sense that they ignore some of his/her demands and try to design a slightly different identity for him/her. This may also be considered an expression of objectification of the client. On the other hand, their behavior may be interpreted as an attempt to act as effectively as possible to achieve what is best for that client as they perceive it, i.e., marriage, in accordance with their knowledge of the rules of the game in the marriage market.

Pursuing Goffman's (1959) conceptualization, the matchmaker helps the client present a better and upgraded identity, which is aided by a new outward "packaging." In this sense, the matchmaker as an authoritative figure gives the client the legitimacy to deliver a new image to potential "shoppers."

The protracted singleness in the modern orthodox society is perceived as a "societal problem" which troubles many in this sector (Shtuhl, 2000; Bartov, 2004; Nahari, 2007; Engleberg, 2009, 2011), who see it as a deviation from the norm which is desired and expected by the society. According to Becker (1963), social groups create a deviance by the very fact that they set down rules of behavior. A breach of these rules is considered deviance, and people who act in a way that does not conform to these rules of behavior are considered different or deviant. From this viewpoint, deviance is the product of evaluating a person's behavior or outward appearance according to the criteria of rules set by others. In this case, it refers to rules, which are a product of Jewish tradition, and which most members of the national-religious society who have married and set up a family are concerned with preserving. This group sees itself as normal and others, who are not married, as deviant. In this way, Becker contends, this group maintains authority.

Durkheim (1933) contended that society's reaction to deviance clarifies its moral limits. Therefore matchmakers, by guiding their clients on how to look and dress, fulfill the role of defining the moral limits of

national-religious society. This is demonstrated most explicitly in instructing girls about how to dress according to the accepted implicit norms of their sector. Moreover, the matchmakers serve as agents of social control in preventing the deviance of those afflicted with protracted singleness, and they take action to normalize them, in light of the threat they pose to religious society. A community that suffers from a sense of threat and fears deviance tends to cope with these feelings by reinforcing the mechanisms of social control (Douglas, 1966).

The matchmaker can also recommend the correct and suitable look for the single who applies to him by dint of the authority that he/she has been given. According to Weber's classification of the three types of authority (Weber, 1979), authority's power is accepted as legitimate by those subject to it. He distinguished between three ideal types of authority: legitimate political authority, charismatic authority, and traditional authority. During the interviews with the matchmakers, we were indeed impressed that the interviewees were gifted with a charismatic authority, i.e. personal charm and power radiated from them, and it was they who were the source of their own authority and who led the singles who came to them to entrust themselves in the matchmakers' hands and rely on their selections. Charismatic authority stems from the personal charisma or personal power that characterizes the individual personality of the authority figure. Furthermore, the traditional authority is relevant since the matchmaker's personage has been respected and venerated in Jewish society for centuries (Grossman, 2004).

An obvious and explicit result of these aesthetic improvements is the satisfaction of the clients after finding their match and getting married, thereby putting an end to the stigma of being deviant. However, there is another kind of consequence for the matchmakers as they increase their social power and position in the community, owing to their impressive success in marrying off a large number of singles. This self-serving benefit may explain why female matchmakers act similarly to their male counterparts and agree to comply with masculine standards of mating preferences.

## Conclusion

The purpose of the article was to examine the level of correspondence between the Jewish cultural ethos toward beauty and the everyday life praxis of Jewish matchmakers. The analysis of the data is based on the sociological view that sees the body as a bearer of meaning, since it reflects a given social order (Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987; Chazan, 2003). Accordingly, when coming to evaluate these matchmakers' activities and attitudes toward the beauty issue, one should take into consideration the social context. In the recent two decades, many women in the NR sector have adopted modern lifestyles and arrived at impressive educational and occupational attainments, thus challenging the patriarchal traditional order of the community. The rise of women's power was accompanied by a parallel academic proliferation of religious feminist female scholars, who began to publish academic and publicist articles that call for a change toward more egalitarian norms between the genders (See Adler, 1998; Safrai, 1998; Hartman & Marmon, 2004; Elijor, 2010). According to Faludi (2006), after women have made substantial gains in their efforts to obtain equal rights, there is a recurrent media-driven "backlash" against these advancements. A backlash is a popular negative reaction to something which has gained popularity, prominence, or influence. Beauty standards are perceived by feminist theorists as a means to weaken women and regain male dominance in society (Tolmach Lakoff & Scherr, 1984; Wolf, 1991; Rothblum, 1994; Rhode, 2010; Hakim, 2011; Mears, 2011). The use of beauty standards in the marriage market creates a backlash by making women's educational and professional attainments meaningless. Hypothetically, a meeting with a matchmaker and hearing advice could potentially have a liberating effect on women. However, considering the fact that most of the matchmakers are rabbis, rabbis' wives, or people whom the rabbi respects and suggested they should start matchmaking in their community, this potential is not fully realized because all of the matchmakers belong to the mainstream traditional non-feminist sections of the national-religious sector (as noted in the Method section). Traditional matchmakers serve as backlash agents by applying beauty standards during the matchmaking process. Applying and amplifying these standards for women contribute to the phenomenon of lookism: the discrim-

ination against homely women in the marriage market, lowering their chances to get married and acquire the accompanying social and psychological benefits.

In summary, this study can shed light on the contribution of social agents to the phenomenon of backlash in a traditional society that is going through social change toward a more egalitarian society for both genders. It should be stressed that the matchmakers' cooperation with the beauty obsession of their male clients may facilitate two outcomes: it has the potential to contribute to a sex-objectification of women in society, by emphasizing their physical traits while ignoring other personal qualities; at the same time it also perpetuates an archaic non-egalitarian society. It can be assumed that if the matchmakers use their social power to educate the male singles to reduce the importance of external appearance, they will lose some of their prestige and status in the short run, but in the long run they will take part in forming new mating norms, which may lead to forming intimate relationships that are not based on superficial physical criteria, but rather on a good pairing of the personality and worldviews of both partners, as well as more egalitarian relations.



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## Appendix A

**Table 1**  
*Main characteristics of the interviewees*

number	age	gender	Years of matchmaking	Ethnic origin	Educational level	Number of couples that got married	profession
1	54	f	30	Ashkenazi	academic	25	Educational counselor
2	45	m	3	Sepharadic	High school	0	Government office clerk
3	55	m	3	Ashkenazi	Education after finishing high school, non academic	8	businessman
4	56	f	35	Ashkenazi	academic	"a few dozens"	Social worker
5	45	f	27	Ashkenazi	Education after finishing high school	40	Rabbi's wife
6	48	m	25	Ashkenazi	Education after finishing high school	40	Rabbi
7	35	m	10	Ashkenazi	Education after finishing high school	7	Rabbi and a teacher
8	32	f	10	Ashkenazi	Education after finishing high school	7	Informal education
9	46	f	0.5	Ashkenazi	academic	2	Kindergarten teacher
10	34	f	10	Ashkenazi	academic	7	clerk
11	48	f	10	Ashkenazi	High school	2	Not employed
12	52	m	20	Ashkenazi	High school	"a few hundreds"	businessman
13	58	f	30	Sepharadic	High school	30	Shop assistant
14	38	f	2	Ashkenazi	academic	0	teacher
15	43	f	12	Ashkenazi	academic	3	teacher
16	47	f	3	Sepharadic	academic	12	teacher and an educational counselor
17	54	f	7	Ashkenazi	academic	37	counselor
18	60	m	9-10	Sepharadic	High school	83	Rabbi
19	56	f	40	Ashkenazi	academic	18	lecturer
20	58	f	35	Sepharadic	High school	45	Rabbi's wife
21	53	f	12	Sepharadic	academic	42	Social worker
22	33	m	4	Ashkenazi	academic	14	senior clerk in a governmental office
23	55	f	18-20	Ashkenazi	academic	"a lot, I do not remember, I do not want to tell it, because only confidential /secret information is blessed"	Social worker
24	49	m	10-12	Sepharadic	academic	200	teacher
25	24	m	3	Sepharadic	academic	7	Security agent

\* interviewees no. 5 and 6 are marital partners

\* interviewees no. 7 and 8 are marital partners

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