



Photo: David T. Greenspun

# IS E-DATING GOOD FOR JEWISH WOMEN?

by SUSAN SCHNUR

**“Everyone knows someone who fell in love at JDate,”** is the tagline that JDate flaunts, and this seems entirely unassailable. There are JDate success stories wherever one turns: this one’s best friend, that one’s widowed mother, the couple in the downstairs apartment, all three girls in the medical research department at work. Susan Gold, who has JDate for 10 years but has yet to find a life partner, raves about online dating nonetheless. “I think JDate is the best thing in the whole wide world for everyone!”

For some women of all ages (as well as men), JDate, SawYouAtSinai, JRetroMatch, OkCupid, Nerve, Match,

and other sites have brought satisfying relationships: many have married, others found meaningful friends. But looking closer at the Internet dating scene—and specifically at (heterosexual) Jewish women’s experiences and success—Lilith found another, less obvious story. A decade into e-dating—and 40 years into the feminist revolution—it’s time to take a look at what’s happening beyond the slogans.

For a good number of Jewish women—mostly those in their late thirties and up who have never married—Internet dating has proved an embittering experience, making them feel isolated and at fault. “Something must be terribly

wrong with me,” one 36-year-old told her therapist, echoing others. “Everyone seems to find a partner online but me.” Lilith spoke with dozens of women in this cohort, and a significant minority said that e-dating made them feel hopeless and despairing. Some women reported being online compulsively, checking dating sites into the wee hours, at work when no one is looking, alone in a Starbucks with a laptop and latte. “I used to have a life,” one 29-year-old lamented. “Now I’m just a maniac.”

Some female e-daters meet liars and predators online and abandon the whole enterprise in disgust. Others meet simi-

larly problematic men—ones who turn out to be married, who aren't Jewish but say they are, who bear no resemblance to the self they construct online, who have sexual fetishes—but are nonchalant about weeding them out, pragmatic about a process that will put them in

## Online dating sites are a resource for singles, but the question of whether they are ultimately good for Jewish women is a serious one.

touch both with appropriate partners and those whom they find revolting.

Some women, largely those in their twenties, happily use the sites for casual sex or hook-ups; others—even those in their seventies—go online for cybersex, typing racy exchanges while masturbating in their darkened kitchens.

**The online dating world**, according to Virginia Vitzthum, author of *I Love You, Let's Meet*, has turned into a \$521 million industry, and almost one in four single Americans have used dating sites—of which there are between 800 and a thousand. JDate claims about 400,000 active members, 74,000 of them paying subscribers. An informal consensus puts the number of non-Jews using JDate at about 25 percent—a hefty number—but JDate says the number is 11 percent. (Non-Jews sometimes self-describe as “Jew-curious” or “Jew-whores.”) The overall count of Jewish men and women who use e-dating services is staggering.

Internet date sites, however, remain a resource that arguably cause as much pain as happiness, and the question of whether they are ultimately good for Jewish women is a serious one. We remain, of all Caucasian groups in America, the ones least likely to marry (female marriage rates correlate with educational levels, and Jewish women are the best educated females in North America), and statistical trends suggest that these numbers are growing. (In the general population, the gender ratio disfavors heterosexual women looking for marriage partners; this disparity is heightened for Jewish women who want to date and marry only Jewish men.)

As a reader of *Lilith*, you can probably readily bring to mind single Jewish women in their thirties, forties and fifties who, in one interviewee's words, are “attractive, kind, smart, and just wonderful”—but also “mystifyingly uncoupled.” The ratio of men to women on most dating sites,

interestingly, is reasonably comparable, so what accounts for the fact that a 42-year-old Jewish male who posts his profile on JDate will find his in-box flooded with as many as 1000 eligible women, while the same-aged Jewish female will log on only to find that she's been embalmed as a wallflower? Another scenario, described by a woman in her late thirties, and echoed by others, is that of “getting a flurry of responses, but largely from men old enough to be your father.”

Recent research by Columbia University economist Ray Fisman on what makes women romantically desirable to men sheds some light on the matter. “Men avoided women whom they perceived to be smarter than themselves,” he writes, and “the same held true for measures of career ambition—a woman could be ambitious, just not *more* ambitious than the man considering her for a date.” (Fisman told *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd that his findings were like “that ‘Sex and the City’ episode where Miranda went speed-dating. When she says she's a lawyer, guys lose interest. Then she tells them she's a flight attendant and that plays into their deepest fantasies.”)

Alex Williams, also of the *Times*, recently reported similar findings. “...that the new income superiority of many young women in big cities is causing them to encounter forms of hostility they weren't prepared to meet, leaving them trying to figure out how to balance pride in their accomplishments against their perceived need to bolster the egos of the men they date.” A recent analysis of census data by Andrew Beverage, a sociology professor at Queens College

## E-DATING

### Seeking: Calm, Gentle Man

**Debby Bernson, 50, from Seattle, went on JDate two months after her husband of 22 years left her.** “Everything about it was weird,” she says. “Thinking about other men, dating other men. In my head I was still so completely married.”

Family members had had good experiences on JDate, and they gave Debby advice that helped her move forward. “Take it lightly,” they said. “Do it to get out of the house, so you don't get self-pitying. Do it to have fun. Don't look for a boyfriend. If it isn't positive, stop doing it.” Debby chatted online with a handful of men, went out with two, circled back to the first, and found herself, eight months later, in a deeply satisfying relationship with a man named Daniel.

She feels she learned a lot just filling out her JDate profile. “It had been a long time since I'd thought about myself. Who I was, what I wanted. I thought I was plain and boring. I mean, I'm not a doctor or gymnast. I became a wife and mother, a part-time office manager, and at some point I left part of my identity. Writing my profile raised my self-esteem. There are dimensions to me; I love art and nature, I'm physically fit. I'm loving. It helped me remember who I am.”

Debby was looking to meet men who met her emotional needs “at that moment. Calm, gentle men, laid-back personalities. Not someone challenging or egotistical. Not someone with young children.

“**I wanted to respond to men who hadn't provided photos,**” she says. “At 50, I was surprised to find myself feeling that looks meant nothing to me. Daniel's profile sounded like someone who bounces back from life's difficulties and goes on. I found that very attractive.”

Daniel, 46, had been left by a spouse as well, and they both, in Debby's words, “had experienced hurt and disappointment. You want to be a family, you want your marriage to last. Connecting with someone empathic around these losses was wonderful. Daniel turned out to be a thoughtful, loving person. We're on the same wavelength, I love the way he talks with his kids. When I met him, I just liked him. I look in



his eyes and see this really special person. He's all the calm stuff I was looking for.

"I know I'm still going through an emotional time," she adds. "I ask myself, 'Am I loving this man for the wrong reasons?' A big part of me doesn't care. It is what it is, and it's lovely."

## E-DATING

### Seeking: The Chance Encounter

**Caitlin Mount, 25, had recently broken up with her boyfriend of five years when she joined 10 Internet dating sites.** Sounds like a lot, but Caitlin's a freelance journalist in New York City, and a woman's magazine picked up the tab. She filed a story about her experience.

"JDate, of all the sites," Caitlin says, "is the lamest of the lame. There is totally an ick factor at JDate. The guys on Jdate are stereotypically Jewish—a lot of referencing of mothers in profiles. Everyone looks pretty Jewish; lots of doctors and lawyers. And i-bankers. I'm probably in the minority of Jewish girls who wouldn't be into that."

She's equally hard on eHarmony. "It chooses guys for you using really elaborate personality measures. **They were spot-on in characterizing me; it was frightening.** Being stubborn, holding grudges. But they were so bad at picking dates out for me. They assumed I would put looks aside, and I don't. If they really knew me, they'd know I'm superficial. I ultimately decided that the folks on that site were not my 'pool.' But eHarmony does have a really high success rate.

"I enjoyed the written correspondence on some sites a lot. If you can be clever or witty in your email, you've got me. It's a way to figure out if there's remote compatibility.

"I learned that Internet dating isn't for me. There's something about organically meeting someone that holds an appeal—you meet through a friend, or you're at a museum, in a coffee shop. Not a bar. A chance encounter. I romanticize the chance encounter, perhaps.

"Look. I wasn't really, really serious. In your twenties, you mostly just want to hook up, anyway. I went on 11 dates. It's not hard to get them."

*\*Not her real name.*

in New York, shows that, for the first time, women in their twenties are earning higher wages than many men in the same cohort.

Stephanie Coontz, director of research at the Council on Contemporary Families, notes that high-earning young women "are of two minds" about their achievements. "Proud," but also "scared"—worried about their ability to attract marriage-minded men, given that the latter may not "be the main breadwinner[s]."

## A 42-year-old Jewish man posts his profile on JDate and finds his in-box flooded with 1,000 eligible women. How come the same-age Jewish female logs on to find she's a wallflower?

"These are old tapes running in their heads," says Coontz. "This is how you get a man." Fisman's research points out, however, that these tapes aren't just old—they remain potently current.

**Here, then, is what many single Jewish women told me:** that most of the single men they know are single either by choice or emotional handicap; that more Jewish men than Jewish women seem to be gay (in the general population, male homosexuality outnumbers female by about 2:1); and that a not insubstantial number of men on Jewish dating sites pose as single—but are, in fact, married. (Interestingly, this is not the case with women.) Some studies estimate that between one-fifth and one-third of all online daters are married.

There is, then, a demographic "black hole" into which Jewish college-educated women, never married, in their mid-thirties to late-forties, simply vanish, while unmarried men of the same age go on merrily dating women notably younger than themselves.

Some men with whom Lilith spoke date younger women but actually fail to perceive that that's what they're doing. For example: Vitzthum interviews one Jewish man, age 70, whose ideal match is "a beautiful lady, age 58 to 65"—that is, someone as much as 12 years younger

than himself. "A lot of guys want someone younger," he says, "but I don't." Jewish men's cognitive dissonance around this issue is so commonplace that Vitzthum calls it "JDate math."

The fact is, the field of eligibles for Jewish men and women careen in opposite directions—men's getting larger with each passing year and women's growing smaller. And the Internet, as well as a phenomenal 21st-century demographic—what some are calling "the new

Manhattan immigrant" (that is, hordes of single urban professionals)—definitely intensify the problem for women in this "black hole" cohort.

Rob Eshman, Editor-in-Chief of *The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*, mirrored many Jews' perceptions when he recently wrote an empathic story—"Our Hindu Widows"—about "too many beautiful, brilliant single Jewish women in their thirties and forties" and the "lack of available Jewish men":

*"A passionate Hollywood executive pushing 40 who simply, desperately, still seeks the elusive nice Jewish guy. A brilliant doctor with a runner's body who, at 44, still can't find 'the one.' A writer who asks me to keep my eye out for any Israelis new to town, because she figures she's dated most of the native Jews. A marketing executive who has given up on finding the right Jewish man. 'If it happens, it happens.' I ask her if she still wants children, and she says, 'More than anything.' And tears come to her eyes."*

And yet, what's so different now from the early 1980s when Bill Novak's article, "Are Good Jewish Men a Vanishing Breed?" circulated widely? A lot. While many factors come into play in our complex lives, Lilith notes **seven primary reasons that so many heterosexual Jewish women today are having trouble finding men to marry.**

**1. Men (and women) are postponing serious dating.** In metropolitan areas in particular, men seem increasingly to devote their twenties to building their careers (as opposed to earlier eras in which males of this age tended to establish their careers *and* date seriously), and it is not until they are in their

thirties that they begin orienting themselves towards marriage-minded dating. At that point, Internet trends suggest, many start going out with women in their twenties.

**2. Women stay in bad relationships considerably longer than men.** Males,

it seems, are quicker to turn the page on unpromising couplings, while females can really mangle. I spoke with women who stayed in ungratifying relationships because they couldn't tolerate hurting the men they were involved with; women who fell in love with men who had lied about their marital status—and then

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## AND AN EXPERT SAYS...

Elana Katz, family therapist and divorce mediator on faculty at the Ackerman Institute.

“Internet dating creates a lot of opportunity, but it can also turn the idea of netting a partner into something like fishing: after you've caught your fish, you've pretty much accomplished your goal. From a relational point of view, “catching the fish” is only the first frame in life's board game. After that, there's so much more. What will you both continue to bring to the relationship, how will you negotiate difference, will the connection become rewarding, exciting?”

The Internet comes at a time when our culture is about “getting the best” and “being the best”—and it feeds that drive. If someone's insecure about their standing, then the right arm-candy, the right dollar amount, can signal both to themselves and the world that they've arrived at a particular level of success.

How many times have you heard this exchange? “I've met someone terrific.” “Great. What does he do?” I long for the day when the response, instead, is: “What's he like? How does he treat you? What's the connection feel like?” There's nothing wrong with trying to find someone accomplished, but there isn't going to be someone “perfect” who solves all of your life's issues. Instead, a good relationship will be about mutual support: two people negotiating their own life journeys while also bringing out the best in one another and building an intimate connection. It doesn't mean “perfection,” it means a healthy way to deal with what's not “perfect.”

In our culture, we know how to write the copy for The New York Times wedding pages, but we don't have much experience describing what really warms our heart, what it really takes to build a relationship. It's mind-boggling, really—you wouldn't plunk someone behind the wheel of a car and say, “You'll figure it out,” yet we send people off to couple with only the most superficial understanding of what it's about. Our expectations for relationships are so much higher than in the past, but we haven't built in a mechanism to learn how to get there.

**There's also a biochemistry to falling in love:** you have butterflies, you can't eat, you listen to songs, everything is amazing. Our bodies are wired for this phase to fade out at between eight and 18 months, and to shift to a more nurturing love. But people who are dating don't know this, and when the sizzle goes out, they start to think, “This guy forgets to call, he didn't bring home the newspaper. I'm with the wrong person.” Instead, you want to be thinking, “How am I going to build this? Do I like what's developing?”

In many parts of the Jewish community, there is still a deeply held value (especially for women) that we need to find our way to a loving relationship. It's considered an accomplishment: for ourselves, for our families, for our community. The community brings pressure—but also real commitment—to this search. I know many single Jewish

women who, at around age 40, start carrying around this urgent question: “What went wrong here?”

There's a huge contradiction in the community. On the one hand, Jews promote marrying—so you would expect to see a lot of traditional configuration—but on the other, there are huge chunks of the population where it's simply not happening. That's contradictory input, and people can't begin to work on this issue, never mind solve it, if it hasn't been articulated.

There *are* gender issues. We talk “paradigm changes,” but we're not fully living them. I hear stories from men, “She was only interested in finding out how much money I make, what I could do for her.” Their take-away experience is that someone will be using them, exhibiting too much interest in their platinum credit card. Some men are scanning for this—they had a bad divorce, say—it worries them. Men are people, too. We need to approach them—and they, us—more thoughtfully. One woman told me that on her first JDate date she said something complimentary to her date, and he almost dropped his fork. He couldn't recall the last time a date had complimented him. Men are anxious, too—they want a pleasant evening with someone who takes some care with them.

## YOU WOULDN'T PLUNK SOMEONE BEHIND THE WHEEL OF A CAR AND SAY, “YOU'LL FIGURE IT OUT.”

Women's e-dating experiences can be greatly enhanced if they approach Internet dating intelligently, with intentionality, with a shaping hand. We have to know when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em. We might say online, “I would never live outside of San Francisco. I would never date someone with kids,” but the specificity only captures you at one point in time. In the context of a relationship that's really nurturing, that potentiates both partners' growth and connection—you can experience yourself as surprisingly flexible. A man who was only interested in women who worked part-time found himself cheering for his girlfriend's promotion at work, even though that meant a lot of travel.

When all goes well, there's a balance, there are roots and wings. It's not only what goes on between you, what you give each other, but also how you applaud each other as adults going out into the world. ”

— as told to Susan Schnur

## E-DATING

### Seeking: 5'10" tops

**Helena Kryushkin, 27, a patient-services liaison at a Boston hospital, used JDate, Yahoo, and Craigslist on and off for three years, meeting men with whom she's still friendly.**

"I was on JDate because I was new in town, and I wanted to get to know as many people as I could. I wasn't, 'I'm looking for a guy I want to marry, to father my children.' It was, 'Let's see what happens.' My criteria were pretty broad. I'm 4'10", so a guy had to be within a foot of me. I preferred someone with a college degree, probably no more than 10 years my senior.

"I met Ben, my boyfriend, in April 2006.

**We did the progression: JDate, email and messaging, phone, then face-to-face.** After two or three months of dating, we both backed off from other Internet dating. But then we thought, 'Maybe this is going too fast. Do we want this?' We had a month or so of questioning. After that, we became a couple.

"I was selective when I talked with people online," Helena says. "I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted, but I would know that that particular guy wasn't 'it.'

"You have to put in time, sifting through piles of crap. Some men can't manage the real world because they're socially inept or jerks or liars—that's why they're online. You have to protect yourself. For me, the Internet's anonymity gave me freedom. In a bar, I would be too nice to say No. But, you know, most girls make the same mistakes online as they do in real life. They fall into that same rut, and then they're, 'How do these guys always find me?'

"There's a skill to dating. It's not luck-of-the-draw," she says. "I wasn't a hottie who was getting a million responses. I would check in—at work, sometimes. It's like shopping for shoes. You have a coupon, and it's going to expire, and you're just going to go at it."

Helena thinks JDate is marketed to young people "to a fault"; that e-dating is definitely "a harder scene for older women"; and that a girl going on JDate will largely find "two kinds of guys. There are the younger ones looking for a hookup or sex or fun," and then there is "that nice Jewish boy who has dated whoever

found it hard to leave; and women who knew they were in dead-end situations but felt it was unbearable to be, as one woman put it, "that stereotypical, pity-engendering 'single Jewish woman'."

"Unless you're my age and unmarried yourself," a lawyer told me, "you have no idea how shaming it feels to be 44 and single." In general, my informants agreed that it was "far more stigmatizing for a Jewish woman to be single than a Jewish man."

Nancy Slotnick, dating coach and founder, in pre-Internet days, of Drip, the popular dating-service café on Manhattan's Upper West Side, told Lilith, "Time management is a big thing in the dating process. Women can be loathe to rule a guy out, or too scared to be single and out there again. Women lose decades"—and their biological clocks stop ticking. "Pay attention to how old you are," she cautions, "how old you want to be when you get married, how many kids you want. You have to plan this out in your early twenties." Most Jewish women, it seems, never got this memo.

Yaacov and Sue Deyo, well-known Los Angeles dating coaches and authors, got into the field specifically because of what they call "women's painful time factor." Many females date "non-productively," they say, and can be taught "effective dating." Their methods are impressive.

### 3. Women have no time to date.

This is, simply, a cultural sea-change. A good number of Jewish women attend demanding professional schools, some work 80-hour weeks at jobs that never leave their consciousness, others hold down two jobs just to be able to pay their bills—which in metropolitan areas almost always include exorbitant housing costs. (Jewish singles increasingly cluster in a very small handful of America's densest cities.) Several informants said that, crunched for time, they eschew Internet dating sites that require them to fill out time-intensive dating profiles, even as they also know that these sites boast the best outcomes!

"I never respond to profiles where the guy's left a lot of blanks. It's an efficient rule-out," one informant told me. "If a man can't even find the time to fill out the form, how serious is he about dating, really? But

my profile has a lot of blanks, too," she added. "It's a problem."

Helena Kryushkin [profiled on this page] is an interesting exemplar. Working as a catering manager during a period when she was actively dating, she describes a "work schedule that was horrendous. I had such minimal time outside of work, and it was clear to me I had to devote all of it to online dating."

### 4. Internet dating sites encourage some men—who would otherwise probably be marriage-minded—to stay single.

This one is a killer. Quite a few women reported that they had dated men who overtly shared this about themselves. One male informant wrote me, "E-dating is the land of the lotoseaters. Why should men move forward into committed relationships? We've got available women who are always there, girls to have sex with, plenty of decent-enough relationships."

"There's the impulse to want to constantly trade up," another man said. "This woman is nice, but there are hundreds maybe nicer.' Why settle for anything less than the 'perfect match' when there are so many to choose from?"

The Internet can be like feeding a fire," says therapist Elana Katz [see p.23], "and at 2:45 a.m., you really can go online and find a thousand potential dates *right now*. It's like asking an alcoholic in a bar to stop with one drink. They can't, it's an addiction, they're having a whole experience. Buying a home, deciding on a profession—at some point we all have to step away from the infinite possibilities of what 'might be' and say, 'This is what *will* be.' Some people can't do that with e-dating."

"Men are lazy," a 41-year-old man told Lilith. "Just dating and keeping it simple works fine. I'll probably get married at some point, but for now my life's demanding enough. I don't want the hassle of a serious relationship."

Lauren Gottlieb, who once lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, writes about her old neighborhood's paradoxical "scene"—as it has come to be called. "The growing number of options in people and activities has served not to help young Jewish singles to date and marry," she says, "but rather to date, and date...and remain single."

## E-DATING

### Seeking: Sex, Promise, Desire

**Susan Gold\*, 61, a retired ad agency media director, has been using JDate since its inception in 1997.**

“My mating story starts with me being married for 13 years — but my husband left me when our kids were small to marry his secretary and move to California. She converted. I liked my husband, I loved him, he was crazy. After he died, his wife went on Match.com and found a guy right away. I have other women friends who I am sure will meet *somebody*. They can’t stand being alone.

But me? I could have had anyone in the world when I was younger — I was attractive, fun, positive, I went with the flow. But now I date older guys, and a lot of them don’t have dreams anymore — they just want to live their lives with someone physically beautiful. I’m pretty good-looking for my age, but they want women they can control, nurture, help grow. I’m too challenging. A man can enhance my life, but not influence it. Most men don’t know what to do with that.

But I’ve also met wonderful guys. I think JDate’s a wonderful thing. It’s about hope. The sun is shining and you’re out there. I use JDate in different ways — for sex, companionship. And it frees me up to be alone and love it: because JDate’s there. There are men out there. I know they exist. So I’m happy.

**I can hear my mother saying,** ‘It’s a beautiful day, Susan. Why aren’t you going out, having a good time?’ So I go out with JDate in my bedroom. I don’t have to go actually *out* — like to the beach. I have erotic, intelligent conversations with guys my age online. If they’re older than me, they’re too straight. But if they’ve lived through the ’60s, they’re not inhibited. You can both masturbate. You can do anything you want on JDate.

So the laptop’s on my bed. If I have insomnia, I don’t just lie there. I’m on JDate. If I wake up in the middle of the night, that’s what I do. It’s like playing solitaire. It could be useless — I do spend a lot of time doing it; if I’m into it, it can be hours. But I have a lot of concentration, I used to do spreadsheets. It feels stupid sometimes when I’m all done with it. People do get addicted.

It reminds me of fifth grade, coming home from school, going up to my room, discovering masturbation. I’d say, ‘I’m not doing this anymore. Tomorrow I’m not going to do it.’ It was constant. And I’m still like that now. I love sex. And *Viagra*? *Everyone’s* taking it. Everyone. They take it, then they have incredible erections. You know from the feel of the penis. These men are so concerned about performance.

So I think of my mother. I can tell her, ‘Ma, I’m at the beach. Only it’s not so sandy, I don’t have to get the sand in my pants.’

**I go online once or twice a day now.** I see the same guys over and over. I want to see if someone’s new. I want to get there first because he’ll find someone quickly, someone the opposite of his wife. How can there only be, in New York City, 100 men my age? Tell me.

**What am I looking for?** Besides sex and fun... a Jewish guy. Someone to spend Shabbat with, to be a family with, to fulfill my need for *chuppah* [marriage] and *shalom bayit* [domestic tranquility]. I’m so brainwashed about this. What I’m looking for.... If you don’t make over \$100,000, I’m not going to go out with you. I feel that a Jewish man, to feel a sense of success, needs to have accomplished this. I’ll go out with a talented artist or scientist, though — they don’t make that much money, that’s okay. I won’t go out with someone who hasn’t had children. And they have to be interested in the trends of the world: music, fashion, politics, the new Alzheimer’s meds. I find trends fascinating. I’m going to go to an expensive restaurant with you. It’s not like when you’re younger — you go for a blintz or something, you go to the Irish Pub. For me? No, these guys are going to spend money on me. I’m not meeting anyone at Starbucks.

**Would I have an affair with a married guy?** Probably. I’ve slept with a lot of guys from JDate. I went out with one guy who lied about everything. I found him under another name in another city. It was terrible. I wrote him, ‘How could you possibly do this?’ He wrote back, ‘Ha ha ha’.

I don’t expect to see anyone a second time on JDate. If I have expectations, then I’m disappointed. Last summer I went out with someone four or five times. It came down to making out.

“MAYBE I SHOULD SAVE \$25 A MONTH, BUT THERE ARE MEN OUT THERE. I KNOW THEY EXIST. SO I’M HAPPY.”

Well, I’ve had breast cancer and a mastectomy. I couldn’t have reconstruction, so it was like a mutilation. So with this guy, it just didn’t come up in conversation. I’d had enough time. So it became a secret. So I told him and then immediately had sex with him. I hated it. I had to think about the breast cancer during the sex. It was horrible.

But look! Last night I had a wonderful date. I’ve enjoyed this guy’s company for awhile now. He has the same M.O. of all the men I like: power, attractiveness, a little needy, and a mostly hidden ‘other life’. And today I had a first date — with a widower, and it was really nice.

**To be honest, I could live my life the way it is.** But there’s always that desire to mate. To find someone. Under everything, you think you’re going to meet someone. You’re playing around, but underneath you think, ‘Today I could meet someone for real.’ ”

— as told to Susan Schnur

\*Not her real name.

he wanted to date, and now his mom is telling him to settle down, and he has to do it with a nice Jewish girl. And so you see him on JDate, and he just wants to get married.”

Come February, Helena, and Ben Cohan, 28, a high school teacher, celebrate a year’s cohabitation.

## E-DATING

### Seeking: A Woman Not Like Me

**Ben Saypol, 35, runs a theater program in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, but he has also lived—and dated—in Chicago, New York City, and Denver.**

“If you do a JDate search in New York, over 1,000 women come up—literally. In Denver, it was like 400 women. In Chapel Hill, it was only 36. I’d maybe contact three. So it’s not worth it.

“My dating happens in waves. There are periods where I’m into it, and then you forget about it. I used to be so good about reading the profiles thoroughly before each date, but then you get lazy. **You start to feel like you’re in the montage part of a movie, and you’re sitting at a table, and the movie cuts from one person to another, and another, and you’re having the same conversation over and over.** Now I just go for coffee on the first date, because you don’t want to have to suffer through a whole dinner.

“On JDate, well.... Look, I’m kind of neurotic and I bounce off walls and I work too hard and I’m over-achieving, and I’m looking for someone to calm me down, slow me down, and I tend, instead, to meet a lot of people, well, like me.

“I don’t date women over 37. I want children, and dating takes time. You meet, date, get engaged. My range is 25 to 37.

“I’m not despairing. I am a little concerned, though. I’m 35. I have to shit or get off the pot. I’m craving a long-term partner. All I want is someone centered, down-to-earth, in the moment, with a strong sense of self, who values family and friends, who communicates openly, who’s good, who’s kind. This shouldn’t be that difficult....

“I just think it’s ridiculously hard to find your soul mate on this earth.” ■

**5. E-dating prompts some women to become so picky that they undermine their own best interests.** Virginia Vitzthum writes about herself here: “One of the worst things about online dating is the [urge] to come up with incisive critiques of perfectly nice people. If you’ve been keeping a friend abreast of your dating, you find yourself switching from rapture over funny emails to, ‘I don’t know, his pants looked weird/ she likes a stupid movie/ he agreed with me too much’. I know I [go] into [Internet dates] less emotionally available than for other kinds of dates.”

Online dating can begin to feel like you’re “shopping out of a human-being catalog”—people begin to morph into commodities. “If you like the looks of this bachelor,” one site notes, “check out these four like him!”

“I think e-dating has turned me into a horrible person,” one 33-year-old woman told Lilith, “like Goldie Hawn in that film where she needs the perfect mushroom-colored ottoman. You forget you’re dating an *actual man*. You start to think of yourself as a ‘customer’.”

Some sites feature photos of models, implying that we should all hold out for perfection. Like ads on the sides of buses or in Times Square, says Vitzthum,

is not the case when buying something relatively simple).

Psychological studies have also been done on the retail phenomenon called “overchoice.” If a customer enters a shop to buy a pair of jeans, she’ll buy them if confronted with four or five choices. If there are 10, though, she’ll walk out with nothing.

**6. Some women become so demoralized by their online experiences that they drop out of dating altogether.** Internet dating can be tremendously wounding. Because of its impersonality—you and the man you’re “talking” with may not know people in common or share communities, you or he may log on with false names or airbrushed information, you may treat one another thoughtlessly because you have no intention of meeting *in vivo*, you may be one among dozens of females he’s contacting—women need something of a thick skin. Not all of us have it.

Among Lilith’s informants, younger women took the commodification of the e-dating enterprise (“JDate as shopping mall”) much more in stride. One 25-year-old said matter-of-factly, “It’s an assembly line for both genders. We’re culling the herd, culling the herd, all the time.” This gender-equal experience, though, seems largely spe-

Online dating can begin to feel like you’re “shopping out of a human-being catalog”—people begin to morph into commodities. “If you like the looks of this bachelor,” one site notes, “check out these four like him!”

they sizzle with promise: “This is what’s beautiful; this is what’s hot; *this is what you want....*” Although men online get fussy, too, Madison Avenue has long targeted females as the true shoppers (men “hunt” while women “gather”). We are the ones more skilled at discriminating, more likely to pay attention to the details and nuances of merchandise. There is also considerable data on the psychology of “complex purchases”—the more time spent in conscious deliberation, the less satisfying the purchase becomes (which

cific to women in their twenties—they’re a cohort very much in demand. Older women’s experience can be radically different. One 37-year-old reported that she “struggled with feeling devalued. It became so painful that I stopped dating.”

The relative undesirability of older females can lead them to be treated particularly cavalierly. “You can feel so disposable,” one 52-year-old woman revealed, “like a paper plate. There are so many more where you come from, and they’re prettier, (continued on page 36)

## A SHRINK (ANONYMOUSLY) REFLECTS

### On the Difference between Physical and Electronic Attraction

**On a hot September day**, I wandered around an antiques show in Maine (a crowded, many-boothed affair spread over acres), and paused to look at a tray of arrowheads in a booth devoted to Native American artifacts. One of the booth owners came over to me and said, “Please come in and feel free to spend a bundle.” I laughed and looked up to see a strikingly attractive (to me, and more on that in a moment) man, my age (in his 50’s), no wedding ring, a big guy, hairy (he had on shorts and a t-shirt), a bit of a swashbuckling look, and an expectant, energetic air about him — ready to interact.

I was taken by him. The question is Why. Well, the interaction with this man had started with teasing — that’s particularly appealing to me, having grown up with beloved uncles who teased me a lot, and I associate teasing with a person’s being unafraid of his or her own aggression — in a healthy way. Then his looks: big and hairy. He shared these qualities with my father. So far, so good. Now a lot of information has been registered and assessed, and less than 60 seconds have gone by.

So I ask him about the arrowheads, and tell him about finding one as a child. He talks about finding arrowheads where he grew up, then goes on to talk about the qualities of stone, slips in he’s an anthropologist-turned-businessman (a further positive sign for me; he has some intellectual interests and abilities). We take this conversation about as far as it can go, so I make a motion to leave, and he quickly moves to show me other arrowheads in a different part of the booth. After a brief conversation there, my very slight interest in arrowheads is already way over-extended — and he has to deal with another customer — so I leave.

But as the day progresses, I keep thinking about the interaction and some kind of energy in it. And I decide, two hours later, to walk back by this guy’s booth on the way to my car. Now thinking, ‘Maybe this was just me. I won’t be forward, but I’ll just see if he notices when I walk by’. And he does. Comes out to talk to me again (another good move in my book — I like a man who is confident enough to approach), and we talk for 15 minutes — about his work, the show, I mention my children (Test: is he a family man?), he mentions he comes to Boston on buying trips, I match this by saying he should call me when he does, he raises by saying too bad I wasn’t here earlier as he would’ve taken me to lunch. He gives me his card and says I should send him my email address. I ask about the name of his company, Cupid’s Sharpened Arrow, and we laugh (here a positive and a negative thing — charming name, but why would someone name his company this? What is his issue about love?).

**Now, what of this can occur online?** Certainly not the power of the physical attraction, which is a strong and primitive phenomenon; a potent corporeal effect. The teasing? Maybe it could occur later in an email conversation, but it couldn’t occur online right off the bat, as each person writes his or her own essay — alone, not interactively. Now, a sense of humor could certainly be conveyed in an electronic essay, but that’s significantly different from the complex communication in this man’s first comment to me: “Please come in and feel free to spend a bundle.”

The interactions from that point on — about mutual interests, intentions — could be conveyed in an email, but the excitement, if you will, of the in-person experience — two people walking on a tightrope

of feeling; hitting a conversational and attractional ball back and forth — can’t quite be duplicated. So enough now on what can transpire *in vivo*. Let’s look at online relating and what it can do well.

**So... I send Mr. Big Hairy Strikingly Attractive** No-Wedding-Ring Swashbuckling Anthropologist-Turned-Businessman Teasing Confident Arrowhead Guy my email address, and, in an attempt to continue and expand the conversation, note that where he lives (Boothbay Harbor, on the ocean) happens to be just the area I’m reading about in a book about crabbing, and I convey a bit about the book to him. (Aside: I’m wondering — Does he read, like nature, is he curious about the world, books?) He responds, and — with the wonderful at-arm’s-length encapsulation that email allows — I can see a pattern that I’m not so sure I would see as clearly in person; or at least it might take me longer to see.

## “HAD OUR RELATIONSHIP BEEN ONLY ELECTRONIC, IT WOULD NEVER HAVE GOTTEN OFF THE GROUND.”

He first mentions that he was quite sick after the antiques show, then talks about being allergic to crabs, but doesn’t mention any interest in crabbing or Boothbay Harbor — although I know, from our real-life conversation, that he lives on a boat — and then refers to having an “obstructed view” of an island I mentioned. None of these things is a deal breaker, but all three together in a first email make me wonder about a tendency to present himself as less strong or in charge than he initially appears, a bit a victim of circumstance.

**I may perhaps be reading too much** into things (a professional liability), but I want to underline something that online dating and emailing are very good at: They allow each person to more thoughtfully consider the meaning of things, the content of interactions — and to separate that out from our more immediate, and often physical, responsiveness. Also, for women in particular, the Internet removes the social demands of being encouraging and positive, and increases our opportunity to be more analytic.

And so Mr. Big Hairy Allergic-to-Crabs Obstructed-View a-Bit-of-a-Victim Not-Much-of-a-Listener and I email back and forth a couple more times, and then the distance between Maine and Brookline, the increasing lack of interest on my part, the ever-more-clear information conveyed by email that our similarities are few and our differences many...lead to our not continuing the “conversation.”

Had our whole “relationship” been conducted electronically, it would never have gotten off the ground. But had it all been in person, the physical attraction might have carried it along for far too long, leading to more involvement than was ever really warranted. ■

*[Adapted from a presentation on dating and the Internet.]*



## DATING (continued from page 26)

sexier, for sure thinner, more fun, younger, less depressed, less intense, and have much better boobs. I couldn't keep doing this to myself."

"Dating years ago was easier," says Dr. Joan Klein, a psychotherapist in New York. "There wasn't the exposure to so many people. And I see women enraged. 'He contacted 10 other women! He didn't contact me!' You didn't have so much rejection."

Susan Gold, 61, had one exquisitely punishing experience. "I went out with a major JDate contender," she says. "I met him at a very expensive restaurant. I thought he was great. He volunteered right there, 'I have trouble having an erection. I have to give myself a shot.' This guy's so open, I think, I'll tell him about my breast cancer, the mastectomy, that I couldn't have reconstructive surgery. 'Does it bother you?' he asks me after I spill. I say, 'It's really hard. *Of course.*' 'Does it bother you a lot?' 'Yeah, it bothers me tremendously,' I say. 'I can't sleep with you, then,' he says, 'if you haven't worked it out.' He put me in a cab. That was it. It was horrible."

**Some women drop out of e-dating for a different reason:** They have met one too many men who can't form a relationship. Several therapists underscored this issue, contending that there are a significant number of males online who wouldn't be dating at all if the Internet weren't an option.

"Women have to be prepared to sort through the deck because a lot of men use Internet dating when they can't figure out other ways of making connections," says psychologist Mark Kline of Boston. "Some have impairments in their capacities to have relationships and they're looking for 'partial relationships'. This might mean a lot of men looking for sex rather than 'real dates', or men who form relationships who are not fully able to be in them."

"I do think that many men online have commitment issues," agrees Joan Klein, "but I also think that some of the women who keep complaining about men's commitment issues have commitment issues, too." And there's another source of e-fatigue, she adds. "Some women present themselves online as the kind of women they *think* they should be, rather than the kind of women they

are. It becomes exhausting—feeling you can't be yourself or you won't be 'chosen'. But it's in response to feeling there's an enormous amount of competition."

## 7. Feminism, while helping women achieve so many goals, inadvertently dropped the ball for many unmarried, childless Jewish women in their mid-thirties through early fifties. (Younger women—a new generation—seem to be working with more promising messages.)

While feminism encouraged well-educated females in particular (read: many Jewish women) to invest energy in their careers—this task was strongly sanctioned—it didn't encourage us to do likewise with intimate relationships.

"Our generation of women," writes dating coach Nancy Slotnick, 40, in *Turn Your Cablight On*, "was subtly discouraged from pursuing relationship goals.... It should not be embarrassing to want a great man as much as—or more than—you want a great job. We may not need men anymore for financial stability, but we still *want* them." Indeed, some women in this cohort told me they feel real shame around their wish to mate.

Vitzthum, in *I Love You, Let's Meet*, notes that many women "paint casual sex as feminist and free," but being serious about finding a boyfriend or husband as "totally not-hot." Women who want real relationships, she writes, "inspire fear in men and contempt in other women the way sluttiness used to."

Several therapists also note that some women seem to lack basic "mating skills." Slotnick concurs. "Women's mothers have not taught them well. Parents expect their daughters to just navigate all this. We have career workshops, financial workshops, but dating? love?—women are left taking advice from their other single friends."

"I don't trust myself," one 30-year-old told Lilith. "The culture constantly sells us on what we're supposed to value, but I have no internalized sense of what's right for me. I don't really know what I want at all."

The rise in popularity of e-sites that provide real matchmakers (like JRetroMatch and SawYouAtSinai) may be connected to this. Joan Klein describes patients who "are greatly relieved to have someone looking out for them—someone

who cares about their best interests." One 39-year-old on JRetroMatch explained, "I wanted to be on a site where I didn't have to feel apologetic about my wish to get married. And I want a parent-figure to make this happen for me. I don't want to make all the choices, and I'm also pissed about having been left alone with this."

Indeed, some single women finger the women's movement. "We harped on the right to abortion," a 53-year-old said, "but said absolutely nothing about the biological clock. *Who knew?* Nobody was thinking about it. And now it's too late for a lot of us, and we feel duped, and very, very sad."

**To be sure, e-dating has been extraordinarily positive** for a huge number of Jewish men and women. There are lots of happy stories, and people of all ages who feel they would never have found a mate otherwise.

My favorite story, perhaps, comes from 39-year-old Rachel, divorced mother of three, down 57 pounds on Weight Watchers. Her ad, as described in *I Love You, Let's Meet*, was for a man over 6'2", with all his hair, earning more than \$150,000 yearly, living within five miles of her zip code. I know what you're thinking: Insanity.

She responded to her future husband's profile the day he posted it—as did 6,000 other females! "I write him this quick two-sentence e-mail," she recounts, "and I know other women are writing him longer, more detailed things. So I write him again and say, 'I think I wrote you yesterday, but if I didn't, I'm interested. If I did, I'm very, very interested.'"

They meet, and she plops herself down and says, "I'm done, I've been doing this for a year and a half. You're new at this, you do what you need to do, but I know it's you."

Vitzthum wants to hate Rachel as a schemer and superficial gold-digger, but she's also thrilled by Rachel's confidence and self-actualization.

"She was the knight in her online romances," she writes. "Not the princess waiting in the tower: she roamed widely and proclaimed her intentions without coyness. The Internet was perfect for her." ■

*To post your comments on this article, go to Lilith.org/blog.*