

Dating Religiously

by Dave Gordon

You meet at midnight. You're scraping the bottom of a pint of Ben & Jerry's "cherry Garcia." He's munching popcorn some hundreds of miles away. You share your thoughts and feelings, and continue to "talk" via email for the whole of the following week. You give him your phone number and speak for the first time. His voice is warm and friendly. You decide to meet, hoping he'll be as nice in person as he sounds online. You check out his "real life" references, including his rabbi. Finally, he picks you up at your door. And yes, he's as nice as he sounded!

Welcome to the world of online Jewish dating. Derek Saker, director of marketing at Frumster.com, says that internet dating has caught on like

wildfire among observant singles. Frumster, which has emerged as one of the most successful online Jewish dating services, has been the catalyst for 146 marriages – that is, 292 members – in its almost three years online.

Created in December, 2001, as a reaction to the Orthodox "singles crisis," it answers the demand of marriage-minded religious singles for a secure and comfortable online dating environment that meets their specific needs. The site has become a virtual meeting place for religious singles of all ages living all over the United States and abroad. Religiously, they run the spectrum from modern Orthodox to yeshivish, from *chasidish* to Carlbachian, from Sephardic

traditional to just plain *shomer mitzvos!*

People are using Frumster for various reasons. "Elisheva," from Baltimore, who met her husband on Frumster, says, "The people at Frumster are doing a great mitzva by assisting *frum* singles in *shidduchim*. Young people traditionally have their parents assisting in the *shidduch* process, but it seems harder and harder, especially for older singles, to find their *bashert*. Frumster is making it possible for people in different geographic areas to meet, whereas they may not otherwise have had the opportunity. On Frumster, you can find people with the same *hashkafa*, have initial email conversations, and

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then "check out" a potential match the old fashioned way after initial contact. It may not be conventional in some circles, but finding your *bashert* on the internet is becoming more and more common and much more acceptable. Without Frumster, I would have never met my *bashert*."

Many singles also like the feeling of empowerment gained by having direct access to observant singles. Still others are attracted by the ability to engage in written communication before making the decision to date someone. As Mr. Saker says, "Frumster enables members to get a more in-depth perspective of an individual through an insightful profile and meaningful communication." In fact, he adds that many people are surprised to hear that, in 50 percent of Frumster courtships that culminated in marriage, it was the woman who initiated contact. "Within a secure environment of anonymity, Frumster women members find it more comfortable to make their own choices and judgments, and initiate contact with male members they see as possible matches," Mr. Saker says.

Simcha and Suri

One such match involved Simcha Fulda, a young man from England, and his wife Suri, from Israel. How did this previously divorced woman with two children find a mate in an already complex and frustrating dating scene? One of her coworkers nudged her for two months to register on Frumster, but Suri hesitated. "I felt that using the internet to meet a guy was very sleazy. I had lost a lot of trust in men, and I wasn't interested in messing up my life with the wrong guy." At the same time, Suri hated singles weekends and had not had luck with *shadchanim* (matchmakers). So, despite her hesitations, she gave it a whirl. "What did I have to lose? If I really hated it I could just stop."

After chatting online with Simcha, and thoroughly checking him out through "Jewish geography," she gave him her phone number, and they hit it off. Suri has revised her opinion: "Trying to meet someone over the internet is much easier and less stressful than blind dating. And the best part is, if you meet a really creepy guy, you can get rid of him with just a click of a mouse!"

Simcha and Suri have been married for almost two years, and Suri still can't believe how it happened: "I mean, what are the chances of two nice, *frum* people meeting over the internet and actually getting married, especially when they live in different countries?" In this case, pretty good.

Tzvi and Channie

Suri and Simcha's experiences are not atypical. Tzvi Michanik tried Frumster upon a *shadchan's* recommendation, although he had the same trepidation as most neophytes to internet dating. "The whole idea of placing my hopes and *shidduch* desires into a website did not appeal to me," he says, "but I had gone out with some six or seven girls, and nothing was materializing. Moreover, I was in the middle of a very tough graduate school program. I needed something that would allow me to respond on my own schedule." Overcoming his reservations, Tzvi decided to check out Frumster, to at least look at the website. "When I saw how the website was set up, I was quite impressed. It was modest, serious, and extremely easy to navigate," he says. (cont. on page 80)

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In addition to its pool of 14,000 sincere, marriage-minded singles, the key to Frumster's success is rigorous screening and hands-on support by a dedicated Orthodox management team based in Passaic, New Jersey. (Pictures and descriptions of the team are on the website.) The site also relies heavily on Orthodox rabbinic supervision.

Unlike some other dating sites, Frumster evaluates prospective members to make sure that only serious singles apply. Singles complete a simple but comprehensive online questionnaire, providing their full name and contact telephone number. This contact information is kept confidential and is only used by Frumster screeners to verify member details. Once screened and approved, a member can communicate anonymously with any other member through the secure Frumster email exchange environment.

According to Mr. Saker, users feel reassured by Frumster's initial, and continuing, daily screening. Indeed, the site uses special software that ferrets out language hinting at abuse of an individual or the system – while maintaining the total privacy of member communications.

After just three weeks on Frumster, Tzvi got a message from Channie. "From her first email, I knew that I was dealing with a whole different ball game. Channie was deep and sensitive from the very outset. Her positive nature seemed to come right through the computer screen."

As for Channie, Tzvi was the third man she contacted after her decision to put greater *hishadlus* into finding her *bashert*. "After initial pleasantries, we began to chat about very deep spiritual, and intellectual concepts. We discussed many interesting topics via email. I was captivated by Tzvi's fascination with all of Hashem's creations, especially nature, since I am a nature lover and outdoors person," she says. The Northeast blackout that summer triggered their first phone call. It was smooth sailing after that. Channie Braun and Tzvi Michanik were married last March.

New Features

Some people think of online dating as being all about plugging information into a website database, looking through profiles, and fishing for a date. "Nothing could be further from the truth," says Mr. Saker. Frumster has recently expanded its website, integrating a number of new interactive features. Frumster's Batya Ben Ze'ev, MSW, is the Frumster dating advisor. An individual, marital, and family therapist, Batya, who has worked extensively both in the United States and Israel, answers members' personal dating questions.

For those who like to shmooz, a unique innovation is "Frumster Forum," which posts articles and interviews for members to discuss. Recent exclusive interviews included dating expert Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis and a political analysis from former White House speechwriter David Frum. Any comments from members are linked to their profiles, allowing other members to contact them to continue the discussion.

On the "Inspiration Central" page, members can submit an inspiring life story of their own, which is also linked to their profiles, providing yet another way to stimulate member communications.

The latest initiative is called "Frumster Connect®," a third-party facilitation service that assists in the initial stages of the dating process. This person helps establish real life contact between two members who have already been emailing and mutually wish to move forward but feel more comfortable engaging a facilitator in taking the next step. The facilitator can set up a time for the first phone call, help them exchange personal contact and reference information, and act as a point-person before and after dates. Chaya Laya Koenig (née Zohn), a graduate of Bais Yaakov of Baltimore, helps manage the service. She is married to Mayer, and now lives in Passaic, New Jersey, with their two children, Sara Leeba and David.

Frumster recently introduced a low premium membership fee. "Frumster's success has brought with it the reality that continued maintenance and development of the

service now requires a charge," says Mr. Saker. In fact, the charge – by creating a token barrier to entry – is actually attracting many sincere new members who were hesitant to join a free service. Members can still post a profile and conduct searches for free, but must upgrade to initiate emails to others. Aware that some members may find even the low premium fee unaffordable, Frumster has created a scholarship fund that provides a limited number of monthly scholarships to those in financial need.

Frumster Live

Frumster is becoming a meeting place for singles in more ways than one. For those who enjoy mingling and shmoozing in person, Frumster hosts quarterly events in the New York area (soon to expand), all of which have been sold-out. From sushi and politics discussions to a lecture from relationship expert Rabbi Aryeh Pamensky, the crowds pack in.

In another project, Frumster is working with well-known personalities Sherry Zimmerman and Rosie Einhorn to plan "mentor training" events across the U.S. Their purpose will be to educate people in various communities to act as a coach to dating singles who need an objective individual to talk to concerning a dating issue.

There's no doubt that for *frum* Jewish singles, finding that perfect mate within the tribe is a challenge. But Derek Saker says he hopes that all Frumster's new accouterments will make it an easier goal for marriage-minded observant Jews. "Despite the challenges," he points out, "we average 14 new matched members each month!" Devorah Levy, who married Philip Levy last October, sums it up best: Citing a combination of faith and persistence with helping her find her *bashert*, she unabashedly credits the website as well: "When people ask who our *shadchan* was," she admits, "I say Hashem and Frumster." *

Dave Gordon is a freelance journalist, who has written for The Baltimore Sun, National Post, Jewish Week, and The Forward, among other publications.