

SURPRISE, You're a *Kallah!*

Navigating the *Parshah*, *Chassidische* Style

To experienced daters, despairing mothers, or hardened *shadchanim*, the *chassidische shidduch* system may seem like a relic from a different era or a different planet. Yet the method is still alive and well, with many happy marriages to its credit. In the following story, Zissy, a happily married mother of seven and veteran of the *chassidische* system, shares the tale of her own whirlwind *shidduch*, completed in less than a week. Between the light-hearted lines and humorous descriptions lies a bedrock trust in her parents' judgment, which allowed her to make that very fateful leap

BY ZAHAVA KLEINBERG

Thursday afternoon, 5:30 p.m. I had come home early from work, and dressed for the meeting with shaking hands. I was so nervous I could barely close my necklace without help.

We were sitting at a formal dining room table, across from each other, straining to make conversation amid the awkward silence. In the kitchen nearby, door slightly ajar, sat both sets of parents, making nervous small talk and waiting for us to finish.

I clenched my fists, played with the tablecloth, and listened to the handsome young man sitting across from me — a boy I had never met before, but who could well become my *chassan* by tomorrow — detailing his *yeshivah* experiences.

From time to time, I glanced at him, out of the corner of my eye, and caught him glancing back. We both blushed, and looked down again. The formal meeting was stiff and artificial, a mere formality. There was no way I could tell if this was truly *bashert* for me.

After about forty-five minutes, my parents entered the room, and my father cleared his throat.

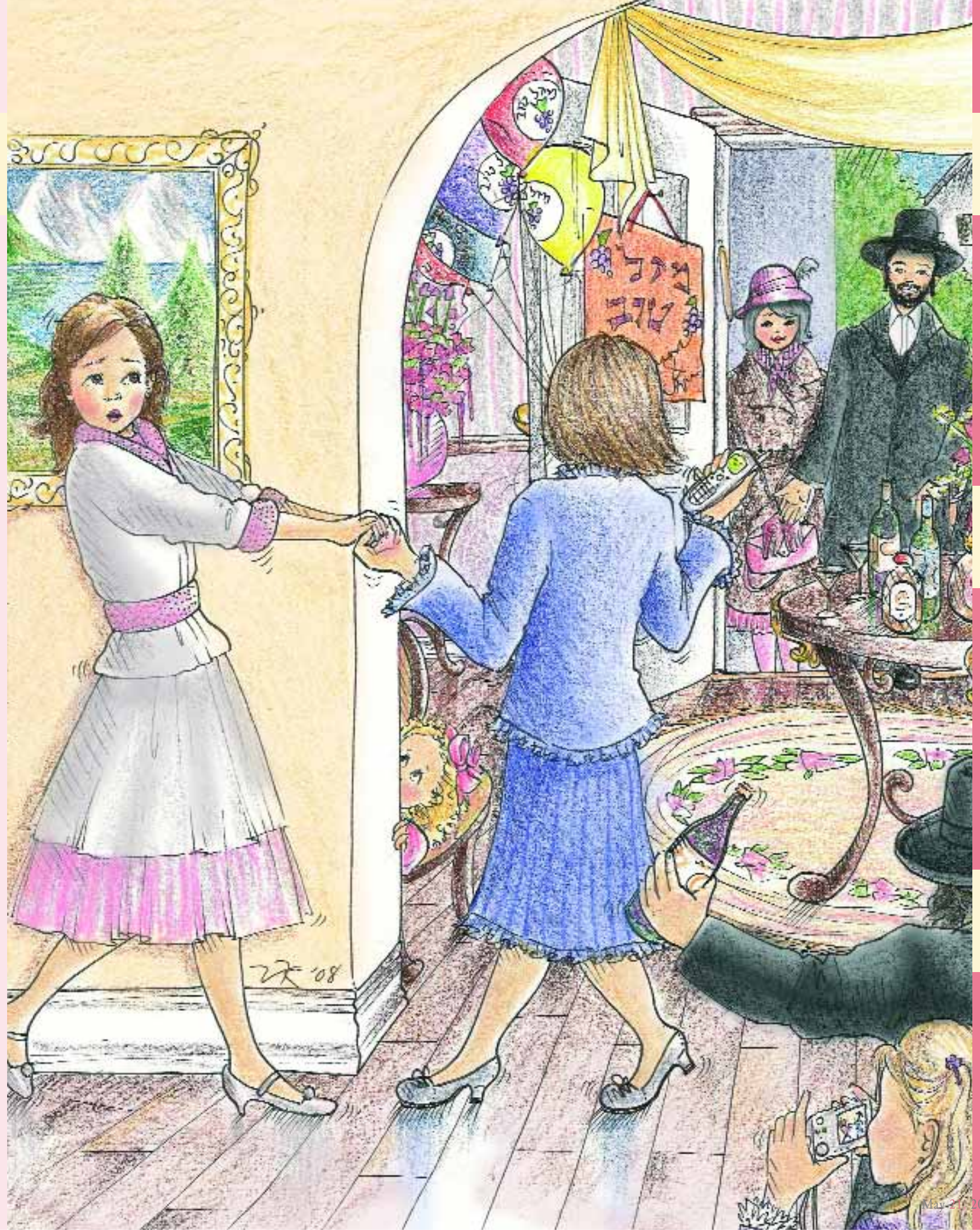
“OK, I think it’s time to ...” his voice trailed off, as we stood up, caught off guard. The young man and his parents left with formal goodbyes, and we remained in the empty house (my grandparents’ apartment, since ours was crawling with little eavesdroppers and surrounded by curious neighbors.)

“So, what do you say?” my father asked, after I had taken a few deep breaths and drunk a glass of water to calm down. “Are you ready to get engaged?”

“Ta, I barely met him,” I complained, the butterflies in my stomach attacking full force. “I spoke to him for less than an hour, and you want me to decide if I’m ready to marry him?”

“But ... is he nice? Did you have a good conversation?”

“Yeah. I think so. He seems intelligent, good-looking.” I blushed. My parents mistook that for acquiescence.





I clenched my fists, played with the tablecloth, and listened to the handsome young man sitting across me, a boy I had never met before, but who could well become my *chassan* by tomorrow

"You don't have to decide tonight," my mother said, in soothing tones. "We have time to make our decision tomorrow. After another meeting, of course."

"I want another meeting," I said decisively. "With no obligations. If I decide that it's not for me ..."

My parents exchanged glances. "But of course he's the right one for you!" my father asserted. "Such a fine young man, such *yichus* ... The Rosh Yeshivah says he's the star of his class."

"Yeah, I know all that," I added morosely. "But ... I'm barely eighteen. I'm not ready to get married yet!" My voice rose an octave.

"Listen to me, Zissy," my mother warned. "When the right one comes along, you grab it. Don't wait too long, or you might miss the boat."

I understood what she was talking about. One of my cousins, who had

been way too picky, was still single at (gasp!) the ripe old age of twenty-three. In our close-knit *chassidische* community, this was unheard of.

"Ma, there's a big difference between eighteen and twenty-three. Besides —"

"Besides what?"

"I don't like his mother. I can see already that she's a critical, controlling person."

My mother erupted in laughter. "Spoken like a true daughter-in-law! That's one sign that the *shidduch* is really *bashert*."

Later that night, I tossed and turned in bed, cradling the cordless, schmoozing on the phone to my closest friend. "How do I know that he's the right one?" I agonized. "I don't even 'feel' anything."

"Trust your parents," my friend, a blissful newlywed who had gotten

engaged in much the same fashion, advised. "All this talk about feeling a 'spark' is just a bunch of baloney. Once you're married, you'll see: it'll come."

"That's what everyone says," I lamented. "But still, it feels so strange. I'm not ready to become engaged, to get married in a few months. I still want to enjoy my childhood."

"You think if you turn away this *shidduch*, then the next one will be better?" she replied, in her candid manner. "Who says it'll come exactly when you want it?"

I was silent for a moment, mulling her advice.

"Zissy, tell me something," she continued. "How did you feel when you were talking to him? Were you comfortable? Did the conversation flow?"

"As much as it could have, with both sets of parents hovering in the next room," I replied. "Actually, it went quite well. He seemed intellectual, interested in growing. He even quoted Rabbi Avigdor Miller, whose tapes he listens to all the time. Interesting for a *chassidische bochur*, no?"

"I think that's a great sign. Go for it, Zissy! Can't wait to dance at your *vort*!"

The following day, a Friday, dawned stormy and snowy, and the meeting, dubbed a *besbau* (a Hungarian word that means "meeting between young man and young lady for *shidduch* purposes"), was canceled. That left us with Motzaei Shabbos as the next alternative.

There was only one slight problem: Word traveled fast in our close-knit family, and as I had not expressed any vehement objections to the *shidduch*, it was assumed that I would become a *kallah* ... on Motzaei Shabbos.

Without my knowledge, or, better said, as I went about my business in blissful oblivion, the news spread quickly through the wires. Tante Suri arranged a car service to bring her, her ailing mother, and her married daughter from Williamsburg to the *vort*. The young man's parents invited all their children, while my local relatives lined up babysitters for the occasion. And I thought it was simply going to be a meeting, no strings attached!

The first sign that things were moving rapidly, beyond my control, were the cakes my mother was cutting and

setting up on trays, while a cleaning lady scrubbed the house from top to bottom. I was sent to an aunt (who lived next door, and was updated on all the developments) to curl my hair and iron my prettiest outfit. As she fussed over my frizzy mane, I kept on protesting, wanting to go home. "What's the big deal already? It's only a *besbau*!"

"You still have to look your best," she firmly replied, adorning my collar with her butterfly pin, applying some gloss to my cheeks, and finally sending me home, all dolled up, with instructions to "smile, and act natural."

Smiling and acting natural were the last things on my mind when I burst through the front door, and found the house set up for a party, my siblings wearing their Shabbos best.

"What is going on here?" I sputtered, at a loss for words.

"Exactly what it looks like, *mammele*," my mother replied from the kitchen, harried and frazzled. "Just setting up for the *vort*."

"*Vort? What vort?*" I burst out, trying to blink away my tears. "I never said I wanted to marry him!"

"Zissy, calm down," my father said, walking into the kitchen. "No one is forcing you to do anything. You don't have to get engaged unless you agree."

"Tatty, Tante Suri called the car already," my younger sister announced, flouncing into the room. "She says she should be here in an hour, just in time for the *vort*."

Too late, she caught the warning look in my father's eye.

"Tatty, how could you do this to me?" I stormed, the tears coming thick and fast. "I never said I wanted to get engaged tonight! I'm not coming out of my room!"

"You want us to push it off for tomorrow?" my father asked, really worried.

I vacillated for a moment. My parents wanted only the best for me. How could I do this to them? Besides, did it really matter if I got engaged today or tomorrow? After all, it seemed like this was the "one."

"Ta, Tante Suri called a taxi already," I wailed, dabbing at my cheeks with a tissue. "All that money, in the garbage ... I hear a taxi from Williamsburg costs over a hundred dollars!"

"Does that mean yes?" my father asked, daring to breathe again.

"I ... I guess so," I mumbled, feeling trapped. To be sure, I had nothing against Chaim, my soon-to-be *chassan*. I actually thought he was a nice young man, with a pleasant disposition, definitely promising *chassan* material. It was just that ... I wanted to be the one to decide when to become engaged, without Tante Suri's taxi coming into the equation.

A half hour later my future in-laws arrived, their handsome son, all spiffy and dressed to the nines, in tow. We had another meeting, a mere formality, as my mother kept on interrupting us to put trays of cakes on the table, and I heard the kitchen filling with assorted family members, who were waiting for the *l'chayim*. After a short while, my father called me out of the room, and led me to a private corner, which happened to be the laundry room. And this is what he said:

"Zissy, dear, we want to drink *l'chayim* already. Chaim and his parents already agreed to the *shidduch*. So, what do you say? Do you want to marry him?"

"Ta, I already told you that Tante Suri is on her way here in a taxi. I can't make her waste the taxi fare!"

"Zissy!"

"OK, OK, I was just joking."

"So, is that a yes?"

"I guess so," I grumbled, though inside I was elated.

L'chayim! L'chayim! The glass was

"*Vort? What vort?*" I burst out, trying to blink away my tears. "I never said I wanted to marry him!"

broken, we were *mekabel kinyan* with a *gartel*, and Chaim wished me *mazel tov* with a shy smile.

And that was how, at the tender age of eighteen, I was blissfully engaged to a young man I had met for a total of an hour and a quarter. I met Chaim once more, at the *tenayim*, and he called once, before Rosh HaShanah, to wish me a *gut yahr*.

...

Zissy continues:

Six months later we were married, and sixteen years later we are the

proud parents of seven delightful children, ages one to fourteen. Chaim learned in kollel for ten years and then went into business, as I became a full-time mother and homemaker, quitting my office job.

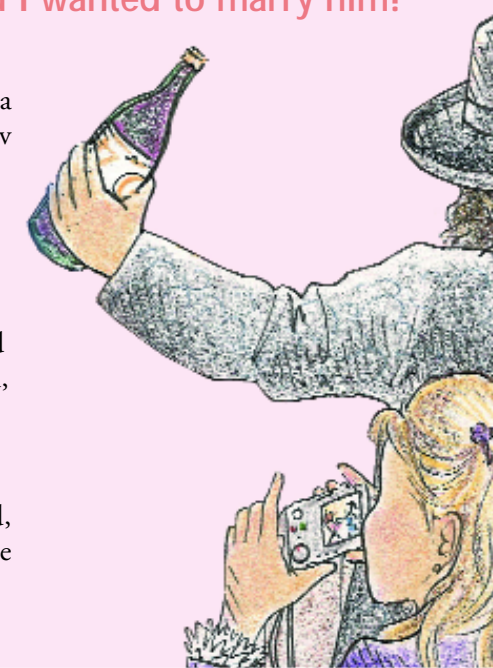
How is our marriage today? Baruch Hashem, couldn't be better.

I feel that we grow closer each year, as Chaim and I share more of life's ups and downs together. Closeness in marriage can't be predicted in advance; it happens on its own as the years go by, and we each invest so much of ourselves in the partnership.

Was it easy, marrying a virtual stranger, without any contact during the engagement period? Yes and no. *Shanah rishonah* was like the dating process, getting to know each other while already married, discussing our individual hopes and dreams over the supper table, discovering how much we had in common, and, yes, how different we were.

In fact, when we argued or disagreed, I jokingly would quip, "I only married you because Tante Suri had already ordered a taxi from Williamsburg!" That had us both laughing in seconds, clearing the air.

I can't say we didn't have our ups and downs, but on the whole, it's been smooth sailing, *baruch Hashem*. Not just for Chaim and me, but for most of my friends. They all had similar experiences, (though not all of them had "surprise" *vorts*, like I did,) and feel that they grow closer with every year of marriage, each additional child.



Now that our eldest is about four years away from *shidduchim*, we often joke about how our roles in his *shidduch* process will be so much more prominent than our roles in our own *shidduch!*

Sometimes, my *yeshivish* friends (yes, I have those too) express amazement at how our system works, and wonder why most of us are not divorced. It's hard to explain to an outsider how or why arranged marriages have been so successful, but the facts — and the numbers — speak for themselves.

Virtually no *shidduch* crisis. No entitlement process among the good boys, nothing to make them feel like they deserve an apartment and lifetime support for the privilege of agreeing to a *shidduch*.

No burned-out *shadchanim*, who put so much time and effort into setting up a couple, only to watch the *shidduch* flounder after the tenth date. The *chassidische shadchanim* are much more motivated, because, after the first meeting, most *shidduchim* are finalized so quickly (though admittedly, weeks or months can pass until the first meeting takes place).

No agonizing humiliation of going

on date after date, and getting nowhere, or watching the years go by, while the phones are silent and the *shadchanim's* lists keep growing. No wondering if we made the right choice by saying no due to a perceived failing in the young man or woman, which may or may not be an issue later on.

As a talented, beautiful single (*yeshivish*) girl, now nearly twenty-eight years old, recently told me, "I absolutely blame myself for my present (single) status. I was going out with a wonderful boy, a real *masmid*, who wanted to marry me. After the tenth date, he was going to propose, but then he said something silly, without thinking, and I read too much meaning into it. There was nothing to talk about. I refused to marry him, even though my parents begged me to reconsider.

"Today, the young man is happily married, the father of three, and I am still single, still hoping, and wondering what would have happened had I overlooked that isolated comment, which didn't really mean anything, anyhow."

"Had you been *chassidische* ..."

"Had I been *chassidische*, the burden wouldn't have been on my shoulders. True, my parents supported me, made the necessary phone calls, but they left

the decision to me, and that's what keeps me awake at night. I can't help but wonder, 'Did I really miss the boat, or is he still out there, waiting for me?'"

Although Zissy is a firm proponent of the *chassidische* way of making *shidduchim*, she still feels that a bit more flexibility, in her case, would have gone a long way. "Had my father given me a few days to think about it, instead of assuming that I was ready to have the *vort* on Motzaei Shabbos, it would have made me feel much better. Would it have made a difference in the long run? I doubt it. But still, I plan to give my children a bit more input into the decision making process."

"But the final decision will still be in your hands, no?"

"Actually, the final decision will be in the Hands of our Tattch in Shamayim, who decrees *bas ploni l'ploni* forty days before the child is born. We are merely His *shlichim*, who carry out His Will in keeping with our sacred traditions."

This true story was told to Family First by Zissy F, a typical chassidische mother of seven. Although this story may seem extreme, and even disturbing to some, it is a true reflection of the way many chassidische shidduchim are conducted. And it's hard to argue with success. However, if a boy or girl finds something offensive in the other party, or even if they have serious doubts, the shidduch is always called off. No one is ever forced to marry someone they can't stand. Most children, though, having no experience in the shidduch process, implicitly trust their parents and leave the decisions up to them.



"The final decision will be in the Hands of our Tattch in Shamayim, who decrees *bas ploni l'ploni* forty days before the child is born. We are merely His *shlichim*, who carry out His Will in keeping with our sacred traditions" – Zissy F.

Because...
EVERY WOMAN DESERVES ONE.

a AZIZA WIGS
NOW DIRECT TO THE CONSUMER
at prices never seen before

PLATINUM \$375-\$600
Select Human Hair

VALENCIA \$450-\$700
Premium Human Hair

EUROPA \$800 & up
100% European Hair

PONYTAIL WIGS \$575

PERSONALIZED SERVICE AND SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

For more information or to schedule an appointment, please call in USA:
SURIE MORGENSTERN
347.693.8080

In Canada:
514.223.7577