



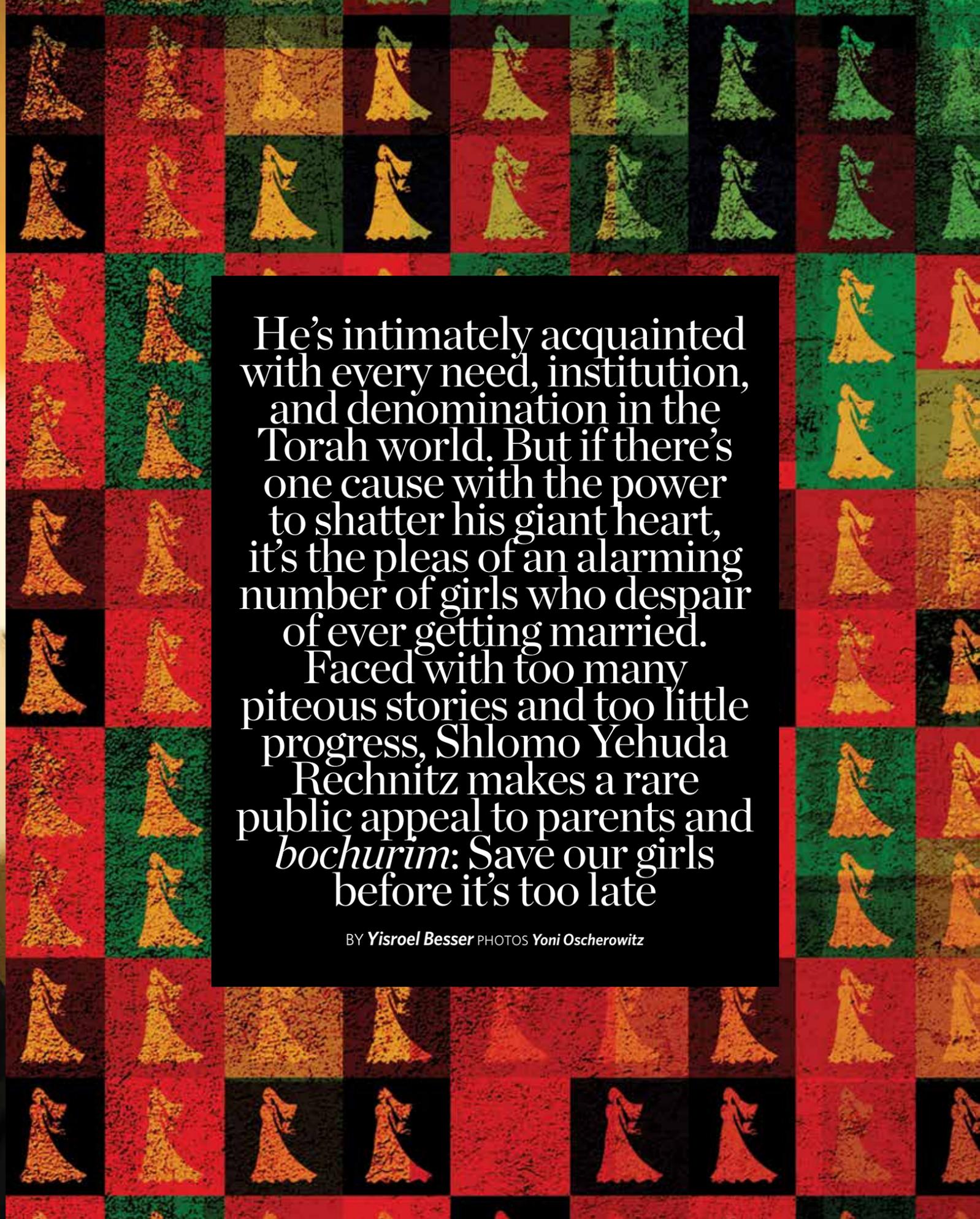
# CRISIS

# CONTROL

He's intimately acquainted with every need, institution, and denomination in the Torah world. But if there's one cause with the power to shatter his giant heart, it's the pleas of an alarming number of girls who despair of ever getting married.

Faced with too many piteous stories and too little progress, Shlomo Yehuda Rechnitz makes a rare public appeal to parents and *bochurim*: Save our girls before it's too late

BY *Yisroel Besser* PHOTOS *Yoni Oscherowitz*



# Alley-oop

**is a basketball term: an offensive play where one player throws the ball in the vicinity of the hoop and his teammate jumps in to catch the ball midair, slamming it home for the two points.**

It's a tricky play that requires teamwork, timing, and precision. As a teenager, Shlomo Yehuda Rechnitz, usually the tallest player on the court, perfected the play; he would stand off to the side unobtrusively, then step in at the perfect moment, making the basket before returning to the other side.

As an adult, he's still alley-ooping. From his home base in distant California, the young businessman and philanthropist has been known to step in at precisely the right moment to score — and then he steps back out of sight. No buildings carry his name. Many of the individuals who crowd his waiting room, and fill his answering machine and e-mail inbox with pleas for help, don't know him — even after their requests are answered. He's content to make a difference and then step back.

He has made relatively few high-profile appearances, and, other than a television interview he agreed to for business reasons, he has never before consented to an interview or article — not for this publication or any other.

(Close confidant and mega-*shadchan* Yisrael “Freddy” Friedman tells a story about the famously witty businessman: An Israeli publication printed an unauthorized feature on him, replete with information about his net worth, which they reported at over \$1 billion dollars. After it went to print, they received an e-mail. *This is Shlomo Yehuda Rechnitz; I read the article and I'd like to know how to access that account, the one with the billion dollars. Can you direct me to which bank it's in?*)

So why now? Why this topic? Why the uncharacteristic foray into print media?



**The Loudest Cry** Insight comes from Rabbi Berish Goldenberg, *menahel* of Los Angeles's Toras Emes, who was Shlomo Yehuda's seventh-grade *rebbe* and is now the administrator of his *tzedakah* funds.

Like all *askanim* and donors, Reb Shlomo Yehuda hears many cries for help, and has identified various communal issues. Rabbi Goldenberg estimates that between e-mails, text messages, and voice mail, Reb Shlomo Yehuda receives more than 50 requests a day for help. While 80 percent are for funds, many involve jobs, advice, help in getting children or teenagers into schools, or medical assistance. Yet the cry of the single girl is louder and more heartrending than the rest. Reb Shlomo Yehuda receives tens of e-mails each day related to *shidduchim*, each one another drop in an ocean of tears.

Not only is this problem most piteous, it also comes with a solution. With the efforts of concerned and committed *balabatim*, and under the guidance of leading *roshei yeshivah*, a set of proposals was drafted appealing to the “Nachshon” spirit of a generation of boys. Other activists felt that with Reb Shlomo Yehuda starting the conversation and spearheading the project, perhaps it would enjoy *siyata d'Shmaya*. The drive to implement the plan is what spurred Reb Shlomo Yehuda to open his heart here, on these pages, in a rare public message.

As he pithily puts it, “Even if they wouldn't do it for themselves, they should step up for the sake of their own future daughters, and seize the opportunity to make a difference.”

Throughout our conversations, he reiterates his apprehensiveness about being a “*dei'ah-zogger*”; he is admittedly not an expert in this field. In his inimitable way, he drily points out that he doesn't want to be like a professional athlete weighing in on whom to vote for president; he is no more than a spokesman for a group of *askanim* addressing the problem head-on.

His oldest friends perceive that Reb Shlomo Yehuda's identification with the underdog doesn't stem for a sense of mission alone, but from his own story.

**The Mashgiach's Favor** School was a struggle. Yeshivah wasn't any easier. (“I did graduate kindergarten,” Shlomo Yehuda deadpans. “I guess my coloring was okay. All the other stuff was a problem.”)

At the tender age of 17, he traveled across the world to learn in Yerushalayim's Yeshivas Mir. One of the youngest *talmidim* in the yeshivah, he tasted vulnerability.

“And I will never forget,” he recalls, “those who came forward to help me, particularly the *mashgiach*, Rav Aharon Chodosh. He was able to find my *mailehs*, to see things in me that I didn't see in myself, and to cultivate them.”

At that time — unlike today — the Mashgiach didn't invite *yeshivah bochurim* as Shabbos guests, yet the teenager from California was a *ben bayis* at his home. The first time Rav Aharon Chodosh ever boarded an airplane and left the sacred borders of Eretz Yisrael was for the *chasunah* of Shlomo Yehuda Rechnitz. This past winter, the Mashgiach traveled to Los Angeles to join in the *chasunah* of Reb Shlomo Yehuda's eldest; in his spirited dancing and singing, *talmidim* detected just how personal it was for the elderly *mashgiach*.

“Someone else who was indispensable to me, especially in the hardest times, was my twin brother, Yisroel Zev,” Reb Shlomo Yehuda says. “I often wonder how people can make it through the day without a twin. He understands me when I can't speak, supports me when I can't ask for help. While he remains in the background, he always watches over me and keeps me in line.”

With time, Reb Shlomo Yehuda established himself as both a businessman and a *ben Torah*. He maintains a second *seder chavrusa* with a *kollel yungerman*, and authored a *sefer* on *Bava Kamma's perek Hakoneis* — entitled *Shiur Chadash* — as a wedding gift for his daughter. (“The *sefer* is very popular,” he cracks. “My kids are selling copies at their lemonade stand.”)

On the wider stage, he has emerged as a fierce champion of those who are easily overlooked. Today, the boy who didn't receive a diploma at his elementary school graduation is the one who stands on stage as president of the local school, handing out the diplomas and

kissing each and every boy finishing eighth grade. The teenager who had problems with authority in yeshivahs has emerged as the greatest friend the Torah world has ever had. Shlomo Yehuda — once oh-so-close to receiving his high school diploma (he left for Eretz Yisrael just after Pesach, three months before graduation) — has lectured at Stanford, the most prestigious business school in the nation, along with his brother. The twins, who work as business partners, were recently honored with Ernst and Young's Entrepreneur of the Year award.

He never forgot what it's like to need help; his own experiences have made him into a listener. Reb Shlomo Yehuda has passed on the Mashgiach's favor many times over, giving the needy a sense of self-worth. Along with a check, he offers genuine friendship, a smile, a well-placed joke.

“I know,” he maintains, “that people are hurting, that people have suffered. But it's too easy to fall into the rut of self-pity, to become bitter and make a career out of griping. It's possible to lift yourself up and start again, to climb out and really live. There is nothing more exhilarating.”

**No Strings Attached** According to Rabbi Goldenberg, the one thing that Reb Shlomo Yehuda does not give is *dei'os*. There are no strings attached to his donations, no red tape or bureaucracy.

Close friend Reb Moishe Mendlowitz recalls a trip to Eretz Yisrael during which Reb Shlomo Yehuda met with three *gedolei Yisrael*, Rav Michel Yehuda Lefkowitz and *yblcht*’a, Rav Chaim Kanievsky and Rav Aharon Leib Steinman. He bluntly asked them how one can protect his wealth; he wasn't satisfied with the answer that simply giving *tzedakah* is enough. He was familiar with too many generous, compassionate *gevirim* — *gevirim* whom he looked up to and he still considers mentors today — who'd lost fortunes. He struggles with this concept, he admits, because many of the *gevirim* who suffered reversals were and are on a higher level than he.

With each *rav*, he discussed the proper

attitude toward affluence; they all cautioned him against the dangers of taking interest. Reb Shlomo Yehuda shared with them an insight of his own, a “*shemirah*,” so to speak, for protecting assets. He offered a *mashal* of a wealthy donor who appoints a *gabbai tzedakah* to distribute funds on his behalf.

One day, the donor overhears his *gabbai* receiving petitioners. The first one is soliciting for a yeshivah, but the *gabbai* remembers how his nephew was turned away from that very institution. “I’m sorry,” he tells the collector, “but you turned away my nephew, I can’t help.”

The second fellow asks for funds on behalf of a shul, and again the *gabbai* remembers how in that shul, his father was slighted by not receiving an *aliyah*. He refuses this request as well.

The third gentleman is making a *chasunah* and is desperate for assistance; the *gabbai* points out that the supplicant’s rebbe made a disrespectful comment about his own rebbe, and turns the man away.

The benefactor is incensed. He calls his *gabbai* aside and says, “It’s my money, not yours. Your personal *cheshbonos*, *hakpados*, and opinions mean nothing here!”

And the first thing he does is immediately take away the checkbook.

So too, concluded Reb Shlomo Yehuda, a real donor — someone who wants to be a true *gizbor*, a trustee for the Eibeshter — has to really believe that he is merely distributing Hashem’s money and that his personal opinions or agendas have no relevance.

Thus, there is no *makom Torah* that won’t receive money from Reb Shlomo Yehuda *b’shitah*, as a matter of principle. People joke that it seems that those *mosdos* who hurt him along the way seem to benefit; it’s almost worth upsetting him, because he makes such a point of not letting the emotion affect him that he gives extra.

In the years since Rabbi Goldenberg has begun helping Reb Shlomo Yehuda oversee the *tzedakos*, he has never turned away an institution or individual based on a difference of opinion on personal issues. In fact, Rabbi Goldenberg states flatly, “In six or seven years of helping him oversee his *tzedakos*, I’ve never seen him turn down anyone. He is

a nondenominational giver. There is hardly a yeshivah, *chassidus*, *mossad* — whether Ashkenazic or Sephardic — that doesn’t benefit from his largesse.”

Sunday mornings see Reb Shlomo Yehuda sitting in shul, receiving over 500 local indigents, *frum* and not *frum* alike. Each one receives a gift card to the local grocery.

Last month, Reb Shlomo Yehuda visited Auschwitz for the first time; he was deeply affected by the experience. He turned to Moishe Mendlowitz as they climbed back into the van. “Hitler *yemach shemo* perceived a truth that we often forget or sometimes don’t realize: a Jew, is a Jew, is a Jew. He didn’t differentiate.”

His generosity to several local and national charities — such as his unsolicited financial aid to widows of fallen police officers, local and national hospitals, health funds and military families, for example — have engendered great *kiddush Hashem*.

Rabbi Goldenberg’s own job doesn’t make him popular, but he accepted it out of a sense of duty at the behest of Rabbi Yaakov Rechnitz, Shlomo Yehuda’s father. Rabbi Rechnitz realized that neither Shlomo Yehuda, nor his wife — who grew up with the same *chinuch* as he — could say no and there was a real worry that, without intervention, they would drive themselves into bankruptcy. With each plea, the Rechnitz couple would say, “This is different, we *have* to give” — so Rabbi Goldenberg stepped in to ensure that these donors will be able to continue giving.

**While People Are Starving** The attitude that money is meant to be shared has influenced many others to follow in Reb Shlomo Yehuda’s footsteps, and a new generation of working *bnei Torah* look to him as an inspiration.

Good-natured as he is, Reb Shlomo Yehuda has little tolerance for selfishness; before doing business with other people, he first ensures that they are *baalei tzedakah*.

Close friend and partner Reb Duvy Blonder retells how on a visit to Eretz Yisrael, Reb Shlomo Yehuda sat on a couch in the hotel lobby and distributed checks to needy locals. Word spread quickly and eventually, there was



**HE NEVER FORGOT WHAT IT'S LIKE TO NEED HELP; his own experiences have made him into a listener. Along with a check, he offers genuine friendship, a smile, a well-placed joke**

a line outside the hotel, as the security personnel allowed in groups of ten people at a time. Another hotel guest — a wealthy individual who doesn’t share Reb Shlomo Yehuda’s attitude — had a hard time with the generosity he was witnessing.

“Rechnitz,” he finally said in disdain, “do you have to give *tzedakah* so ostentatiously?”

Reb Shlomo Yehuda looked him in the eye. “I have a question for you, and perhaps you can save me significant amounts of money. I’m curious to know what answer you will give Beis Din shel Maalah after 120 years when they ask you why you kept millions of dollars in the bank while people were starving. If it’s a good excuse, maybe I can use it too and save myself lots of money — and if it’s a *really* good excuse, I’m willing to share some of the money

I save, with you.”

Reb Shlomo Yehuda doesn’t confirm or deny the story, but his tone as he reflects on its message leaves no question as to his perspective.

Though Reb Shlomo Yehuda employs an army of *frum* Yidden and gives much business to the *frum* community, says Shlomo Yehuda’s cousin and personal attorney, Alain Kupperman, there is an exception. He takes a step back when it comes to those who have a hard time giving *tzedakah*, even though they should know better and can clearly afford to part with their money.

“Why won’t these people move to Fargo, North Dakota?” Reb Shlomo Yehuda is wont to ask. “It’s because they need the conveniences of a *kehillah* — shuls, *batei midrashim*, *frum* friends, schools, kosher food, *mikvaos*, and the like — yet they aren’t willing to contribute their share to the *kehillah* they so rely on.

“Every *kehillah* should have one more communal collection,” he concludes. “They should make a list of such people, and the community should put together money to buy them one-way tickets to Fargo, North Dakota.”

At a local parlor meeting, Reb Shlomo Yehuda was given the opportunity to speak, and his message was equally direct. “We don’t have to keep davening for *parnassah*,” he said. “The Ribbono shel Olam has already given the Torah community ample *parnassah*, sufficient funds to address our financial challenges. What we *do* need to daven for is that those blessed with the money understand what it’s for. They aren’t going to be taking any of it with them. They need to realize that the currency in Shamayim — the way to buy nice things and get good service — is only with *canceled* checks.”

His tone is one of wonder. “I simply can’t understand. Is it really so enjoyable to call the automated bank service and hear the tinny-voiced recorded lady reading off your balance — *two hundred and thirty-seven million dollars* — more than the pleasure of

helping others? I sincerely believe that these are genuinely good people, they just aren’t seeing the bigger picture. Perhaps Hashem made it a larger *nisayon* for them, that they have to work harder to feel the connection to their brothers and sisters.”

**It’s Up to the Boys** Reb Shlomo Yehuda’s approachability and affability have made it challenging for him to carve out a private space; he has accepted his public role with graciousness as well. His voice cracks as he shares details of the e-mails that come his way — hundreds each week.

“But even in this stream of troubles, it’s *shidduchim*-related problems that seem to overshadow the others.” That is why he’s made it a priority to reverse the situation, by calling on all parties involved to restructure the standards of the yeshivah and *shidduch* norms. “I’m envious of the *zechusim* of the real catalysts for change here: the boys themselves, and their parents and *rebbeim* who can help this along. It’s time.”

What emboldens him to keep dreaming is the people. “We have a nation like no other, and this is a time like no other. My grandparents, from Russia, from Poland, were in awe of the levels of *chesed* in contemporary America. We’ve created a society with genuine *achrayus*, with a level of commitment that makes change possible. Sure, there are problems, there are battles — but there are also soldiers to fight those battles. I’m confident in our army. I’m confident in our willingness to tackle any and all challenges.”

Reb Shlomo Yehuda has several partners in this venture, starting with the *gedolim* who encouraged it. In addition, Mrs. Tamar Rechnitz — a daughter of the *rosh yeshivah* of Torah Vodaath, Rav Yisroel Belsky — has been a strong source of encouragement to her husband.

The commotion and steady stream of traffic in the Rechnitz home hasn’t wiped the perpetual smile off her face; she’s known to embrace the tumult. Her home, she’s

commented, is upstairs; downstairs is dedicated to the *klal*. She wouldn’t have it any other way.

She too, feels the strain of the girls and their parents. “*Shidduchim* is an overwhelming stage for parents, all parents. Everyone is vulnerable, but with a small shift in attitude, we can make a difference, make it a more pleasant time.

“We live in an out-of-town community, so the statistics are even more daunting. People are intimidated to travel out of town — though I would point out that there are unique *mailehs* to out-of-towners. There is a wholesomeness and refinement, genuine *middos* and warmth, that you find here that might well balance the inconvenience of a bit of travel.”

In conversation with *shadchan* Freddy Friedman and myself, she says it’s the *shadchan* who gets credit for bringing many of her husband’s ideas forward. “Freddy is part of our family,” Mrs. Rechnitz laughs. “His energy and sense of humor are very much like Shlomo Yehuda’s. Shlomo Yehuda appreciates that even though Freddy, with his marketing savvy and skill, can fare well in the private sector — and Shlomo Yehuda has attempted to hire him numerous times — Freddy chooses to give up on the Los Angeles weather and significant increase in income to stay put in Lakewood and face the daily bombardment of making *shidduchim*. When my husband has ideas at three o’clock in the morning, Freddy picks up the phone and helps implement them.”

Together, they — and the *roshei yeshivah* and activists at their side — are launching these proposals with great hope, *tefillah*, and a readiness to do whatever it takes.

Reb Shlomo Yehuda is buoyed by the initial reaction. Despite the pain to which he’s exposed each and every day, he is optimistic that real change is feasible.

“Chazal teach that there is no *‘kli machzik brachah’*, no vessel more capable or deserving of receiving blessing, than *shalom*. If the community works in unity — and we can do it, if we realize just how critical this is — we can merit untold *brachah*. *Brachah* means *parnassah*. *Brachah* means *shidduchim*. *Brachah* means all the good in the world, if we join together and stay focused on the ultimate goal.”



There *IS* no

# SHIDDUCH CRISIS

BY **Shlomo Yehuda Rechnitz**

**J**ust a few weeks ago, at my daughter's high school graduation, the *menahel* approached the podium and announced that this year we would be starting the program with the recitation of Tehillim in the *zechus* of finding the three kidnapped yeshivah boys. Each heartbreaking *pasuk* he recited was repeated by the unusually sad, teary-eyed girls, as they swayed along harmoniously with the large audience. Call me gloomy, but my mind quickly drifted away from the missing teenagers. Instead, I focused on these innocent, precious *bnos Yisrael*, who would soon approach the podium to accept their diplomas. With obvious excitement, they'd smile and enjoy the feeling of accomplishment at the completion of their training to "take on life." Sheer happiness. Nothing would get in the way of their plans to become *n'shei chayil*, tasked with the challenging yet satisfying mission of nurturing generations *b'derech Yisrael Saba*.

The *chazzan* continued his Tehillim: "*Mei'ayin yavo ezri*." How many of these girls would be let down? How many of them would see their hopes dashed? It's inevitable. Every year a larger percentage of our Bais Yaakov graduates become a mere statistic. How many of their older sisters would hug and kiss them, crying tears the graduates assumed came from joy, when in fact they'd cry knowing very well what they were really up against? Just three years earlier, another graduating class excitedly threw off their graduation caps. All 72 of them. Seventy-two shining faces, and today, out of all of them — ranging in age from 21 to 22 — only 13 replaced those caps with *sheitels*. No, that wasn't a typo! Only 13 out of 72 girls are engaged or married!

Chances are, *b'ezras Hashem*, that by next year's graduation, there won't be kidnapped boys,

but there *will* be Tehillim. We will be davening from the depths of our hearts, that these pure *neshamos'* most recent encounter with their essential *tafkid* won't be the time they donned a *tichel* and lit the Shabbos candles as the kindergarten "Shabbos Mommy."

**You Call This a Crisis?** It's not my style and is very uncharacteristic of me to write an article. As a matter of fact, I believe this is the first piece I've ever authored in a public medium.

But it's come to the point where I feel I can no longer contain myself. Besides the pain we all feel witnessing the grief of our lonely girls, I'm convinced that I am contacted and/or confronted by people suffering from this current *tzarah* (or their advocates), way more than the average person. In the last year, I don't believe that I've gone through two days without hearing the helpless and hopeless stories of wounded *bnos Yisrael*. Rav Aharon Chodosh *shlita, mashgiach* of Yeshivas Mir, suspected that I might be a fitting address for these people, as I might be considered an *askan* in some circles, and being young enough to still be in the "*parshah*," I would therefore be more understanding of their plight. However, neither you, nor I, should even consider for one second that this issue is not constantly on the minds of every *askan* and non-*askan*. This is a dreadful predicament that consumes every last Yid.

I would like to preface my comments with two disclosures.

Firstly, I realize that my opinions cannot be considered *daas Torah*. I've taken the liberty of writing this article only after the publication of a *kol korei* signed by all the *roshei yeshivah* who sit in anguish over this acute, pressing calamity. Even with that in mind, any comments or opinions that I suggest would need to be ratified by our *gedolim*. "*Vasisa k'chol asher yorucha*."

Second, I am not an educator, I'm not in *chinuch*, and I'm not a marriage therapist or counselor. I'm not even a *shadchan*. My viewpoints and sentiments should therefore be viewed as coming from a layman at best. FYI, I just decided that I should retroactively change the title of this article to "Just food for thought."

Once we're on the subject of titles, you're probably asking yourself: What did he mean by "There *IS* no *shidduch* crisis"?

Everywhere I turn, and at most Shabbos tables, eventually the topic turns to the Shidduch Crisis. What is causing the Shidduch Crisis? What can we do to solve the Shidduch Crisis?

*Morai v'rabosai*, please understand. An example of a "crisis" is, say, there weren't enough hotel lobbies in the tristate area to accommodate all the nightly *shidduchim* dates. Or perhaps the cost of gasoline went up. Or maybe there aren't enough stockpiles for this year's flu shots. These, obviously, are all problematic situations that need solutions. But beyond that, a crisis is usually short-lived. (Think the Cuban Missile Crisis). And interestingly enough, when the dictionary defines the word "crisis," it includes both a negative and positive form.

What we on the other hand are experiencing, for the lack of a stronger, harsher, word, is a Shidduch Catastrophe! Who in their wildest dreams can begin to describe the *tzaar*, the stabbing pain, that our precious *bnos Yisrael* endure every day? Right in front of our very own

eyes, every day, more *bnos Yisrael* become destined to remain single. Single forever! No husband, no children... ever! Is this a life worth living? "What is my purpose on this world?" "There must be something terribly wrong with me..."

These sentiments are reborn with them every morning from the moment they awaken. This is not something a girl can get used to. How can their parents possibly watch this consistently, without falling apart mentally and physically, feeling they failed in their innate responsibility to protect their children? How many girls cry themselves to sleep every night? How many girls get to the point where only therapy or other means can get them through the day, as they live in a depression, losing all self-worth and confidence, when in fact it's the current system we have in place that is defunct?

**My Problem, Your Problem, Our Problem** A few months ago, I was at a *chasunah*, and the almost-24-year-old daughter of a family friend came over to me by the *mechitzah*. With tears rolling down her cheeks, she asked me to look over at the men's side and check if there was anyone "her type" who would agree to go out with her. I nodded and turned around at once, to show her that I was going to immediately look out for somebody. What I didn't want her to see were my eyes tearing up. "Her type?" What was I to look for? A black suit? A Borsalino? A blue tie?

What I did look for, was someone on whom I could place blame for this *tzarah*. Turns out nobody bore any more responsibility than I did. We are all to blame.

Why are we not having a *yom tefillah* every single day until we find a resolution? Why, as a nation, are we not grasping the gravity of this devastation? Why are we all not getting into a locked room and not leaving before we have answers? Why are most of us considering this somebody else's problem? It's not a question of "if." It's a question of "when" is it going to become *your* problem. *Our* problem. At the rate and direction we're headed, everybody, yes, every last family will feel it.

This is a cancer that is metastasizing every day. Why are we not desperately looking for a cure? Do we have to wait until the Singles' Shabbos has a larger attendance than the Siyum HaShas to finally ask, "What were we thinking?"

"We shouldn't mix in. The Eibeshter will take care of it. The Eibeshter is in charge of *shidduchim*. It will work out in the end," say some of the "real" *maaminim*. Obviously, the Eibeshter can turn around a situation in a flash, even if it's "as hard as the Kri'as Yam Suf." But perhaps the Eibeshter has already ensured that the solutions exist. That's why this isn't a problem among chassidim, chareidim in Eretz Yisrael, and other populations. It is only our *oilam* — the American yeshivah world — that is dealing with a self-created problem. And it's reached the point where the halachah of "*ein somchin al haneis*" would apply.

Our problem has a relatively simple root: the age gap between our *chassanim* and *kallahs*. Since our community is in a blessed growth mode, each subsequent year sees a larger population than the last. Each

## Numbers of as-of-yet unmarried Bais Yaakov alumnae from a major American city graduating years 2000–2012:

Year Graduated	Approximate current age	Number of Graduates	Number as-of-yet unmarried	% of Graduates as-of-yet unmarried
2001	31	65	12	18%
2002	30	81	12	15%
2003	29	77	8	10%
2004	28	70	6	9%
2005	27	85	12	14%
2006	26	100	23	23%
2007	25	105	29	28%
2008	24	113	39	35%
2009	23	106	33	31%
2010	22	103	49	48%
2011	21	111	61	55%
2012	20	112	91	81%
<b>Total</b>		<b>1128</b>	<b>375</b>	

year's population is split relatively evenly between boys and girls, and so every girl should be able to find a match within her age group. However, we have nurtured a system where girls look for matches in the age group several years older than theirs — which means, very simply, that there will not be enough candidates to meet the need.

Some *shadchanim* estimate that this system will leave 10 percent of the girls without *shidduchim*. Sorry, but not where I live. Those

numbers are extremely outdated, and being that we understand the underlying cause of this tragedy, it can, and will, only get worse with time. It has to. A very popular *shadchan*, who spends 18 hours a day on *shidduchim* and is very familiar with the numbers, suggested to me that a girl in the yeshivah world who is over the age of 25 has less than a 15 percent chance of ever getting married. When I tried verifying that statistic with another *shadchan*, he thought it was overly generous. How did we

let this happen?! What are we going to say to the Eibeshter after 120? Who can possibly carry this on their *plaitzes*?

But what baffles me most is the proverbial mental block that most of us exhibit when it comes to this issue. Klal Yisrael are *rachmanim bnei rachmanim*. Our generation is known for its nonstop overflow of *chasadim*. There isn't a need, issue, or problem that we haven't opened up ten organizations dealing with it. The *chesed* in every city across America

is astonishing. And every single *yachid* wants to be a part of it. From the seemingly smallest needs, to the ostensibly insurmountable problems, the *chesed of acheinu Bnei Yisrael* is unparalleled. Seeing the caring and the *arvus* that one Yid feels for another is an incomparable *nachas*. However, when it comes to this issue, the most acute problem at hand, we become oblivious. We are suddenly deaf, blind, and desensitized. We speak about it and then push it aside as we digest our desert. It's not a rare occasion that a mother will be pleading with a *shadchan* on the phone to find a *shidduch* for her daughter, extolling all her virtues, and yet on the very same call, as soon as the *shadchan* suggests a *shidduch* for her 21-year-old son, she replies that he's absolutely not dating yet because he wants to get a full two years of learning in Eretz Yisrael before "settling down."

Why is this issue simply not registering correctly in our minds? Is this possibly part of the *gezeirah* on our Bnos Yisrael?

**Roadblocks along the Way** The road toward a solution seems straightforward enough: boys and girls must close the age gap, seeking spouses of the same age. This will ensure that there is an equal pool of *chassanim* for all the hopeful *kallahs*. Yet there are many obstacles along the way preventing this change from being implemented. It's time to tackle them.

I'd like to strongly preface this disquisition by making it very clear that any boy or girl who doesn't participate or follow any particular program that has been suggested or implemented to date (i.e., if a boy waits today until age 23 to start dating), cannot and should not be viewed even with the slightest hint of negativity. Until there is a widely accepted change throughout the entire system, nobody is obligated to be the "first."

Every week, there seem to be new *eitzos* and more opinions. *Mi k'amcha Yisrael!* New organizations and incentives are popping up every day. Individuals and organizations with a burning passion to finally put up road blocks to catastrophe, to at least slow down this free fall. A lot of them make a lot of sense,

yet unfortunately nothing of substance is successfully being implemented on a large enough scale. Despite the many success stories each organization is proud to publicize, it's hard to be very optimistic, as the overall trajectory is still in a downward spiral. But we won't throw up our hands and give up. Klal Yisrael doesn't know how to give up.

It's important to understand something I know from firsthand experience: money cannot and will not solve this catastrophe, as an overall solution. It might help move things along in a few rare instances. Without going into details, I've thrown in and continue to invest substantial amounts of funds into different *shidduchim* projects. Being that the *inyan of shidduchim* is private in nature, these programs (at least the ones that I'm involved in) are not advertised, but are well known to the people who need to know them. All these organizations have nothing but the best intentions, but I question the amount of money that has indeed actually caused the *shidduch*, and the percentage of money that goes to people who happen to be at the right place at the right time. (My wife happens to be seven months older than I am. Where's my check?)

That said, for the upcoming calendar year of 5775, I am offering to supplement the *shadchanus* of any *shadchan* successful in marrying off a girl age 25 or older, to a boy her age or younger, so that they receive a total compensation of \$10,000. Certain minor conditions will apply. This offer isn't only for professional *shadchanim*. It applies to anyone and everyone, every age, race, or gender.

In our quest for effective solutions, I think it's also important to establish that any change should not have to come from the girls. The reasoning is simple. If, in an effort to close the age gap, girls are urged to wait until they're 22 to start *shidduchim* — and then the "new system" fails — the boys will still be as eligible as ever. A girl on the other hand, is literally lowering her chance of getting married with every passing month. I wouldn't let my daughter be the test pilot, nor would I expect that of any other parent. So all the ideas of girls attending an additional year or two of school or seminary before *shidduchim*, or starting kindergarten a

few years after boys do, could only be implemented by a person with the strength, *emunah* and backbone of Nachshon ben Aminadav. And unfortunately, we can only rely on that type of person to surface every few thousand years. (Perhaps that's another *pshat* in *kasheh k'Kri'as Yam Suf*.)

**Crucial Connections** So if we want to institute realistic change, we have to ask the boys to enter *shidduchim* earlier. Let's take a good hard look, and closely examine the problems and crises that could potentially occur if boys should start dating at an earlier age.

1. Some parents question if boys are mature enough for marriage at the age of 20 or 21.

2. A yeshivah, especially with younger *bochurim*, cannot host a demographic of boys involved in the dating process or getting engaged. This is not at all healthy for the boys who are too young to date. There are constant conversations, updates, and nightly tumults that can severely interfere with and impact the most serious *bochur's* learning and *shteiging*. An 18- or 19-year-old *bochur* who sees flowers being delivered to the yeshivah on Erev Shabbos, or watches an "older *bochur*" talk on his cell phone for three hours straight, cannot be expected to focus as strongly as he should on his learning. So while the *roshei yeshivah* signed the *kol korei* out of sheer desperation, to ease the burden on our sisters and daughters, they realize that its implementation would bring changes to the current system — changes that are not optimal.

3. Every *bochur* needs a *rebbe*. A *rebbe* for life. And it takes time to establish a special *keshet* with a *rebbe*. On the flip side, a *rebbe* or *rosh yeshivah* needs time to teach his *talmidim* a *derech halimud*, *derech eretz*, and a *mehalech* in how to lead their lives. These metamorphoses don't occur overnight and need sufficient time to flourish. So again, while the *roshei yeshivah* and *rabbanim* signed a *kol korei* calling upon boys to start dating at a younger age, it remains far from ideal for these boys to leave their *rebbeim* before the mentors have had sufficient time to impart their knowledge.

Just a quick, back-of-the-envelope

# Do we have to wait until the Singles' Shabbos has a larger attendance than the Siyum HaShas to finally ask, "WHAT WERE WE THINKING?"

calculation lays forth these average numbers. A *bochur* graduates high school at age 18. He learns in first-year *beis medrash* until he's 19, and then enters the *rosh yeshivah's shiur*, affording the *rosh yeshivah* one year to "make" him his *talmid*. Acquiring a *derech halimud* and a *mehalech hachayim* isn't like a tasting contest, or a buffet. You can't take a little from here and a little from there and expect a *bochur* to become a *shaleim*. "Well," one might say, "let's just have the *bochurim* go directly from high school to the *rosh yeshivah's shiur*." The problem is that the younger *bochurim* aren't on the level of a *shiur* designed and delivered to boys three or four years their senior. And on the flip side, older *bochurim* don't want the level of the *shiur* curtailed or diminished to accommodate the younger boys.

**Into the Market** There are various solutions that can be implemented to solve the problems outlined above. What is clear is that a minimum of two years of learning needs to be deferred to after the *chasunah*. Perhaps the *roshei yeshivah* will consider it a viable possibility to eliminate the *shiur* for first-year *beis medrash bochurim*, or maybe they would recommend eliminating 12th grade. We ultimately need to follow their guidance.

These types of possibilities can lead to several outcomes. In the first scenario, a new

standard can be adapted, where every *rosh yeshivah* says two *shiurim*: one *shiur* geared to the boys who've just finished high school, and another, higher-level *shiur* given to the older boys. This would facilitate the *rosh yeshivah's* goal of having enough time to create the required *kesher* with his *talmid*, to transmit his *derech halimud* and his *mehalech hachayim*. The *bochur* would conversely have sufficient time to able to fulfill *aseh lecha rav*. The *roshei yeshivah* want to be *marbitz Torah*. They want *talmidim*, and that's the way it should be. *Bochurim* want a *rebbe*, a *rosh yeshivah* for life.

While this change may cause some *rebbeim* to lose their previous posts, there are many other options within the yeshivos for those *rebbeim*. In addition, I'm prepared, should the Eibeshter continue to give me the *zechus*, to organize a very large fund to help yeshivos and *rebbeim* overcome this potential issue.

When the *bochurim* hit the age of 20 to 21, after spending two to three years with their *rebbe*, they will go to yeshivos that already exist or that will open anew exclusively for *bochurim* who are learning, while simultaneously being *metapel* in *shidduchim*. Perhaps these yeshivos can start *shiurim* with a slightly more structured environment. These yeshivos will attract the top *maggidei shiur* and offer an array of *limudim*. There will be *shiurim* in Kodshim from *maggidei shiur* who've spent their lives learning Kodshim in yeshivos and

*kollelim* that focused on those areas of Shas. These new *mechinahs* will prevent the problem of boys who are "on the market" possibly interfering with the growth and the focus of the younger *oilam*. When I spoke with several *roshei yeshivah*, they were ready and ecstatic to immediately implement these programs, *shiurim*, and *chaburos*. I have no doubt that other yeshivos will grab our precious *bochurim* with open arms.

Those *bochurim* who want to learn in Eretz Yisrael before they get married can perhaps stay with their *rosh yeshivah* for two years (i.e., one year of the lower-level *shiur* and the next year in the higher-level *shiur*), and then go to Eretz Yisrael for one year.

These and more are all options the *roshei yeshivah* can explore, analyze, and examine. But I, along with other *askanim*, am prepared to help the *roshei yeshivah* implement their decision.

"But how can we make such rash and audacious decisions, which will change the way it's been for the last 30-plus years?" the question will certainly be voiced. Change is not easy, but "rash" is a relative term. Try, for a moment, to imagine *galus Bavel*, which had its own Shidduch Crisis. Chazal instituted a *takanah* where a father could marry off his underage daughter contrary to her will, even to a leper, because it was considered "in her best interest" — as otherwise she could end up living her life alone. That's how important it was for Chazal to ensure that a girl should not remain alone. With that example in mind, starting to date a year or two earlier may not seem like such a major sacrifice.

**But They're Too Young** While these suggestions can allay the second and third concerns raised above — allowing *bochurim* to form a vital *kesher* with a mentor, and preventing *shidduchim* from distracting younger *bochurim* — what do we do about the fact that some parents and *rebbeim* feel that the required maturity levels are not yet reached by boys at the tender age of 20 or 21?

Let me say this, as I've actually taken out the time to speak with *mechanchim* and counselors

about this precise topic. The belief of many *mechanchim* and counselors with whom I discussed the issue is that an extra two years don't add enough maturity to make a noticeable difference. Boys at the age of 23 are generally not sufficiently mature to get married. They have no choice but to rise to the occasion. They learn quickly. A boy at the age of 21 can rise to the occasion just as well. There is even a very popular school of thought that those who marry at a younger age have a better chance of creating a stronger and happier marriage. The reasoning is that when a boy is 20 years old, he is more open to molding himself and more willing to compromise — a major component to a successful marriage — while a 23- or 24-year-old boy is already set in his ways. He knows best, and no 19-year-old seminary girl, albeit equipped with a few more Rambans at her fingertips, is going to tell *him* how to act or behave.

I sometimes imagine how many parents of American 12th-graders would dream that their son is actually ready to put on a uniform, strap on a rifle, and, after a 30-day "*chassan schmuz*," set off for the over-pressurized zones of the Gaza Strip, dodging intermittent gunfire. It happens every day. Boys rise to the occasion when they need to, and quickly become men. My grandfather *a"h*, like other prewar *kinderlach* who had no other choice, supported his ill father and the rest of his family at the unfathomably fragile age of 14. He finally got married at the age of 18 to my grandmother *ybl"ch*, who is *bli ayin hara* less than two weeks away from becoming a centenarian. They enjoyed a blissful marriage for 78 years, sans any therapy or books on how to stay happily married, authored by someone thrice divorced. You grow into the role. Eventually everyone does.

Parents, put a little more trust in your kids. They're more resourceful than you think. Your most frequent conversation with them after they get married will be them asking you for money, and they've practiced that since they were six.

**Be a Game Changer** And finally, to all the 20-year-old *bochurim* out there.

On one hand I am so *mekaneh* you, a jealousy that I can't overcome, something you have that I can't get. Yet on the other hand, I would be scared to be in your position. I'm *mekaneh* you because I always wanted to be a pioneer. Since I was a young boy, I always wanted to make a difference. A major difference. I quickly realized that all the *roshei yeshivah* and *rabbanim* who changed the world for the better were way out of my league. I read about Reb Aharon Kotler *ztz"l*, and other *roshei yeshivah* collecting monies on Shabbos for Holocaust rescue efforts. I read stories of selfless heroes: Rav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, Mike Tress, Reb Moshe Sherer. People who noticeably changed the world for the better, who instituted ways to solve global problems. It is still my wish, it remains my dream. I don't know if I would've been successful, but the Eibeshter is my witness, I would have tried. I would've put all my *kochos* into such an effort. Yes, I'm baruch Hashem able to write a few checks here and there, but those aren't close to game changers.

You, on the other hand, have the chance to be a game changer! You need to speak to your friends, to organize *chaburos* and declare, "We are going to turn this Shidduch Catastrophe around." Klal Yisrael is imploding in a Shidduch Catastrophe, and you, and only you, can change the direction. I feel jitters just writing about it. What an opportunity you have. Do you realize the control you wield? Sit down with your *chaveirim* and say "*Rabosai*, nobody else can do this but us." I'm *mekaneh* the *zechusim* you'd gain for pulling this off. *Frum* yeshivah girls, their parents, and future *doros* will eternally talk about the boys, the *chaburos*, the yeshivos that attacked this problem head on, and won!

And as I've mentioned before: If for some reason, you can't deal with this right now, or would rather not "make a tumult," then just think about your own daughter. Because by then, if this catastrophe doesn't make an about-face, there's a good chance *lo aleinu*

that your daughter will approach some family friend at a wedding with tears in her eyes, asking him if he notices anybody on the men's side who just might agree to go out with her.

I would like to be clear again. I am not in *chinuch* and am definitely not on the level of any *rosh yeshivah* in any aspect. They know what a *bochur* needs to flourish. I **don't**. They have experience in creating *bnei Torah*. I **don't**. They collaboratively created an unprecedented *matzav* of *limud haTorah* after everyone thought that Torah was gone, at least in America. I **didn't**. While I can suggest different alternatives, nothing further should be pursued or implemented without the full backing and support of the *roshei yeshivah* and *gedolim*.

As far as my story, I went back to the girl at the end of the wedding and told her that I found a few prospects. She smiled and thanked me. I'm sure it wasn't the first time she would experience dashed hopes, and probably not the last time. But I took solace in the fact that she felt better that night. I went back to the men's side and ate my dessert as my mind drifted off.

As we are in the week of Tu B'Av, I remind myself of the *mishnah* in *Taanis*: "There were no days among the Yidden more festive than the 15th of Av... For on that day, the girls of Yerushalayim would go out to the fields in white gowns that they borrowed from each other, so they would all appear as equals..."

The Mishnah doesn't just describe an event. It gives us another key to the entire process. If we wish to truly close the age gap, we would do well to eliminate the extra year (on average) that it takes a *bochur* to choose his *bashert*. To do that, we need to help our *bochurim* understand the most important *mailehs* that they should be seeking in a possible *zivug*.

As the girls of Yerushalayim would say every year on Tu B'Av: "*Bochurim*, look up and choose one of us. But remember, don't choose based on meaningless virtues. *Sheker hachein v'hevel hayofi*."

It might be just about now that we start listening to them.

# Desperate Times, Desperate Measures

Rabbi Yisroel “Freddy” Friedman, of the Gateways *shidduch* program, expands on Reb Shlomo Yehuda’s vision and the need for dramatic change in the *shidduch* system

**Q: Given your close friendship with Reb Shlomo Yehuda, why do you think the topic of *shidduchim* has benefitted from this type of engagement on his end?**

A: I’ll tell you this. I have spent hundreds, if not thousands, of hours in conversation with him and observing him. Almost never does he refer to business or making money. He is consumed with Klal Yisrael. The bulk of his time is devoted to the *tzibbur*. For most people, it’s a cliché; but he really thinks he can change the world.

When his own daughter was in *shidduchim*, we spoke frequently. What amazed me was that once she got engaged, nothing changed. The same Shlomo Yehuda, with the same passion and determination, just shifted to other people’s *shidduchim*. He spends a lot of time listening to people, to problems, and he really felt this pressing need to change things as he realized the magnitude of the problem. It’s been a while that he’s been working on an individual level to “close” *shidduchim*, stepping in to finalize the deal when necessary, but now, with the *askanim* supporting him, he feels ready to do it on a more global level. He doesn’t like to tell people what to do, to direct or give *dei’os*, but this idea is being backed by others — *gedolim* and *askanim* he respects — so he’s comfortable stepping forward.

**Q: Rav Elya Ber Wachtfogel, the rosh yeshivah of South Fallsburg, has said that with all the problems in our camp— *parnassah*, *shalom bayis*, health, *chinuch*— *shidduchim* is the most painful. What do you think the Rosh Yeshivah meant?**

A: You don’t need an algorithm or computer program to do the math for you. It’s a disaster. For example, my wife is 31 years old; 13 girls in her graduating high school class aren’t married. The scary part is that after reaching the age of 24, not one of them got married!

Now, you can blame *shadchanim* who don’t suggest *shidduchim* to older girls, or throw money at them, but it won’t change much. A *shadchan* is just a broker; if you try to sell homes in the Bronx to people who want to buy in Lakewood, they’ll find a different broker. Often, mothers choose to send their sons out with younger girls; they’re less complicated and the success rate is higher.

But the problem is that it isn’t just the 22-year-old boy who wants to go out with the 19-year-old; the 24-year-old boy also does. So what happens with the 23-year-old girl now? Who’s going out with her?

The only solution is to increase the supply of boys by starting them in *shidduchim* at a much earlier age.

You know, the fact that there is a *shidduch* crisis is problem enough; the fact that everyone is aware of it makes things much worse. Now, boys know that they have the upper hand, that they have their pick, and in some cases, they’re marrying “up” — mediocre boys marrying fantastic girls, simply because they can! Of course, that’s not a great *segulah* for *shalom bayis*.

The new proposals will make more boys accessible to the 19-year-olds, so naturally, a boy who’s 23 or 24 will consider a girl closer to his own age.

**Q: Wouldn’t the fact that a boy of 21 is less mature than a 23-year-old create problems in the marriage?**

A: I don’t know that it’s so. First of all, an argument can be made that the fact that the boy isn’t yet “shaped” or “formed” makes things easier, as he develops along with his wife. Also, why wouldn’t they have this problem in the Israeli yeshivah community, and in the *chassidische* world? Boys get married at the age of 20 or earlier, and we don’t see a higher divorce rate there.



PHOTO: OURIATADIMOR

sit back without making fundamental changes and expect things to work out.

**Q: Won’t parents fear not being able to fully transmit their *mesorah* if their sons are out of the house by age 20?**

A: Desperate times call for desperate measures. There is a cost here. But look at our history — there were times when men got married at bar mitzvah. Then there’s Yitzchak Avinu, who married when he was 40 years old. In prewar Lita, boys were often in their high 30s. Each era brings its challenges and we always responded. If we accept that there is a challenge here — and it’s undeniable — then we have to react and make adjustments. Even if a child leaves home at an early age, your *derech*, *chinuch*, and *mesorah* accompanies him throughout his life and hopefully into his marriage. You never cease to have influence on your children.

As to the premise of the question, I’m not sure how many *bochurim* are home until 20. I left home at age 14 to go to yeshivah. Unless you’ll argue that that’s why I turned out this way....

**Q: You are Reb Shlomo Yehuda’s “point man” in this area and many others. If *bochurim*, or their parents, want to seize the opportunity and rise to the challenge of being *Nachshons*, how can they reach you? Will there be incentives or programs designed to make it easier?**

A: Absolutely. Until now — may Hashem allow him to continue — Shlomo Yehuda has pulled out all stops. He wouldn’t want me to say this, but he’s approached the mission of marrying off all the girls in Los Angeles with the same intensity as he does for his own daughters. All the major *shadchanim* are aware that when any Los Angeles girl doesn’t have the funds for plane fare for a date, the *shadchan* can — without asking — automatically book the tickets and rental car, if necessary, for either the boy or girl, on the Rechnitz account. Shlomo Yehuda and Tamar don’t want to know the recipients of these tickets. Popular Lakewood *shadchan* Reb Shloime Lewenstein has already made several L.A. *shidduchim* thanks to this program.

In addition, any *shadchan* who marries off a Los Angeles girl has his *shadchanus* supplemented to \$4,000. If the *shadchan* can get a couple to date

**“We have to do our *hishtadlus* to have a working, functional system that allows every girl to get a date. We can’t just sit back without making fundamental changes and expect things to work out.”**

at least four times, they receive \$500.

Shlomo Yehuda also established a fund offering support for the daughters of families in unfortunate circumstances. It’s really the ultimate *hachnassas kallah*, because no one was calling off a *chasunah* because of money in these cases. They were simply not calling back the *shadchan*. These girls couldn’t get dates because of support; now, with Reb Shlomo Yehuda’s commitment, quite a few girls have gotten married.

This new initiative is being introduced with *brachos* and encouragement of leading *roshei yeshivah*, but each *bochur* and family has to work with their *rebbe* and *rav*. We’re on the cusp of *bein hazmanim*; a bunch of *bochurim* can step up now and respond to the call. Reb Shlomo Yehuda is ready and willing to speak and possibly meet with any *chaburah* or *shiur* that feels, with their *rebbe*’s guidance and permission from their parents, that they are ready to step up and consider being the *Nachshons*. Feel free to contact me personally at [yis678910@gmail.com](mailto:yis678910@gmail.com) as we work together to do whatever it takes.

**Q: What about a communal *takanah* to stop girls from going out before the age of 20? Wouldn’t that result in the same solution?**

A: It’s July now. We’re less than two months out of seminary. Do you know how many girls from last year’s class have come to meet me so far? Over 200! We are in full-blown panic mode. The girls come straight from the airport. Forcing them to wait wouldn’t work. No one wants to be a guinea pig and be left out in the cold. With the boys, however, they having nothing to lose by trying. They will always have options.

**Q: What would you respond to those who say that Hashem makes *shidduchim* and there’s no reason to worry?**

A: If a girl locks herself in a closet for four years and doesn’t come out, can she say she’s waiting for her *bashert* to come? We have to do our *hishtadlus* to have a working, functional system that allows every girl to get a date. We can’t just