

Eeny, Meeny, Miney, You...

Choosing Your Life Partner

By Barbara Ann Rosenberg

Boy meets girl. Girl meets boy and ... zap! A bolt of lightning illuminates the sky and you know immediately that he (or she) is "the one for you." At least that's how many people think it happens, this business of choosing a mate.

But, according to the "experts," those people who deal in marriage for a living, this fairy tale-inspired version of how people select the person they want to marry rarely, if ever, occurs. There seems to be a lot more going on in people's heads — or psyches — that affects their choice of whom they plan to marry. It's not just whether someone is cute or has a sense of humor or is charming that matters, although those factors often do play a part.

According to David H. Wice, rabbi emeritus of Congregation Rodeph Shalom, who has performed approximately 2,000 marriages during the 41 years he served the congregation, there are some external factors that are very important, indeed: "Proximity and timing play a great role in selecting a mate. What's actually going on in an individual's life at the particular time may make all the difference in

whether they decide to marry. Sometimes that timing affects the choice, as well. People have to be ready for marriage, and then their selections are most frequently affected by how they feel about themselves at that stage."

However, as for *how* people actually do the choosing, Rabbi Wice claims, "I'm no authority on this, just an observer. But you don't have to be Sigmund Freud to know that psychology plays a role."

CHEMISTRY

Then, says Rita DeMaria, president of the Center for Family Development in Springhouse, there's that thing called "chemistry" which draws people together.

Each of us, DeMaria points out, has an emotional hunger. "We all walk around looking, even longing, for nurturing. We also have an emotional comfort zone —

that place where we all feel good."

The tension between a person's emotional hunger and his comfort zone results in a "formula" of a sort. The closer the match of the formulas of any two given people, the closer they come to what most people describe as "true love."

Of course, it doesn't always work this way. Sometimes other factors take precedence. Sometimes people ignore the signals of the heart or the psyche and seem to place their value on external things. They marry for status or money or even, in the case of Sandy Metzger, a "40ish" communications director for a major drug company, an overwhelming shared interest in music.

"I fell in love with my second husband because he was wearing a Jackson Brown T-shirt, and I was a Jackson Brown freak."

"Of course," says Metzger, "I now understand that it went much deeper than that, as I found out more about myself after

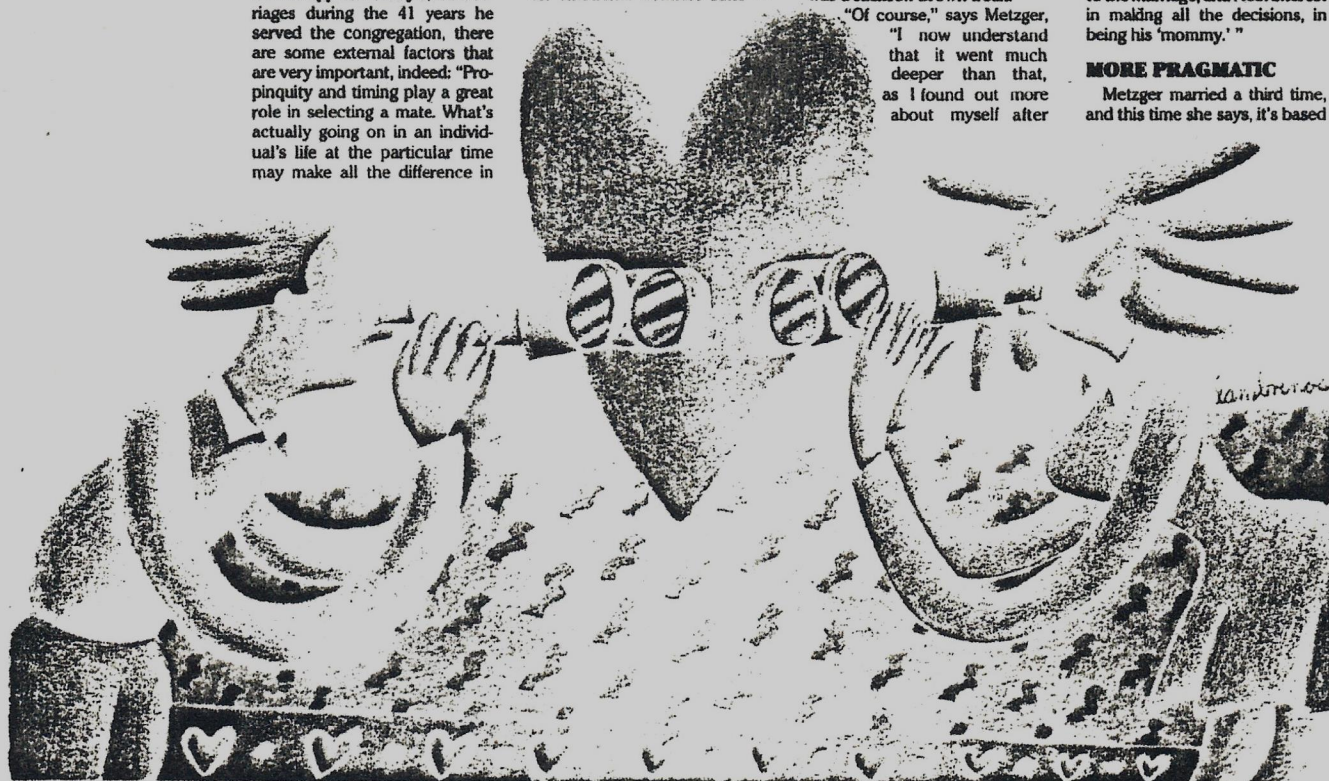
that marriage, too, fell apart."

Metzger says her therapist helped her come to grips with her real motives in choosing both of her previous husbands. "I chose my first because I was young and inexperienced and he was handsome and a real charmer. I wanted to get away from home because I sure wasn't getting much active show of love there."

"But," she recalls, "the whole time we were together, he dominated me so completely I could never even have a thought of my own. That sure didn't make me feel good. So the next time around, I went completely the other way. To make sure I didn't get under somebody's thumb again, I married a quiet man who was several years younger than I and shared my passion for music. He even wrote songs about me. But that's all there was to the marriage, and I lost interest in making all the decisions, in being his 'mommy.'"

MORE PRAGMATIC

Metzger married a third time, and this time she says, it's based



on "a lot more mature values." She is less romantic and starchy eyed, and much more pragmatic. "This time," Metzger says about her husband, "I chose a warm, understanding man with two children of his own. He is a caring stepfather to my little girl."

The process of mate selection in remarriage is different, says Martin Goldberg, M.D., director of the Marriage Council of Philadelphia and of the division of family study at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. This is due in part to the fact that by the time they reach the remarriage stage, most people are less controlled by family factors.

Family factors may also play a lesser role in mate selection when people don't rush into marriage at an early age. "The one thing we know is that mate selection is unquestionably better when people defer marriage until a little later date. Teenagers have the statistics loaded against them," says Goldberg. That may be because they are making an escape rather than a choice. "When you're grabbing for a life raft, you don't look too hard to see what the lifeboat looks like."

No matter what their age, Goldberg believes that people tend to choose as a mate "someone with characteristics that appeal to them because they complement the factors in their personality."

But, he notes, the factors that appeal at one stage of life may

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not be the same at another later time. Indeed, the very qualities one found endearing may become annoying. There is less likelihood of that happening when "people have their career identities established, when there's less volatility, when there's less possibility for changes that would affect the marriage."

PRIORITIES

Jane Friedman, a hospital public relations specialist who recently married for the first time at age 37, agrees wholeheartedly. "You reset your priorities when you get older. I don't think that people, as they mature and have had some relationships, go around with the same grocery list in hand — in search of a partner who meets a whole lot of very superficial criteria," she says.

"With experience you learn there are certain things you can't live without. Then you go in search of someone who fits in with your psychological *mishugas* and has the qualities that are most important to you."

Looking back over the patterns that preceded her recent marriage, Friedman recognizes that she may have had to break a cycle that was unproductive for her before she developed some kind of insight about her true needs. "But that's not to say I gave up looking for someone with the qualities that were most important to me."

Matt Schuman, assistant communications director of the Federation of Jewish Agencies, says he, too, found someone with the qualities that were most important to him, although he didn't realize that at the time he married. "I had dated a fair number of girls, and none before Nanette lasted any longer than about two months. I'm not proud of that. I was scared to death to get married, but I'm so happy now that I did. If I had known how happy I could be, I would have probably married a lot sooner, instead of agonizing so long and thinking up excuses about why the timing wasn't right."

Schuman doesn't recall exactly why he chose Nanette out of all the other girls he dated, but he remembers very vividly how they started to go out together. "I had just hung up on the girl I was dating at the time, because

she couldn't make up her mind if she wanted to go with me to a wedding I was invited to. Nanette walked by my desk at that very moment (they were both students at Temple at the time, and both working at the newspaper, but knew each other only slightly) and I asked her if she wanted to go to a wedding." After she said "yes," I was embarrassed to back out."

Another recently married young woman, Catherine Locke, a biologist at the Veterans Administration, talks about her unusual meeting with the man she eventually married: "I called on the telephone to ask if I could come and live with him."

Locke grins as she recalls the first time she was in contact with Mark, who was, at the time, on the committee of the cooperative living house where Locke eventually took up residence. She notes that at the time "I wasn't sure I'd be accepted into the co-op since it was a small house, but I did want to meet the guy I was talking to on the phone."

After their "chance encounters," Schuman and Locke went on to find the qualities in their respective partners that eventually led them to the altar. Schuman is still somewhat mystified about the process. "I think it's because she was willing to put up with me."

Locke is quite definite, though, in her assessment of why she and Mark (her husband) eventually got together. "We're like two

halves of a puzzle. There's an emotional 'fit' that makes us both feel comfortable with each other, and it took place almost immediately."

IN BALANCE

It took Schuman a lot longer to come to that conclusion. He and his wife, Nanette, went together for six years before they married, and he credits her quiet patience with being the quality he needed to take the step. "She's unlike anyone I ever met, certainly not like anyone in my family. And not like me at all. I'm sports-minded and she doesn't know which sport has a World Series and which has a Super Bowl. I'm usually pretty carefree and she's cautious. But I guess we balance each other out, and she was willing to put up with me."

Sheldon Rotter, director of counseling service at the Jewish Family and Children's Service, says, "People look primarily for someone who fills in the blanks in their life." For example, a person who is less outgoing but eager to socialize might seek out an outgoing person who will help him realize his goal. "Mostly people look for a communality of interest, some serious shared values and goals, and someone who will help them accomplish what they want in life."

Mattie Gershenfeld, president of the Couples Learning Center in Jenkintown and a professor at Temple University, recalls a man

who had not received much nurturing in his childhood. "He met a woman who was caring and nurturing and built him up in every way. All he could think about after that was, 'Imagine having someone like her around all the time.' It was a perfect fit: He needing to be nurtured, and she liking the nurturing role."

Gershenfeld notes that as people grow up, they look at their parents' relationship to evaluate (unconsciously) whether they want to be "more like Mom or more like Dad." In one instance, she recalls, a woman had a strong father and a submissive mother, and she grew up knowing she wanted to be "more like Dad."

"And when she married," says Gershenfeld, "she looked for a man to fit her configuration, a man who would let her be the dominant one."

"The way people are feeling about themselves at a given stage in their life dictates, to a certain extent, the kind of a person they choose to marry. If we're feeling good about ourselves, we'll find a person who reflects that self-love. And the opposite is true, as well," Gershenfeld notes.

Are psychological factors the only ones that lead to two people getting together to form a union? "Not at all," declares Rabbi David Wolf Silverman, Ph.D., of Congregation Beth Zion-Beth Israel. "No psychologist can tell you how it comes about, and no psychiatrist, and no rabbi, either ... only God

knows.

"As it says in the Midrash, when the Roman matron asked Rabbi Akiba, 'What does God occupy himself with?', the answer was 'pairing people.' And," says Rabbi Silverman, "that's the sum of Jewish thinking on the subject." □

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