

Questions about Frum Marriages

Posted by lionfree - 28 Aug 2024 07:31

I sent this text to both of my Rabbi. Coincidentally both Called Rabbi, Mendy.

Dear Rabbi Mendy,

As someone who has witnessed two generations of divorced parents on both sides of my family, I've often sought better role models for a healthy and enduring marriage. I'm grateful to have found that in the Orthodox community. The relationships I've observed have restored my faith in marriage as an institution worth upholding, rather than something doomed to fail.

My father, however, holds a different view. He believes that marriage should be a legal contract renewed every 15 years, offering an exit strategy while also motivating spouses to improve their relationship. I can't fault him for his cynicism, as it stems from his own heartbreak. He once told me that he never wanted to get divorced because of the pain he experienced when his own parents separated. But over time, he's come to accept that the statistics on divorce suggest it's often inevitable, and there's little you can do to prevent it. This realization has further fueled his pessimism about marriage.

It's difficult for me to accept this perspective, as I aspire to hold myself to a higher standard. To me, his outlook feels like saying, "You'll be an alcoholic because I was," which removes personal responsibility and agency. It's a nihilistic approach that contradicts everything I believe.

He also encourages me to explore the dating world, even suggesting I date non-Jewish women to gain experience, including the intimate aspects of a relationship. While I understand that he wants what's best for me, his "taste the rainbow" and "you only live once" approach clashes with my values. When I push back, he accuses me of being defensive and afraid of getting hurt. But to me, the goal of a relationship is not to prepare for its end by trying a bunch of new things until you find what you like, but to build something lasting from the start.

My father is also critical of the religious dating system. He doesn't understand why I would want to marry someone after only a few dates and without living together first. While he says he's okay with me being more religious, this is a concept he fundamentally disagrees with. He

argues that divorces are rare in the Orthodox community because women have fewer rights and there's a social stigma against divorce. I find this hard to fully accept.

I'm trying to be realistic and not idealize the Orthodox lifestyle. I wonder if Orthodox couples ever fight or have serious disagreements. My father believes that fighting is good because it helps resolve issues, but his definition of "fighting" seems unhealthy. I also find myself asking, how much strife and sorrow do Orthodox husbands and wives hide from the public in their relationships?

I'm at a crossroads. My conversation with my father left me more unsettled than I expected, especially because I've been confident in my beliefs for a while now. It's one thing to debate with a peer or a stranger, but it's much harder when the disagreement is with someone as close as your father.

I'm struggling to decide whether to continue pursuing this lifestyle or to give secularism another try. Will God forgive me if I need to explore secularism once more? This question has been weighing heavily on me. I constantly feel like I have to guard my eyes and isolate myself from others. I can't relate to people who are dating because I'm not. At what point does this spiritual battle become more depressing than simply giving in to societal norms? How can I be sure that my father's views are wrong?

My grandfather's goal was to ensure his children wouldn't have to work as hard as he did. My father's goal for me was to have a better relationship than he had with his father, who was a workaholic. Now, my goal is to have a balanced, harmonious relationship.

I've often heard people compare struggles like mine to the story of Joseph, who endured so much but never compromised his values. Now, I find myself in my own "Egypt." How do I know if I'm not just a religious zealot destined for a miserable life of prudishness and misogyny? I've reached these conclusions through logic and critical thinking, but does my lack of experience to prove them matter?

I'm deeply frustrated and conflicted. I just want freedom, but I don't know from what I want freedom.

If you have any answers to these questions I desperately crave them!

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Re: Questions about Frum Marriages
Posted by BenHashemBH - 28 Aug 2024 11:03

[lionfree wrote on 28 Aug 2024 07:31:](#)

I sent this text to both of my Rabbi. Coincidentally both Called Rabbi, Mendy.

Hello LionFree,

I think sending this to your Rabbi's is a great move and that both of them should be able to provide you with a valuable response.

Disclaimer: my thoughts are far from complete ideas - merely scratching the surface of much deeper topics. I also hope that nothing I wrote is incorrect, and that others will weigh in.

Dear Rabbi Mendy,

As someone who has witnessed two generations of divorced parents on both sides of my family, I've often sought better role models for a healthy and enduring marriage. I'm grateful to have found that in the Orthodox community. The relationships I've observed have restored my faith in marriage as an institution worth upholding, rather than something doomed to fail.

My father, however, holds a different view. He believes that marriage should be a legal contract renewed every 15 years, offering an exit strategy while also motivating spouses to improve their relationship. I can't fault him for his cynicism, as it stems from his own heartbreak. He once told me that he never wanted to get divorced because of the pain he experienced when his own parents separated. But over time, he's come to accept that the statistics on divorce suggest it's often inevitable, and there's little you can do to prevent it. This realization has further fueled his pessimism about marriage.

It's difficult for me to accept this perspective, as I aspire to hold myself to a higher standard. To me, his outlook feels like saying, "You'll be an alcoholic because I was," which removes personal responsibility and agency. It's a nihilistic approach that contradicts everything I believe.

I agree with you. It would seem like his belief stems from his own experience - you don't have to live his life.

The statistics for divorce tell you that a lot of divorces take place. It doesn't tell you why, or if it was indeed inevitable. Experts have said that most divorces could be avoided. People lack the right reasons to get married, they lack the proper mentalities to maintain a healthy marriage, they lack the tools to repair marriage when there are issues, and they lack the care to invest in their marriage when divorce is the 'easy' way out.

He also encourages me to explore the dating world, even suggesting I date non-Jewish women to gain experience, including the intimate aspects of a relationship. While I understand that he wants what's best for me, his "taste the rainbow" and "you only live once" approach clashes with my values. When I push back, he accuses me of being defensive and afraid of getting hurt. But to me, the goal of a relationship is not to prepare for its end by trying a bunch of new things until you find what you like, but to build something lasting from the start.

Curious if he realizes that the high divorce rate is in the secular world where people are much more likely to have come from this "try everything" background. What happens is that you start comparing the best and worst parts of everyone you've experienced and build in your mind this impossible combination of perfection. Then in marriage, instead of focusing on yourselves and inner work (which EVERYONE needs - this is an essential part of becoming one), you excuse it by thinking about the other people who might be better (without the work).

My father is also critical of the religious dating system. He doesn't understand why I would want to marry someone after only a few dates and without living together first. While he says he's okay with me being more religious, this is a concept he fundamentally disagrees with. He argues that divorces are rare in the Orthodox community because women have fewer rights and there's a social stigma against divorce. I find this hard to fully accept.

The religious dating system has a much better track record for success. Yes, it has its drawbacks, but it works differently. When you date for marriage and aren't being physical / erotic, you are (after a few more casual dates) really focusing on the potential and emotional

connection. This is the foundation of the marriage. People who get physical first are distracted by that "connection" and don't necessarily investigate if the emotional relationship is healthy.

There is some social stigma against divorce. Some very high percentage of the time, that is a good thing, because most marriages can be successful. The issue is less about whether they do/don't get divorced as much as it is about them putting in the work when needed. For most of history, Jewish women had way more rights than secular women. People like to throw around blanket statements, but you need to look at all the facts to determine the accuracy of a conclusion. Sounds like you've done your own thinking and realized that there is a lot more to it than the popular argument points that he is making. Keep doing your own thinking and learning so you can consider all sides and come to your own conclusions.

I'm trying to be realistic and not idealize the Orthodox lifestyle. I wonder if Orthodox couples ever fight or have serious disagreements. My father believes that fighting is good because it helps resolve issues, but his definition of "fighting" seems unhealthy. I also find myself asking, how much strife and sorrow do Orthodox husbands and wives hide from the public in their relationships?

Good. In general, yes. Ideally with good manners, but complacency does not build connection or growth. Disagreements and discussions are healthy, when handled appropriately and with successive repair attempts. Arguing isn't about resolution, it's about understanding. John Gottman is a marriage expert who writes a lot about right and wrong 'fighting' and how successful vs unsuccessful couples do it. It turns out that couples who disagree often but do it respectfully and follow up with what he calls repair attempts, those marriages fare much better than most that don't 'fight'.

Orthodox relationships are more private, and it's not recommended to air your dirty laundry to the public. It's probably not healthy nor helpful to do that anyhow. Ideally, you are dealing with any major issues by seeking the appropriate council from you Rabbi and other professionals who can help.

Orthodox people are still normal people with normal people problems.

I'm at a crossroads. My conversation with my father left me more unsettled than I expected, especially because I've been confident in my beliefs for a while now. It's one thing to debate

with a peer or a stranger, but it's much harder when the disagreement is with someone as close as your father.

It's definitely hard, but at the end of the day, this is your life. Your father's feelings are worth consideration, but these are your choices to make.

I'm struggling to decide whether to continue pursuing this lifestyle or to give secularism another try. Will God forgive me if I need to explore secularism once more? This question has been weighing heavily on me. I constantly feel like I have to guard my eyes and isolate myself from others. I can't relate to people who are dating because I'm not. At what point does this spiritual battle become more depressing than simply giving in to societal norms? How can I be sure that my father's views are wrong?

The only certainty in life is death. That's overdramatic, but true. You need to decide what you want and pursue it. It will be very hard for you standing alone. To be fair to yourself, religious Jews live in communities because we are different, and you need connection and support

My grandfather's goal was to ensure his children wouldn't have to work as hard as he did. My father's goal for me was to have a better relationship than he had with his father, who was a workaholic. Now, my goal is to have a balanced, harmonious relationship.

I've often heard people compare struggles like mine to the story of Joseph, who endured so much but never compromised his values. Now, I find myself in my own "Egypt." How do I know if I'm not just a religious zealot destined for a miserable life of prudishness and misogyny? I've reached these conclusions through logic and critical thinking, but does my lack of experience to prove them matter?

You might consider some reeducation on the Jewish values of women and marriage - because prudishness and misogyny are backward/opposite of what we stand for. (My apologies if I misunderstood your comment here, and you meant something else).

I'm deeply frustrated and conflicted. I just want freedom, but I don't know from what I want freedom.

If you have any answers to these questions I desperately crave them!

We will always have questions. That's why we have belief. But keep asking your questions - that is the path to learning, which will bring you closer to what you are seeking, even if you aren't clear on what that is yet. One man's freedom is another man's slavery. Being free to do whatever you want is being a slave to base instincts and desires. There is no happiness to be found there, only the next want.

Wishing you fulfillment in your search for a life that has real meaning.

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Re: Questions about Frum Marriages
Posted by chosemyshem - 28 Aug 2024 14:55

Dude this is an extremely impressive letter. Wow. Well-written, insightful, thoughtful. I'm blown away.

I cannot really relate to your letter. I grew up frum, went to yeshivos, and basically everyone around me encouraged me further into this life. I can't imagine how tough it is with the the whole world, including your own father, encouraging you to indulge yourself.

But do you feel like a religious zealot destined for a life of prudishness and misogyny? Or do you feel like you're working to a life that will give you the happiness and fulfillment you seek?

I constantly feel like I have to guard my eyes and isolate myself from others. I can't relate to people who are dating because I'm not. At what point does this spiritual battle become more depressing than simply giving in to societal norms?

This is tough. This is really tough. Given the environment you're in, you need to hold yourself

separate and that is something that is undeniably difficult.

If you feel like it's a struggle, it makes it tougher. Take pride in being different. Take pride in holding yourself to a higher standard. You're fighting a spiritual battle that the people around you can't imagine. That should be a source of pride.

And make friends you can relate to. I'd bet a decent amount you didn't feel this conflict in camp this summer, being around people who were interested in this growth. Am I wrong? Ask Hashem to send you a real friend, someone who can help you grow. As the talmud says, "Give me a friend or you have given me death" (paraphrase).

To answer your question about Orthodox couples fighting, I'm married and orthodox but idk if that qualifies me to answer. My wife and I disagree sometimes. It's happened we've even raised our voices. But that's rare and we both put in a lot of work to make our marriage better and better. That's not a religious thing, it's a human thing.

If I had to pinpoint why religious Jews have a lower divorce rate I'd say 1) a belief that our spouse is our destined spouse and a resulting willingness to put in the work to make the marriage work - most marriages can thrive if you put in the work. 2) A religion/culture of personal self-improvement. 3) A detachment from the culture of chasing pleasure that has devoured the world. 4) A culture that encourages staying married (but again, I don't think that forces people to stay in unhappy marriages. I think the majority of the time that forces people to put in the work to make the marriage thrive.)

That is to say, marriage is a human thing that anyone can excel at. (The same way not watching porn is a human thing.) I think the reasons Orthodox Jews are the ones excelling at it are largely cultural, but in a positive way.

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Re: Questions about Frum Marriages
Posted by frank.lee - 29 Aug 2024 22:40

Awesome letter and amazing responses!!!!

May I suggest you read some of the book The Battle of the Generation?

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Re: Questions about Frum Marriages

Posted by chaimoigen - 30 Aug 2024 01:15

Hey, here's a warm hand!

I can't begin to imagine how crushing it is to have that kind of conversation with one's father. Connection like that runs so deep, he is trying to help, and it makes you doubt...

There's a tremendous amount to address and unpack in the points you raise. I'm not going to try to address everything you write systematically, even though you deserve it, because of time constraints. I'm going to address a few points, and then perhaps I'll get to a few more later.

I'm hoping that your Rabbeim take the time to connect with you and address your questions fully, and give you the personal support and guidance you deserve.

Here are a few points. Most of your father's assumptions about frum marriage are pretty much completely wrong, and it's completely understandable that an outsider would make those assumptions, because of how we look to the outside world. It's smart of you to reach out to ask what really goes on.

Today, frum dating (for the most part, certainly in the Litvish world), doesn't mean that you don't know the woman you're marrying well by the time that you walk down the aisle to the Chuppa. On the contrary, dating in a marriage-focused setting, (after intensive research) enables a couple to get to know each other on a deeper level than they can if they would be hooking up after a couple of dates.

Please look up and read a New York Times article about "The Thirty Six Questions to fall in Love" (There's a TED Talk on the topic too) about how lasting, deep, relationships are forged by sharing different layers by answering personal questions while making eye contact....

Lasting marriages happen through shared goals, emotional investment and mutual respect and work, attachment, and a healthy dose of *Siyata dishmaya*. We have a community that is very invested in belonging to a family unit, and that's a healthy thing. Staying together in a disastrous relationship because of the stigma of divorce isn't healthy, but is far less frequent, especially today. The idea that we have a lower divorce rate because women have less rights, for the most part simply is not true.

Sure, frum couples argue and even fight. And they also kiss and make up, too. Same as everyone else. I'm not sure why anyone would think otherwise.

Me and my wife have had plenty of disagreements, even some pretty serious ones over our decades of marriage. And we've had some pretty intense apologies, too. Both of us have each changed and grown in so many ways through those experiences. We're on pretty solid ground by now, we rely on each other always, and BH it's terrific. But marriage always needs work. Like people.

Marriage is the best setting to become a mensch. And the best chance you have at it. And you can earn love, companionship, happiness, intimacy, and family along the way. If you look at it that way, as a growth opportunity, then I don't think there's any reason to think that failure is inevitable. That's only when you look at love as something that "happens" and unhappiness and something that results when it "stops happening".

The concept of trying out a few women to see what you like, and trying your potential wife out in advance to see if you are sexually compatible is unfortunately completely wrongheaded. Allow me to explain.

There are two kinds of sex. There is Taking/Excitement Sex in which a person is excited by the erotic and seeks the greatest orgasmic pleasure that he can get, which would be triggered by whatever he (or she) would find to provide the greatest source of sexual stimulation. The problem is that the excitement doesn't last with a single partner, and trying new things runs out, and demeans the wife. It leads to emotionally sealed-off sex, and leaves a gnawing hunger for more. (Actually, the search for the ultimate sexual experience is one that demeans and objectifies women, far more than the "mysoginy" that's allegedly practiced in Frum marriages.)

Unfortunately, the quest that begins with trying out different women to see what sexuality

satisfies you ends in frustration and unhappiness. Yeah, maybe that's why the system he's suggesting has an incredibly high divorce rate.

Sex as an expression of intimacy in a loving relationship is completely different

It's not sealed-off taking, it's connecting. It's expressing something that exists between you. The whole day that you've shared is there when you climb into bed. And you are enwrapped in the aura of years of hopes and dreams and hurts, the vulnerability and ache and all the joy of what's between you for years, all this gets expressed in a private moment of intense personal nakedness and connection that satisfies in ways that Hollywood can never portray. It may not be as exciting but it's far more satisfying. And pleasurable in a way that has to be experienced. Intimacy is much better after 20 years, and a lot of kids and tears and dreams. When you know what each other like, and like to give it because you love each other. Hope you get there, it's worth it. (Obviously some times are better than others, some have it better than others. I'm painting an idealized picture, obviously. But the idea is that Intimacy Sex is a completely different idea and experience.) The joy and satisfaction in the experience is one that's dependent on marriage, love commitment and relationship. As opposed to the other kind of sex, which is founded on "fun", being "hot", performance and excitement. Two completely different things entirely.

Porn and Hollywood are selling a counterfeit imitation. The sugar rush without the nutrients. Or as HHM says: "Intimacy is cake. Sex is icing. Cake without icing is pretty good. Icing without cake doesn't satisfy. Cake with icing is best".

So this is why the idea of trying out sex with a few partners, and a potential spouse before committing isn't right. Because it's impossible. You can't "try it out" with someone you're not committed to - that's a contradiction in terms!! You can't try out the intimacy of commitment and shared life when you aren't committed and aren't sharing anything except a sweaty grunting in the night. Trying to preview *marriage* by trying the other kind of sex is sad and wrong. That's why the Torah encourages discovering intimacy only IN MARRIAGE. Because that's where you can experience the real deal.

That's all I can write now.

Here's a hand and a hug. Hang on! You'll find the truth in your heart of how you want to live. And Hashem will guide you, if you ask Him to. Hold on to him, tight.

Your friend,

Chaim

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Re: Questions about Frum Marriages
Posted by Heeling - 30 Aug 2024 01:47

You are a lion for reaching out, dear friend!! What a letter! So much depth and pain yet so much clarity and determination.

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