

Should Genetics be a Deal Breaker in the Dating Scene?



By Estie Rose

The Midrash tells of an exchange between a Roman matron and Rabbi Yose: “How has your G-d been occupying His time since the creation of the world?” asks the matron. Rabbi Yose replies, “He has been busy pairing couples; for God, it is as intricate as the splitting of the sea” (Bereshit Rabbah 68:4). Although this statement has become a cliché in the world of dating and marriage, it certainly bears truth. The selection process for finding the perfect mate has become so complex and detail-oriented that when a couple ties the knot, it really is a true miracle.

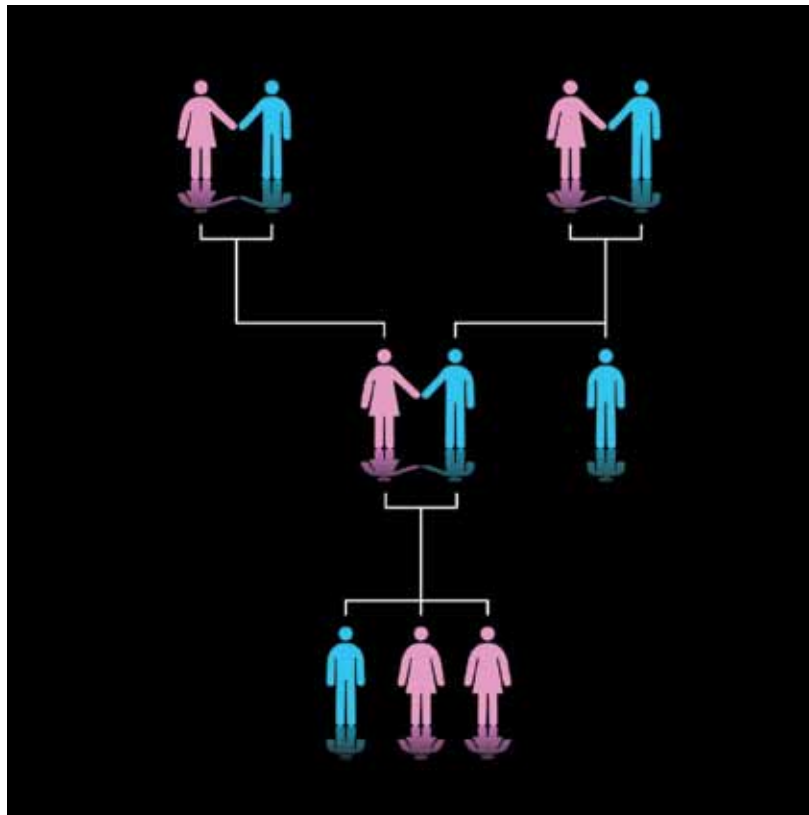
There are so many factors that need to click before a couple decides to get married. Part of my job as a genetic counselor is to check if couples are a genetic match, that is to verify that they are not both carriers of the same genetic disease that could affect their offspring. If they are both carriers, there is a 25% chance that each of their children would be affected. However carrier couples have many reproductive options, especially if they find out before getting pregnant, and do not necessarily have to break up.

Carrier screening for common diseases in the Ashkenazi population has been around since Tay-Sachs testing began in the 1970s, and has since expanded to testing for over a dozen diseases. While preconception carrier screening cannot eradicate all genetic diseases and birth defects, the number of children who are born with serious conditions has dropped dramatically since screening programs for these specific conditions began.

In the early days of genetic testing, when the public was not well-informed about genetics, many people felt that carriers of these diseases were “genetically unfit,” and therefore undesirable. We have come a long way since then, and now it is generally understood that carriers of these diseases are perfectly suitable mates. In fact, one

in three Ashkenazi Jews carries genetic changes (mutations) associated with one of these common diseases—can you imagine if every third person out there had a big “NOT GOOD ENOUGH” printed on their foreheads?

But the situation seems very different when it comes to families that have members with a genetic disease already present in a parent,



sibling, or child. Here there is still more narrow-mindedness than I wish there would be. Recently, I have met with several families with mental health issues. Many of them are particularly worried about the stigma that this can have on the affected individual. But beyond that, I am finding that the siblings of those individuals are concerned about their own “marriageability.” These siblings worry that they may not be desirable for fear of their developing mental illness themselves and/or of their passing on the mental health problem to the next generation.

It is important to note that mental illnesses are understood to be inherited in a multifactorial pattern. This means that there is

some genetic component that can actually involve multiple genes, as well as some environmental or situational component to trigger its onset. This is why it is not surprising to see that mental illness will “run in a family,” but that not everyone will be affected. So if a man has mental illness, each of his children, siblings, and his nieces and nephews will have a higher-

than-average risk to develop the same or a related condition, but this is not definite.

I would like to draw attention to something that many people don't like to hear. We all have something in our families—whether it is mental illness, predisposition to cancer, or more common conditions like diabetes or hypertension. And some of us don't even realize we have things going on. But the fact is that we are all carriers of about five to ten genetic mutations for diseases that could affect our offspring! So while some things may be more public and seem more apparent, others are less conspicuous but still in existence. No one can predict what health issues tomorrow, next week, or next year may

bring to light.

For individuals and families who are dealing with genetic health issues, my message to you is that disclosure at the appropriate time during the dating process is essential. In addition to halachic rulings on this topic, if you are deliberately hiding personal information from your partner, you are part of a relationship that is not based on trust and is therefore tenuous. When you disclose significant information about yourself or your family before marriage, you may see that you can learn a lot about a person and his or her ability to cope with difficult situations or decisions. And if we all work hard enough to break the stigma of disease, the fear of rejection will diminish and disclosure will not be as difficult a task as it seems to be today. I will never forget that when I was at one of our program's educational events about the halacha of disclosure in the dating setting, one man came over to me afterwards to ask me a question. He started by saying, “I am coming to you privately since I would never raise my hand in public. My daughter is in the dating scene and people would think I have something to hide if I ask a question.” How distressing it is that it needs to come to the point where people are scared to ask innocent questions!

We as a community should be more considerate about and tolerant of these issues as opposed to automatically creating stigmas or rejections around them. Genetics does not have to be a deal-breaker. Focus on the bigger picture, since there is a lot that needs to be “just right” for a good partnership. ♥

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