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Nearly 2,000 years ago the Talmud recognized that finding a partner for a happy marriage is a miraculous feat. "To match couples together is as difficult as the splitting of the Red Sea," it tells us.

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For young adults with disabilities, even splitting a sea does not capture the difficulties they must overcome in order to marry. One determined couple tackled them bravely.

Shalom is unaware that he is a trailblazer. This, he says, is just "the fulfillment of a dream of mine." When asked for how long has he wanted to marry, he responds, "From age zero."

Bearded, casually groomed, handsome and self-possessed, he is forthcoming about his engagement to Ronit. She is "smart, wise, serious, full of self-confidence and pretty," he assures us. His indistinct speech is overshadowed by its articulateness. Both Shalom and his fiancée have Down syndrome.



Shalom's mother Bina sits beside him detailing the upcoming event, at times reverting to English, which he does not understand. Unperturbed, he waits for the conversation to return to Hebrew.

The couple first met many years ago at summer camp, but then lost contact. Several months ago they bumped into each other again at the Central Bus Station in Jerusalem. From there followed dates at cafes and flowing conversations. "We have tons to talk about," Shalom says. "She loves to laugh and sometimes I make her laugh." She has dubbed him "Matzhikon" (funnyman), he adds.

There was no formal marriage proposal. Once both sets of parents understood that their children were in love, they met and decided to arrange for them to marry. Handling the logistics of an event for the 950 invitees has been the easy task. Planning for the couple's life afterward is more challenging.

Shalom's mother, Bina, is well aware of what she now faces. His and Ronit's

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welfare will, no doubt, always remain a source of concern. "Shalom knows that all these years I didn't want him to get married," she relates, turning to him for agreement.

"He's a pleasant, easy boy, not problematic, and I like having him at home. But he wanted to marry because he is searching for a partner like everyone else, and I understood that the right thing is to let him marry and develop."

The families have only roughly outlined the couple's living arrangements. Shalom and Ronit will remain at their current jobs - she as a photocopier at a primary school for learning disabled children in Jerusalem's Romema neighborhood, and he in paper recycling at the Givat Shaul offices of the Ministry of Education. The parents are looking for a rental apartment near Shalom's parents.

Ronit has lived in an Alei Siach sheltered home for the past 15 years. She and Shalom will be the third married couple among the 360 Jerusalemites who are assisted by the organization's network of hostels, workshops and clubhouses.

Chana Bransdorfer, spokeswoman for Alei Siach, says that Ronit attended weekly therapy sessions for several years. It was there that the idea of marriage arose and then took root. The sessions primed her for the undertaking, along with her family's support and in consultation with outside professionals.

All residences and activities sponsored by Alei Siach are gender-segregated, so Ronit never met boys there. The other Alei Siach couples were arranged through matchmakers, in accordance with haredi protocol. Marriage is clearly a goal that Alei Siach champions for those of its charges who are capable of it.

SHALOM NAMES three married Down's friends, and his mother adds two more couples she knows who live together. Yet, Rivka Sneh, a founder and director of Yated, the nonprofit serving 1,500 families of Down's children around the country, paints a bleak picture of marital opportunities. She says that despite impressive strides in the areas of education, employment and community living, progress in this area has been minimal - it is the last frontier.

In an effort to conquer it, Sneh lectures throughout the country about the sexual and marital needs of Down's adults. According to her records, there are only five married couples in the country. A sixth has been engaged for more than a year and is awaiting subsidized marital quarters from the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services. They will become available, she says, once another couple materializes to join them in a sheltered apartment. Only parents with the finances to rent their children an apartment can sidestep this obstacle.

Sneh argues that acknowledging the right of Down's adults to form relationships and marry is not enough. Most of them need to be taught how to socialize with the opposite sex. Currently there is one national center in Tel Aviv that provides counseling and instruction in forming relationships. Local branches exist in Haifa, Afula and Beersheba, and a new one will soon open in Jerusalem. Through various exercises such as psychodrama, participants acquire social skills that include making eye contact, initiating conversation, asking appropriate questions and listening attentively. Sneh claims that these few centers do not meet the needs of all.

Sneh, who knows Shalom, emphasizes that he is unique: He never needed any such guidance. In fact he tells us that he has many friends and even a string of past girlfriends, the first of whom he met in primary school. Since then he has enjoyed several other relationships. His mother explains, "He was always warm, giving, knew how to dote on others and how to give love." Shalom adds, "And how to give respect."

Shalom radiates an enviable inner peace. Sneh points out that many Down's individuals are denied that by dint of their sexual frustration. They are rendered so tense, restless and even aggressive that caregivers frequently administer medication just to calm them down. Sixty percent of those institutionalized and 40% of those in community-based residences receive psychiatric drugs. Sneh says that according to the chief psychiatrist of the Welfare and Social Services Ministry, only 10% of that sector have conditions that actually require such treatment.

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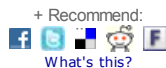
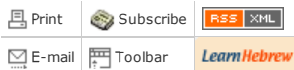


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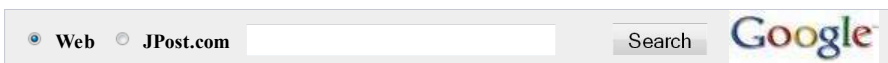
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