21 to the Chuppah?

A pronouncement by leading roshei yeshivah can change the face of shidduchim in America

By Yossi Krausz

A *kol korei* by over 80 *roshei yeshivah* and *rabbanim* was released this week, calling for *yeshivah bachurim* to consider *shidduchim* starting at age 21 under the guidance of their parents and *rebbeim*. This new guideline has the potential to change how the American *yeshivah* world arranges marriages for its young people—and in the process, solve the *shidduch* crisis once and for all.

Askanim working under the guidance of *roshei yeshivah* have already been instrumental in lowering the average age of boys seeking *shidduchim*, in an attempt to lessen the age gap between *chasanim* and *kallos* that is understood to be behind the *shidduch* crisis for girls. A *kol korei* issued last year by almost 20 American *roshei yeshivah* permitted *talmidim* to begin *shidduchim*, on the advice of parents and *rebbeim*, in fourth year *beis midrash* after Adar.

"We've found that in the past few years, since we started with these *kol koreis* focusing on boys going out younger, more and more younger boys have been going out," says Leib Spitz, one of the *askanim* who has worked on the issue. "We've heard from parents, *bachurim* and *shadchanim*—*shadchanim* in particular have told us that it's become much more of an option for a boy of 21 to go out.

"There are around 2,000 boys entering *shidduchim* every year. The average age of a *chasan* is 23, but we've had around 50 21-year-olds become *chasanim* in the past year, which never really happened before. That was a big byproduct of last year's *kol korei* allowing *bachurim* to date in fourth year. Most boys are already in Eretz Yisrael by then, but there's still a small percentage in America who aren't—about 300 such *bachurim*. When the *roshei yeshivah* signed, it had an impact right away."

There are two simultaneous societal processes involved, he explains, in *bachurim* considering earlier *shidduchim*. Parents become more willing to consider the idea, and *shadchanim* begin looking for 21-year-olds to suggest *shidduchim* to.

The number 21 doesn't just have relevance to *bachurim* who have remained in the US for their fourth year of *beis midrash*. The *askanim* hope that those returning from Eretz Yisrael for Pesach will consider *shidduchim* at that time.

NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES FOR MARRIAGES?

But won't boys getting married earlier cause a higher rate of divorce? After all, the boys aren't as mature at 21. Won't that bode ill for their marriages?

Rabbanim involved in *shalom bayis* issues don't believe so. *Askanim* point out that in communities where younger marriage is already the norm—such as the *chasidishe*, Israeli or British *Litvish* communities—there does not seem to be a higher rate of divorce.

"On a practical level, each individual is different," says Rav Sholom Spitz, *rosh yeshivah* of Yeshiva Shaar Hatorah. "Each *bachur* should assess his personal situation with his parents and *rebbeim* as to the proper time to enter the *parshah* of *shidduchim*. Generally speaking, however, most boys are mature enough at 21, as has been attested to by *gedolei Yisrael*.

"While there is often a reflex to underestimate the maturity level of 21-year-old *bachurim*, realistically, there doesn't appear to be any reason to assume that American *Litvishe bachurim* are any less mature than their counterparts in the Israeli, English and *heimishe oilam*, where getting married at 21 is commonplace."

"Maturity of humans doesn't take place like maturity of tomatoes," Rav Yechiel Yitzchok Perr, *rosh yeshivah* of Yeshiva of Far Rockaway, tells me. "You don't sit them on a shelf until they turn red. Maturity comes from experiences. And I think the greatest experience a person can have is getting married. Maturity comes from the experience of interacting with another human being in such close quarters—Rav Yisroel Salanter held that marriage is the great laboratory of life. There can't be anything better than two young people getting married and learning how to grow up together. You're no longer under your parents' wings, although they're supporting you in everything, but the fact is your mind has suddenly realized that you're in a different situation than you were as a child.

"It's a very maturing process. I don't think that we have to be concerned with them being mature or not mature by the time they get married. I think we should marry them off young."

LEARNING IN ERETZ YISRAEL

What about the fact that boys getting married at 21 will mean that some will have not gone to Eretz Yisrael to learn before marriage? According to the *roshei yeshivah*, that may in fact be the better choice for some *bachurim*.

"After they are married, *bachurim*, now *yungeleit*, feel a greater sense of *achrayus*, which is often reflective in their commitment to *hasmadah* and all other facets of *avodas Hashem*," Rav Spitz observes. "While it's true that, for many boys, getting married at 21 would preclude them from going to Eretz Yisrael as *bachurim*, the fact is that for many the best time to learn in Eretz Yisrael is after marriage, as opposed to going as *bachurim*, when the *nisyonos* are many and the *hashgachah* is often too minimal. Once married, the challenges are no longer as relevant, and Eretz Yisrael becomes a place for them to *shteig* in learning and *avodas Hashem*."

Rav Perr is even stronger on this issue. "What stands in the way of marrying young is the trip to Eretz Yisrael, which lasts a year or two years. American *roshei yeshivah* I have spoken to are very hesitant about the whole question of Eretz Yisrael. One of the most important things that a *bachur* gains at this age is a *kesher* with his *rebbe*, but in Eretz Yisrael, however close you may be with your *rebbe*, you know it's temporary. Most boys, unless they have family in Eretz Yisrael or are American-Israeli, do not stay on.

"I think the Israeli experience is not of great value for many boys, not of greater value than getting married. I also think it is the *me'akev* for young marriages. If they would stay, they would get married. There's a market out there looking for them, and they're available."

He says that having *bachurim* remain in America could raise the level of Torah in American *yeshivos*. "For the most part, I think the *roshei yeshivah* would prefer them to be here. There are benefits to them being in the *batei midrash*, because they're older, they're helping the younger ones. Many only go because it's the style. A rite of passage. No other reason."

The *askanim* I spoke to point out that when *bachurim* remain in America, they are able to retain a connection to their *rosh yeshivah*, who will eventually be able to help with any questions of *shalom bayis* that come up during their marriage—in essence, *increasing* the harmony of marriages.

And they also point to the greatest sources of *daas Torah* in Eretz Yisrael: Rav Elyashiv, *zt"l*, Rav Chaim Kanievsky, Rav Shteinman and Rav Shmuel Auerbach were all asked about learning vis-à-vis marriage, and all stated that getting married earlier is better, not worse, for a young man's learning. Conditions have changed, they point out: "Twenty years ago, not that many people were learning in *kollel*, so you wanted to learn for as long as you could before you got married. But now that learning in *kollel* has become common, a boy's *ruchniyus* will only be better if he marries younger."

UNDERSTANDING OUR ACHRAYUS

According to *askanim* who have worked on the *shidduch* crisis, as the average age of *chasanim* edges closer to 21, the *shidduch* crisis for girls will no longer be an issue. We cannot see our decisions for boys to look for *shidduchim* in a vacuum, the *roshei yeshivah* say.

"It is incumbent on all of us," Rav Spitz said, "to do whatever is in our *yecholes* to alleviate this crisis and enable all *bnos Yisrael* to get married. This is no small issue—*Chazal* enacted numerous *takanos*, including many *kulos*, all in order to alleviate the plight of *agunos*. Many hundreds, even thousands, of *teshuvos* of *Rishonim* and *Acharonim* were written all in order to facilitate the possibility of marriage for *agunos*. There's a famous *memra* of Maran Rav Chaim Ozer, *zt"l*—when he was young, he thought that his *chidushei Torah* would be the key to his Gan Eden, but when he was older he realized that being *matzil agunos* was more important.

"Our present predicament is altogether as serious a situation as that of the *agunos*, *r"l*. How can anyone of our *am Yisrael*—*baishanim*, *rachamanim*, *gomlei chasadim*—not be willing to do a part in this *avodas Hakodesh*?"

Rav Perr points out that the current age at which *bachurim* marry creates what he calls "thousands of households of tragedy." "It's not just that young women aren't getting married, which is itself a tragedy that cannot be described. But it's also that each of their families, in addition to the young woman who's not married, is suffering immeasurably. Every time they hear about a *shidduch* or *l'chayim* taking place, both the girl and her parents and siblings suffer deep emotional pain. We have to do everything in our power to stop this. *Lo sa'amod al dam rei'echa* is really what's involved here.

"I think such a change is the only way we can cope with the problem, so I don't think we have much to ask in terms of can we do it or not. As they said in Novardok, if we have to do it, we do it. It has to be done. *Oib mir ken nisht, muz men ariber*. I don't see any way out of it. I cannot imagine that we should allow this to increase. Even as it stands it's horrible. We have to do it."

Moshe Reichman, an *askan* involved, says there's one simple way everyone can get involved in ending the *shidduch* crisis: *Redt shidduchim* to boys who are 21 years old. If the community begins this trend, we can create *simchos* for all of *klal Yisrael*. ●

IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT REGARDING SHIDDUCHIM FOR BOCHURIM AGE 21

Jan ’16 **בס"ד שבט תשע"ו**

The **Gedolei Hador** have previously exhorted the Tzibbur and Bochurim to make every effort to marry **at the earliest appropriate age**. **Therefore, we encourage Bnei Torah and their parents, if it is consistent with the advice of their Rabbeim, to consider shidduchim at age 21.**

May a sweet and pleasant life be bestowed upon those who listen, and may they merit to build upstanding homes in Klal Yisrael, and to raise children and grand-children involved in Torah and Mitzvos.

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