

BIASES & DISTORTIONS IN SHIDDUCHIM

Introduction

Imagine a scenario in a Jewish court, a *Beit Din*, where two witnesses step forward to testify. One is a close friend of the defendant, the other an avowed enemy. Jewish law, steeped in millennia of wisdom, **disqualifies both** from testifying. Why? Because our Sages understood that **personal biases** – whether love or hate – can cloud judgment and distort perception. In fact, the Talmud goes so far as to question testimony that is *too* perfectly aligned, recognizing that if two witnesses give **identical** accounts down to the last detail, it may well be a sign of collusion or distorted recall rather than truth. The message is clear: even in sacred legal settings, **Judaism acknowledges the fallibility of human perception and cognition.**

Now, consider the realm of **shidduchim** – the traditional Jewish matchmaking process. Here, each decision can feel as weighty as a court verdict, and the “witnesses” influencing those decisions are our own eyes, ears, and hearts. We read a resume or hear about a potential match and form instant impressions. We go on a first date and within minutes might feel we’ve “figured out” the other person. We reflect on our experiences and memories as if they were infallible records of reality. Yet, both modern psychology and Torah wisdom teach us that our **minds are prone to biases and distortions.** We are, in a sense, *witnesses* testifying about a potential mate – and not always reliable ones.

Cognitive and behavioral biases are systematic patterns of deviation from rational judgement. Psychologists have identified dozens of such biases: we tend to **anchor** on first impressions, seek out information that **confirms** our preconceptions, let a single good quality cast a **halo** that makes us blind to other flaws, and more. These tendencies are not sins or moral failings; they are part of the human condition. Our brains use shortcuts – heuristics – to navigate complex decisions, and while these shortcuts often serve us well, they can just as often lead us astray (Kahneman, 2011).

In shidduchim, the stakes are incredibly high. Choosing a spouse is one of life’s most consequential decisions. It’s no wonder that **emotion, social pressure, and expectations** swirl around each interaction. But this emotional gravity can amplify our biases. A witty comment or awkward greeting at first meeting can stick in our mind out of proportion to its true importance. A piece of information on a résumé – the hometown, a particular hobby, a familial connection – can color our entire view of a person, acting as an anchor that we never fully adjust away from. Our own hopes and fears can play tricks on us: if we deeply wish for a match to work out, we might explain away red flags; if we’re nervous or skeptical, we might magnify minor issues into deal-breakers.

This pamphlet is a journey through the landscape of **cognitive biases and psychological illusions** as they specifically relate to shidduchim. We will delve into research in psychology and behavioral economics to understand biases like **anchoring, confirmation bias, the halo effect, availability heuristic, loss aversion, and many more.** Each will be explained, with findings from academic studies to illustrate how these biases operate. Alongside this, we will explore **Torah perspectives** – drawing from Tanach, Talmud, and commentaries – to see how Jewish teachings often anticipated these ideas or provide spiritual counterbalances to our cognitive pitfalls. The Torah and rabbinic literature are replete with insights about human nature, decision-making, and the ingredients of a good marriage. From the story of Eliezer’s search for a bride for Isaac, to the wisdom of Pirkei Avot on love and friendship, our tradition offers profound guidance for navigating the complexities of choosing a spouse.

Importantly, this exploration is not just theoretical. Throughout, we will introduce **real-life case studies and scenarios** that illustrate biases in action. You will meet a young woman who nearly declines a promising match because of a single lukewarm reference that triggered

her confirmation bias; a young man who becomes fixated on a minor detail in a prospective match's profile (anchoring bias at work); parents whose **halo effect** for a charming suitor blinds them to incompatibilities; and other composite characters drawn from true-to-life experiences in the shidduch world. These stories ground our discussion in reality and remind us of what's at stake: real people's happiness and futures.

Yet this pamphlet is not meant to provoke cynicism or despair. On the contrary, knowledge is empowerment. By shining a light on these often-unconscious biases, we can learn strategies to **mitigate their influence**. Each section will offer **practical guidance** – tips and tools for individuals dating, for *shadchanim* (matchmakers), and for families. How can we pause and reflect before rushing to judgment? In what ways can we structure the dating process to counteract predictable biases? What mindset should we cultivate to balance between using our instincts and our intellect? We will see that the structured nature of the traditional shidduch system, with its involvement of family and community guidance, actually contains wisdom to offset some biases – if used correctly. Conversely, we will also examine how modern developments like online dating profiles and photo-swiping may introduce new biases we need to be wary of.

Finally, we will place shidduchim in a **historical and cultural context**. How did our current practices evolve, and what can we learn from the way shidduchim were conducted in previous generations? What challenges are truly new (such as the ubiquity of social media images) and which are old problems in new guises? We'll explore the so-called "shidduch crisis," including demographic and age-gap issues, through the lens of cognitive biases and social psychology. Are some of our communal fears or tactics influenced by biases like **availability cascades** (where the more a problem is talked about, the more urgent it seems) or **moral panics**? How can understanding human psychology help the community address these concerns more effectively?

In sum, this pamphlet integrates **rigorous psychological analysis with Torah wisdom**, aiming to be both scholarly and practical. You do not need a Ph.D. or *semicha* (rabbinic ordination) to benefit from it – we have aimed for a style that is accessible and engaging to the average reader, while still providing depth and detailed references for those who wish to study further. Each section contains citations of academic research and Torah sources so you can see the foundations of the ideas presented. We encourage you not just to read but to reflect on your own experiences – have you seen these biases at play in your dating life or that of your friends and family? Recognizing a bias is the first step to overcoming it.

Ultimately, in the words of our Sages, a marriage match is divinely influenced – “Even before a child is born, a Heavenly voice declares the identity of their future spouse” (*Sotah* 2a). We are taught to have **faith** that God guides us to our *bashert* (destined partner). But we are also taught that we must do our **hishtadlut**, our due diligence and effort. Part of that effort in modern times is **self-awareness**. We must strive to know our own minds and inclinations, so that we can rise above mere habit and emotion and make decisions with clear eyes and hearts. If this pamphlet can help singles and their supporters approach shidduchim with a bit more awareness, patience, and wisdom – balancing the “wisdom of the heart” with the wisdom of the mind – then it will have achieved its purpose.

Let's begin by setting the stage with a look at how shidduchim have been conducted over time and what unique psychological challenges and advantages the traditional framework offers in our quest to find the right match.

Shidduchim in Historical and Cultural Context

To better appreciate the dynamics of biases in shidduchim, it's important to understand how the shidduch process has evolved over time. The way Jewish marriages are made today is the product of both ancient tradition and adaptation to new circumstances. This section will explore how **shidduchim were conducted in the past**, how they changed in different communities,

and what modern developments – from dating websites to demographic shifts – mean for those seeking a match.

From Biblical Matches to Talmudic Times

The Torah provides some of the earliest examples of “matchmaking.” Perhaps the most famous is the story of **Eliezer**, servant of Avrohom, who was sent to find a wife for Yitzchok. In Bereshis 24, Eliezer develops a **strategy to identify a suitable bride** – he prays that the right girl will offer water to him and his camels – effectively creating a test for kindness and hospitality. When *Rivka* (Rebecca) does exactly that, Eliezer thanks God for guiding him to a match for Isaac. Interestingly, Eliezer brings gifts and speaks at length with Rivka’s family about lineage and character, but Isaac and Rivka do not meet until the match is already agreed upon. This narrative highlights the traditional emphasis on **family vetting and values** over direct courting. It also shows an early awareness that one must **set criteria** (in this case, kindness and generosity were the key traits) and not be blinded by surface factors alone. In fact, the Torah says nothing about Rebecca’s appearance at the well – only her actions.

Throughout the Torah and Gomorrah, we find that marriages were often arranged by families. The Talmud describes how in certain eras, young people would meet at specified times – for example, on Yom Kippur or 15th of Av, the daughters of Jerusalem would dance in the vineyards and young men would choose wives (Ta’anit 26b). However, even in those somewhat “romantic” scenes, the Sages injected guidance: “Beauty is deceitful and charm is vain, but a God-fearing woman is to be praised” (Mishlei 31:30). They warned young men not to focus only on looks or wealth, but on **virtue and piety** (ibid.). We see that our tradition always recognized the **pull of superficial factors** and tried to redirect attention to deeper qualities.

In the Talmudic era, **matchmakers (shadchanim)** became customary. The idea of a third party helping to arrange a match is ancient – it’s said that God Himself made the very first match between Adam and Eve, and ever since, God continues to be a matchmaker. A famous Midrash in *Bereishit Rabbah* (68:4) relates that a Roman matron asked Rabbi Yose bar Halafta, “What has God been doing since finishing the creation of the world?” He replied, “God sits and makes matches – pairing the sons and daughters of men.” The woman scoffed at how trivial that sounded and boasted that she could match all her many servants easily. According to the Midrash, she proceeded to line up 1,000 male and 1,000 female servants and “marry” them overnight. The next morning, her estate was in chaos – couples were fighting and injuring each other. Chastened, she admitted, “Your God is indeed wise and your Torah is true, pleasing and praiseworthy. You spoke wisely.” (Bereishit Rabbah 68:4) The lesson? **Making a successful match is profoundly complex**, even for the greatest human minds, and it requires a wisdom beyond superficial metrics.

Thus, early Jewish communities put great care into matchmaking, often involving **multiple stakeholders**: parents, rabbis, and professional matchmakers. In small towns (shtetls) and even in larger urban centers in Europe, matches were frequently arranged when the boy and girl were quite young – sometimes even in childhood or infancy (through *shidduch* agreements). By the time of the wedding (often in the late teens), the couple might have met only briefly, if at all. While this system might seem to sideline the couple’s own emotional input, it had certain advantages: the families and community figures could more objectively evaluate compatibility of **background, values, and life goals** without the fog of infatuation. It was understood that love would blossom after marriage, as the couple grew together. There is a Yiddish saying: “*You don’t marry the one you love, you love the one you marry.*” In psychological terms, this reflects the concept of **commitment preceding passion** – a deliberate choice to build love rather than the modern idea of falling in love first and then committing.

The Role of the Shadchan and Social Networks

In traditional societies, the *shadchan* was an important figure. Sometimes caricatured (as in Sholem Aleichem’s stories) as a meddling yenta, in reality the matchmaker had a vital social

role. They had extensive knowledge of families and individuals, essentially functioning as a human database of eligibles. A good shadchan needed keen insight into personality and family dynamics – and perhaps informally they understood **cognitive biases** too. For example, a shadchan might know that a particular family always insists on a scholarly son-in-law because of a *halo effect* around Torah learning in their values, or that another young man tends to reject suggestions quickly due to an **optimism bias** (believing a perfect match is just around the corner). The shadchan would adjust their approach accordingly, sometimes even using “strategic deception” (withholding certain non-essential information initially) to allow a match to take root without premature bias. While ethical practice was always urged – Jewish law prohibits outright lying and *geneivat da’at* (deception) – there was an understanding that **framing matters**. For instance, presenting a suggestion as, “They’re an amazing family, everyone speaks highly of the girl” sets a positive anchor, whereas “People say she’s shy and not so pretty, but very nice” plants a negative anchor that could unfairly sabotage a meeting.

Over time, different communities developed variations in how shidduchim were done. In many Sephardic communities, for example, matches were traditionally arranged with somewhat more input from the young man and woman after an initial introduction, and family reputations were meticulously considered. In parts of Eastern Europe, there was a period when dowries and economics began to overshadow other considerations – rich matches were sought to support Torah scholarship or to forge business alliances. This introduced its own biases: **status quo bias** (preferring matches that maintain or elevate social status) and even **confirmation bias**, as families might interpret a prospective in-law’s every gesture as proof of either wealth or stinginess, depending on the narrative they wanted to believe.

Modern Shifts: From the Shtetl to the City to Cyberspace

The late 19th and 20th centuries brought massive changes. As Jews moved to big cities and later to other continents, the pool of potential matches grew, but community structures in some places weakened. After World War II, with the loss of so many communities, the traditional shadchan system took a hit. In the new worlds of America and Israel, some Jews gravitated toward more modern dating practices, while others doubled down on old methods. By the mid-to-late 20th century, we see a spectrum in Orthodox Judaism: from completely arranged marriages with hardly any courtship (more common among Chassidic groups) to “modern Orthodox dating” that closely resembles Western dating albeit with the intention of marriage from the start.

One notable modern development is the advent of **shidduch résumés** and telephone networking. In many circles today, when a match is proposed, it’s accompanied by a one-page résumé listing basic information (age, yeshiva or school, family background, references, etc.) and often a photograph. This phenomenon is relatively recent (late 20th century). It arose as communities grew large and geographically dispersed – a tool to summarize a person’s *shidduch profile*. However, as later sections will explore in depth, these résumés can become a breeding ground for biases. A résumé is essentially a **first impression on paper**. Readers may unconsciously apply stereotypes (“Oh, she went to that seminary, she must be very sheltered” or “He’s a doctor, he must be super busy and career-oriented”) which are not always accurate for the individual. The very existence of a written profile might encourage what psychologists call the **representativeness heuristic** – judging someone by how closely they fit a particular template or stereotype we have in mind, rather than seeing them as an individual.

Additionally, the Orthodox world has embraced technology to facilitate matches. There are now dating websites and apps specifically for religious singles, matchmaking WhatsApp groups, and online databases. These have expanded the reach of shadchanim and individuals alike. A young man in New York might be suggested to a young woman in Los Angeles whom he never would have known existed a generation ago. While this increases the **quantity** of possibilities, it also changes quality of information. Online profiles and text-based communication strip away some of the human elements and context that a traditional matchmaker or family friend might have

provided. Studies in psychology have found that an abundance of choice can lead to decision paralysis or less satisfaction – known as the **paradox of choice** (Schwartz, 2004). Furthermore, people can become overly picky when faced with countless profiles, looking for an ideal that might not exist, a phenomenon akin to **choice overload** in consumer behavior (Barry Schwartz's *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*) (How the Paradox of Choice Affects Support - Kayako).

Another contemporary challenge is often referred to as the “**shidduch crisis**.” This term, popularized in the 2000s, points to the perceived large number of single Orthodox women in their late 20s and 30s who struggle to find matches, especially in certain communities. Various causes have been proposed, one being a demographic **age gap**: if men typically start dating at, say, age 23-24 and women at 19-20 (as has been common in segments of the Yeshivish community), and if the population is growing, then mathematically there will be more eligible women than men at any given time, leaving some women without counterparts. Some community initiatives (like the NASI Project) have tried to encourage closer-in-age shidduchim to mitigate this imbalance. Others argue the crisis is exaggerated or that factors like **unrealistic expectations** and **postponing marriage for education/career** also play roles.

From a psychological perspective, the discourse around a “crisis” can itself create biases. An **availability heuristic** comes into play: the more people talk about stories of wonderful girls who can't get dates, the more easily we recall such stories and assume it's an epidemic, potentially leading to *panic*. This can cause parents and singles to approach shidduchim with a sense of desperation or excessive urgency, which in turn might lead to **confirmation bias** – seeing every small setback as proof that “See, it's hopeless” – or conversely, **wishful thinking** – jumping into an imperfect match out of fear that nothing else will come. As we will later discuss, maintaining perspective is crucial: not every community or subgroup experiences the same difficulties, and many individuals do find matches in time. The narrative we believe can influence how we experience the process.

Sociocultural Expectations and Biases

Every society has its ideals and expectations regarding marriage, and these can strongly influence the shidduch process, sometimes in biased ways. In some circles, there is an ideal of the *Torah scholar husband* supported by a working wife's family, in others the ideal might be a professional power couple, or a large family with a stay-at-home mother. These ideals, while valuable, can create **tunnel vision**. For example, a family might reject an otherwise excellent match because the young man isn't currently learning in a top yeshiva, even if he has other qualities that would make him a wonderful husband and father. This can be seen as a form of **confirmation bias** combined with **status quo bias** – families want what fits their existing image and filter information to confirm that narrative (“if he's not in Yeshiva X, he must not be serious about learning”). Likewise, superficial factors like **physical appearance, height, or yichus** (distinguished lineage) can take on outsized importance. These can feed into biases such as the **halo effect** (attributing overall goodness to someone who has one positive quality, like beauty or a prestigious family) or its opposite, the **horn effect** (undervaluing someone due to one negative trait).

Cultural differences also play a role. In Western societies, the idea of *romantic love* as the basis for marriage is dominant. In traditional Jewish thought, love is certainly important but often is seen as something that grows through commitment and shared life (ahavah that comes *after* marriage). This clash can sometimes create internal conflict for young people who grow up influenced by secular media's portrayal of “love at first sight” or the idea that one's heart should instantly know. They may go into dating with unrealistic expectations, a kind of **idealization** that can be dangerous. If they expect a soulmate to perfectly click from day one, they might dismiss real opportunities due to a lack of immediate infatuation – falling prey to what psychologists call the **focusing illusion**, where they focus on one aspect of the experience (e.g., the initial spark) and ignore other signs of compatibility.

On the flip side, communities that emphasize the practical over the emotional may lead some people to ignore red flags because “on paper it’s a good match,” which can be a **conservatism bias** (sticking to an initial plan despite new evidence) or simply social pressure. Torah literature and halacha do stress that both parties must genuinely want the match – a marriage coerced or entered without personal willingness is invalid. Thus, a balance is needed between **rational assessment** and **emotional connection**.

In summary, the history of shidduchim show a delicate interplay between enduring principles and new realities. The **traditional framework** – involving family, community, careful deliberation, and yes, prayer – has much wisdom to commend it. It was arguably designed (or divinely guided) to help people make one of life’s most important decisions with clear eyes and support, counterbalancing the passions of youth with the experience of elders. Modern changes have brought *opportunities* (more choices, tools to connect people across distances, breaking out of insular bubbles) but also *challenges* (information overload, new biases, and the loss of some personal touch). As we proceed, we will keep this context in mind.

Understanding where we came from helps us appreciate why the shidduch system has certain safeguards – like involving a third party, limiting the length of dating before a decision, or emphasizing community norms – which can be seen as attempts to mitigate known pitfalls of human nature. It also helps us identify which newer issues we need to be vigilant about. Armed with this perspective, we can now delve into the psychological nuances of each stage of the shidduch process: from reading that first résumé or hearing that first suggestion, to the first date, the courtship, engagement, and beyond.

First Impressions on Paper: The Resume and Profile Stage

The shidduch process often begins with a **shidduch resume** or a profile relayed through a network. This is essentially a one-page portrait: schools attended, family background, references, and a few lines of description about the person and what they are looking for. While convenient, these resumes can be a minefield of cognitive biases. When all you have is a sheet of paper (or an email) and perhaps a photograph, the human mind tends to fill in the blanks – and not always accurately.

The Forer (Barnum) Effect – Seeing Ourselves in Vague Descriptions

One common feature of shidduch resumes is the use of broad, positive descriptors: “She’s a warm, growth-oriented person, sometimes quiet but friendly,” or “He’s very bright, outgoing in the right setting, and has a nice sense of humor.” These phrases sound nice, but they are so general that almost anyone can see themselves (or what they want) in them. Psychologists call this the **Forer effect** or **Barnum effect** – the tendency for people to accept vague, general statements as uniquely applicable to themselves. In a classic 1948 experiment, psychologist Bertram R. Forer gave his students personality assessments that were actually identical, filled with generic statements like “You have a great need for other people to like and admire you” and “At times you have serious doubts about whether you have made the right decision.” Most students rated the assessment as highly accurate for them. We see the parallel in shidduchim: a parent reading a resume might project a whole personality onto the candidate based on a few lines that could describe almost anybody under the right circumstances.

For example, if a résumé says “Chaya is creative and open-minded,” one reader might imagine a bohemian artist type, while another might think it means she’s flexible in thinking and not judgmental. If a young man’s profile says “he’s quiet in public but warm once you get to know him,” some might interpret that as shy-yet-dependable, others might worry he’s socially awkward. Each interpreter reads their **own hopes or fears** into the vague description. This is the Forer effect in action – the resume becomes a mirror of the reader’s mind more than a window into the actual person.

Torah wisdom cautions us against this kind of projection. There is a teaching in *Pirkei Avot* 1:6, “**Judge every person favorably.**” One way to understand this is that we should give the

benefit of the doubt and not jump to negative conclusions – essentially an antidote to projecting our biases. However, favorably does not mean **blindly**. The same tradition that tells us to judge favorably also emphasizes the importance of seeking truth. The resumes and first reports we hear should be starting points for inquiry, not verdicts. The Jewish approach encourages us to **investigate** – by calling references, by asking pointed questions – rather than assume we already know the person from a few flattering lines.

Anchoring on the First Piece of Information

When faced with limited information, our minds often latch on to one prominent detail and use it as an “anchor” for our overall impression. This is known as the **anchoring bias**. In the context of a shidduch resume, the “anchor” could be the person’s college or yeshiva, their family name, or even something like “older sister is married to so-and-so.” For instance, if the first thing you notice on a resume is that the girl is from an illustrious rabbinic family, you might automatically ascribe to her qualities of piety or learning – even if you have no direct evidence of her personal level of religiosity. Conversely, if a young man’s resume notes he is 5’5” tall, a reader who subconsciously prefers taller men might let that detail anchor their impression and assume “he’s probably not so confident” or even decide to reject the match outright, even though height has little to do with character.

Studies show that once an anchor is set, people make **insufficient adjustments** away from it, even when new information is provided (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). If a mother has heard that “the family isn’t well-off,” that might serve as an anchor of “this might not be so suitable for our family,” and every subsequent detail – “he’s a wonderful learner, actually comes from a very respected lineage, and is extremely kind” – may get discounted in light of that initial bias. It takes a conscious effort to counteract anchoring. One strategy is to deliberately **seek a second opinion or additional data** before forming any judgement. A father might say, “Okay, the resume looks weak on academics, but before I write him off as not intelligent, let me call his study partner or someone who knows him.” By getting more perspectives, we dilute the power of any one anchor.

The Availability Heuristic – What Stands Out in Memory

The **availability heuristic** is another bias at play when reading resumes. This is our tendency to judge the frequency or importance of something by how easily examples come to mind. If a particular detail on a resume triggers a strong association for us, it can color our entire impression. For example, suppose the resume mentions the girl is from Cleveland. If the reader once had a very negative interaction with a family from Cleveland, that memory might immediately pop up (becoming “available” in the mind) and unconsciously influence how they view this candidate – “Oh, Cleveland... I wonder if she’s also going to be X, Y, Z like that person I knew.” Similarly, if the profile lists a hobby like “volunteering with special-needs children” and the reader’s own beloved cousin has special needs, that positive emotional association might make them view the candidate in a glowing light, even though many other important qualities remain unknown.

In the shidduch world, certain keywords can serve as “availability” triggers. *Seminary names* for girls and *yeshiva names* for boys often carry reputational baggage. One mother might see “BJJ Seminary” and immediately think of three wonderful BJJ alumnae she knows, leading her to assume this girl must be wonderful too. Another might zero in on something like “needs to work on anger management” (if such honest notes are included or relayed) and instantly recall a story of a volatile marriage – making that detail loom larger than perhaps it deserves in this case. The key problem is that what is **easily recalled** is not always **generally true** or relevant. The availability heuristic can thus skew initial impressions unfairly.

To combat this, one can practice a form of **mindfulness** when reviewing a resume: notice what words or details trigger a strong reaction in you, and ask “Is this reaction about them, or is it about something in my past?” If it’s the latter, mentally set that aside and seek more objective

information. Here, too, involving a shadchan or third party can help. A skilled shadchan will often say, “Don’t get caught on that one point; I know people in that yeshiva and they are very diverse” or “Yes, the family had a financial struggle, but I think it built character in the boy – speak to his rebbe about how responsible he is.” These nudges help override the distortions of availability by providing **context and nuance**.

Attentional Bias – What We Focus On, We Amplify

Closely related is **attentional bias** – the tendency to pay more attention to certain pieces of information while neglecting others. If a parent reading a resume has a particular “pet concern,” their attention will zoom in on any hint of that. Say a mother is very concerned about health issues because there’s diabetes in the family. She might scrutinize the medical information line on every resume (“does anyone in the family have health issues?”) to the point that if one detail is slightly out of the ordinary – e.g., the father wears a hearing aid – she might magnify it and fixate on health as a disqualifier, missing all the positive attributes listed. Another example: a young woman might have strong feelings about not wanting to marry someone who is “spoiled.” As she reads a shidduch profile, she might latch on to the fact that the suggested match is an only child who’s been given many things by doting parents. Her attention narrows to that detail (“only child, probably spoiled”), and she glosses over the lines describing his volunteer work or good middot (character traits).

Attentional bias means that our *fears or preoccupations act like highlighters*, making certain words or facts glow brightly while others remain virtually invisible to us. This can lead to an unbalanced view. We might inadvertently create a full picture of a person using 10% of the available data, simply because that 10% drew all our focus. The remaining 90% might have painted a different picture.

One effective antidote is to use a checklist or structured approach when reviewing resumes. For instance, decide in advance what the key categories are (e.g., Family, Education, Personality, Values, Goals, Health) and make sure you *intentionally note something in each category*. This forces a more even distribution of attention. If you catch yourself saying “I can’t get past X,” pause and ensure you have also considered Y and Z about the person. Discussing the resume with someone else can also reveal biases: the other person might say, “Funny, I didn’t even notice that detail, but I was impressed by this other point – did you see that?” Trading perspectives helps ensure that no single bias dominates the impression.

The Illusion of Transparency and Asymmetric Insight

Another psychological quirk in early impressions is the **illusion of asymmetric insight** – the belief that we understand others more deeply than they understand us, or even than they understand themselves (Illusion of asymmetric insight - Wikipedia). When reading about someone, especially in a shidduch context, it’s easy to fall into a false sense that we can “read between the lines” and discern truths about them which, in reality, we cannot know at this stage. For example, a father might read a resume and a reference letter about a boy and conclude, “I can tell he’s the type who struggles with commitment,” based on nothing more than subtle phrasing or the father’s own intuition. We often trust our gut feeling that we have x-ray vision into people’s souls, but psychology warns us that we **overestimate our ability to understand others**.

In the world of shidduchim, this can be dangerous. A mother might confidently assert, “I can tell from the way they wrote her profile that she’s very self-centered,” or a girl might think, “The way his friend described him – I just know he has a temper issue.” These snap analyses might discourage what could have been a promising introduction, or conversely, might cause someone to pursue a match against other evidence because they “just feel” they truly get the person (when in fact they are projecting).

Jewish teachings put a heavy emphasis on the unknowability of a person’s true inner life without proper interaction. King Solomon writes, “**As face reflects face in water, so the**

heart of one person reflects another” (Mishlei 27:19), suggesting that genuine understanding is reciprocal and comes from direct encounter (like two faces meeting in a reflection). Until you’ve met the person and spent time, any sense that you fully understand them is somewhat illusory. Thus, humility is warranted: we must remind ourselves at the profile stage that **we might be wrong** – perhaps that soft-spoken reference who described the boy as “laid-back” really meant “lazy,” or perhaps our impression that someone is “career-driven” is actually misreading their passion as materialism.

Case Study: The Misjudged Resume

To illustrate how these biases can work together, consider the case of “David and Sarah” (a composite of true stories). David’s mother received a resume for Sarah. Sarah’s profile described her as “a 24-year-old teacher who values family and growth,” noting she was “outgoing with friends but can be reserved initially” and enjoys painting and volunteering. The mother’s immediate anchor was that Sarah was 24 – two years older than David. That set off alarms in her mind about why an attractive, accomplished girl was still single at 24 (anchoring bias entwined with availability heuristic, as the mother recalled two other older single girls who, it turned out, had “issues”). Then the mother focused her attention on the word “reserved” in the description, because she worried her son needed someone energetic. She virtually ignored the parts about painting and volunteering. Her impression solidified that “Sarah might be too old and boring for my David.” Fortunately, David’s father had a different take: he noticed that Sarah’s references included a family rabbi they knew. He called the rabbi, who effusively praised Sarah’s character and mentioned that she had spent a couple of years caring for an ill relative (hence she started dating later – explaining the age). The father relayed this to his wife, helping to break the grip of her initial biases. David and Sarah did go out – and to her surprise, David’s mother later found out that in person, Sarah was lively and their conversation flowed easily. David himself admitted that had he just seen her resume (which he actually never did in detail because his parents filtered it), he might not have been excited – “It didn’t really capture who she is at all,” he said later. This story has a happy ending: David and Sarah got married, proving how dangerous it can be to judge too much from paper.

Guidance for the Resume Stage

For individuals and families at the resume stage of shidduchim, here are some practical strategies to mitigate cognitive biases:

- **Be Aware of Emotional Triggers:** Take note if a particular detail in a profile triggers an emotional reaction (positive or negative). Pause and ask, “Am I reacting to the person, or to something/one this reminds me of?” Reminding yourself of the Forer effect can help – don’t assume the profile is tailored to you; it’s meant to be broadly appealing.
- **Seek Multiple Data Points:** Don’t rely solely on the written resume. Make those phone calls to references, and if possible, speak to someone who knows the candidate in person. Different contexts can reveal different sides of a person. Also, consult with your spouse or a friend to see if they picked up on the same things in the profile or something entirely different.
- **Write Down First Impressions, Then Revisit:** It can be useful to jot down your initial impressions or concerns after reading a resume. Then, after gathering more info (or even after an initial meeting if it progresses), look back at what you wrote. Were your assumptions correct? Often, this exercise teaches us how far off initial impressions can be, which trains us to be more cautious next time. It’s a way of self-auditing your anchoring bias and adjusting for the future.
- **Use Torah Perspectives as Correctives:** Recall relevant Jewish teachings. If you find yourself focusing on externals (looks, yichus, money), remember God’s words to Samuel when Samuel was impressed by the handsome Eliav as a potential king: “Do not look at his appearance... for man sees what is visible to the eyes, but **Hashem sees into**

the heart” (I Shmuel 16:7). This verse, often quoted in shidduch talks, reminds us not to be swayed by first-glance impressions or surface information. Likewise, remind yourself of the Pirkei Avot teaching to judge others favorably – meaning, give them a chance to show you who they are rather than deciding too quickly.

- **Consult Da’at Torah (wise counsel):** In many communities, it is common to run a prospective match by a trusted rabbi or mentor who knows the individuals or at least knows people who do. These mentors can often spot bias in the concerns raised. For example, a parent might say to their Rav, “We’re worried this family isn’t our ‘type’ religiously,” and the Rav might challenge, “Is that truly so, or are you overemphasizing a minor difference?” Submitting our reasoning to an outside perspective can keep us honest and humble.

In summary, the resume stage should be treated as a preliminary filtering, not as the final judgment on a person’s suitability. The goal is to gather information, not to rush to a conclusion. By approaching resumes with curiosity and caution – aware of the cognitive bias traps – we can better ensure that we don’t reject our true match or pursue a poor one based on a distorted first impression. In the next section, we’ll move from paper to in-person: how biases manifest when the dating actually begins.

The Power of Appearance: Photographs and First Impressions

In many shidduchim today, a **photograph** is exchanged before the first meeting. While a picture can help gauge basic attraction, it also introduces strong biases. Human beings are extraordinarily quick at forming impressions from visual cues – research shows that people make judgments about others’ traits like trustworthiness or competence within a fraction of a second of seeing their face (Willis & Todorov, 2006). In shidduchim, a single photo might determine whether a match is pursued or not. This raises two major concerns: first, **the halo effect** – where physical attractiveness or a pleasing appearance creates an overall positive impression that may be misleading – and second, the risk of **premature dismissal** if the photo doesn’t align with subjective standards or expectations.

The Halo Effect and Attractiveness Bias

The **halo effect** is a cognitive bias in which our overall impression of a person is influenced by one outstanding trait, often physical attractiveness. If someone appears beautiful or handsome in a photo, we tend to unconsciously ascribe other positive qualities to them: “She looks so sweet, she must have a great personality” or “He’s good-looking, probably very successful/confident.” This can obviously be dangerous – a photogenic face tells us nothing reliable about character or compatibility. Yet the halo effect is powerful and well-documented in psychology: attractive people are often assumed to be more intelligent, kind, and capable than less attractive people (Dion et al., 1972). In a shidduch context, this means a very good-looking candidate might get a “pass” on probing questions or potential issues. A parent or matchmaker might be less critical when red flags come up, because unconsciously they’re influenced by the positive glow from that person’s looks.

From a Torah perspective, our tradition is actually aware of this bias. The Talmud (Taanit 5b) relates that Rabbi Yochanan, famed for his beauty, would sit at the gates of the mikvah so that women who looked at him would have beautiful children – a somewhat humorous aggadah that nonetheless acknowledges the impact of seeing beauty. But Jewish wisdom also cautions us: **“Grace is deceptive and beauty is vain, but a God-fearing person is to be praised”** (Mishlei 31:30). When choosing a spouse, external beauty is a **blessing**, but not the foundation. The **inner beauty**, reflected in Yirat Shamayim (fear of Heaven) and good deeds, is what ultimately matters.

However, ignoring physical attraction entirely is unrealistic. Judaism doesn’t expect that – in fact, the Talmud (Kiddushin 41a) advises that a man should see his prospective wife before marrying her, lest he find something unattractive and come to resent her. Physical appeal and

chemistry do play a role in marriage. The key is **not to let looks outweigh all other aspects**, and not to let the halo effect create an illusion of total compatibility. A pretty face can mask flaws, and in the flush of infatuation, one might minimize legitimate concerns. We will later discuss how positive illusions can actually help in an ongoing marriage, but at the stage of deciding whom to date or become engaged to, one must strive for clarity.

On the flip side, there's the "**reverse halo**" or horns effect: if the photo is unflattering or the person isn't initially attractive to the viewer, one might unduly ascribe negative qualities – "He looks arrogant" or "She seems dull" – again without real evidence. This could cause someone to reject a match who, in person, they would have found appealing. Many can attest that photos can be misleading; some people are far more attractive in real life due to their expressions, movement, or warmth that a still image can't capture. Others might be photogenic but less impressive in person.

Thin Slices and Snap Judgments

Even beyond attractiveness, a photograph or a first meeting yields what psychologists call a "thin slice" of someone – a very brief exposure – from which we tend to make broad judgments. **Thin-slicing** research by Ambady and Rosenthal (1992) famously showed that students could accurately rate a teacher's effectiveness from just seconds of silent video. We like to think we're deep and deliberative, but in truth our brains often decide "like/don't like" almost instantaneously. On a first date, the way the person walks, their voice, their style of dress, all contribute to an immediate gut feeling. In shidduchim, where people often meet only a handful of times before deciding on engagement, these first impressions carry a lot of weight.

However, first impressions can be very **fallible**. A person might be extremely nervous on date #1 and come off as stiff or awkward, leading the other to conclude "not my type." Or someone might be very polished at small talk and charm, creating a great initial impression that later rings hollow as deeper incompatibilities surface. Psychologically, the **confirmation bias** can kick in after a first impression: if you initially find the date delightful, you'll likely interpret everything they do in a positive light thereafter (at least for a while), and if you initially find them off-putting, you'll notice every little flaw subsequently.

One common bias in early impressions is the **fundamental attribution error** – the tendency to attribute someone's behavior to their character rather than to the situation. On a first date, if the other person is 15 minutes late, one might think, "They are irresponsible or don't care," rather than considering situational factors like traffic. Or if they seem a bit distracted, one might label them "inattentive" or "not interested," when in reality they are anxious or dealing with a personal issue. We have to be careful not to draw big conclusions from small behaviors. It's telling that Halacha (Jewish law) encourages giving the benefit of the doubt – *dan l'kaf zechut* – especially when you have limited information. In Pirkei Avot 1:6, judging favorably can be applied here: interpret the other's early behaviors in the best reasonable way, until proven otherwise.

Case Study: The Photo that Almost Cancelled a Date

To see how appearance can mislead, consider the story of "Rivka," who was suggested to "Eli." Eli's mother requested a picture of Rivka. The photo that came was a somewhat grainy snapshot where Rivka was dressed in a formal gown at a wedding. For reasons even Eli's mother couldn't fully articulate, she didn't like the photo – "She looks a bit too fancy, maybe high-maintenance," she thought. She worried that Rivka's style indicated a hashkafic (religious outlook) mismatch – perhaps more modern than their family. Eli, however, had heard very good things about Rivka's character from a friend, and he insisted on at least one meeting. On the first date, Eli was pleasantly surprised: yes, Rivka was very pretty in person, but more importantly, she was down-to-earth, kind, and shared his values deeply. Her personality was different from what the still photo implied. Only later did Eli's mother admit that she had jumped to conclusions from the picture and that meeting Rivka shattered those preconceived notions. Rivka and Eli continued

dating and eventually got married – a match that almost didn't happen because a photograph created a deceptive first impression.

Managing Biases in Early Impressions

For those going on shidduch dates, or guiding their children through them, here are strategies to keep first impression biases in check:

- **Limit the weight of the photo:** If you find pictures unhelpful or too influential, consider meeting (or having your child meet) without having seen a picture, if that's culturally acceptable for you. If a photo is necessary, remind yourself it's only a partial truth. Some people even purposely look at multiple photos or a short video, if available, to get a more balanced sense than one snapshot. Shadchanim sometimes facilitate an initial brief meeting ("just a short date or a quick hello") precisely to move beyond the photo stage without a big commitment.
- **Conscious Correction of Halo Effect:** If you find yourself very attracted to someone early on, enjoy the chemistry but also intentionally gather other information. Ask yourself: "What do I actually know about their values or behavior so far?" Conversely, if not immediately attracted, consider the advice of sages like Rabbi Yaakov Emden, who suggested giving a shidduch at least a second look unless there's a clear reason not to – sometimes appreciation can grow with familiarity (and indeed many happily married couples will say their love grew from a modest beginning).
- **Structured First Dates:** Early dates in the shidduch system are often quite structured (a sit-down in a lobby, a conversation over coffee). While this has pros and cons, one advantage is it provides a controlled environment to observe character beyond just looks. You can pay attention to how they treat service staff, whether they listen or only talk about themselves, etc. These substantive observations can balance out the superficial impression. One should mentally note, "What did they say that impressed me? Did anything worry me?" rather than just "How I felt." Because feelings can be driven by irrelevant things like the fact that he resembles an old friend or she has a nervous laugh like your sister – things that trigger comfort or discomfort not truly reflective of compatibility.
- **The 3-Date Rule (Flexibly Applied):** A common guideline is to try to go on at least two or three dates unless the first was absolutely objectionable. Often the first meeting has both parties on edge. By the second date, there's a bit more ease to see the real person. If by the third date there's still zero attraction or too many negatives, then it might not be a match. But pushing yourself to that point can ensure you're not tossing aside a great potential due to a subpar first encounter. Anecdotally, many couples report that they only really started feeling a connection on the third or fourth date; had they given up after one, they would have lost out.
- **Mindful Reflection and Prayer:** After a first date, take time to reflect in a balanced way. Some recommend writing down impressions: positive, negative, questions. This engages the rational mind alongside the emotional. In prayer (as many singles do pray for guidance), one might explicitly ask: "Help me see this person clearly, neither through rose-colored glasses nor through unfair negativity." In Jewish tradition, clarity (*siata dishmaya*, help from Heaven) is sought in making the right choice; being aware of our biases is part of creating a vessel for that clarity.
- **Consulting Others:** Discuss your first impressions with a trusted mentor or friend who knows you. Sometimes they can spot if you're being too harsh or too smitten. For example, you might gush: "He's amazing!" and your mentor asks, "But what do you actually know about him so far? Are you perhaps infatuated with his looks or charm?" – a necessary reality check. Or if you say, "I didn't like how she talked about her job," the mentor might offer an alternative view: "Maybe she was nervous and came off wrong;

give it another shot.” The goal isn’t to override your feelings, but to ensure they aren’t prematurely ruling the day.

In essence, **first impressions in shidduchim are inevitable but should be held lightly.** The initial chemistry or lack thereof is just one data point. By approaching early encounters with humility (“I don’t know this person yet, I’ve only seen the tip of the iceberg”) and with strategies to broaden our perspective, we stand a better chance of either discovering a true gem beyond an awkward start or recognizing when a shiny exterior might be concealing flaws.

As we progress, subsequent sections will examine how relationships develop over multiple dates, how attraction can grow or falter, and what cognitive biases come into play as people move towards making a decision about engagement.

Navigating the Dating Process: Emotions and Biases Over Multiple Dates

Once a shidduch gets past the initial meetings and into a *dating process* – a series of dates aimed at determining suitability for marriage – a new set of cognitive and emotional biases can come into play. At this stage, two people are getting to know each other in more depth. Feelings may begin to develop, expectations can rise or falter, and both memory and judgment become crucial. It’s a delicate time: both overestimating and underestimating the quality of the match are possible. Let’s explore some key biases and psychological phenomena in this phase, along with Torah insights and practical tips.

The Peak-End Rule and Memory Distortions

Psychologists have found that when people remember an experience, they tend to heavily weight two moments: the **peak** (the most intense point, whether positive or negative) and the **end** of the experience. This is known as the **Peak-End Rule** (Kahneman, 1999). In the context of dating, this means that an amazing moment (a particularly heartfelt conversation, a romantic gesture) or a terrible moment (an awkward misunderstanding, a disagreement) can disproportionately color one’s memory of the date as a whole, and the way the date ends – with a warm feeling or a sour note – can strongly influence the overall impression. For instance, a couple might have a generally good 3-hour date, but if in the last five minutes a small argument erupts, both might walk away feeling that the entire evening was bad. Conversely, a date that was mediocre could be remembered more fondly if it ended on a high note, say with a delightful discovery of a shared interest that left both smiling.

Related to this are broader **memory biases**. As the relationship progresses, each person accumulates lots of information and impressions about the other. However, memory is not a perfect recorder. Psychologist Daniel Schacter famously outlined “**Seven Sins of Memory**”: transience (forgetting over time), absent-mindedness, blocking, misattribution, suggestibility, bias, and persistence. In dating, some of these “sins” appear in subtle ways. One might **misattribute** a comment to the wrong context (“I recall she said X on the second date, but it was actually someone else who mentioned that”), or fall prey to **confirmation bias in memory**, where one selectively recalls details that support their current leaning. If a girl starts doubting the match, she might suddenly “remember” every awkward or negative thing the boy did, while forgetting the positive moments – her memory literally becomes biased to justify an exit. Similarly, if she’s very invested, she might brush aside or even forget incidents that troubled her at the time.

Judaism places a strong value on honest recollection and testimony; the Torah forbids bearing false witness – and in a way, we must be careful not to be false witnesses to our own dating experiences by recalling them inaccurately to ourselves or advisors. It can help to keep a **dating journal**, noting down after each date what you liked, what concerned you, and how you felt at the end. This creates an objective record that can be consulted later. Sometimes reading your past entries can surprise you (“Oh, I actually was bothered by his comment about family dynamics on date 4, I forgot about that amid the excitement of date 7”). This aligns with the mussar (ethical teaching) practice of *Cheshbon Hanefesh* – taking an accounting of the soul –

here applied to dating: regularly accounting your impressions can counteract the distortions of memory over time.

Confirmation Bias and Belief Perseverance

By the time a couple has gone on several dates, each person typically has formed a narrative or “theory” about the other and about the potential of the relationship. Confirmation bias – the tendency to seek, interpret, and remember information that confirms one’s beliefs – often kicks into higher gear now. If you feel this person is “the one,” you might overlook signs of incompatibility. If you suspect it’s not a good match, you might increasingly notice little things that “prove” you’re right. The user files earlier mentioned an insight: *“a common finding is that at least some of the initial belief persists even after it is discredited.”* In shidduchim, this means even if you discover that a worry you had is unfounded, the negative impression might linger in your mind. For example, if a young man hears a rumor that the young woman has a temper, he might approach cautiously. Suppose over several dates she never shows any anger – one would think the rumor is disproven. Yet, he might still feel an irrational hesitancy or “what if” doubt. This is sometimes called **belief perseverance** – an initial belief sticking around in our psyche even after being proven wrong.

On the positive side, confirmation bias can make us *blind to new red flags*. Perhaps a young woman is convinced that the guy she’s dating is wonderfully kind. She’s told everyone how great he is. If on a later date she witnesses him being rude to a waiter, she might excuse it as a one-off bad day, not allowing it to update her overall view of him. Her brain essentially says, “That doesn’t fit the story, so I’ll ignore it.” This is why it’s crucial during dating to periodically take a step back and **re-evaluate**: “What new things have I learned about this person? Do they fit my initial understanding, or challenge it? Am I glossing over anything that my trusted mentors would consider important?” Sometimes having a friend or mentor ask these questions can jolt one out of a bias. In Torah terms, this is akin to the value of *emes* (truth) – being truthful with oneself even when it’s uncomfortable. One should pray not to be misled by personal bias: a traditional prayer some have is to ask Hashem, “Help me see the truth of this shidduch, whether it is meant to be or not.”

Emotional Rollercoaster: The Empathy Gap and Hot-Cold Empathies

Dating for marriage is inherently emotional. People often cycle between excitement (“I think this could be it!”) and anxiety (“But what if it’s a mistake?”). Emotions greatly influence decision-making – something known as the **affect heuristic**. When in a positive mood, we might downplay risks; in a negative mood, we might overlook benefits. Additionally, there is the **empathy gap** – when in one emotional state, we have trouble predicting how we’d feel in another state. For instance, during a relaxed, romantic date, one might commit to something (“Sure, I’d move to another city for you”) that later, in a more stressed state, they reconsider and feel differently about. Or vice versa: during a tense week of dating, one might feel, “I’m so overwhelmed, maybe I should stop this,” not realizing that a day or two later, in a calmer state, they’d feel more confident again.

To handle this, it’s advised not to make hasty decisions in the heat of emotion. If a date goes very poorly and you’re upset, it might be worth giving it a day or two, and perhaps discussing with a mentor, before deciding to end things – unless, of course, there was a clear deal-breaker. Sometimes that emotional low can rebound, and the issue can be solved with communication. Conversely, if you’re on an emotional high (e.g., after a beautiful date where you feel infatuated), it could be wise to “sleep on it” before, say, agreeing to get engaged that very night. Our tradition certainly celebrates joyous momentum – when it’s right, it’s right, and things can move fast – but Judaism also values **wise counsel** (*etzah*). “Plans are confirmed through consultation” (Mishlei 15:22). Talking things through with parents, a wise Rebbi or mentor can help modulate emotional extremes. They might ask, “Are you perhaps riding a ‘high’ and ignoring something?” or “Are you perhaps overly anxious about an issue that could be resolved with conversation with the other person?”

One technique is to explicitly **role-play mentally** being in different emotional states: imagine yourself calm and content – how do you view the relationship? Now imagine yourself under stress or facing a challenge with this person – what concerns arise? This can highlight areas to address. For example, visualizing a future where, say, one of you loses a job: do you foresee working together or do you sense blame? If the latter, maybe it indicates an unresolved trust issue in the current dating.

Fundamental Differences: Attribution and Value Alignment

As dates progress, discussions get deeper: life goals, values, religious observances, family aspirations, finances, etc. This is where core compatibility is tested. **Attributional bias** can emerge in how each interprets the other's values. Suppose a young woman prioritizes charitable giving and she notices her date seems less enthusiastic on that topic. She might prematurely label him "selfish," attributing a character flaw, when in fact his budget is tighter or he prefers private giving not spoken about. Many such misunderstandings can occur if one isn't careful to really listen and clarify. Here the Torah value of judging favorably is vital: assume good intent unless proven otherwise, and ask, don't assume. Instead of thinking "He's materialistic because he talked about money," one can ask, "How do you view money in terms of lifestyle and tzedakah?" – maybe his perspective is more nuanced.

Another bias to guard against is the **sunk cost fallacy**. By the 8th or 9th date, people sometimes feel, "We've invested so much time in this, we have to make it work," even if significant red flags are appearing. It's psychologically hard to walk away after investing emotionally for weeks or months. Yet Judaism doesn't encourage engagement or marriage out of inertia or fear of wasted time. Better to have spent 2-3 months and realize it's not right, than to marry and face lifelong issues. No external pressure (like "what will people say if we break it off now?") should force a shidduch to continue if the match itself isn't solid. Conversely, another form of bias is **the grass is greener syndrome** – thinking maybe there's an even better match out there and thus being unwilling to commit even when things are very good. This can be fueled by an availability bias ("I keep hearing about so many other singles... maybe someone even better is around the corner"). This is where guidance from mentors and self-honesty is crucial. There is no *perfect* spouse – everyone has imperfections. The question is whether the imperfections or differences here are ones you can live with and grow through, and whether the core values line up.

The great commentator Rabbeinu Tam reportedly said one should marry when one finds someone with whom **flaws and all, you can build**. This echoes modern research: the concept of the "**good-enough**" relationship (which doesn't mean settling in a bad way, but rather recognizing when you have the essential ingredients even if a few boxes on some idealistic list remain unchecked).

Case Study: When One Bad Memory Took Over

Consider a scenario: Aviva and Moshe had been dating for a month and things were progressing well. They had many shared values and got along. On their fifth date, Moshe, feeling more comfortable, made a joke at Aviva's expense – a teasing comment about her being late sometimes. Aviva laughed it off at the moment, but later felt hurt; she had been sensitive about her punctuality issue. On date six and seven, Aviva found herself a bit on guard, looking for signs that Moshe might be insensitive or mocking. She recalled that joke frequently (persistence of memory bias) and it tinted her attitude. Moshe sensed something was off and became anxious, which made him act less naturally. By date seven, Aviva was ready to halt the shidduch, citing that she felt Moshe didn't truly respect her.

Fortunately, Aviva's mentor urged her to talk it out with Moshe before making a final decision. In a frank conversation, Aviva mentioned the joke and how it bothered her. Moshe immediately apologized, explaining he never meant to hurt her and that his humor sometimes misfires. He even thanked her for telling him, as it gave him a chance to clarify and learn more about her

feelings. With that discussion, Aviva's bias began to dissolve; she saw that her memory of that incident had blown it out of proportion in her mind. Moshe's genuine remorse and maturity in handling the conflict actually strengthened her regard for him. They continued dating with a clearer slate and eventually became engaged. This shows how a single negative moment, if not addressed, could derail a great match due to memory bias and confirmation bias, but with communication and an open mind, the bias was overcome.

Strategies for the Ongoing Dating Phase

As couples move through the dating process, here are some strategies to maintain clarity:

- **Maintain Open Communication:** Don't be afraid to bring up concerns kindly. Sometimes your date may not realize how something came across. Discussing things not only potentially resolves specific issues but also gives insight into how you each handle conflict and communication – vital knowledge for marriage. If you find you cannot have open dialogue (e.g., the other person becomes defensive or shuts down), that itself is important information.
- **Periodic Check-ins with Mentors:** Continue consulting with a trusted rabbi, rebbetzin, or mentor figure as the dating progresses. They can help you discern patterns. They might ask, "Do you find any recurring issues that bother you? How do you feel about this person when you're not with them? Do you feel at ease being yourself?" These reflections guard against getting lost in the emotional forest.
- **Focus on Core Values and Middot:** As per our tradition, the primary thing to seek in a spouse is good character (*middot tovot*) and shared values. When you debrief a date to yourself or others, try to frame feedback in those terms: "I saw kindness when he interacted with that child" or "I noticed she spoke about her family with such respect." If you find yourself focusing on more superficial aspects ("I wish he were a bit more stylish" or "Her laugh is a little loud"), gently remind yourself of what really counts in the long run. The Rambam writes that external beauty, wealth, etc., are lesser factors compared to *yirat Shamayim* and virtue in a wife.
- **Watch Out for External Pressures:** Family or friends might start asking, "Nu, so is it getting serious?" Their expectations can add pressure or bias. A parent might already be dreaming of an engagement and thus unintentionally push their child to continue even if the child has doubts, or conversely a friend's negativity about the match could sow unnecessary doubts. It's important to filter external opinions: take advice from those you respect, but ensure the decision is truly coming from the two of you and what you feel before God is right. A helpful practice in Jewish communities is *hishtadlut* (effort) combined with *tefilah* (prayer): do your due diligence (which includes introspection, discussion, seeking advice), and pray for guidance that any external noise doesn't drown out the "*still small voice*" of true intuition.
- **Envision the Future:** As things get serious, imagine realistic future scenarios with this person. Not just the wedding or the idealized life, but day-to-day living. Can you picture making decisions together? How might they react in various life situations? This isn't pure imagination – it should be informed by what you've learned of their personality. If there are areas of uncertainty ("we never discussed how finances would be handled" or "I'm not sure how religious they want our home to be relative to me"), now is the time to talk those through. Don't let *assumptions* lie hidden, only to surface after engagement or marriage as points of contention.
- **Recognize the Normalcy of Doubt:** Almost everyone has some doubts or fears before making a life commitment. This is normal and not in itself a sign that something is wrong. It's the mind's way of double-checking. Our sages speak of Satan's efforts trying to stir anxiety intensifying before something holy like a marriage in order to derail the *shidduch*. The key is to differentiate between nervousness and true red flags.

Nervousness might be general (“marriage is scary”) or minor (“I wish he were 2 inches taller but oh well”). Red flags are significant incompatibilities or character issues. If it’s hard to tell, that’s again where outside counsel and prayer can help. The phrase “*Im tachkim, yavin*” – “If you become wise, you will understand” – suggests that through gathering wisdom from Torah and teachers, you gain understanding to make the right choice.

In sum, the dating phase is a time of discerning the *emet* (truth) of the relationship. Biases like memory distortion, confirmation bias, and emotional reasoning are like funhouse mirrors that can warp reality. But awareness of them, along with the tools of honest communication, reflection, and seeking Hashem’s help, can straighten those mirrors. By the end of this stage, the hope is that one can confidently answer: “Do I truly know and trust this person? Are we aligned in the ways that matter? Can we accept each other’s differences with love and respect? Do I feel guided to move forward?” If the answers are yes, then one can proceed towards engagement with joy and confidence. If serious hesitations remain, wisdom might counsel to pause or step back. Either way, navigating this process with open eyes and heart is itself a growth journey – one that prepares individuals for the ultimate goal of building a **bayit ne’eman b’Yisrael**, a faithful home among the Jewish people.

Conclusion

Our journey through the landscape of cognitive and behavioral biases in shidduchim underscores a profound paradox: the same psychological tendencies that can lead us astray are also, in some contexts, what bind us together. We saw how **distortions are dual-edged** – they might cause an excellent match to be overlooked due to superficial judgment, or they might be the glue that helps a couple overlook each other’s minor flaws and form a bond. The key is in timing and moderation: being **clear-sighted when choosing** and a bit “biased” in favor of kindness and forgiveness once chosen.

Throughout this pamphlet, we integrated the insights of modern psychology with the eternal wisdom of the Torah. We found that:

- Our brains use shortcuts like heuristics and biases to make the daunting task of finding a life mate more manageable, but those shortcuts can misfire. By learning about phenomena such as the **halo effect, confirmation bias, anchoring, availability and attentional biases, memory distortions, empathy gaps, and the peak-end rule**, we become aware of the invisible “tricks” our minds might play on us. With awareness, we can compensate for these tricks – slowing down our judgment, seeking more data, getting second opinions.
- The Torah and rabbinic teachings, far from being in conflict with these modern findings, often anticipated them and offer guidance to channel them positively. The Torah’s emphasis on judging others favorably, on focusing on inner qualities (“*HaShem looks at the heart*” (1 Shmuel 16:7), and on seeking counsel aligns with best practices to counter biases. Conversely, Jewish wisdom also acknowledges the *necessity* of a bit of irrationality in love – “**Ahava mekalkel et haShura**” (love can disrupt the normal order of things, Talmud, Sanhedrin 105b) – and as we discussed, a dose of positive illusion can help sustain love in marriage.
- Real-life shidduch scenarios illustrated that these concepts are not abstract. By examining case studies – a misinterpreted resume, a misleading photograph, a badly remembered comment, a near break-up over a joke – we saw the concrete impact of biases. We also saw how, with the right approach, each situation could be remedied: through communication, seeking truth, and giving the benefit of the doubt. These stories should remind every reader – whether you are a single person searching, a parent or shadchan guiding others, or a married individual reflecting – that if a shidduch process

you're involved in encounters bumps, it's not necessarily a sign of doom; it may be an opportunity to apply wisdom and grow.

- Practically, we outlined strategies for singles, families, and matchmakers: from writing and reading resumes with care, to structuring early dates and reflecting after them, to engaging in honest conversation during the dating process, to making decisions about engagement with both head and heart in harmony. We emphasized the importance of **self-awareness** (“am I seeing this clearly or is a bias at work?”) and **seeking outside guidance** (a mentor can often spot what we overlook). We also touched on community issues like the so-called shidduch crisis, suggesting that while structural factors exist, collective attitudes and biases (like age-gap perceptions or chasing only the most elite prospects) can either exacerbate or alleviate these challenges.
- Historically and culturally, we learned that while technology and times have changed some mechanics of matchmaking, human nature remains consistent. The lessons gleaned from earlier generations – such as prioritizing values over vanity, involving wise intermediaries, and balancing personal choice with community input – are just as applicable today. At the same time, we must face modern realities, like the influence of social media and the abundance of choice, which require us to be even more disciplined in how we approach shidduchim.

In the final analysis, a successful shidduch (and the happy marriage that follows) is not about tricking our minds or eliminating all bias – it's about **harnessing our God-given cognition and emotions in the service of a higher goal**. It's about doing our very best hishtadlut (effort) – by learning, preparing, and acting with wisdom – and then having **bitachon** (trust) that if it's meant to be, Hashem will guide us to the right match and help us see it. As much as this pamphlet has focused on human psychology, we conclude with a reminder of the transcendence beyond human effort: “House and wealth are inherited from fathers, but an insightful wife is from Hashem” (Mishlei 19:14).

Our job is to remove the obstacles our own minds might create, and to actively cultivate insight and clarity. But ultimately, we seek the blessing from Above, as expressed in the traditional blessing to a bride and groom under the chuppah: “**May you have much joy together, building a home faithful to the traditions of Israel.**” This is our prayer for every reader – whether you are a single person searching, a parent or shadchan guiding others, or a married individual reflecting – that the knowledge gained here will be empowering and enlightening, but always coupled with the humility of spirit to know that the greatest shidduch architect is the One above.

May we all be blessed to find or help others find their true bashert at the right time, and may the homes built be filled with love, understanding, and the Divine light that comes when decisions are made with both **wisdom of the mind and wisdom of the heart**.

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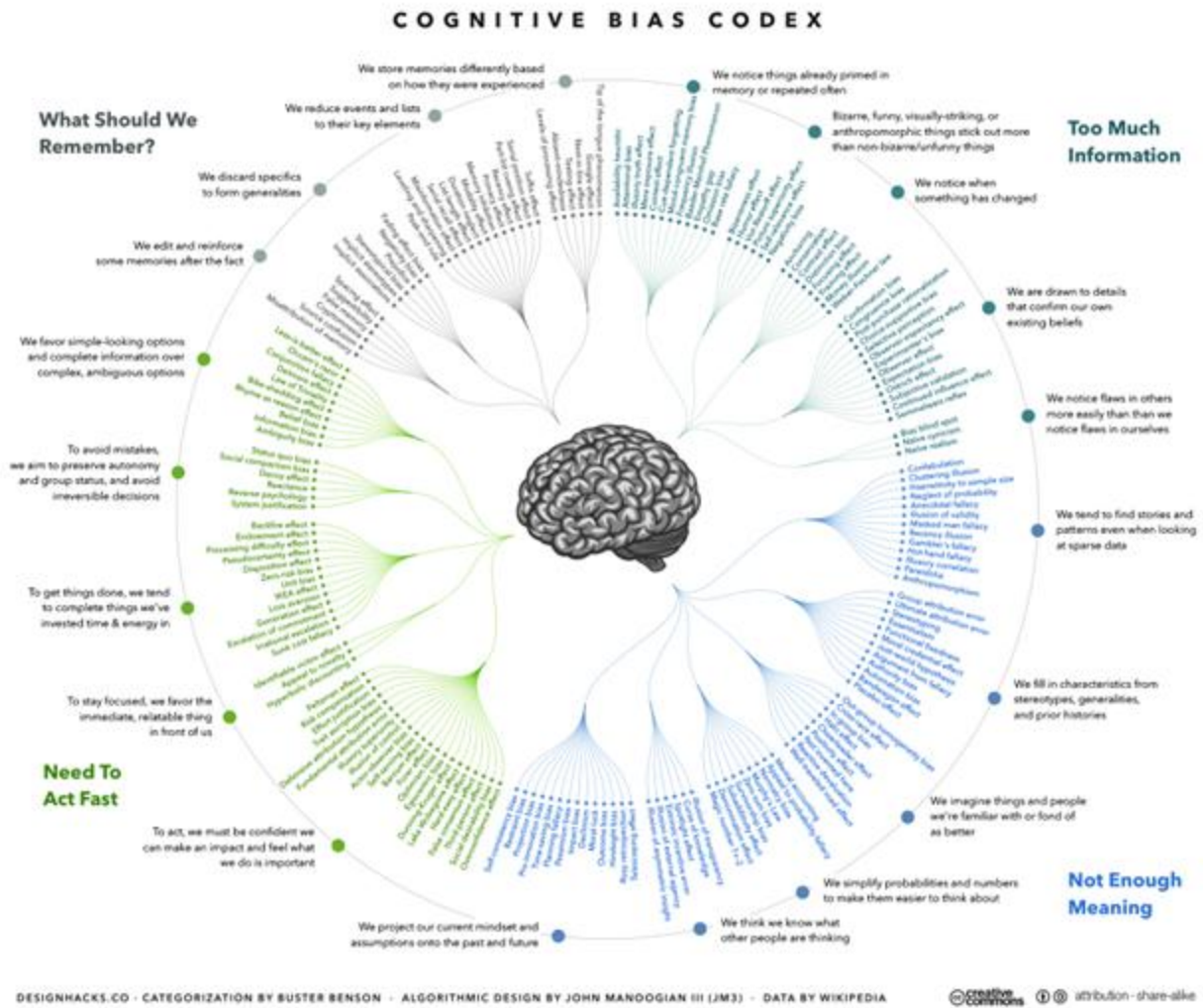
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There are more than 180 known cognitive biases, so this only scratches the surface.



In conclusion, our journey through the biases and distortions in shidduchim reveals a complex interplay of cognitive science, biology, and spirituality in the formation of loving relationships. By understanding these factors, we can approach shidduchim with greater wisdom, patience, and self-awareness. We can embrace the beautiful, transformative experience of falling in love while also respecting the need for guidance and structure in forming lasting bonds.

Remember, successful relationships aren't about finding a perfect person, but about two imperfect people relating perfectly.

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