

Tu B'Av or Not Tu B'Av?

Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky and Rabbi Shaanan Gelman

Nachamu 5777

One of the most popular comic strips of the 1930s was Al Capp's hillbilly comic strip "Li'l Abner," chronicling the goings on in the fictitious Kentucky hamlet of Dogpatch, referred to by its inhabitants as the most miserable and unnecessary place on earth. The men were worthless wastrels, and the women were desperate enough to want them anyhow. One such woman was Sadie Hawkins, a 35 year old spinster who was "homeliest gal in all them hills." As she aged and her prospects dimmed, her father, Hekzebiah Hawkins, began to worry that she would never leave the house. At his wits' end, he called together all the bachelors of Dogpatch and declared it Sadie Hawkins Day. This day would be celebrated by a footrace, in which Sadie pursued all the town's eligible bachelors. The prize of the race? Freedom. The consequence for losing the race? Marrying Sadie Hawkins, a fate that went to a hapless bachelor named John Jonston. The spinsters of Dogpatch decided this was a good idea, and declared Sadie Hawkins a mandatory annual event. If a woman caught a man and dragged him kicking and screaming across the finish line, he was required by law to marry her.

Sadie Hawkins day was mentioned in the strip of November 15, 1937 and the storyline ran for two weeks, thereafter becoming an annual event for the next four decades. Oscar Wilde famously said, "*Life Imitates Art far more than art imitates life.*" In 1939, a double page spread appeared in Life magazine declaring "On Sadie Hawkins Day, Girls Chase Boys in 201 Colleges," featuring pictures from [Texas Wesleyan](#). What was initially a plot device in a comic had become a social phenomenon, enshrined in popular culture as a day when social conventions are overturned and women ask men out, or propose to their significant others. In fact, by 1952, Sadie Hawkins Day was reportedly celebrated on the first Saturday after November 9 at *40,000 known venues*.¹ In discussing gender roles in dating, social scientists have described the "Sadie Hawkins Effect."² What Al Capp didn't know, however, was that Sadie Hawkins Day is described in much earlier sources than his, dating back to the Mishnah- and it takes place this Monday.

The Mishna in Tractate Taanit³ paints a colorful image of two extraordinarily joyous days: Yom Kippur and the 15th of Av. Yom Kippur is a joyous day because it is the day we are forgiven for our sins. What about Tu B'Av? The Mishnah gives a list of joyous events that happened on that day, or the cessation of negative ones. But what do both of these days have

¹ And https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sadie_Hawkins_Day

² <http://www.scienceofrelationships.com/home/2013/11/18/the-sadie-hawkins-effect-gender-role-reversals-in-dating.html>

³ Taanit 4:8

in common? On both of these days, Jewish women went out in the fields wearing white and attempted to snag themselves a husband. The Talmud⁴ describes the way every woman attempted to attract a man by playing to her strengths:

מיוחסות שבהן היו אומרות בחור וכו': תנו רבנן יפיוות שבהן מה היו אומרות תנו עיניכם ליופי שאין
האשה אלא ליופי מיוחסות שבהן מה היו אומרות תנו עיניכם למשפחה לפי שאין האשה אלא לבנים
מכוערות שבהם מה היו אומרות קחו מקחכם לשום שמים

Those women of distinguished lineage among them would say: Young man, please lift up your eyes and see what you choose for a wife. The Sages taught this practice in greater detail in a baraita: What would the beautiful women among them say? Set your eyes toward beauty, as a wife is only for her beauty. What would those of distinguished lineage among them say? Set your eyes toward family, as a wife is only for children, and the children of a wife from a distinguished family will inherit her lineage. What would the plain ones among them say? Acquire your purchase for the sake of Heaven.

Each of the women is trying to attract a man in this Mishnaic version of Sadie Hawkins Day, as opposed to the normal order of things, when she would be pursued by a man. And so, when a woman in the field emphasized the attributes that a potential mate might seek in wife, she was marketing herself with the attributes that showcases her singularity- whether family,

⁴ Taanit 31a

femininity or fervor. But the Mishnah stresses that while each woman offered a sales pitch to stand out from the rest, there was one area in which everyone was the same: Each woman wore white,

שלא לבייש מי שאין לו

so as not to embarrass those who didn't have. Not only did they all wear the same white clothes- they were not even allowed to wear *their own* white clothes. No matter who you were- even the daughter of the Kohen Gadol would borrow garments from the daughter of a Kohen of lower rank!

There are several difficulties presented by this Mishnah and the attendant passage of Gemara. The Mishnah talks about what women would *say* to attract a husband, each one speaking about an attribute a mate would find desirable, a “pick-up line,” if you will. Yet the very same Mishnah seems to prohibit women from expressing their uniqueness! Assuming the clothing is modest, what is so terrible about allowing people to express themselves through fashion? What is the reason behind this Talmudic socialism?

I'd like to suggest an answer based on an explanation of the Geonim, who note that the phrase indicate the purpose is not to avoid *her* embarrassment, but *his*. Whose embarrassment, you might ask? Either potential suitors who cannot afford a wedding, or fathers who cannot supply a large dowry. In the market for attracting a Torah mate, there can be no preconceived notions

of paternal wealth and no unfair advantages. In other words, every Chatan and Kallah needs to have parents or others with the wherewithal- financial or emotional-to advocate on their behalf. If that is socialism, so be it; the bottom line is that people, especially in the world of *shidduchim*, need a support system. Sadly, there are people out there who have no one gunning for them, promoting their value as a soul mate- and even those who claim this role are often just well intentioned yet are entirely passive.

Tu B'Av is the Jewish holiday of love, but it's not a free for all- it's not the day we open the floodgates, and say "Come one and all and may the best man or woman win." Instead, we intervene and disrupt the natural process and advocate on behalf of those with no "in" into the dating market.

Intelligence, beauty and pedigree are often perceived as crowning virtues, our sages felt it was *our* obligation to promote everyone, by interceding in, and even engineering, the shidduch process.

If there is one lesson of Tu B'Av, it's not that everyone has a positive trait, though that certainly is true. It's that *everyone must be involved in shidduchim*.

Now, there are plenty of compelling reasons people advance for not wanting to get involved

1. We don't want to be perceived as being nosy, inserting ourselves paternalistically into other people's lives to satisfy our own prurient

interests. The answer to this, of course, is that if you are nosy, at least channel it productively into setting people up.

2. We are terrified of being labeled a *shadchan*, stereotypically a pestering and unscrupulous character best summed up in the acronym for the word in Hebrew, שִׁקְרָ דוֹבֵר כֶּסֶף גּוֹטֵל one who speaks falsehoods and pockets the proceeds, known as *shadchanus gelt*. Additionally, we are afraid that a bad date may reflect poorly on our ability to judge character, or our view of our friends
3. It is a tremendous investment of time, emotional energy and even money to be involved in *shidduchim*. The legendary shadchanit Tova Weinberg, (close friend of Doris Klein), has matched well over 200 couples through her involvement with Saw You At Sinai, some of whom she does not even know. In an interview⁵, she recalled being confused when a man she knew to be in a serious relationship registered for a singles Chanukah party she was running. She asked him why he was registering for the party, when he was dating someone seriously. The man responded that he was very much in love, and wanted to marry the woman he was dating, but he despised her dog. Tova Weinberg called the woman to let her know that her boyfriend wanted to marry her—without the dog. When the woman balked, Weinberg came up with an elegant solution. “If I find an

⁵ <http://www.jns.org/latest-articles/2014/1/6/meet-the-jewish-matchmaker-in-chief#.WYPyfQ2ZO9Y=>

owner willing to give a loving home to the dog, will you give him up?” The woman agreed. Within a few months, the couple was engaged, and Tova Weinberg was the proud owner of a dog. You may question a love that cannot withstand a dog in the relationship, but maybe it is their equal small-mindedness that led Tova to think this was a good match. Besides, this is not about the couple- it’s about Tova Weinberg, and the lengths she would go to make a shidduch happen.

There are so many other reasons, too, that we are reticent to get involved, but we don’t get results standing on the sidelines. We know well that there are many pieces that need to be come together for a shidduch to come to fruition. When the Talmud describes matchmaking as being more difficult than splitting the Red Sea, that means that we need to be emissaries of God Himself and create more opportunities for matches to happen. We all know someone who is looking- looking to settle down, looking not to be alone anymore- have we tried to think of anyone for them? Have we created spreadsheets of such friends and pooled resources with others to match them? We trade recipes, we carpool, we coordinate gifts for the kids’ teachers and meals for new families and new parents; our organizational skills are second to none. There is no reason whatsoever not to apply these to the realm of matchmaking, and believe me, I am speaking to myself even more than to everyone else. Don’t be afraid to suggest an idea because

someone might not like that person; one date will hopefully not make or break a friendship of decades, and it might change two people's life forever.

One of the most touching songs from the legendary Jewish music composer Abie Rotenberg is about a man who has spent a long time dating, and is fatigued and has grown cynical. Every time he receives a call from that overbearing shadchan promising him a better outcome, he reluctantly agrees, describing how he drives his '67 Buick, positioning a *sefer* in the dashboard to appear more devout. To the attendant in the tollbooth (the song is a tad dated), he is a familiar face, greeted always with the refrain, "Oh, it's you again"- yet another reminder of his many failed attempts to find love. Yet each time he agrees to go out, because of the ringing in his ear from that *shadchan*. The song ends with this stanza:

I'm still driving up the turnpike to New York, and my '67 Buick still had better days.

But the drive, it's not as lonely as it used to be. 'cause I got my wife and seven kids along with me.

And every now and then my wife tells me go make a call, to some young man who wants to settle down.

And I tell him all about middos and personality, and the ten best places that there are in town.

And I say to him "This time it will be different", he says to me "I've heard those words before."

"But the family's nice, oh believe me, this one's special," he says "all right", oh, he says "all right, but only just once more".

On Tisha B'Av, we spoke about the loneliness of people and committing ourselves to not allowing others to be alone. This Shabbos, we find our footing once again, when the prophet tells us to call out to the lonely city of Jerusalem. So let us pick up the phone tonight- don't wait!- and call out to someone who is alone and might want to change that- and if *you* are looking, call for someone else. Be an advocate. If a mere comic strip can ignite a social phenomenon, a passage of our holy Talmud, *lehavdil*, should be able to accomplish something equally noble. In the merit of our calling out to Jerusalem, may we witness the fulfillment of that prophecy sung at every Jewish wedding, especially the ones we have facilitated- עוד ישמע בערי- יהודה ובחוצות ירושלים קול ששון וקול שמחה קול חתן וקול כלה