

# Sephardic Link

## Revolutionizing The Way Singles Meet and Date

**W**e, the Sephardic community, a magnificent microcosm of society, have continually taken the finest that civilization offers and refined it to suit our own traditions, religious doctrines and needs. In our synagogues, we practice our own rituals according to time-honored, longstanding customs. In our schools, our youth are brought up with our distinctive culture. Our numerous charities stand as proof that our community comes to the aid of others instantaneously. Our rabbis and leaders have paved a safe and pro-

services, combined with the aforementioned security and reinforcement of community tradition. Many have heard of Sephardic Link, now, as many bonafide unions start to form, it is the time to understand exactly what Sephardic Link is all about, and where they came from.

### AN IDEA IS BORN

Two years ago, the organizers of Sephardic Link noticed how successful online dating services had become and thought, "Why aren't we doing this for our own community?" They were sparked by the

notion of providing singles access to other circles and new faces. In this tremendous community, why was it that singles were always meeting the same people over and over? A team was assembled that included Rabbi Eli Mansour, and Rabbi Raymond Harari. "This site is 100% kosher and monitored by the *chachamim*. You can be confident that everything is on the up and up from a kashrut standpoint," says Rabbi Mansour. "Considering the size of our community, there should be two to three weddings happening every night, and this is not the case. The Sephardic Link is a volcano that is beginning to erupt and will soon explode!" he says with great anticipation.



tected environment for us at every turn. Thus, it is only natural to extend this tradition to the way our singles socialize in this world of ever-increasing risk. Sephardic Link.com is our community's answer to the popularity of internet technology and dating

"Sephardic Link has already begun to respond to the very real needs of the Syrian community in progressive and effective ways," adds Rabbi Harari. "It is a pleasure to see it grow as a vital organization in our

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community." Even our Chief Rabbi Shaoul Kassin refers people to the site. "It is one of the most important projects that we have in the community," Rabbi Kassin says, as he wishes the site great success; he hopes to see many more happy occasions come out of it.

The rabbis' blessings were crucial to the sites' development, since one of the major concerns our singles had with other sites was the validity, or 'kashrut', if you will, of some of the individuals they were meeting on these other sites. "I went out on three dates before I realized the man I was set up with was not even divorced," said one online dating site user. "These websites say they are Jewish, but anyone can join. I don't know who to trust anymore," commented another site user.

The more the team at Sephardic Link researched, the more they realized how essential a site like this was for our community. They interviewed seasoned commu-

their involvement would be. No better testament to how popular the site was becoming. Why has the site caught on so quickly? "There's no- where to meet anymore!" says one single "You can never *really* meet anyone at parties," said another. "Unfortunately, the singles scene is all over the place and dates are replaced with hang-outs and texting and emails, instead of traditional phone calls. It's really hard," said another site user. "What's great about Sephardic Link," commented one man, "is that I am able to focus on one person at a time, instead of being bombarded in a social atmosphere." "I finally got my parents off my back when I told them I joined the Link," joked another site user.

By July 2006, the site officially opened and its first online date was made. Now, just a few months later, there are three engagements on the way and several more brewing. Ironically, they had planned a 'soft' open-

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nity matchmakers, rabbis, psychologists, trained professionals, and directors of other sites. Sample questionnaires were given to singles from various age groups, and the feedback was used to help mold the project. Imagine a dating site with a drop down list of community rabbis and shuls, in which the database prohibits a *kohain* from being matched to a divorcee. Unimaginable at one time, yet now it's a reality. The site was prepared to change the community's entire singles scene as we know it.

The concept was born in June 2005, and by February 2006, the site was open for registration only, in an effort to fill the database and open with enough people to begin matching. At first, the Sephardic Link team was apprehensive. In targeting so many different levels of religion, age groups, backgrounds and geographical locations, how would they be able to please everyone? With over 1,000 applicants and dozens more joining each week, it became apparent that the site had broken through the social barrier. "I love our community and I love the idea of a network to keep our community together," commented one user. "It has been needed for a long time, and now its time has come," exclaimed Rabbi Raymond Beyda. Girls are signing up on their 18th birthday (minimum age is 18); the most mainstream singles have signed on, knowing how discreet

ing in the summer to be ready full force for September, when the social scene slowed. However, people began signing up in droves, claiming, 'I'm relying solely on your site, because I don't have the head for all those parties.' Combined with feedback from singles, the site has grown into what it is today... a major force in the Sephardic singles dating scene.

### **HOW DOES THE SITE WORK?**

#### **WHAT MAKES IT DIFFERENT?**

##### **1. Trust and Discretion**

"In the beginning, before people admitted to having signed up, I remember standing with a group of singles who claimed they hadn't joined. Meanwhile, each one was on the site, and not one of them knew the other was on, that's how discreet it is," said one of the directors. No one needs to ask a parent for money or a credit card, although the site does encourage singles sharing their dates with their parents once a match is made. Everyone involved behind the scenes at the site had to sign a confidentiality agreement. "The staff of the Sephardic Link understands how difficult it is for people to put themselves out there, and our discretion is given the utmost respect and consideration," said one user. "I may not be the most religious person, but the fact that rabbis are overseeing this gives me the confidence I

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needed in this site," one Sephardic Link user stated.

## 2. No Fee – Everything Free of charge

A true indication of our community's generosity and concern for the happiness and well-being of others is the fact that so many generous donors have given their time and money, out of their own pockets, to help fund the day-to-day expenses of the site. "Everyone knows someone who they want to set up. To know my donation will directly affect the youth of this community is



tremendous," says one donor. "As long as we continue to have a steady stream of donors, we need never have to ask our singles for a dime," the site directors declare. The team has recently expanded to include advertisements. "It's amazing to see vendors approaching us, ready to give discounts to anyone on the site," says one sales representative, referring to the offers of 20% off your restaurant bill, or free dessert to anyone who is on a date made by Sephardic Link. Perhaps in the future, there will be sponsored gifts, prizes, or giveaways to couples who are matched on the Sephardic Link.

## 3. Rabbi Recommendations

It just so happened that the launching of the site coincided with the re-signing of the edict. Thus, together with the rabbis, the site made a choice that proved to be time-consuming and tedious, yet necessary. Every single individual that fills out a profile would not have their form processed unless the site received an authorization from their rabbi that they were 'kosher' or okay to marry in a Sephardic wedding. For those reading this who are unaware: the Sephardics are one of the only Jewish communities that do not permit marriage to a converted Jew. If someone is divorced, that means he

or she must have a proper *get*, and it is legitimate for him/her to remarry. The site handles these recommendations based on the rabbi that the user indicated on his/her form. (The rabbi does not need to know the individual on a one-on-one basis.) The site recently recruited additional staff strictly to help obtain these approvals, due to numerous applications. Singles have embraced the recommendation process, making comments such as, "Take your time. Knowing that there is a recommendation process makes me trust the site even more!" In the end, it is still always up to each individual to check with his/her own rabbi and/or parents, and basically do their own homework, because everyone has different levels of belief and different rabbis whom they follow. "What you are doing is a big *mitzvah*. We are here to be a part of this '*zechut harabim*,'" says Rabbi Isaac Mohadeb.

## 4. Agents

The idea was to take the archaic concept of a 'matchmaker', revolutionize and expand upon it, yet preserve the essence of why the art of match-making has been so beneficial for so many centuries. The matchmakers who have been doing this for years embrace Sephardic Link. Many have learned the software and use it daily. Randy Laniado, who has been making matches for 17 years, claims that "the Link gave me more accessibility, and enabled me to do much more networking." New agents who were sought were chosen to appeal to different factions of society: black hat, white hat, mainstream, older, younger, and out-of-towners. Imagine combining all of their little black books in one cohesive location at their fingertips at any time, and then adding to it a whole new generation who probably would never have put their name into the pool. "It's like putting your name in the phone book! Why wouldn't anyone join?" commented one user.

The Link likes to call its system, "50% human and 50% computer", which means that, in many ways, they may not be perfect, but they are human. This is actually the beauty of it, that humanity has not gotten lost in the technology. Each person who joins chooses an agent, or is assigned one, and after his or her form is processed, the agent meets with them, either in person or by phone or email, depending on each individual's preference. Users are prohibited from perusing each other's profiles, unlike other sites that allow you to view

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profiles. Sephardic Link keeps everyone's profile discreet; only when you are matched with someone will your name be disclosed. "Before you find the right match, you must find the right agent!" Some agents are more selective than others, and each has his or her own style. Depending on the client, some agents will respect your wish to stay at arm's length, and others get so involved that, at times, they are planning the date for you! Their training is ongoing, as this tight group meets frequently and is constantly in touch with each other. They sit for countless hours networking, perusing profiles, and championing on behalf of their clients, all on a volunteer basis. "It's a privilege to be a part of this awesome group!" says agent Elaine Sutton Dweck. "This site is like a fever that is catching on like wildfire. It's quick, it's easy, it's confidential, and it works!" adds agent Renna Bildiricci.

The biggest obstacle for agents to overcome is a direct result of the tightness of this community. "I can't go out with him/her – they're my friend," the agents hear constantly. "Not everyone sees stars in the beginning; they have to give every date a fair chance!" says one agent. "I married my best friend," agent Rochelle Terzi

comments. The agents suggest being more open-minded, and if you're unsure, once you do go out, "keep on dating a person until you are sure either way," suggests one rabbi. Sephardic Link will not match just for the sake of matching. If they feel they see something that looks right, they will suggest it. "We may not send you a match for a month, or we may suggest two matches in one week," says one agent. Everyone agrees on one thing: it is not the agents, the site, or the computer. Everything is ultimately in Hashem's hands, and when a person is introduced to the right one, the agents are just the messengers. A match will happen when it's supposed to happen. But it definitely helps to put your name out there!

### 5. Global Access

Primarily, clientele from Manhattan, Brooklyn and Deal have flocked to the site. However, as word of the site's success spread, singles have begun to join from Great Neck, Queens, and even as far away as

California, Panama, Florida, Mexico and Israel. Users can specifically state on their forms whether or not they are interested in meeting someone abroad, and whether they would prefer to move or not.

### 6. Easy to join

Anyone wishing to join should go to [www.sephardiclink.com](http://www.sephardiclink.com) and fill out the 20-minute questionnaire. "Some may consider the 7-page profile to be lengthy, but every question has a purpose," says agent Melanie Kishk. "I think the questionnaire is excellent and right to the point," said one user. "All your questions are relevant and important and give me the confidence I needed in your site," stated another user.

After meeting or speaking to an agent, the matching begins. Matches are determined by a unique combination of computer and personal matchmaker insight. The agent runs you through a computer search based on

your basic criteria: age range, if you were married before or not, if you have children, geographic location, and other basics. Then the agent reads through each profile to determine which would suit you best. Agents can look up things a computer cannot, such as religion and type of personality.

The more information a user gives about himself, the better an agent will be able to refine his search for a match. If an agent does not know both parties, she consults with the other party's agent. Users have the option to decide if only their agent, or all agents see their profile. Users will receive an e-mail telling them when there is something to check on their user page, and the agent will fill them in, so that when they view the match's name and photo, they are judging on more than just these basics. Every person has a chance to approve the match choice – a user is given full control. The site does not suggest more than three people at a time to one user and once a date is made, no new dates are made for that user. This is done so that everyone is focused and does not become confused with the dating process. "This is all about quality, not quantity," says one of the directors. If you ever want to take a break, you may put your account on hold. A date counter on the main page



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keeps tally of how many first dates were made. "The entire operation seems like the people behind it have a complete, comprehensive, and very sensitive understanding of the community and its inner social workings. It makes the process much more comfortable and exciting overall," compliments one user.

(Please note the site is not MAC compatible (yet) and for optimum results, they suggest using Internet Explorer only.)

### 7. The Sweet Smell Of Success

To date, Sephardic Link boasts of three upcoming engagements in the four months since they officially opened. One of the couples actually met while the site was waiting to open. A matchmaker saw their profiles, introduced them off the site, and they recently got engaged. When another girl joined, upon seeing her profile, her agent was reminded of her and she quickly did a search. She called a matchmaker off the site who had the perfect man in mind, and the rest is history. Another couple had both joined, and connected the moment their agents matched them. "We really want to take this opportunity to thank Sephardic Link for what you did for us and all the singles in general. You cannot possibly know how happy you made us. It's quite ironic that we have crossed paths many times in our lives, but never stopped and took notice of each other until Sephardic Link came around and matched us together," says the couple.

In conclusion, based on the tremendous feedback from its users, Sephardic Link is right on track: "I want to thank you for doing this. It's very hard to find the right one. I am glad that there are people like Sephardic Link that want to help singles," said one user. "I think it is absolutely the best thing that a community has ever done," commented another user. "The idea is genius – I am so pleased to see how organized it is being run!"

To continue to provide for and care for our community, it is essential to begin with our youth. They are protected in our yeshivahs at the youngest age, and, as they begin adulthood, it is important to have the next safety net available to them, if they choose to use it. Sephardic Link is that net of security and trust. It is there for those who want an alternative, and to provide choices in life. Phase two of the site, which is just beginning to pick up steam, is geared to those who need or want a second chance in life, or who have gone through divorce or loss of a loved one.

When something fits, it seems to find its place immediately, and Sephardic Link is the perfect fit for the Sephardic community. With the help of the Link, and all those who strive to better our community, we're sure to bear witness to many more happy community success stories in the future! □