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As Persian Jews pray for their souls on Yom Kippur, they scope out potential soul mates

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Negar Salim Messian, husband Ramin and daughters Lauren, 3, and Chloe, 6. The couple met on Yom Kippur 10 years ago.

Multiple Page View

Yom Kippur, the holiest and most somber day of the Jewish calendar, is a time for repentance, traditionally reserved for fasting and intense prayer. But scores of Iranian American Jews in Los Angeles, many of whom congregate in just a handful of synagogues across the city, aren't just looking for forgiveness on the Day of Atonement.

They're looking for love.

Facing enormous pressure from their families to marry within the community, many of these young people -- and their matchmaking relatives -- say they use the day to scope out potential romantic interests and tap into vast social networks to get the scoop on prospective candidates.

The irritability and less-than-fresh breath that can accompany the 25-hour fast don't seem to stop many of them from dressing up and synagogue-hopping from the San Fernando Valley to the Westside in search of a soul mate.

"If you go to the mall a few days before, everyone's looking for an outfit for Yom Kippur," said Dalia Azizi, 25, of Beverly Hills. "Every year the skirts are getting shorter. They're going to temple and they look like they're going to a club."

Still, Azizi, who like most in the community prefers to be called Persian instead of Iranian, said pressure from her relatives to marry had ramped up recently. The aspiring physician's assistant said that for now, she is focusing more on her studies than on romance. But, asked if she was hoping to meet someone this Yom Kippur, she quietly assented.

"God willing," Azizi said. "I hope so."

Iranian American synagogues, which are mainly Conservative or Orthodox, might not appear conducive to single-mingling. Orthodox congregations are divided along gender lines. Men sit on one side and women on the other, often with a curtain between them that stymies cross-sanctuary eye contact.

But in the synagogue lobbies, the traditional solemnity lifts, even on Yom Kippur. Young people stand in circles, chatting, while children, not yet required to fast, push through the crowds with snack bags in tow. Older women, unofficial matchmakers, approach young women -- rarely do they approach men -- and talk up their single sons, nephews or grandsons before asking for a phone number.

The community's religious leaders generally seem to approve. A skirt slightly shorter than might be deemed modest or some overt flirting, the reasoning goes, are small prices to pay to encourage marrying within the group.

"If young people start to connect and later on try to meet, it's very positive," said Rabbi David Shofet, a prominent spiritual leader of the local community and son of the former chief rabbi of Tehran.

Shofet, a rabbi at Nessah Educational and Cultural Center in Beverly Hills, said that he gets irked only when phone numbers are exchanged -- not because it's immodest, but because writing during Yom Kippur is forbidden. "The old ladies come and chase the young girls, saying, 'What's your number, what's your number?' " the rabbi said, switching to falsetto to mimic the matchmakers. "That, I don't like. I despise it."

For many Jews of other ethnic groups, marrying within the religion might be sufficient. But for those whose background is Iranian, maintaining the culture can be just as important. Many of the customs can seem curious to outsiders, to the extent that convergence through marriage with families that don't share the background can be fraught with cultural land mines.

The crowds drawn by Yom Kippur services make the holiday ripe for matchmaking. Only the more religious members of the Iranian Jewish community make it to synagogue for other holidays, let alone weekly Sabbath services, but Yom Kippur attracts young people and the less devout, bringing a vast intersection of the community together one day a year.

"Not all Jews go to synagogue every week, but they do go on Yom Kippur," said Ramin Messian, 40, an entrepreneur from Santa Monica.

Ten years ago on Yom Kippur, Messian attended nighttime services with his relatives. After a couple of years of unsuccessful blind dates arranged by his mother and failed attempts to meet women at parties, he was fed up with the dating scene.

"I honestly wasn't looking that night. I don't know why, but for whatever reason, I said, 'Forget about tonight,' " Messian said.

True to his word, he spent much of the night holed up in the sanctuary, praying -- but on his way out after the services, he noticed a woman.

"I told my mom, 'Next time you want to set me up with somebody, this girl that we just saw pass by, I'm attracted to this kind of girl,' " Messian said. "All of a sudden, I see my mom is missing."

Unable to resist, Messian's mother approached the woman, asked for her phone number -- like countless matchmakers before her -- and arranged a meeting right then and there. The two chatted briefly before deciding to see each other again, the beginning of a slow courtship that eventually led to marriage.

Messian and his wife, Negar Salim Messian, an attorney, now live in Santa Monica with their two daughters, ages 6 and 3.

So for now, few expect a slowing of the Yom Kippur matchmaking at such synagogues as Beverly Hills' Nessah or Tarzana's Eretz Cultural Center.

"I don't look down on it one bit," said Arash Melamed, 24, of Beverly Hills, who is active at Nessah. "Because you know what? Better they come to synagogue and meet somebody than rubbing up against them in a club and starting things the wrong way."

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