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**Charlotte's Matchmaker:
She helps Jewish singles find love in all the right places**

Looking for a romantic candlelight dinner -- over a menorah?

For single Jews tired of their mothers asking them when they'll find a "nice Jewish" boy or girl, Laurie Berzack has made it her business to help.

Berzack launched her personal matchmaking service, "Chai Expectations," in September. Chai (pronounced "High" with a guttural H) is Hebrew for "life," so the play on words goes two ways.

"I just want to see Jewish people marry Jewish people," Berzack explained. "It's about Jewish continuity."

It's already hard to meet people between the demands of work or family, Berzack said, and it's even harder if you're looking in the small pool of Jews scattered throughout the Bible belt.

"If people don't ever see each other, chances are greater that they're going to marry out of the faith," Berzack said, pointing to a Jewish Federation study showing that Charlotte Jews reported an intermarriage rate of 47 percent. Of those intermarried couples, only 34 percent raised their children Jewish. The intermarried couples were also less likely to be involved with synagogues and Jewish rituals.

That doesn't mean there aren't single Jews looking for each other in Charlotte, Berzack said, and more are moving here every day. Her client Eve Koenig, 30, who came from New York seven years ago, is one of them.

"I'm not necessarily a very religious person, but I do want to raise my children Jewish," Koenig explained. "It's part of who I am; it's part of where I come from. I don't want to lose my history."

Personalized touch

Berzack, 38, caught the matchmaking bug after successfully setting up a couple about a year ago. She decided to use her master's degree in social work to do it

professionally. She'd spent the past 11 years in Charlotte writing grants, fundraising and taking care of her two boys, ages 5 and 8.

"Maybe it's the social worker in me, but I just want to help people reach their potential," Berzack said. "I want other people to be happy like I am. I want everybody to find love. Everybody deserves that."

Berzack said she hopes to reach singles who want a more personalized, private experience than they would get online. Theoretically, that should mean better chances of a good match -- or at least a good date.

And, as client Koenig pointed out, it feels safer. You don't have a picture or contact information out for anyone to see. Berzack knows all her clients and even background-checks them.

"You know where they come from," Koenig said. "You're not having people lie to you about their age or various other things."

Berzack goes so far as to check into pet allergies that might be problematic, Koenig said.

Both clients are supposed to call Berzack within 24 hours of the date to tell her how it went. She asks what worked or didn't, and handles rejection if that's needed.

After a few good dates, Berzack steps back and lets the couple arrange more on their own.

Unlike online services, Berzack does one match at a time.

"This isn't a dating service. This is really a marriage service."

A small group of singles

Benjamin Schwartz is holding out hope that Berzack will be successful once more people find out about her -- for his sake.

Schwartz, 37, returned to his native Charlotte about five years ago to help run his family's steel business in Gastonia.

He went to whatever Jewish events he could find in Charlotte and ran into the same small group of singles. Same thing with Jdate, the Jewish dating Web site. He even took a quiz on Eharmony, a customized online dating service.

Finding a Soul Mate

Jewish people seem to have a special penchant for matchmaking, from the famous "Matchmaker" musical song to speed-dating parties believed to have started for Jewish singles to the Jdate.com Jewish online dating service.

Because Jews are a minority, it takes more effort to find other single Jews. An estimated 10,000 to 12,000 of the 1.8 million people in the Charlotte region are Jewish. (No current figures are available on how many of those are single.)

Then there's "beshert," the idea that all Jews have a destined Jewish soul mate. The Yiddish word means "fate."

It's like the completion made between two Jewish souls, said Charlotte Torah Center Rabbi Mordechai Roizman. If all that's not enough reason to matchmake, Jewish law offers a reward: Jews who match three Jewish couples together are promised a place in the afterlife.

"I guess there's a higher incentive that we're internally programmed with," says matchmaker Laurie Berzack. "It's in our blood."