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You Don't Have to Be Jewish to Love JDate



J. Emilio Flores for The New York Times

FOR LOVE OF A MENSCH Agnes Mercado, a Catholic, recently started dating a Jewish man she met on JDate. Judaism, she said, is "so ancient and full of traditions that make sense to me."

By **SARAH E. RICHARDS**

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DOMINICK COPPOLA, 22, a real estate salesman from Brooklyn, is looking for a confident,

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intelligent and open-minded woman who shares his love of walks in the park, sushi and home cooking. He had some luck meeting women through Internet dating sites like AmericanSingles.com, but they were rarely good matches. Then he found what he now considers an online gold mine — JDate, a Web site that bills itself as "the largest Jewish singles network."

Although he is Catholic by birth and upbringing, Mr. Coppola has long preferred to date Jewish women. "If a girl walks by in a bar, and I'm attracted to her, it always turns out she's Jewish," he said. "My friends say I have Jew-dar. I thought I'd go with the odds."

Mr. Coppola is one of a growing number of gentiles who have lately signed on to JDate, which was established in 1997 as a service for bringing Jews together. The number of non-Jews on the site is difficult to estimate: 50,000 of its 600,000 members identify themselves as religiously "unaffiliated," but they include Jewish members who don't want to identify themselves as "secular" or with any particular sect. But interviews with people who use JDate suggest that gentiles have become an increasingly visible presence in recent years (full disclosure: this reporter is one of them) on a site that was designed to promote mating within the tribe.

The reasons non-Jews seek Jewish mates vary in their particulars, but generally seem to come down to the old idea of the nice Jewish boy or girl. Agnes Mercado, a Catholic administrative assistant from West Hollywood, had never even met a Jew until she immigrated from the Philippines 15 years ago. But in October, a little over a year after the death of her Jewish boyfriend of 13 years, she placed an ad on JDate that read, "I am a gentile looking for my mensch, are you out there? I want to be your shiksa and your partner for life." Ms. Mercado, 40, said that her late boyfriend had been "a kind soul" and that she believes his Jewish upbringing gave him a good character. She has just started seeing a 44-year-old Jewish man she met through the site, and is willing to convert if things get serious. "If I have kids, I would want to raise them Jewish," she said. "It's so ancient and full of traditions that make sense to me."

Another non-Jewish JDate member, Mark (who insisted that his last name not be


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used, to protect his privacy), was at first reluctant to join the site. A 48-year-old professional sports coach from Wayne, N.J., he was raised "vanilla Protestant," as he put it; although he checked the "unaffiliated" box in his profile, he felt that he "should have put 'Christian in hiding.'" But he had dated a Jewish woman for several years, was comfortable with Jewish culture ("I knew more about her holidays than she did"), and felt that Jewish women "hold onto tradition — that's important." He added that they also "take care of themselves — they just seem to be more put together."

Krissy Kerwin, 31, a self-described lapsed Catholic and a chef in Encino, Calif., said she joined JDate for a month just to locate an old neighbor. After she was contacted by several interesting men on the site, though, she extended her membership. "The ones I've met seem to be a little bit nicer and have their values intact," she said. She does worry though that pressure on some Jewish men to marry within their faith means that she's "O.K. to date, but not good enough to marry."

Traditional stereotypes are alive and well, according to Robin Gorman Newman, the author of "How to Meet a Mensch in New York" (City & Company, 1995) and a dating coach with several non-Jewish clients who say they prefer to date Jews. "A lot of girls think that Jewish guys know how to treat women, so they want one," she said. "On the flip side, non-Jewish guys think that Jewish women will take charge and make their lives easier."

That is the central theme of "Jewtopia," the comedy that opened off Broadway in October, which satirizes both Jewish anxiety about intermarriage and the romantic desire of non-Jews for Jews. The play is advertised as "the story of a gentile who wants to meet a Jewish girl so he'll never have to make another decision." It also follows the travails of a Jewish man who falls for a Mongolian woman; his parents can't decide whether their joy that she is a doctor outweighs their dismay at her not being Jewish.

To some Jews, of course, the issue of intermarriage is not at all funny. The most recent data available, from the National Jewish Population Survey of 2000-2001, show that 47 percent of Jews who married after 1996 chose a non-Jewish spouse, an increase of 13 percent from 1970. If the trend continues unabated, some fear, it could lead to the end of the American Jewish community.

Jonathan D. Sarna, the author of "American Judaism: A History" (Yale University

Press, 2004) and a professor of the subject at Brandeis University, argues that while gentiles who marry Jews may embrace Jewish traditions and pass them on to their children, such commitment is unlikely to last more than a generation in a mixed family. "Jews are much more in danger of being loved to death than persecuted to death," he said.

Given those concerns, some JDate members are less than thrilled about outsiders on the site. Jill Flegenheimer, a 51-year-old computer consultant from Livingston, N.J., was recently contacted by a man on the site who told her he was Catholic. "I said, 'You have Catholic kids. I have Jewish kids. I don't see a future.' Women on JDate are looking for Jewish husbands or else they'd be on Match.com." And Stephanie Rodin, 30, a lawyer from Manhattan, said she has seen non-Jews on the site but has avoided them. "It defeats the purpose," she said. "I'm like, 'Get your own site!'"

David Siminoff, the chief executive of JDate's Los Angeles-based parent company MatchNet, defends the site's unrestrictive policy. "I'm not going to tell someone who wants to be part of Jewish culture you can't come online," he said, although he added that JDate is clearly oriented toward Jews. He said the company is considering adding a "willing to convert" option in the religion category.

Mr. Coppola, the real estate salesman, said no one has ever admonished him for being on a site created to encourage Jews to meet and marry other Jews. Still, he does not advertise his background in his written profile.

Because he is not Jewish, he lets women contact him. "I respond, 'You probably figured out by now I'm not Jewish,'" he said, adding that his status as a gentile has not seemed to be a problem: he has gone on about one date a week since he joined JDate a year ago, and has had several monthlong relationships.

But Mr. Coppola concedes that he does sometimes wonder if he is trying to become a member of a club that does not want him. "I feel a rabbi is going to knock down my door because I feel I'm doing a disservice to Jewish culture," he said.