

Can you answer the *shadchan's* question of "What are you looking for?" if you've never addressed the more basic query of: **"Who are you?"**

Rabbi Doniel Frank wants to give you a compass to help you figure out where you're going and how to get there

BY *Barbara Bensoussan*
PHOTOS *Meir Haltovsky*

PROS

PURPOSE

SELF
WORTH

HAPPINESS

CONS

SELF
ESTEEM

MAP QUEST

We hear a lot of talk about the many crises in our community —

older singles, broken engagements, early divorces, unhappy marriages, disaffected adolescents, addictive behaviors, *parnassah* issues... and the list goes on. It seems our society is plagued by catastrophe, but all these “crises” are often symptoms of a more pervasive social ill that begs to be addressed, according to Rabbi Doniel Frank, a Monsey-based therapist who has created a movement to bring back personal integrity at the individual level. Too many *frum* people come off the assembly line into adult life, never having addressed three core questions: Who am I? What do I really want in life? And, how am I going to make it happen?

“For the last few years I’ve been working extensively with young couples and singles in the *parshah*,” says Rabbi Frank, “and what they’re showing up with is a really poorly formed sense of self. The *shadchan*’s typical opening question of ‘What are you looking for?’ overlooks a much more basic but ignored question: Who are you?”

Rabbi Frank, who served as rabbi of the Young Israel of Westport, Connecticut, and the director of the Torah Learning Center in Stamford after receiving *semichah* from Ner Israel in Baltimore, went on to become a licensed marriage and family therapist with training in a variety of therapeutic approaches. In 2001, Ohel approached him to head up its school-based services program in Rockland County and its mental health clinic in northern New Jersey.

“I saw the struggles of students and the deficits in the educational system,” he says. “Meanwhile, I’d begun working with engaged couples, and while it’s good to catch people whenever you can, by that point it’s hard to make a paradigm shift. Young people who’ve created ways to avoid challenges can’t be instantly converted into a responsible couple. Premarital workshops definitely have value — and I offer them too — but we’re asking a lot of one workshop to redo a person from scratch, teach new habits, attitudes, and skills that should have been formed long before. The concept of personal responsibility, of getting to know yourself, these are things that take a lot longer than four hours.”

And so, over the next ten years, he developed and presented school-based seminars to foster the development of life skills such as rapport-building, decision-making, self-awareness, and goal-setting. He launched his M.A.P. (Motivation and Performance) Seminars — which he also likes to refer to as your “Mission, Ambition, and Passion,” or “Meat And Potatoes” of life — in 2012, with encouragement from Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky and Rav Sholom Kamenetsky, with whom he’s in ongoing contact. The goal of the seminars — to help people develop a core, a drive, and a map for life — is the response to the phenomenon of young people who aren’t well-launched, going forward without thinking too much, and wandering through life without motivation, ambition, or passion.

The Unexamined Life Rabbi Frank, a sincere and approachable father of eight, considers Ner Israel *rosh yeshivah* Rav Yaakov Weinberg *ztz”l* his strongest inspiration.

“Rav Weinberg was a very authentic person,” he says. “He was fearless when it came to taking positions. He had tremendous certainty and clarity.” And the Rosh Yeshivah was adamant that his *talmidim* become thinkers, not passive recipients of information. He’d tell them, “If you have the choice between being a happy robot or an unhappy thinker, be the thinker.” (Frank later compiled Rav Weinberg’s insights into young people and education in a book titled *Rav Weinberg Talks About Chinuch* [Feldheim, 2006]).

That fearlessness to tackle real — albeit uncomfortable — issues head-on was a mandate for Rabbi Frank in his work with young people, having become increasingly disturbed by what he sees as an apathy and complacency (what he calls “the blank generation”). The challenge, as he sees it, is to catch their attention and get them interested in answering the tough questions that will lead to self-awareness and self-discovery. One out-of-town *rosh*

yeshivah he’s close to confided in frustration, “So many of the boys aren’t really listening anymore, even though I work hard to get their attention. And if I want them to go out and play football, I have to go out onto the field and put the goals out for them.”

What would today’s boys rather be doing than playing sports during their free time? Rabbi Frank shrugs. “They’ll ‘chill,’ whatever that means,” he says. “Or maybe shop.”

What they aren’t doing is developing character and responsibility. He speculates that the instant gratification of an affluent, Internet-habituated society has created a shallowness and passivity. Instant availability and prosperity have many advantages, but encouraging resourcefulness isn’t one of them.

By contrast, he remembers growing up in the ’70s in Queens, where he and his friends loved playing hockey in the quiet streets, although they didn’t have proper goals. “We scavenged the neighborhood for old window screens and wood, and we built our own goals,” he says. “It took us close to six months, and we were so proud of them. But what do kids do today?”

“FOR THE LAST FEW YEARS I’VE BEEN WORKING EXTENSIVELY WITH YOUNG COUPLES AND SINGLES IN THE PARSHAH, AND WHAT THEY’RE SHOWING UP WITH IS A REALLY POORLY FORMED SENSE OF SELF”



“WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING
TO ACCOMPLISH THIS YEAR?
 WHAT’S GOING TO BE YOUR
BENCHMARK FOR SHTEIGING?
 AND HOW ARE YOU GOING
TO SHOW RESPONSIBILITY IN
 MEETING THOSE GOALS?”

Go onto a sports equipment website and order them — with overnight delivery.”

Adolescence is a particularly challenging time, one that Frank feels the *frum* community has often failed to handle adequately — and the price is being paid in young adulthood and beyond. “Adolescence is a pivotal life stage during which children are supposed to evolve into young adults. For a child, this stage is fraught with confusing social dynamics, physical changes, and emotional evolution. This is a critical time when the transformation from child to adult takes place, and we need to offer them insightful guidance. Our approach tends to minimize the challenges and focus mainly on our children’s academic and religious experience,” he wrote in *Klal Perspectives* in 2012. “We typically leave adolescents to navigate these turbulent times without adequate or proactive parental or *chinuch* guidance.” In other words, our teens require a great degree of direction regarding their individuality and how to maximize their unique potential, which they may not be getting. Without this direction they lack the self-awareness necessary for making tough choices critical before entering the *shidduch* scene.

One Size Fits All The impetus for Rabbi Frank’s current seminars — many of which are given in high schools, yeshivos, and seminars — is, in large part, a response to a culture of sameness where young people don’t sufficiently take their needs, personalities, and interests into account. He also facilitates weekly “fireside chats” — interactive webinar and teleconferences for the general public covering these issues. And in light of incentives offered by Reb Shlomo Yehuda Rechnitz and other organizational initiatives for boys to marry younger and thereby close the *shidduch* gap, these seminars are even more timely and relevant.

“Mr. Rechnitz and others have generously offered incentives for younger guys to marry,” says Rabbi Frank. “But I have a different question: Why aren’t the 23-year-old guys marrying girls their age? Why are they looking at 19-year-olds instead (a major factor in the crisis, as four years of girls are being bypassed)? In the chassidic and Modern Orthodox communities you don’t have it. It’s only in the *yeshivish* circle that guys won’t go out with girls their age. Why not?”

“I think the answer is because the girls at that stage are pretty advanced, already finished with seminary, college, and are already engaging life — and through their choices have reached a sophisticated maturity level. Of course, this doesn’t mean that a 23-year-old yeshivah guy has to be in the work force to match her maturity. It does mean, though, that he needs to deal with challenges and goals, be aware that he’s constantly making choices and decisions, and that he’s focusing on who he is, what he wants, and how he’s going to get there. He shouldn’t be where he is by default, by ‘taking the path of least resistance.’ And that’s what I help him with.”

So whatever age the boys start to date, self-awareness and life-skills training should begin well before that. “Making choices and taking responsibility should go hand in hand with graduation from high school,” says Rabbi Frank, who is quick to qualify, “I don’t like to show up when they’re already in *shidduchim*. I prefer to get involved way before that, to lay the foundation that will make the launch a success.”

His ideal target: to catch those three years between 17 and 20, before *shidduchim*, when young people can use their time to figure themselves out. “I start giving goal-setting workshops in 11th and 12th grade. Many schools give

12th-graders *shidduch* workshops, but I believe that’s premature. I want you to think about your life and your goals, so that in two years you’ll be ready when the *shadchan* not only asks you what you’re looking for, but asks you who *you* are.”

When Rabbi Frank talks about goals, he makes it clear that he’s not “the guy who pushes *parnassah*” instead of learning. It’s about being goal-oriented within the *yeshivah* experience as well.

“I tell the guys, ‘Look, you’re graduating high school. When you go to first-year *beis medrash*, your counterparts are going to college or going out to work. The fact that you’re still in yeshivah means you’ve chosen it.’ So I want them to realize that they’ve made a choice. Now, when you choose something, you’ve chosen it for a reason, there’s some gain for you in the choice you’re making. What are you looking to accomplish this year? What’s going to be your benchmark for *shteiging*? Is it to complete a *masechta*? To master a *shitur*? And how are you going to show resilience and responsibility in meeting those goals?”

He admits that girls, who have a broader curriculum that includes outlets like school plays, student governments, *chesed* organizations, and *tzedakah* events, generally are better at identifying their strengths and interests, but says that, in this cookie-cutter generation, they too are sometimes boxed into decisions and life choices that are not truly reflective of who they are.

Recently parents came to Rabbi Frank — they had been *redt* a boy for their daughter, but he was just 21 and the girl felt she was being shortchanged. She had her heart set on a solid learning boy who would eventually go out to work, and that was in fact this boy’s plan, but she couldn’t get past the fact that he was so young and already in *shidduchim*. It wasn’t her picture. She

wanted a 23-year-old standard type. What was wrong with this boy that he was dating so early? For her it was a red flag. Did he want out of yeshivah?

“I found out that boy is a real prize, good learner, serious, very mature and responsible, but doesn’t connect well with the *chevreh* of young guys – preferring to associate with the *kollel yungeleit* and older *bochurim* instead,” says Rabbi Frank. “He’s very serious about his learning, but also wants to get out and have a family already. Meanwhile this girl couldn’t get past the question of why he needs to be different. Here’s a guy who’s thinking, who’s responsible, and knows what he wants – he’s like a M.A.P. Seminar poster boy! – and yet the girl sees this as a red flag. I explained to the parents that this red flag is really a *green* flag turned red, something positive that their daughter turned into a negative.”

The one-size-fits all model our children are encouraged to conform to means many of them wind up suppressing crucial parts of their personality. In their desire to please parents, *rebbeim*, and *shadchanim*, Frank says, many develop a false persona whose underlying makeup may be unknown even to themselves. He often begins discussions by saying, “Tell me about yourself,” and finds that young people have nothing to say – they’re stumped. They produce shallow answers like, “I wear a white shirt,” but are otherwise unable to articulate what it is that makes them unique.

“Many of these young people aren’t even aware of the extent to which they’re strangers to themselves,” Rabbi Frank explains. “And so they head toward dating, with human shopping lists in hand, feeling much more comfortable describing what they want than who they are.”

So when it’s time to get married, how will they be able to find someone compatible when they haven’t even begun the journey to find themselves? Rabbi Frank laments the fact that kids are being marched to the *chuppah* with inadequately formed

“IT’S AMAZING TO ME THAT MANY YOUNG PEOPLE CANNOT EVEN RECALL A SINGLE SIGNIFICANT DECISION THEY MADE IN THEIR LIFE”

identities; a lack of true self-awareness; weak goals, drives, and people skills; and minds often filled with complacency and confusion.

When he asks participants in his pre-marriage seminars why they want to get married, they typically offer responses such as, “Well, I put in a year in Eretz Yisrael, so it’s time.”

“But that doesn’t show any inner motivation or developed sense of responsibility,” he emphasizes. “If you ask for a plan, they often say something like, ‘I’d like to learn for five years.’ I answer: I’m okay with that. But tell me: Why five years? Have you thought about how you arrived at that number? Do you have a specific idea what you want to accomplish in those five years? Do you think you have the stamina or personality to do it? Are you willing and able to shoulder the responsibility that this choice of lifestyle demands?”

Midlife at 28 The fact that so many people have never really thought about their goals is one reason, according to Rabbi Frank, that more and more young men are suffering from an early midlife crisis, waking up at age 28 and realizing

they’re not cut out for long-term learning, but are unprepared for anything else.

“The typical midlife crisis used to mean a middle-aged guy who has skills and accomplishments but feels bored and needs to make a change,” says Rabbi Frank. “But today it’s an earlier and a more profound and painful problem. At age 28 the young man or woman looks back with resentment about how he ended up where he is and confusion about how he’ll move forward. This midlife crisis is not just about a change, but about a failed launch.”

He gives an example of an older *bochur* who stays in the *beis medrash* for ten years despite having lost the motivation to continue, thinking that’s the only way he’ll find a wife. Then he gets married. “So the guy becomes depressed, doesn’t wake up in the morning for *kollel* and shows no drive for life,” Frank says. “His wife, who thought he was this *shtark* learner because he stayed in learning so long, feels betrayed and upset.”

Rabbi Frank is quick to remind that he’s not taking sides on the young man’s future. “This isn’t about *parnassah* plans, it’s about getting in touch with your inner core, what you are aspiring to.”

One young man from a chassidic community came to Frank for counseling after he broke an engagement over a trivial matter. “I understood there must be a deeper reason,” Frank says, “but after several sessions of trying to get him to articulate, I finally asked him, ‘Why are you getting married anyway?’ He looked at me and said, ‘That’s a question for 50-year-olds!’ I responded, ‘You mean you’re planning to wait 30 years to ask it? You’ll be a grandfather by then.’”

When he asks young people to identify their future goals, he has one caveat: no clichés. He won’t discount any dreams, but will ask questions to make sure those are *their* dreams, unique to them, and can be expressed in a language that’s natural to the person.

“One of the ways we know someone is authentic is if he can articulate his values

and why those values are important to him. If someone says, for example, that ‘Torah is really important to me,’ I’ll ask, ‘So what have you done in your life to demonstrate that Torah is important to you?’ I show how to rank values, because a lot of times the decisions kids – and adults – make come with a conflict of values. One value might be fun, and another value might be *tzniyus*, so what happens when these elements clash?”

In his dating workshops, Frank challenges participants about their decision-making abilities by asking them to describe a recent choice of theirs and how they made it. “It’s amazing to me that many young people cannot even recall a single significant decision they made in their life.” Because of that, he says, “I never ask them, ‘What would you do if you were married and such-and-such a scenario came up?’

Those questions aren’t helpful because it’s all hypothetical. Instead, I want them to tell me about the time they made a big decision and took responsibility. I’d rather have them extrapolate from past behavior than to assume they’ll be able to do in the future what they haven’t done in the past. I tell singles, don’t marry on credit. If someone hasn’t demonstrated a competency at any level before marriage, don’t expect them to step into it after marriage.”

One of the warning signs of self-alienation is when clients avoid answering his questions directly and frankly. Some use sarcasm as a way of deflecting attention from the real issues. Others simply dodge questions; when he suggested the name of a *shadchan* to one 25-year-old, the young man replied, “I don’t go to that one, he asks too many questions.”

“What was he afraid of?” Frank asks.

“Why wouldn’t he want to answer questions about himself? Why wouldn’t he welcome the opportunity to let a *shadchan* know him? To me it’s obvious that he’s either got something to hide, or ‘nothing’ to hide.”

What’s Your Passion? One of Rabbi Frank’s first inspirations in helping people get in touch with their true selves came out of an interview he took many years ago with the representative of an organization. He’d prepared for the interview, but one of the questions was a revelation. “He asked me, ‘What are you passionate about?’ I was a *kiruv rav* at the time, but I’d never thought about the idea of passion before, and certainly never articulated it.”

Those answers, he says, can only come out of self-knowledge, and only stated with certainty if they’re authentic. And so

many of us don't know what really excites us in life or what motivates us to get out of bed in the morning. We don't know what our mission is and we lack the compelling "why" that drives us through the day. It became an important insight for Rabbi Frank's therapeutic work: a lack of being in touch with oneself and one's true path in life ultimately puts marriages, careers, and other relationships on the wrong track. The result may be depression, *shalom bayis* problems, or maladaptive behaviors like gambling or addictions. "You can't reach your goal unless you know who you are, where you want to go, and how to get there," he says.

In 2011, during a visit to Eretz Yisrael, Frank offered to give self-awareness and goal-setting seminars in several venues. One of them was a *chaburah* in Yeshivas Mir. "We talked about the need to be passionate in life, and I saw these boys come alive. One of them told me, 'I never heard anything like this before — it's a different language!' For days afterward the *talmidim* searched sources, including Rambam, to learn how to be passionate. They started looking at Rambam in a new way, seeing a new relevance to their selves."

Follow Your Map Because our lives are in constant flux and change, all of us reach certain points where we have to re-evaluate, remake decisions, "reconfigure." For everything we do in life, says Rabbi Frank, the three core questions — Who am I? What do I want? And how am I going to make it happen? — are always appropriate. Women going back into the workforce after the children are grown, spouses navigating complicated marriages, or pensioners dealing with retirement issues are just some examples of life challenges where we might have to reconfigure our "map" if we want to reach the right destination.

In his practice, Rabbi Frank is always having people locate themselves. "I have a client now, a man whose children have virtually all gone 'off the *derech*.' He feels like a total failure — it was a literal hemorrhage

for him. Now, with the M.A.P. model, a critical step to healing is to find yourself on the map. Where are you now? I know where you wanted to be, but that isn't where you are. So first thing is to locate yourself. A map won't help until you can find your location.

"The next step is to define the situation. He defined himself with one word: 'failure.' I had to get his identity back to 'father' and what a father means and how the role is defined. We had many conversations about his role today. He's not the father of 20 years ago when everything was perfect; now he's a father who has to be there for his kids no matter where they are. And so the next step is, what does he need to do to be that father today, to do for his children, in the position Hashem put him? The step after that is strategizing, but that's a very specific area, the details aren't so relevant. What is relevant to all of us is to locate yourself, to know where you are, even if it's not where you wanted to be or where you assumed you were. You're a hundred miles west. And from that point you have to start the healing."

Most people, says Rabbi Frank, go through the process unproductively backwards — trying first to strategize before defining the location or setting realistic goals. Take the wife of the former *kollel yungerman* who assumed she'd married a "lifer" but thinks her dreams are shattered when he did his best but can't do it anymore.

"Both of them have to make a shift," he says. "Her shift is that she has to relocate. She's not back where she was ten years ago, and if she tries to solutionize from that place that's no longer her reality, she'll hit a brick wall. We can't travel from where we were. We have to travel from where we are today, and often that means accepting our new location and redefining the mission."

He had another client who was very down on herself because after being involved in education for over two decades, she never really advanced. Twenty years later she was still in a limited job without advancement, while her colleagues had become principals and gotten higher degrees.

But there was a tradeoff. "Over our conversations, she revealed that throughout the years of child-rearing, she has had offers, but she always makes it a priority to be home when the last child leaves in the morning and in the house when the first comes home. So looking back at her career, she ranked her values. Teaching is important, but being home for the kids is more important. 'That's your highest value, so how could you knock yourself down for sticking to your highest value?' I told her. 'True, you're not in the job of your dreams, but you alone determined that's not your highest value.'

"Life rarely offers us perfect choices, but this woman read her map. She had a clear focus on her goals and her priorities. And, by the end of our work, she recognized the success that she actually was — a woman who was, in fact, leading a life based on her highest ranked values.

Rabbi Frank likes the "map" analogy because in addition to big global maps, we use "local maps" every time we master a specific situation. Take a parent who discovers his child is engaged in unacceptable behavior: He needs to micro-map their interaction, asking himself the same three questions: Who am I in the relationship? (Friend? Parent?) What is my goal? (Punishment? Maintaining a good relationship?) What is the best way to make it happen?

Or a spouse who discovers his/her partner has done something hurtful: Am I a *mashgiach* or a support? Is my priority teaching a lesson or maintaining intimacy? What reaction will help me best attain my goal?

So whether you're in pre-dating mode, have already entered the *parshah*, are busy getting on with life goals, or trying to keep relationships strong, map it out and decide: Who are you? What do you want? And how are you going to make it happen? Those are the signposts on the road to an authentic life. ●

—Rachel Ginsberg contributed to this report