

## Waiting and queuing

The temporal construct of *waiting* is one of the predominant images associated with single women. The figure of the single woman waiting for coupledness and married life has become deeply embedded in conventional thinking about single women. The “What’s new?” genre of questions, the blessing *Bekarov ezlech* (“Soon at yours [wedding]!”), and promises like “By your wedding day you will feel better,”—discussed throughout this book—can be regarded as reflecting and endorsing this temporal imagery. They remind single women of their belated singleness and of their overly extended wait. While waiting for “the right one” at certain stages of one’s life is considered romantic and full of hope, at later stages it marks a state of heightened anxiety, stress, and uncertainty.

In this chapter, I seek to trace some of the discursive constructions of waiting and images of waiting single women and, by proxy, problematize these concepts. From this perspective, I look at waiting as both a temporal construct and as an interactional process which sheds light on how power relations, forms of knowledge, and subjectivities are constituted and reified. Moreover, engaging with waiting as a contingent temporal construct also opens up a space to critique the hierarchical relations it creates, and how in turn it creates and maintains power relations.

### Hopeful, restless, waiting

Samuel Beckett’s (1954) play *Waiting for Godot* famously emphasizes how fundamentally intrinsic waiting is to the human condition. Waiting, adds Giovanni Gasparini (1995), has a wide range of meanings and attributes, and is commonly considered a basic aspect of the human experience. Waiting moves, he observes, from representing a hope and a gratifying experience to a frustration, an illusion, and a form of indefinite distress (*ibid.*, 39).

Indeed, we wait in waiting rooms, we stand in lines, we enroll ourselves on waiting lists. Waiting is a significant part of our social lives and everyday schedules; it is an inherent side-effect of bureaucratic logic and religious beliefs, and is incorporated into a wide variety of social practices. It also plays a central role in our daily social

existence and knowledge, as it guides everything from mundane conversation to traffic rules.

Lance Morrow suggests that waiting casts life into a “little dungeon of time” (Morrow 1984, 65). In western capitalist societies, waiting time generally carries pejorative connotations, partly because capitalist society idealizes notions of efficiency and speed, identifying time with money and, thus, waiting with idleness or waste. One often seeks to minimize waiting time or to eliminate it altogether. Accordingly, waiting is associated with bad service and inefficiency. As a result, today significant technological and organizational effort is invested into seeking to reduce waiting time.

Waiting in its romantic formulation is built into our notions of romantic longing, as expressed beautifully in a verse from “The Man I Love,” the classic love song written by Ira Gershwin and performed by singers such as Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald:

Someday he'll come along  
 The man I love  
 And he'll be big and strong  
 The man I love  
 And when he comes my way  
 I'll do my best to make him stay

The storyline of women waiting to be chosen is set in a long tradition of heterosexual romance (Reynolds 2008, 101). Waiting for him “to come along” and “making him stay” complement the cultural image of a “prince charming” or the “knight in shining armor.” Waiting, in this sense, connotes excitement, delight, and fantasy. Even the new modalities of love, in which women exercise more choice in choosing their partners (Swidler 2003), stress the centrality of waiting for “the right one” and looking for one’s soul mate.<sup>1</sup>

In her analysis of the love stories section on Match.com, Sharon Mazzarella contends that many of the success stories published on the site “tell the tale of individuals who have been searching their whole lives for the perfect partner, a search which has ended successfully thanks to their experiences on *Match*” (Mazzarella 2007, 25). One can find similar stories on most dating websites, which, as a part of their marketing strategy, highlight tales of single men and women who had waited for years before they found “the right one” on this particular dating website.

Another popular illustration of single women waiting for the one can be found in *The Bachelor*, a successful global television format which was also adapted in Israel. One of the highlights of the show is the Rose Ceremony, during which the single women participants in the program wait anxiously to be selected, and hopefully win the big prize—the heart of the male bachelor. As Andrea McClanahan elaborates, “The Rose Ceremony is the validation point for the women. If a woman receives a rose, she is deemed worthy enough to remain in the game, and she is afforded a sense of well-being or happiness by Alex’s [the bachelor] decision” (McClanahan 2007, 267).

A different modality of waiting is depicted in the well-known song “Eleanor Rigby,” written by John Lennon and Paul McCartney and performed by the Beatles:

Ah, look at all the lonely people  
 Ah, look at all the lonely people  
 Eleanor Rigby picks up the rice in the church where a wedding has been  
 Lives in a dream  
 Waits at the window, wearing the face that she keeps in a jar by the door  
 Who is it for?

For Eleanor Rigby, there is no point in waiting. The rice thrown at the happy couple remains on the floor, a reminder to all those lagging behind. Eleanor Rigby can be understood not only as a song about unrealized romance, but also what could be interpreted as a representation of the overly prolonged wait and eventual lonely death of an “aging spinster.”

A comparison of the two songs, “The Man I Love” and “Eleanor Rigby,” depicts the existential condition of waiting for the unknown. Each expresses a longing for an unidentified male savior. The subjects of both songs wait for a “necessary” transformation in their life course, yet to occur. However, a comparison of the two songs demonstrates how waiting is dependent upon differing situational contexts and temporal timetables. While the first is considered to be one of the iconic love songs of the twentieth century, portraying an image of romantic longing, the other is noted as a song about loneliness, portraying a desperate, pathetic waiting. The woman represented by the line “someday he’ll come along” is still *on time*, while the figure of Eleanor Rigby can be perceived as *off time*.

The two images of single women waiting for men in these two songs—well-known in Israel and worldwide—reflect deeply ingrained representations of singlehood and single women at different stages of their life course. The next extract, published in the Israeli website *Mako*, depicts different waiting modalities. The article is entitled “She is 40 Years Old and She is Still Waiting for the Knight on the White Horse,” and depicts the life stories of Ortal Arbeli and Liat Dyan, both almost forty years old:

Ortal Arbeli was not ready to give up the big dream: a child, a dog, and a house with a fence. It didn’t matter to her that she was almost 40 years old. Today she’s married with one child and she proves that sometimes it is worth the wait to find “the right one”. Liat Dyan is single, she’s almost 40 years old and she’s still waiting for the one. (Yechimovich 2013)

While one waited for years, the other one is still waiting. In Arbeli’s case she waited for her soul mate, and found him just in time. As the text implies, she met someone who was “worth” waiting for. Dyan, on the other hand, is still waiting. Waiting for the one is demarcated by culturally agreed-upon deadlines after which there is no point of waiting any more. This is one reason why what may seem like a dreamy and even sweetly melancholic kind of waiting in the earlier stages of the single woman’s life course can evolve into an anxious wait.

In this context, it is important to note that waiting, in common with many of the temporal constructs discussed in this book, entails gender-related differences and age/gender-related role transitions which, in turn, form different temporal regimes and timetables for men and women. The waiting experiences of single women are

juxtaposed with widespread images of women as passively waiting while recognizing the pressure of biological clocks and the threat of turning into “old maids.” In this figuration of waiting, one’s whole existence, social status, and possibilities of belonging come into question. The manifestation of these shifts is represented in the figure of the bridesmaid as a looming presence in the linear timeline of the single woman.

### **Always a bridesmaid, never the bride**

In our much-crazed wedding culture, the bridesmaid is a recognizable social figure perceived as “the next in line” to her marrying friend. She is traditionally a single woman, assigned the role of supporting the bride before and during her big day. The bridesmaid also plays an important role in the secondary wedding market. In the US and many other countries, the bridesmaid’s role has evolved into a flourishing market, producing its own commodities like special bridesmaid’s matching dresses, shoes, flower arrangements, and jewelry.

Popular culture worldwide is fascinated by this figure, and the bridesmaid’s role has become especially popular in some of the most recent Hollywood romantic comedies. One example is Anne Fletcher’s box office hit, *27 Dresses* (2008), also screened in Israel, which depicts the story of a serial bridesmaid, with twenty-seven bridesmaid’s dresses in her closet already, hoping to exchange the bridesmaid dress for a bride’s. Another popular film underpinning this message is Paul Feig’s *Bridesmaids* (2011), which garnered much media coverage in Israel. The film featured, as in many romantic comedies of its kind, the unhappy life of the bride’s best friend, who is given the role of the chief bridesmaid. As in *27 Dresses*, the film focuses on the miserable life of the bridesmaid while she tries to manage all the pre-wedding events and rituals. Both films end on an optimistic tone, the heroines “hooking up” with eligible bachelors. The premise in this narrative is clear: their role as bridesmaid was temporary and transitional, and their waiting period has come to an end.

The bridesmaid film genre can be seen as part of what Negra terms the *relentless celebration of weddings* in contemporary popular culture targeted at women (Negra 2009, 81).<sup>2</sup> In these scenarios, the bridesmaid is often depicted as the negative mirror-image of the bride. While the bride’s life trajectory is celebrated and rewarded, the other’s is configured as pathetic and miserable. In these films, the bridesmaid’s role is to observe and admire the linear progression she is yet to join. She is represented as an immobile bystander, obliged to publicly account for and justify her status. It seems that the wedding ritual not only secures class and sexual orientation hierarchies, but also produces a clear hierarchy between those “who did it” and those “who are still on their way.” In this manner, the images of the bride/bridesmaid create a neat binary opposition, in which one category (the bridesmaid) should transform into another (the bride).

Anglo-American clichés such as “Always a bridesmaid, never the bride” or “Three times a bridesmaid, never the bride” exemplify the social conventions which mark the overly extended presence of the bridesmaid as disruptive to the collective temporal order. In Israeli secular and religious marriage culture, the bridesmaid’s role is less

structured and visible than in Christian weddings. Nevertheless, the presence of one's best friend, sister, or cousin is a recognized informal social role in Jewish-Israeli weddings and shares many parallels with the social role of the bridesmaid. An abundance of texts in *Ynet's* Relationship section, portraying the bride's unmarried sister, cousin, or best friend, express the unease, embarrassment, and at times even humiliation associated with attending a wedding when one is still placed in the position of the "yet to be" married sister or friend.

The prototype of the bridesmaid and "the yet to be married" not only epitomizes the waiting experience, but also emphasizes a socio-temporal order in which an imaginary symbolic queue is formed. This temporal scheme is embedded within prevailing expectations of who should be next. In that respect, the "eternal bridesmaid" not only signifies some form of bad timing, but is also unsettling to common temporal norms and codes. To reiterate some of my observations in Chapters 2 and 3, this blessing can be seen as an indication of the so-called orderliness of everyday rhythms, as well as the wish to restore and fix potential irregularities.

In this connection, Moore stresses the importance of defining the collective temporal boundaries and the orderly arrangements for synchronization in our everyday lives (Moore 1963, 52). Indeed, as these clichés imply, playing the role of the bridesmaid for too long disrupts sequential and synchronized temporal orders. The social sanction needs no further elaboration: "Always a bridesmaid, never the bride." The extent to which this form of temporal organization creates and maintains hierarchical relations within the matrix of power relations between single and non-single women cannot be underestimated.

This ritual has achieved much visibility in many popular movies and television sitcoms and movies worldwide. I suggest that the folkloristic ritual of catching the bouquet can therefore signify a social event which conveys a particular temporal map, in Zerubavel's terms, a map which reflects prevailing temporal and age-related expectations (Zerubavel 1985, 14). In order to catch the bouquet, single women are expected to gather together and even playfully compete with one another to maximize their chances of catching the bouquet. Mann (1969) has argued that the queue can be perceived as a *miniature social system* of shared behavioral norms. Pursuant to this analogy, single women's statuses can be measured according to their location in the queue and whether or not they can stand in line at all. By the same token, it is evident how the various clichés and images of the waiting single woman, such as the bridesmaid or the single woman singing and waiting for *The Man I Love*, depict and form such a miniature social system, a symbolic line which conveys clear temporal norms.

Nevertheless, whether the single woman occupies the temporary role of bridesmaid, or is being bid by well-wishers to get married soon, the underlying assumption is that the social practice of standing in line means that one is being taken into consideration. She can compete with others for the attention of a potential husband, and then hopefully enter one of society's key institutions. The bridesmaid is "still in the game," and she has a chance if she is able to catch the bouquet in time. Thus, the perception and experience of waiting is dependent on one's age. As noted earlier, singlehood is constituted differently at twenty-five, thirty-five, or forty-five. However, the particular

temporal junctures of time and one's awareness of time become a vital factor. Thus, if at the earlier stages of the single woman's life course waiting can be construed as romantic and a positive tension-builder, as singlehood threatens to turn into a permanent status, waiting can become imbued with dread, fear, and uncertainty.

### ***Bekarov ezlech* (Soon at yours [wedding]!)**

The age-related interpretation of waiting is also exposed in the well-known Israeli blessing, *Bekarov ezlech!* Addressed to single men and women, it is a blessing usually conveyed by the married to the non-married, most often at weddings, and it expresses the hope that the next wedding will be theirs. The tone of this blessing is commonly confident and affirmative. In the case of single persons, the *Bekarov ezlech* wish does not specify to whom one should be married, but instead refers to the act and the event itself. However, the wish *Bekarov ezlech* is conveyed to single women and men in particular age groups. When a single woman passes what is considered as the normative marriage age, she will probably cease to hear this blessing. It could be suggested that just as there is no bridesmaid above a certain age, in a similar vein one would not wish for a sixty-year-old single woman (for example) to get married soon.

The *Bekarov ezlech* blessing has come to epitomize many of the experiences of single women, in private and in public settings, as evidenced by the next extract:

As someone who for most of her life was in long-term relationships, I heard this sentence dozens of times. Mostly, I heard it from the bride and the groom, who think that their life choice should match everyone else's lives. Usually the bride hugs me with joy and then yells out drunkenly "*Bekarov ezlech, Bekarov ezlech*" ... Nevertheless, only when I moved from the category of a single woman in a relationship to a single woman without one, I realize what a real trauma [the blessing] can be. The experience of hearing *Bekarov ezlech* when you are in a relationship is unpleasant. People have no right to interfere with your personal life. But for the available single woman [the blessing] is a magnifying glass to all that is wrong and unfitting in one's life ... It does not matter how successful you are you will always be reminded that in this [getting married] you have failed. (Banosh 2011b)

Noa Banosh's reference to the blessing as a magnifying glass elucidates why some single women view this expected encounter as a nightmare, hell, a trauma. Even when these columns are written in an ironic tone, the common denominator of the texts is that they communicate strong reactions and the experience of feeling trapped. These encounters, in which the blessing is communicated is also a moment in which their singlehood and its discrediting features are made known. In such a context, the options for saving face are limited.

The blessing is a critical point of exposure, pointing a finger at the present and the future. These are moments in which relations of power are enacted between the blessers and the blessed, as they demonstrate the differences in their social status. It is another example in which an order of discourse uncovers relations of power and control.

Consequently, these are moments of heightened self-awareness and reflexivity. These blessings are constant reminders of their long, overly extended wait. A post discussing an advertisement for designed wedding greeting cards, published on an Israeli blog, reveals a common attitude to this blessing:

Who has not heard this this annoying sentence [*Bekarov ezlech*]? I have been hearing this blessing from the age of 12. At family weddings, there was always some aunt that couldn't resist and decided to worry about my future, as it is never too early for these kinds of anxieties. ... As I married quite young, at 25 I no longer have to endure these sentences but I go out of my mind when I hear it. ... The design team of netanella.com introduces a new project for wedding greetings. If you are invited to a wedding or two in the next months, we cannot help the single men and women from avoiding hearing *Bekarov ezlech*, but we can save you time thinking what kind of greeting cards to write. (Hanick Zikukit Tafus 2011)

This advertisement presents an interesting illustration of the social pressures put on single women from an early age. It discloses how these expectations position girls, adolescents, and women in a perpetual waiting position to enter marriage. The blessing epitomizes the way in which waiting signals an expectation for “things to happen.” It is a transitional time fueled with despair: moaning, and expectation. Interestingly, while this scripted interaction is anticipated and well known in advance, its very occurrence is rarely negotiated and contested.

In his well-known anthropological work about waiting time in South Africa, anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano notes that at the mercy of time, the waiting individual is subject to “feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, and vulnerability—infantile feelings—and all the rage that these feelings evoke” (Crapanzano 1985, 44). Although this is quite a different socio-historical context, I argue that these are moments in which one's subjectivity is at stake. This is one of the reasons why it is difficult to resist these powerful social prescriptions, which also determine the possibility of one obtaining a heteronormative future. Waiting, as Crapanzano observes, is being at the mercy of time, a position which makes it hard to resist time and its imperatives. Thus while many of the single women resent the social pressures and hierarchies exposed in these encounters, there are no discursive resources to resist their predicted timeline and heteronormative assumptions. The writers grasp the blessing as a social fact, that “we cannot help the single men and women from avoiding hearing *Bekarov ezlech*.”

The fact that this social temporal order cannot be avoided is also represented in Goldy Heart's column:

Every single man and woman knows that one cannot escape the *Bekarov ezlech* blessing ... nevertheless I want to ask why these aunts, who in certain cases have not seen me since my *Bat Mitzvah*, think they know what I want in my life right now ... To be honest, I don't know if this blessing is intended for me or for the aunts themselves. (Heart 2008)

Waiting to be next, then, is far from a personal endeavor; as mentioned above, the blessing itself labels single woman's wait as a collective waiting project. These social

pressures are apparent in both the American and Israeli clichés; *Bekarov ezlech* and “Always a bridesmaid, never the bride” both reflect what is reformulated again and again as a social problem—late singlehood. In the column mentioned above, Noa, a single woman, explains how the happiest day of the bride’s life can turn out to be a miserable day in the single woman’s life, especially since, as she emphasizes, she dared to turn up by herself:

So you [referring to the bride and the groom] made me drive to the middle of nowhere and spend a fortune. Please let me suffer quietly on the way to the buffet and do not interfere with my private life ... If there is one thing on which there is a consensus among single women is that we hate weddings. Not our own, the one we have been dreaming about since the age of five but the weddings of other women. The only way in which one could enjoy herself if you arrive with all the right accessories: a dress, high heeled shoes, a wallet and a boyfriend. Now, after clarifying that I do not like weddings ... Let’s point at the big elephant sitting under the *Hupa* [canopy] waiting for me to uncover him ... I am referring to those two words that can make every single woman’s life a living hell: *Bekarov ezlech*. (Banosh 2011b)

The anxiety expressed here communicates how the expectation of this ceremonial encounter also conveys a loss of control. Being accompanied can provide a shield to this interaction and exposure as a single woman. Thus, her chance to regain control is dependent on finding a male savior. The right man does not only promise marriage, but also a renewed sense of agency and belonging.

In her research about waiting among the mothers of bachelors in Macedonia, Violeta Schubert (2009) writes that waiting for marriage is related to the upward social mobility of both the bachelors and their mothers. For these mothers, the single status of their sons has a significant impact on their daily interactions with other women in the village. Their son’s unmarried status causes them to occupy a low status in the village’s social hierarchy, and leaves them vulnerable to being provoked by other women in their villages. Waiting is a collective project not only in Macedonia. The status of the unwed son and daughter has a significant impact on parents in Israel as well. In the next account, Bat Chen, a single woman, describes her mother as: “Waiting for the moment when I will tell her that I found him. Without me saying it didn’t work; just telling her simply that I found true love” (Bat Chen 2009).

In his well known study *Timetables: Structuring the Passage of Time in Hospital Treatment and other Careers*, Roth (1963) has described how people constantly try to define when things will happen to them and measure their progress according to temporal norms and benchmarks. In the same context, single women’s parents are waiting with them; they are constantly measuring their progress according to these benchmarks.

In Noa’s column mentioned previously she describes the scrutiny she experiences from her family when attending a relative’s wedding:

Every familial event becomes an opportunity to make you feel bad. Undoubtedly the wedding is the highlight for those. Waiting becomes a nightmare to such an extent. If we single woman had a choice between that and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* we would have chosen Freddy Krueger without any doubt ... Of course the interest in



you does not boil down to the blessing or showing interest which is concerned or pitiful. Your singlehood is thrown in your face, again and again, throughout the wedding. (Banosh 2011b)

As noted earlier, in these familial settings the blessing is perceived as an unwanted interaction, a mechanism through which one's singlehood "is thrown in your face again and again." Returning to Mann's (1969) conceptualization of the queue as a miniature social system of shared behavioral norms, the person who blesses the single woman is evidently not considered to be standing in the same line as her. This encounter implies the tacit hierarchy of a temporal order, thus reinforcing the explicit and implicit boundaries between the person doing the blessing and the person being blessed.

### Waiting for the unknown

As noted in earlier chapters, late singlehood is characterized by its main feature, the delay in getting married, a liminal state which has seemingly transgressed and violated its expected temporal boundaries. Against this background, from a certain stage in the single woman's life trajectory, waiting is related to growing personal, familial, and communitarian uncertainty and social anxiety.

The texts analyzed so far depict the difficulties of waiting for the unknown. Waiting becomes a source of suspense and uncertainty also due to its liminal attributes. In his widely quoted study on the ritual process, Turner (1969) argued that the liminal intermediate phase is of fundamental sociological importance. As discussed in Chapter 3, Turner, in drawing on Van Gennep's (1960) theory of the three stages of rites of passage, paid particular attention to the second stage, the liminal phase.<sup>3</sup> Liminality, he emphasized, is a state of being between phases—a transitory position. As such, the individual positioned in the liminal phase is not a member of the group one previously belonged to, nor of the group one will belong to upon the completion of the next rite. In fact, liminal subjects are "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony" (Turner 1969, 95).

The widespread images of anxiously waiting single women could be grasped as *liminars*, in Turner's terms (Turner 1969). This understanding corresponds closely with my contention that singlehood is generally framed as a liminal, temporary state; a transitory stage on the way to couplehood and family life. According to prevalent representations, the single, not yet married woman is depicted as waiting, hoping, speculating as to when the liminal period will come to an end. This familiar image is implicit in the following *Ynet* column:

Where would I meet him? How would it happen? I couldn't let myself believe that I would find him. How could I be optimistic when I had no clue as to the outcome of my search? One of my friends told me that perhaps instead of thinking about how I should think about when ... he's out there you don't know exactly where ... the only question is when you will meet him and not if you will meet him ... it's just a question of time. (Netz 2008)

In the above passage, Tali Netz, a single woman, stresses her liminal and uncertain social position. The liminal stage, as Turner (1969) notes, is characterized by ambiguity and inversion resulting from an anomaly wherein people slip through networks of classification. While marriage is commonly regarded as a charted and planned passage, permanent or prolonged singlehood is often viewed as an emergent, unplanned life trajectory.

Thus, the above quoted paragraph conveys certainty and uncertainty at the same time. The writer predicts that it is just a “question of time” until she finds her one, but she has no knowledge as to where, when, and how. There are no clear temporal references and the exact timing of progress from one temporal position to another is unknown. The experience of waiting becomes ever more intolerable for some of the single women, as the status of being single can change the next day, in a few years, or never at all. As Dazy Bar, another single woman writing for *Ynet*, observes: “I am thirty years old, six years past the age I was supposed to be married, and there is no potential groom on the horizon” (Bar 2009).

This position can also be perceived, then, as a body of clues, constructing the norms of collective timetables (Roth 1963). Indeed, at some vague and unstructured point in time, singlehood shifts from being a socially legitimate temporary phase to what can be characterized as a biographical and social disruption (Bury 1982). In other words, lifelong singlehood marks an unexpected disruption of a seemingly normative liminal state which has unexpectedly become permanent. The texts analyzed here demonstrate how waiting is interwoven with the wish and the social pressures to leave the liminal territory of uncertainty and vagueness, and to enter a non-liminal state.

### Prolonged liminality and uncertainty

Scholars writing about waiting emphasize how it is dependent on the possibilities of mastering the unknown. Javier Auyero, for example, has documented the relationship between waiting and uncertainty experienced by welfare recipients obliged to endure endless arbitrary postponements, bureaucratic mistakes, and changing state requirements: “In the recursive interactions with the state, poor people learn that they have to remain temporarily neglected, unattended to, or postponed” (Auyero 2010, 857).

This is reminiscent of Schwartz’s (1975) observations with respect to what he discerns as the relation between waiting, punishment, and power relations. For Schwartz, punitive sanctioning through the imposition of waiting is met in its most extreme form when people are not only kept waiting, but are ignorant as to how long they must wait. The person then finds himself in an “interactional precarious state wherein he might confront, recognize and flounder in his own vulnerability or unworthiness” (ibid., 38). Thus, summarizes Schwartz, waiting is the crossroads not only between past and future, but also between certainty and uncertainty.

Schwartz’s evaluations can also be applied to the *Bekarov ezlech* (Soon at yours [wedding]!) blessing referred to in the next extract:

Do these people have a special calendar from which they know the specific date that Goldy Heart will marry? Just tell me; I promise not to get mad if they do. It seems to me

that these kinds of calendars and crystal balls only exist in Harry Potter films, and so these kinds of blessings are particularly annoying. They attempt to promise something which is beyond the control of the person who is blessing me. Can you promise me a specific date? If so, then fine; promise. *Bekarov ezlech* is simply not good enough. (Heart 2008)

The blessing lays emphasis on the manner in which our social life is constantly organized and regulated by temporal schedules and temporal boundaries. In this case, the career timetable of the single woman is prescribed in advance, and social injunctions therefore spur her on to move forward in a predefined and recognized linear trajectory, in which marriage is the ultimate goal. Nonetheless, the incorporation or reincorporation of the single woman into society marked by finding one's soul-mate and building a family may or may not happen. Indeed, prolonged singlehood is regularly represented as a period of growing uncertainty and instability. These clichés therefore provide important signposts and, in this case, structure, and bestow meaning upon the passage of time.

By the same token, Crapanzano has observed that waiting implies a particular orientation in time, directed toward the future; nonetheless, it is a constricted orientation that closes in on the present:

In waiting, the present is always secondary to the future. It is held in expectation. It is filled with suspense. It is a sort of a holding action ... in waiting the present loses its focus in the now. The world in its immediacy slips away, it is derealized. It is without élan, vitality, creative force. It is numb, muted, dead. Its only meaning lies in the future—in the arrival or the non-arrival of the object of waiting. (Crapanzano 1985, 44)

Crapanzano notes that in English one cannot distinguish between waiting for something concrete and waiting for anything to happen: “in waiting for something, anything to happen, the object of the intentional act of waiting, like the object of anxiety, is not given” (ibid., 46). In this symbolic line, the single woman does not know exactly if and when she will reach its end. It is unclear to the single woman and to the observer whether or not the queue can be beaten and whether there is any potential for queue-jumping, queue-drifting, or leaving the queue altogether. Therefore, a corresponding social division is fabricated for the waiting single women by the non-waiting, not-single women, who presumably do not have to stand in line anymore. A particular temporal framework is constantly formed and reformed, embedded within explicit and implicit cultural beliefs about societal and temporal norms and expectations.

Given the above analysis, I suggest that singlehood as a prolonged or permanent liminal status differs from other liminal phases, due to a fundamental vagueness as to its end point. Think, for example, of a Ph.D. candidate submitting a request for a scholarship. One generally knows when one can expect an answer and can plan ahead accordingly. On the other hand, the temporal location of the single woman is uncertain; she cannot determine how soon she will arrive at the end of her wait. As opposed to Turner's (1969) conceptualization of liminality, in which one stands between two clearly defined stages of separation and re-aggregation, the exact point

of re-aggregation in this case remains largely unknown, resulting in a particularly stressful waiting experience.

### The production of the waiting subject

Feminist scholarship has long demonstrated how and why women are defined in relation to men and in terms of their relationships to men. Girls and young women are perceived as daughters, wives, and mothers. From this dominant perspective, single women are defined in terms of their lack of relationship to men. The study of the temporal concept of waiting adds another layer to this analysis. Women are socialized, from a very early age to wait for the right man, as Billie Holliday and many others have articulated: “Someday he’ll come along, the man I love.”

One of the etymological definitions of waiting describes it as a state of alertness and of having a heightened sense for changes. In German, the etymological meaning of the word is to watch and to guard; in English, to be awake. This kind of alertness and being on guard is both personal and collective with regards to single women of marriageable age. Moreover, this alertness finds expression in the constant social surveillance that they are subjected to. Single women are forever being questioned: “So what’s new?” “Are you seeing anyone?” “What are you waiting for?” All of these familiar utterances, I suggest, also reflect and enhance the hierarchical relations embedded within the idea of the waiting single woman. My argument is these assumptions give expression to heteronormative logic and produce power relations supported by a disciplinary temporal regime that differentiates between the waiting single woman and the non-waiting, non-single woman.

Schwartz argues that the distribution of waiting time coincides with the distribution of power (Schwartz 1975, 5). In this respect, waiting mirrors temporal power relations: there are those who wait and those who are waited for. To be kept waiting is a social assertion that one’s time and social worth is less valuable (Schwartz 1975). As already noted, single women above a certain age symbolize a disruption of the sequential rhythm of our social lives. As Moore elaborates, “The sequential ordering of activities provides a priority schedule in the strict sense, which may reflect priorities in the loose sense of relative values” (Moore 1963, 48). One effect of this feature is the marginalization and subordination of single women. In this respect, the image of the waiting single woman reflects such a rigid form of sequential ordering, representing, and producing temporal orders. These almost unnoticed miniature systems lie at the heart of the socio-temporal discursive formations and temporal monitoring of single women.

As my analysis in the next chapter will show, public events as weddings, Valentine’s Day, or New Year’s Eve celebrations locate single women in a particularly vulnerable position. When they receive the blessing, to be married soon, their waiting is assumed and repeated again and again. From an Althusserian (1971) perspective, the *Bekarov ezlech* blessing can be seen as a strong moment of interpellation. Weddings and familial gatherings can be seen as spaces through which ideologies turn individuals into subjects. Being blessed resembles Althusser’s well-known analysis of the call of a police

officer towards an individual: “Hey, you there!” or “Papers please,” which requires one to recognize oneself as a subject. This is one of the reasons which could explain why some single women dread this interaction and take it so seriously. This is a critical moment, in which they are interpellated as waiting subjects.

From this perspective, waiting, as Bourdieu (2000), Schwartz (1975), and many others have adeptly identified, is an exercise of power that plays a significant role in the way subjects become compliant subjects in everyday life.<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu observes that waiting is one way of acutely experiencing power—a form of submission, and in that respect waiting is one of the prominent effects of distributions of power. From these works, we learn that waiting is a form of submission, and no wonder that is assigned to the weak, the poor, and the subaltern (Jeffrey 2010; Vitus 2010). This chapter has dealt with a prevalent discursive representation, according to which the single woman is perceived as a bystander, a candidate, and a passive daydreamer, waiting for the unknown. Waiting becomes *a mode of being*.

The various social encounters, such as the lineup of the bridesmaids or being blessed with *Bekarov ezlech*, form, I argue, a *symbolic heteronormative queue* enmeshed with disciplinary power relations and forms of control. From this standpoint, when one hopes for single women to soon be married, this expectancy forms part of a normative injunction emphasizing a linear social order and the way it positions single women within collective timetables. This form of horizontal and vertical lineup is also represented in the symbolic figure of the bridesmaid and accentuated during social events such as the catching the bouquet ritual. It is astonishing to realize that little has changed in the last fifty years, with regards to perceptions of the subject position of single women as women in waiting. This, I suggest, demonstrates the strength and persistence of the heteronormative temporal ideologies, which promote an ideal image of women as good wives and mothers. In the next chapter, I set out to further explore the temporal interactional elements of being and appearing alone in public. This line of analysis will I hope shed more light on the power hierarchies ordained by heteronormative temporality.

### Notes

- 1 Trimberger (2005, 2) observes that many women wait to find their soul mate. According to this prevailing ideal, the soul mate is someone with whom one can combine love, fidelity, emotional intimacy, and togetherness.
- 2 For an excellent analysis of weddings in popular culture, see Ingraham (1999).
- 3 According to Van Gennep (1960), the first stage—the pre-liminal—is a state of separation, of detachment from societal structure or from relatively stable cultural conditions. The second—the liminal—is the interstitial phase or the margin, and the third—the post liminal—entails the reentering of the social structure.
- 4 See also, Auyero (2010); Hage (2009).