



Marriage Matters

BY SARA YOHEVED RIGLER

Is the Surrendered Wife a Jewish Wife?

While at a luxury Dead Sea hotel for a *chareidi* women's retreat, I noticed my friend Tefilla Buxbaum giving an informal class around a table at teatime. She was teaching from a book called *The Surrendered Wife* by Laura Doyle. Afterward, Tefilla told me this book was the best thing that ever happened to her marriage. She was enthusiastic about spreading its principles and tools.

Also at that table was Rebbetzin Raizy Auerbach, daughter-in-law of Rav Shlomo Zalman, *zt"l*. Born and raised in England, Rebbetzin Auerbach was one of the few English-speaking *rebbetzins* at the retreat. She asked Tefilla if she could borrow the book. The next morning, when she returned it to Tefilla, she said, "The points the author makes are good. But you can't teach *Yiddishe neshamos* from a non-Jewish book. You should write your own Jewish version of the book."

"B-b-but I'm not a writer," Tefilla sputtered.

"Then get Sara Yoheved Rigler to do it," Rebbetzin Auerbach replied decisively.

Those words would change my life.

Rebbetzin Auerbach spoke to me. Tefilla Buxbaum spoke to me—several times. I read *The Surrendered Wife*. Two weeks later, I made my way to ArtScroll's Jerusalem office to meet with its vice president, Shmuel Blitz. Having already authored three ArtScroll bestsellers, I was confident that Mr. Blitz would enthusiastically agree to my writing a book about marriage.

He didn't. "You're not a marriage counselor and you're not a *rebbetzin*," he told me frankly, "so you can't write a book about marriage."

When he saw how crestfallen I was, he continued, "Start giving workshops on marriage. Women will confide in you, and then you'll have material for a book."

And that's how I unexpectedly became an "expert" on a spiritual approach to marriage. No one was more surprised than I.

I set about creating the Keshet Wife Workshop for Women, with basic ideas from *The Surrendered Wife* amplified by the Torah I had learned. I turned to my *mussar rebbe*, Rabbi Leib Kelemen, for *haskamah*. I told him I wanted to produce a Torah-based version of *The Surrendered Wife*. Rabbi Kelemen was familiar with the book, which by that time was circulating widely in the *frum* world. He told me, “*The Surrendered Wife* is *krum* [distorted]. The whole system is based on what you can get for yourself. The motivation of the surrendered wife is to take rather than to give.”

Indeed, Laura Doyle’s subsequent book, *Things Will Get as Good as You Can Stand* is subtitled *When You Learn That It Is Better to Receive Than to Give*. Advertising for *The Surrendered Wife* brandishes the goal of “becoming desired, cherished and adored for life.”

Although that’s a tempting come-on, it is the opposite of the Torah worldview. As Rav Dessler taught, our basic life choice is to become either a giver or a taker. The more we give, the more we become similar to (and therefore closer to) Hashem, Who is the Ultimate Giver. When the motivation behind an action is to take, we pander to our lower, egoistic selves, becoming servants not of Hashem but of the *yetzer hara*.

Hearing Rabbi Kelemen’s critique, I immediately revamped my nascent Keshet Wife Workshop. I retained Laura Doyle’s premise that a critical, controlling wife ruins her marriage. I also kept her idea that, given the right tools, a wife can single-handedly transform her marriage. However, unlike Laura Doyle’s goal, the goal of a Jewish wife is a Jewish goal: to grow spiritually and become closer to Hashem through her marriage.

Recently I was speaking with a young friend, a *kollel* wife whom I’ll call Elisheva. Elisheva has long admired the *Surrendered Wife* system, which currently claims 150,000 followers. She had just read Laura Doyle’s newest book, *First, Kill All the Marriage Counselors*. She was excited about what Mrs. Doyle calls “the six intimacy skills,” and she wanted to start teaching them in the *kollel* stronghold of Jerusalem’s Ramat Eshkol neighborhood. She then proceeded to reel off the six skills: self-care, respect, relinquish control of your man, receive, gratitude, vulnerability.

I was startled, because no matter valuable and effective the six intimacy skills are, the biggest lack in the *Surrendered Wife* system is G-d. Understandably, you don’t get your books translated into 16 languages and sold in 27 countries by talking about putting G-d into your marriage, but the truth is that when you leave out G-d, you leave out everything.

The absence of G-d in the *Surrendered Wife* system is a fatal flaw; G-d is the only operative force in the universe. And although

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human beings such as husbands have free will, what happens to us, including how much we will suffer and how much money we will gain or lose, is decided by Hashem on Rosh Hashanah and sealed on Yom Kippur.

In the three years that I've been giving the Kesher Wife webinar, I have encountered many good wives who suffer. They suffer from husbands with ADD who lack executive function, who cannot organize their time and never get done what needs doing. They suffer from husbands who are addicted to the Internet. They suffer from husbands who are hypercritical. They suffer from husbands who can't keep a job and who nevertheless refuse to help around the house while the wife works full time. They suffer from husbands who don't get up to go to *minyan* or who partially or fully abandon Torah observance.

None of these marriage problems can be solved with even the best skills. The only way to deal with these realities is, as Reb-betzin Tziporah Heller always says, to put Hashem in the picture. Any picture without Hashem is a distorted picture, because *Hashem is the only operative force in the uni-*

verse.

From a Torah perspective, the wife who blames her husband for his limitations is like the Talmudic metaphor of the dog that is beaten by a man with a stick. The dog grabs the stick, unaware that it is the man who is wielding it. Although irritations and disappointments may come *through* one's husband, they come *from* Hashem. However majorly painful or minorly annoying the husband's habits are, it is Hashem who has determined that this wife needs this particular husband with his particular limitations for her spiritual rectification, which is the purpose for which every soul comes down into this world.

This paradigm turns conventional marriage wisdom on its head. While everyone aspires to a happy, peaceful marriage, prob-

lems are inevitable when two different persons from two different families live together. Conventional wisdom seeks to solve the problems, but some problems are insoluble. Once you put Hashem into the picture, however, you realize that He has determined that you must face this particular problem for your spiritual rectification.

The problem that was a stumbling block on the road to marital bliss becomes a stepping-stone on the road to spiritual growth and closeness to G-d.

For example, let's say you and your husband have been saving money to renovate the kitchen. You want to use a contractor who three of your friends have used and recommended. Your husband wants to save money by using Jim Smith, whose bid was much lower and who came without references. So you go with Jim. Your husband gives him \$10,000 to buy the materials, and because your husband has never been a stickler for details, he does not bother to ask Jim for a signed receipt.

Jim disappears with the money. He does not answer his cell phone. You have no idea where he lives or how to find him. Even if

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you could find him, the specter of paying legal fees to sue him, especially when you have no receipt, adds to the anguish of losing your dream kitchen. So how do you now go about using your dilapidated kitchen without resenting your husband?

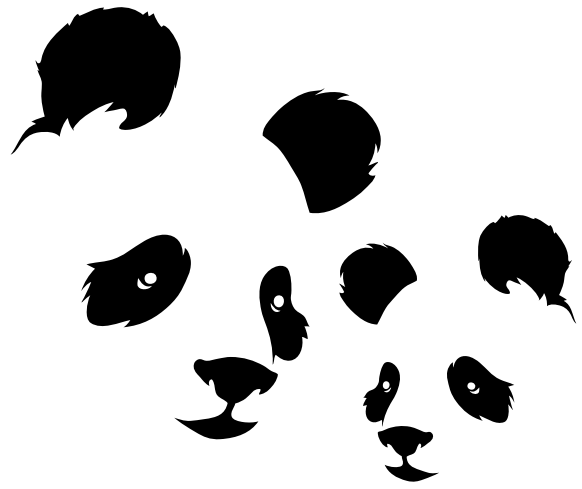
The “wrong way” reaction of the wife losing her dream kitchen is to yell at her husband. The “right way” script ends with the wife saying something like this:

“I feel heartbroken that someone could be so dishonest and cheat us like this. We’ve never had this kind of experience with a workman. I guess we’re naïve. We’re so honest that it would never occur to us that someone could be so corrupt. But you know, dear, this kind of major loss must be a *kapparah* in some way. I learned that how much money we gain or lose in a year is decreed on Rosh Hashanah. And I’d rather lose the money than your health or my health. I’d rather be with you in our old kitchen than, G-d forbid, in a brand-new kitchen without you.”

A woman approached me at the end of a workshop in New Jersey and told me that she had been in a similar situation. She had inherited \$10,000 from her grandfather. Since they were always strapped for money, she wanted to save it for their children’s weddings, but her husband was intent on investing it in a real estate scheme that he was convinced would generate big profits. She yielded to him, and he invested the \$10,000. A year later, they owed the bank \$100,000.

She knew that she could yell at her husband and make him feel guiltier than he already felt. After all, it was her money, her inheritance from her grandfather, and the catastrophic idea had been his. But she actually believed that how much money we gain or lose each year is determined by Hashem on Rosh Hashanah. She also believed that financial loss is a *kapparah* and that Hashem had decreed this for them rather than the much worse loss of her husband’s or children’s health. So instead of resenting her husband, she comforted him and thanked Hashem that it was only money—money they could ill afford to lose and had no way to repay, but a much easier *kapparah* than a family member afflicted with illness or hurt in an accident.

Then something strange happened. They received a letter from the bank with a mistake in it. The bank’s computer omitted a “0,” referring to their debt of \$10,000 rather than \$100,000. Scrupulously



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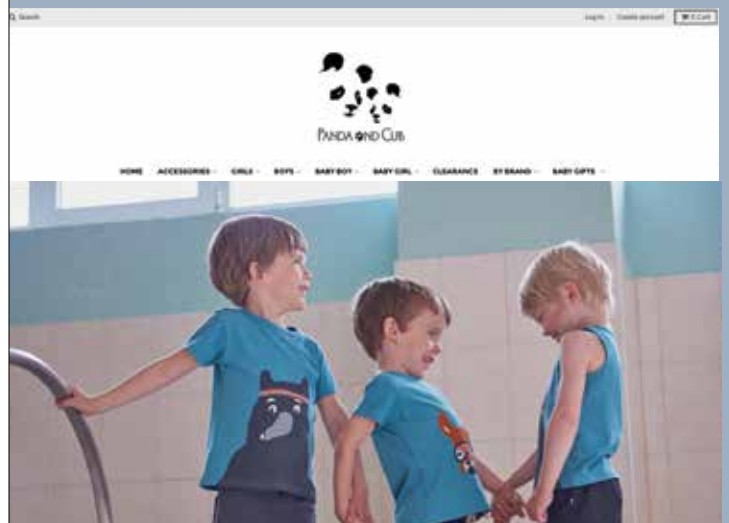
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honest people, they apprised the bank of its mistake. The bank responded (like no bank in history before or since) that since they had made the mistake, they would stand by it, and the couple had to pay back only \$10,000. Just as the wife saw that the financial debacle had come from Hashem, so she saw that the salvation also came from Hashem. And, she told me, she felt that it was Hashem's rewarding her for not blaming her husband

Knowing that the world is run by an all-powerful, all-knowing and loving G-d Who gives you what is best for you spiritually is the key to both a good life and a good marriage.

The Surrendered Wife stops criticizing her husband so that he will worship and adore her. The Jewish wife stops criticizing her husband because it is the will of Hashem that we not hurt other people (including our husbands) with words, the sin of *onaas devarim*.

The Surrendered Wife chooses to follow that system because Laura Doyle promises that the six intimacy skills "are *fun* practices, like taking naps, hanging out with your

girlfriends, thinking about what you want, and getting special treatment." The Jewish wife chooses connection with her husband because she wants to live in what Rav Wolbe calls the *Olam Hayedidus*, the World of Connection—the sublime spiritual dimension which he explains (in his book by that name) is the goal of all the *mitzvos* of the Torah.

The Surrendered Wife practices receiving because, as Laura Doyle says, "the more you're willing to receive gifts, compliments, and help from your husband, the more feminine and attractive you'll be to him and the more special treatment you'll get." The Jewish wife practices receiving because the Jewish ideal is for the wife to be the *mekabel*, receiving help, gifts, compliments, and advice, which leaves room for her husband to fulfill the masculine ideal of the *mashpia*.

The Surrendered Wife practices "self-care" because "if you devote yourself to your own enjoyment and delight, you'll not only have more reserves to deal with everyday upsets, you'll also become more attractive and pleasant so that you start to resemble the woman your husband fell in love with." The Jewish wife takes care of herself because Judaism

teaches that there are three basic relationships—between you and Hashem, between you and another person, and between you and yourself—and none of them should be neglected. Hillel taught his disciples when he was on his way to take a bath that taking care of one's body is a *mitzvah*. Taking care of one's psychological health is no less so.

When my friend Elisheva told me she intended to start teaching the Surrendered Wife system in Ramat Eshkol, she added that she had hesitated because the system does not have rabbinic approval. Then her husband told her it wasn't necessary. She wouldn't be teaching Torah; she had a master's degree in social work and she would be teaching techniques for creating a better marriage.

Doesn't that make sense? If Laura Doyle's techniques and tools are effective, what's wrong with using them in your marriage? After all, no one needs a rabbinic endorsement to teach cooking or accounting or painting.

The answer is that, unlike cooking, accounting, or painting, marriage is the *Kodesh Hakodashim*, the Holy of Holies. Judaism is

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