

“I truly feel it’s tragic that so many frum wives follow Laura Doyle when they could be using a Torah-based method that has proven life-changing for literally hundreds of frum women. I get emails all the time from Keshet Wife Club members, telling me how their marriages have improved and they wish they had my tools when they got married 25 or 35 years ago. So it would be a kiddush Hashem for you to give my Keshet Wife webinar equal time with Laura Doyle.” -Sara Yoheved Rigler

To get Sara Yoheved Rigler's FREE Marriage Workshop, call: (718) 395-7525 or email jewishworkshops@jewishworkshops.com.

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Is the Surrendered Wife a Jewish Wife?

Sara Yoheved Rigler

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. Afterwards, Tefilla told me that this book was the best thing that had ever happened to her marriage. She was enthusiastic about spreading its principles and tools.

Also present at that table was Rebbetzin Raizy Auerbach, daughter-in-law of Rav Shlomo Zalman, z”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, she returned it to Tefilla with the words, “The points the author makes are good. But you can’t teach *Yiddishe nashamas* from a *goyishe* book. You should write your own Jewish version of the book.”

“B-but I’m not a writer,” Tefilla sputtered.

“Then get Sara Yoheved Rigler to do it,” was Rebbetzin Auerbach’s decisive reply.

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 their 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.”

To my crestfallen reaction, he continued, “Start giving workshops on marriage. Then women will confide in you. Then you’ll have material for a book.”

I set about creating the Keshet Wife Workshop for Women, with basic ideas from *The Surrendered Wife*, but amplified with the Torah I had learned during 25 years of Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller’s weekly classes in my home, 16 years of Mussar Vaad and Mussar classes (Rav Leib Kelemen’s first Mussar Vaad started in my living room), Racheli Miller’s life-changing *Shalom Bayis* lessons, and my own God-given gift of turning lofty concepts into practical tools (as exemplified in my book *Battle Plans: How to Fight the Yetzer Hara*, with Rebbetzin Heller). I included the Rambam’s teachings on respecting one’s husband. Choosing the word “keshet,” meaning connection, I based much of the workshop on Rav Shlomo Wolbe’s teachings about the *El Zar* [the force of estrangement], with Rav Wolbe’s emphasis on the crucial importance of choosing connection. I incorporated proven methods for self-change I had learned in Mussar Vaad. I had bigger-than-life-size, humorous portraits made of “You’re Wrong Rhonda,” “Better Way Betty,” and “I’ll Just Do It Doris.” I wrote scripts for workshop participants to act out typical husband-wife interchanges—while driving, while preparing to go to a wedding, when facing a big financial loss, etc.—in order to illustrate “the wrong way” and “the right way.” I printed out handouts. I devised props, such as three pairs of glasses with different labels on the lenses to illustrate how the way we look at something determines what we see. Armed with what my husband called my “Road Show,” I started flying around the world in a crusade to improve Jewish marriages.

I gave the Keshet Wife Workshop to almost 2,000 women on five continents. Women felt empowered by it because, like *The Surrendered Wife*, it put the success of the marriage squarely in the hands of the wife. After years, sometimes decades, of trying to change their husband, most wives (reluctantly) agreed with our foundational principle: “The only person you can change is yourself.” Yet they felt empowered by our axiom’s second half: “But when you change yourself, you change your marriage.”

The workshop also taught 13 practical tools that women could implement in their marriages. I promised that if wives used the tool called, “Don’t commit the 3 Cins—Criticizing, Correcting, and Controlling your husband,” their marriages would radically improve in just a couple weeks. Women, surprised and enthusiastic, got back to me that it indeed worked!

By that point, I no longer wanted to write a book about marriage. As I told ArtScroll’s Shmuel Blitz, “A book is too flat. I want to produce a multi-media kit—with a CD of my dramatized scripts, big color pictures of ‘You’re Wrong Rhonda,’ and the others, and workbooks.”

Mr. Blitz demurred. “ArtScroll knows how to do what it does best—produce books.” He wasn’t interested in a multi-media kit.

When one door closes, however, Hashem Yisborach opens another. Scarcely a month later, Rabbi Yosef Levy of Jewish E-Books asked to meet with me. He wanted to start offering webinars (online meetings with visual components and other hi-tech features such as students typing in questions, polls, and “hand-raising”). I agreed to give the Keshet Wife Workshop in four parts and a follow-up weekly webinar. It became the flagship class of Jewish Workshops, which now offers weekly webinars by Rabbi Akiva Tatz, Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller, and Dr. Miriam Adahan. Webinar technology permits me to sit in my home in the Old City of Jerusalem and teach women in Australia, England, South America, Europe, South Africa, and throughout North America and Israel.

And that’s how this writer unexpectedly became an “expert” in a spiritual approach to marriage. No one was more surprised than me.

In the initial stages of composing the Keshet Wife Workshop, I turned to my Mussar rebbe, Rabbi Leib Kelemen, for *haskama*. I told him I wanted to produce a Jewish, Torah-based version of *The Surrendered Wife*. Rabbi Kelemen was familiar with *The Surrendered Wife*, which by that time was circulating widely in the *frum* world. He told me, “*The Surrendered Wife* is *krum*. The whole system is based on what you can get for yourself. The motivation of the surrendered wife is to take rather than give.”

Indeed, Laura Doyle’s subsequent book, *Things Will Get as Good as You Can Stand*, has as its subtitle, *When you learn that it is better to receive than to give*. The advertising for *The Surrendered Wife* brandishes its goal: to “become 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, the basic life choice is between being a giver and being 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, ego self, and become 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 approach that, given the right tools, a wife can single-handedly transform her marriage. However, unlike Laura Doyle’s goal, “You’ll return to being the Goddess of Fun and Light, just like you were when you first fell in love,” the goal of Keshet Wife is a Jewish goal: to grow spiritually and become closer to Hashem through your 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 five of these six skills (all except Vulnerability) are major components of the Keshet Wife system. In fact, membership in the Keshet Wife webinar comes with two key workshops: the Gratitude Workshop and the True Self Esteem Workshop. So if the skill set of the Surrendered Wife is similar to the skill set of the Keshet Wife, why not go with the former?

The answer is that the biggest lack of 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 just---everything.

Ironically, although the word "God" appears only once in Laura Doyle's newest book (in the "Serenity Prayer"), three times she refers to, "The Goddess of Fun and Light," meaning the woman who utilizes her system. For example, after telling wives not to "help" their husbands by telling them how to do things, which undermines the husbands' self-respect, she writes: "Over time, I've come to appreciate that it's actually more enjoyable to be the Goddess of Fun and Light than it is to be the woman who knows everything." Although her point about not telling your husband how to do things is apt (and in the Keshet Wife system "correcting" one's husband is one of the 3 Cins), when you take G-d out of the picture and instead make the star of the show "the Goddess of Fun and Light," meaning yourself, you are on very shaky ground.

The absence of G-d in the Surrendered Wife system is a fatal flaw, because we Jews believe that G-d is the only operative force in the universe. And although human beings such as husbands have free will, what happens to us, including how much we will suffer and how much money we'll gain or lose, is decided by Hashem on Rosh Hashana and sealed on Yom Kippur.

In the three years that I've been giving the Keshet 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.

(The Keshar Wife webinar is NOT for women in physically or emotionally abusive marriages.) They suffer from husbands who can't keep a job and who nevertheless refuse to help around the house while the wife works fulltime. 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 by even the best skills. The only way to deal with these realities is to, as Rebbetzin Heller always says, "Put Hashem in the picture." Any picture without Hashem is a distorted picture, because HASHEM IS THE ONLY OPERATIVE FORCE IN THE UNIVERSE.

From a Torah perspective, the wife who blames her husband for his limitations is like the Talmudic metaphor of the dog that is being beaten by a man with a stick. The dog grabs onto the stick, unaware that it is the man who is wielding the stick. 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 physical world. As Rabbi Ezriel Tauber once told me, "No one stands under the chuppah with the wrong person—even if they later get divorced."

This paradigm turns conventional marriage wisdom on its head. While everyone aspires to a happy, peaceful marriage, problems are inevitable when two different persons from two different families live together in the closest proximity. 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 be faced with 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 whom 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. Both Surrendered Wife and Keshar Wife endorse giving the husband control in such matters. So you go with Jim. Your husband gives

him \$10,000 to go 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 cellphone. You have no idea where he lives or how to find him. Even if you could find him, the specter of paying legal fees to sue him, when you have no receipt, adds to the anguish of losing your dream kitchen. So how do you spend the next years of using your dilapidated kitchen without resenting your husband?

In the Surrendered Wife system, giving your husband control of the finances is sacrosanct. Laura Doyle, in the early chapters of *The Surrendered Wife*, relates the story of how, after years of handling the finances and paying the bills, she turned the whole job over to her husband. The result was that he didn't pay the electric bill on time, and their electricity was turned off. In a panic, she ran to the electric company and wrote a check (without even knowing how much was in their checking account) to cover the bill plus penalties and interest fees. She ends the tale by writing: "Fortunately, my husband, like most, is a quick learner and he's never made a mistake paying the utility bills again."

But what if he has ADD, and he never pays the utility bills on time? What if the loss is more than a couple hundred dollars, such as in the kitchen scene described above? The Surrendered Wife has no tool for swallowing a huge or repeated loss.

When you put G-d into the picture, however, it becomes a totally different picture. A huge financial loss? In the script for the Keshet Wife Workshop, the "wrong way" reaction of the wife to losing her dream kitchen is to yell at her husband. The "right way" script ends like this:

Wife: 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, that this kind of major loss must be a kapora in some way. I learned that how much money we gain or lose in a year is decreed on Rosh Hashana. And I'd rather lose the money than your health or my health. I'd rather be with you in our old kitchen than, God forbid, have a spanking new kitchen without you.

Workshop participants always responded to this too-sweet-to-be-real speech with an unbelieving, "Ah, how maudlin!" expression until a woman

approached me at the end of one workshop in New Jersey. She told me that a similar situation had happened to her. She had inherited \$10,000 from her grandfather, which at that time was a lot of money. 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 was all his. But she actually believed that how much money we gain or lose is determined by Hashem on Rosh Hashana. She also believed that financial loss is a *kapora*, and that Hashem decreed this for them rather than the much worse loss of her husband's or her children's health. So rather than resenting her husband, she comforted him and thanked Hashem that it was only money—money they could ill afford and had no way to repay, but a much easier *kapora* 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 computer omitted a "0," referring to their debt of \$10,000 rather than \$100,000. Scrupulously honest people, they appraised 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 on their mistake, 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 Keshet Wife stops criticizing her husband because it is the will of Hashem that we not hurt other people (including our husband) with words, the sin of *onaas devorim*.

The Surrendered Wife chooses to follow that system because Laura Doyle promises: "The good news is 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 Keshet Wife chooses connection with her husband because she wants to live in what Rav Wolbe called the *Olam HaYedidus* [World of Connection], the sublime spiritual dimension which Rav Wolbe explains (in his book by that name) is the goal of all the mitzvahs of the Torah.

The Surrendered Wife practices receiving because, as Laura Doyle writes: “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 Keshet Wife practices receiving because the Jewish ideal is for the wife to be the *m’kabel*, 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 Keshet Wife gives herself “self-care” because Judaism teaches that there are three basic relationships (between you and Hashem, between you and your fellow person, and between you and yourself), and none of them should be neglected. As Hillel taught his disciples when he was on his way to take a bath, taking care of one’s body is a mitzvah. Taking care of one’s psychological health is no less so.

When my Kollel wife friend Elisheva told me she intended to start teaching the Surrendered Wife system in Ramat Eshkol, she added that she had hesitated because the Surrendered Wife has no *haskama* [rabbinic approval]. Then her husband told her that it wasn’t necessary. She wouldn’t be teaching Torah; she has a Masters degree in Social Work and she would be teaching techniques for 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 *Kadosh Kadoshim*, the Holy of Holies. Judaism is the religion of Oneness, and as much as we might love our children, our parents, and our friends,

only in marriage can we achieve the true oneness that reflects the Divine Oneness. The Jewish ideal of marriage is that the relationship between husband and wife can actually draw the *Shechinah*, the Divine Presence, into the world and into one's home. Settling for any less is like living in a shanty when you could be living in the King's palace.

Because of its exalted potential, having not just a peaceful marriage or a good marriage but a great marriage is a great challenge. The obstacles are legion. A wife's negative reaction to her husband's leaving his socks on the floor or a husband's negative reaction to his wife's tardiness can turn the potential *Gan Eden* into an ordinary, weed-infested backyard.

In Mussar class once, Rav Kelemen was speaking about the importance of choosing connection. He said that if we choose a relationship of lesser connection over a relationship of greater connection, we are in fact choosing disconnection. He gave as an example: "If, at the end of Maariv, I stop to schmooze with a friend instead of going home to spend time with my wife, I'm actually choosing disconnection."

Smugly I raised my hand. "But we women are more bonded with our friends. So if at the end of this class I stop to schmooze with a friend instead of going home to my husband, then I'm really choosing connection with my friend."

The Rav frowned. "No," he explained. "You're choosing disconnection, because every relationship has a connection potential. The connection potential with your friend is much less than the connection potential with your husband."

"Oh, I get it. The Rav is saying that let's say the connection potential with my friend is 20, and with my parents is 40, and with my children is 60, then with my husband it's 100."

"No," the Rav corrected me. "I'm saying that the connection potential with your friend is 20, and with your parents is 40, and with your children is 60, and with your husband it's 100,000."

The motto of the Keshet Wife Webinar is: "My marriage is the most important thing in my life." No matter how well you care for your children, how much chesed you do in the community, or how much time you devote

to your prayers, working on your marriage should be the keystone of your spiritual life. Hashem Yisborach launched human history by providing a wife for Adam. Marriage should not be just one of the too-many things that demand your time and attention. Permit me to embellish a phrase coined by the editor of *Ami Living*: Marriage matters the most.