

The Proper Role of a Jewish Wife

By Adara Peskin-Shalem

A woman I know, who has gone through some of the most horrific and sickening spousal abuse I can imagine, reached out to me for support, crying because she had just [read an article](#) talking about Jewish marriage and submitting to your husband's will. She was asking herself if maybe she had been a better wife and pleased her husband more, he would have treated her better.

Of course, whenever people write such things, they claim that their advice isn't meant for people in abusive marriages, but as I wrote in my previous article on the subject, many people in abusive marriages don't realize that they are being abused and even if they realize it, they still blame themselves and such articles and books reinforce their beliefs, in addition to the fact that the dynamics recommended are generally themselves abusive.

There is an unfortunate trend in the Orthodox community that [touts lines and ideas from the 'Surrendered Wife' as Torah](#), but it is anything but. In the Torah, husband and wife were equal partners, not a woman keeping quiet and letting her husband have his way as 'head of the household'.

Unfortunately, throughout history and especially in our current exile, terrible backwards mentalities of the outside world have seeped their way into Jewish writing and thoughts. Even Greek culture, which we celebrate defeating on Chanukah, has inundated our lives on a regular basis. (Even the commonly-used word 'narcissistic' is from Greek mythology.) This has been a theme throughout the generations. The Rambam, for example, only allowed women to leave their homes at most once or twice per month (Hilchot Ishut, 13:11) and allowed them to be beaten if they didn't listen to their husbands (Ishut 21:10), ideas borrowed from the Arab Muslim culture of those days (Abd al Qadir commentary on Koran 4:33).

Today there is a different influence on 'Jewish teachings' and culture; many of the foreign concepts making their way into Judaism are ideas borrowed from fundamentalist Christian ideology. One of the biggest influences from Christianity on current Jewish society is the idea of submission in marriage, a factor in the proliferation of Jewish support for the ideologies of "Surrendered Wife" and their ilk. Submitting to your husband's will is literally from the Christian Bible and not the Torah.

In the Christian Bible, Ephesians Chapter 5, states: "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ

is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything."

Judaism, on the other hand, has a drastically different view when it comes to the role of a Jewish woman and wives. At no point in the Torah are women shown to be docile women subservient to their husbands.

Eishet Chayil, the psalm about a virtuous woman and wife, considered by many to be the blueprint of an ideal Jewish marriage, says about the husband and wife relationship, "Piha patcha b'chochma", she opens her mouth in wisdom, and "batach ba lev baala", her husband trusts her judgment. The ideal Eishet Chayil speaks up to her husband and he listens to her.

Starting from the very beginning of our history, we have Eve tell Adam what to do in the Garden of Eden and he listens to her (even though he shouldn't have taken her advice in this instance.)

We then have Sarai who, in Genesis 16, tells her husband, Abram, to take Hagar as a concubine so that he may have children. And he does so. Then in Chapter 21, she tells Abraham to send away Ishmael and Hagar because of his bad influence on Isaac and though it was hard for Abraham, God clearly tells him, "Kol asher tomar elecha Sarah, shma b'kola", "Everything Sarah says to do, listen to her."

This continues on throughout the Bible.

When Rebecca saw that Isaac was going to give the birthright to Esau who she felt was not deserving of it, she helped Jacob deceive his father so he would get the birthright instead (Genesis 27).

When Rachel is infertile, she tells Jacob to take Bilha as a concubine, so that she can raise her children as her own and build a family through her. Jacob does so. (Genesis 30.) Rachel also stole her father Laban's idols, without the approval of Jacob. (Genesis 31.)

We have the story of Tamar who tricked Judah into sleeping with her so that she can conceive the child that she rightfully was meant to have, and then after Judah publicly castigated her for her actions, publicly announced "Tzadka mimeni", she was more righteous than I am. And from this union, King David came, as will the eventual Messiah.

In Judges, Chapter 4, we read about two powerful Jewish women. In this chapter we see that Deborah was both a prophetess and a leader of the Jewish people at the time. At her behest, the Jewish people go out to war against the Canaanite army led by Sisera. During the battle, a Jewish woman named Yael hid him, gave him milk until he fell asleep, and hammered a tent peg into his head, which caused them to win the battle and, later, the war.

In the book of Ruth, Chapter 3, we see Ruth going to the Jewish leader Boaz in the middle of the night, to tell him that he was to marry her, as was his obligation. He did so, and they had a son, and from that union, King David's grandfather was born.

During the exile in Persia, during a time where the prevailing culture was so anti women that the Queen Vashti was killed so that no one might imitate her and dare stand up to their husbands (Esther, Chapter 1), Jewish Queen Esther initiated reaching out to her husband Ahasuerus, knowing that she was risking death by doing so, in order to save the Jewish people.

During the story of Chanukah, we have the story of the woman Judith who takes the initiative and seduces Holofernes, before beheading him, saving the Jewish people from the invading army. (Judith, Chapter 13).

Judaism has many, many, many more references to women taking initiative and standing up to men doing the wrong thing. Examples of this are Miriam telling her father Amram that he was doing wrong by separating from his wife, to avoid birthing another son that would be thrown in the Nile, influencing all the other Jews to do so, and Amram listening to her, remarrying his wife and conceiving the redeemer Moses (Sota 12b). The righteous Jewish slave women in Egypt were credited for being the cause of the redemption of the Jewish people, since they took the initiative and seduced their exhausted husbands, and then did their part to protect their children from the Egyptians by hiding them in the fields (Sotah 11b). When the men of Israel were trying to create the Golden Calf, the men asked their wives to contribute their jewelry, to which they refused (Exodus 32).

It is said that "Chochmat nashim banta beita", the wisdom of women builds homes (Mishlei 14), and we see this time after time after time in Jewish history, throughout Jewish sources since the very start. The way women build a home is by standing up, speaking out, making their thoughts and opinions known, taking initiative, and definitely not by shutting up, nullifying their will, and making themselves subservient to their husbands. This is not a Jewish ideal and it is so sad that so many people have internalized problematic Christian theology to the point of thinking that that is the Jewish

stance. Judaism believes in strong and vocal women, and it's time for the problematic voices in religious Jewish society to return to true Jewish values and views of women's roles.