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Sunday, December 19, 1999 10 Tevet 5760 Updated Sun., Dec. 19 12:05

Reply to "Looking for a Real Man"

Chaya Elana Uriel HaCohen Irvine California USA (17 Dec 1999)

michael.s.laham@boeing.com

Regarding the article "Looking for a real man" in your column "From a Distance" by Naomi Ragen, dated 2 December 1999, I would like to share the following experience I had as an Orthodox Jewess living in Los Angeles, California, USA, with you, Naomi Ragen, Jere Finer, Shifra Finer, and all other Orthodox Jewish women who have suffered abuse.

By the grace of G-d at 36 years of age, I finally got married for the first time. Even though I had been diligently dating and looking for an Orthodox Jewish man, so that I could build a family, for sixteen years in Israel, New York, and finally Los Angeles, I was unsuccessful. I was unsuccessful because every community to which I went for help in finding a spouse either (a) refused even to set me up with potential lifetime partners or (b) set me up with unstable men. It was a known fact that I was to be ostracized via gossip throughout the communities for the simple reason that I was poor. I know this because my friends heard the gossip and told me about it. I was poor living in America, and poor even by Israeli standards. The irony of this "reason" was that I had given up a career and thousands of dollars in scholarship money awarded to me for a secular college education, in favor of getting married and raising a proper Orthodox Jewish family, on the advice given to me by Rabbis. I was what is called a ba'alat teshuva (a Jewess who returns to the Jewish religion) and sincerely wanted to be an Orthodox Jewess and so I followed their advice. Instead of going back to school, I took odd jobs to support myself while looking for a potential husband.

I lived in the Orthodox Jewish Community in Los Angeles, California for eleven years in pursuit of marriage and was so severely ostracized via gossip that I finally contacted one of the Rabbis who was a leader in that community and requested of him a Beit Din (rabbinical court) in order to stop my reputation from continually being ruined simply because I was financially limited. I could not get a date not only in the Los Angeles Fairfax Community, where I lived, but also in other parts of California, such as Pico-Robertson (West Los Angeles), Santa Monica, San Diego, Palo Alto, the entire Bay Area, etc. The gossip was so bad that whenever I contacted a shadchen (matchmaker) whom I never even met before, the shadchen refused to help me as soon as he or she heard my name.

However, the Rabbi whom I contacted refused to set up a Beit Din on some explanation rooted in English Common Law (!), not halacha (Jewish law), that he could not do anything about these Jews speaking lashon hara' (evil slander) about me because he claimed they were involved in their own private actions. I fail to see what this had to do with individuals gossiping about me and causing me to be unable to get a shiddach (date) and thus get married. In addition, halacha clearly states that lashon hara' is forbidden for a Jew for any reason (See Parasha Kidosheem, Leviticus 19:16).

If this Rabbi would have set up a Beit Din to put a halt to the lashon hara' and the blackballing of my reputation for no good reason, I probably would have been able to get married at a much earlier age and would have been able to have children, of which the Orthodox Jewish Community is always clamoring that they need more, because they claim to need more numbers of Orthodox Jews to populate this Earth. I believe that the only reason I got married at all, under these circumstances, was because (a) I drove G-d mashuga' (crazy) with my prayers for marriage, (b) my husband had recently begun his own teshuva (return to the Jewish religion) and was new to the Orthodox Jewish Community, and (c) he had not yet had the unfortunate opportunity to hear any lashon hara' about my

person.

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I grieve for Jere Finer, Shifra Finer, and all of the Orthodox Jewish women who have had to endure abuse at the hands of so-called Orthodox men who fail to live by the very Jewish Codes which they study daily, because I know what it is like to be abused. My abuse came in the form of getting married at too old of an age to have any children because of the lashon hara' that the Rabbis refused to stop with a Beit Din. Even though my husband and I have tried persistently for the last five years of our late marriage to have a child, we have not been able to.

I want to thank Naomi Ragen, and the Orthodox Jewish women for standing up with a voice against the kinds of atrocities that are being committed today in the Orthodox Jewish Communities because we have become fanatic about whose hechsher (kosher certification) is on the kosher chicken we eat instead of focusing our energies on menschkeit (morals and ethics), which is supposed to be the heart of the Orthodox Jewish religion.

Thank you for reading this editorial.



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Thursday, December 2, 1999 23 Kislev 5760 Updated Thu., Dec. 02 12:28

FROM A DISTANCE: Looking for a real man

By Naomi Ragen

(December 2) Of all the great Torah scholars, is there no one to stand up and be a man in a place where there are no men? This is a tale of two sisters-in-law, Jere and Shifra Finer of Baltimore and Monsey.

Why should an Israeli columnist in an Israeli paper be writing about two Americans? Simple. To show that the abusive and immoral treatment of religious women at the hands of the religious community isn't an Israeli original.

It's as American as frozen gefilte fish.

Jere Finer, a religious woman from Baltimore, Maryland, writes me the following:

"My sister-in-law Shifra and I divorced two abusive brothers. Our treatment at the hands of the rabbis and the community has been horrendous. For example, her husband has not yet given her a *get* [religious divorce], yet he is openly living with another supposedly frum woman and her six children, who now wear his own children's clothing and play with their toys.

"Since this woman's children and his own go to the same school, his little eight-year-old is constantly taunted and tortured by this other child. No one in the religious community does anything about it."

When the alleged abuse began, Shifra asked the rabbi of the local yeshiva what to do, and he told her to move out with her children, but not to take any money. At the beginning of the separation, a rabbi decided child-support payments that were so inadequate it left her dependent on charity to feed her children.

Also, as both women found out later, a woman who leaves her husband forfeits her marriage settlement, about \$10,000 to \$15,000. This is the kind of information rabbis know and women don't. Shifra's apartment building is full of such abused haredi women who followed this rabbinical advice.

Despite charges of paternal child abuse, a rabbi decided on joint custody, forcing children aged two to eight to spend each night in a different bed. Though the *beit din* [rabbinical court] ordered her husband to give her a *get*, he refused. No sanctions were imposed on him.

Fed up, penniless, abandoned by the community and the rabbinical courts, Shifra went to civil court. There she finally received some semblance of justice, including increased temporary child support, child custody and supervised visitation for her husband. Incensed at her hutzpa, the *beit din* is now circulating a letter to the effect that Shifra is a traitor for going to civil court, and that her poor husband should be

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helped in any way possible.

JERE has been an aguna for four years. Despite her husband's considerable financial resources, she and her three children were dependent on charity for food. She, too, finally went to the civil court to force some kind of financial settlement. The rabbinical court in Baltimore put her in *herem* (a form of shunning) for it.

As Jere writes: "All I know is that I have to live in this world and that takes money. Tuition for day schools is \$30,000 a year alone. Thankfully, these schools, run by open-minded Orthodox Jews, have been very kind to me. One is taking very little tuition and the other gave me a job - the highest form of tzedaka.

"I want to gather all the stories of women and write a book. The frum world wouldn't publish it. But the embarrassment of publishing it in the secular world is the only thing that could effect a change. I keep hearing about what a desecration of God's name it will be, but isn't all the abuse that's going on a greater desecration?

"I went to rabbis for years for help but none was given. The religious world hides behind Halacha to avoid taking care of its problems. Believe me, I would have rather done this from within the community, but it can't be done. I will take my chances with Hashem since my motives are pure - to help other women in this situation.

"I became observant when I was 12 and I am now 39. What I have seen over the years is a great decline within the Orthodox world. Not in numbers, but rather in the essence of what Torah is. I don't think being arrogant about *cholov yisroel* (cow milk processed by Jews - a kashrut stringency) or putting a baby girl in tights in the summer for modesty is what it's all about. How we behave towards each other is."

A thousand years ago, Rabbenu Gershom decided that the divine law permitting polygamy would expose Jews to disgrace in the world, which no longer permitted it. He changed the biblical law to prevent that.

Isn't there another great rabbi who can rise to the challenge of our age, changing the biblical law that permits Jewish men to hold their wives hostage, to oppress and extort and abuse them by withholding their *get*?

Is there no one to sanctify the name of God and his Torah by ridding the Jewish community of this foul disgrace, this crime that goes against every moral law our Torah stands for and exhorts us to fulfill? Is there no one to make the concept of the aguna a terrible crime of the past? No one to stop the civil courts becoming a refuge of oppressed women fleeing the disgraceful injustices of the rabbinical courts?

Out of all the great gedolim, admorim, and Torah scholars, all the men and boys who are learning and learning, is there no one to stand up and be a man in a place where there are no men? As we light our Hanukka candles, can we all not pray for yet another Jewish victory of the weak over the strong, the oppressed over the oppressors?

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