



## A Delicate Balance: The Role of the *Rebbetzin*

**T**he *rebbetzin's* creed should be similar to that of the physician: "Above all, do no harm." The rest is commentary.

Now for the commentary.

First, a definition: for the purposes of this little exposition, I presume that by the term "*rebbetzin*," we are referring not to the wife of *any* man who has *semichah*, but specifically to the wife of a pulpit rabbi. Unlike any other type of rabbi—day school teacher, scholar, *kollel* student, academician or yeshivah *rebbe*—the pulpit rabbi is a very public figure, subject to the scrutiny, pressures and opinions of hundreds of people.

The wife of such a rabbi is unlike the wife of a CEO, doctor or professor. These wives can all lead relatively private lives, undisturbed by the glare of public attention. The stockholders of a corporation care little about what the wife of the CEO is like. A doctor's patients do not concern themselves with the kind of clothes his wife wears. But the wife of a rabbi is automatically considered to be an adjunct of the rabbi—even though it is only *he* who signed the contract. Who she is and how she interacts with people can affect his work positively or negatively, and can have an impact on her husband's

functioning within the community.

Is this fair? No. Is this a fact of rabbinic life? Yes. A *rebbetzin* often wishes it were not so, that she could live her own life outside the glare of the public eye and that the success of her husband's holy work did not often depend as much on her as on her husband. This is a fond hope. As they say in Israel, "*zeh mah sheyesh*, this is how it is." This is a fact of rabbinic life: a rabbi and a *rebbetzin* are viewed not as separate individuals, but as Siamese twins.

*I wanted to join some badly needed exercise program, but how was I going to do it in a private way? Atlanta (where my husband served as rabbi for four decades) had several swanky Jewish country clubs, frequented primarily by members of the very wealthy Reform community. Since they graciously offered professional courtesy to rabbis and their spouses, I reasoned that if I went there anonymously, my privacy would be assured. I called one of the clubs and asked if it had an exercise program for women. "Wow," came the reply. "Do we ever! We're desperately looking for one more member for our women's tennis team. We play in a league against the other clubs in town, and you don't have to be an expert player to join, because we're in the number-six category, and it doesn't get lower than that. Please join it, because we can't field a team unless we have one more person." I protested that I had not played tennis since I was a teenager, and that I was a forty-year-old grandmother. Came the answer: "Can you*

*walk and carry a tennis racket? Then you're on the team. We play only doubles, so don't worry. We have an excellent coach, and we need you!"*

*When I appeared on the tennis court the next day, despite my wearing a long denim skirt (as opposed to all those other "girls" in their cutesy, pricey mini tennis outfits), I was received as a heroine because I had made it possible for them to play in the league. To the team, I was simply "Estelle."*

*All went well for several weeks. We played the other lower-level teams, and actually won a match or two. But those non-frum teammates of mine really knew how to swear. If they missed a ball, or served a bad one, they expressed their frustration in terms my tender ears had never been exposed to. I expressed my frustrations in my own "kosher" way, and tried to ignore the language around me.*

*Things were great until one day a teammate came running toward me on the court, yelling excitedly: "I know who you are! You're Rabbi Feldman's wife! I saw you with him at that city-wide banquet last night!" My cover blown, there was an uneasy silence all around. I laughed it off, saying, "Well, don't hold it against me. We can still be friends." Everyone smiled, and we went back to our practice.*

*The next two weeks were torture. Everyone tiptoed around me, lady-like, refraining from all those vulgarities that were so normal for them. When someone missed an easy shot, she said something innocuous like "Oh my!" or "Goodness gracious!" I yearned for the*

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*Rebbetzin Feldman is married to Rabbi Emanuel Feldman, who served as rabbi of Atlanta's Beth Jacob Congregation for forty years. The Feldmans currently live in Jerusalem.*

anonymous days when my teammates were relaxed, behaving happily and naturally. Soon enough, they returned to their normal linguistic form. By then, I had made lots of new friends on the team, some of whom I've kept in touch with for years. One of these women subsequently joined our shul and brought along her unsuspecting new husband, who was Reform. In time, they became truly serious Jews, and raised a lovely observant family.

It is obvious, however, that rabbis and their wives begin their public lives from different vantage points. Rabbis know what their task is; they know more or less what is expected of them and what they expect from themselves. They have learned, trained and planned to be rabbis for many years. Although many surprises are in store, as well as unanticipated situations for which no training suffices, rabbis are at least theoretically ready for this kind of life.

In contrast, there are no *yeshivot* for rabbis' wives, no seminaries specializing in *rebbetzin*-hood, not even a short course in "How To Be A *Rebbetzin*." A young woman steps under the *chuppah* with a man who is a rabbi, and presto!—she has become a *rebbetzin*. Yesterday she was an anonymous

bad news about the *rebbetzin's* strange and difficult role. The good news is that she has it in her power to be a major force for good in both her husband's professional life and—more importantly—for Klal Yisrael.

It must be understood that I write here only from a personal perspective. No two synagogues are alike, just as no two rabbis and no two *rebbetzins* are alike. How *Rebbetzin A* conducts herself in the town of B is not necessarily the model for *Rebbetzin C* in the town of D. Nor is the previous *rebbetzin* necessarily the paradigm for the present one. Each *rebbetzin*—like each rabbi and each congregation—is unique and has her own personality and way of doing things.

The unavoidable fact is that the *rebbetzin* is immediately transformed into a model for Jewish womanhood—whether she wants to or not. But as is true of every challenge, it comes wrapped in a package called Opportunity. How a *rebbetzin* does or does not relate to people, her sense of understanding and innate kindness (or lack of it), all reflect upon her husband and his work. She may consider herself a subordinate in her husband's holy work, but in the final analysis her role is as crucial as his. It might be a qui-

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private citizen, and today she has suddenly become a public person. From the day of her wedding on, for as long as her husband occupies a pulpit, she will be admired and criticized, praised and judged, approved of and frowned upon.

In my own case, I was lucky. In my husband's first (and only) pulpit, in Atlanta, I was warmly welcomed by the community, who gave me—a twenty-year-old trying to learn to be a "*rebbetzin*"—much love, patience and understanding. The community gave me the space to grow into my new position slowly and gradually, allowing me to create my own niche at my own pace—for which I am forever grateful.

Not all rabbis' wives are so fortunate. But even in less-fortunate circumstances, there is both good and

eter, less public role—in the spirit of "*kol kevudah bat melech penimah, the glory of the king's daughter is within*" (Psalms 45:14)—but she has a powerful share in her husband's success as a spiritual leader. Because people look up to her, her behavior—such as how she *davens*, how she *bentches*, how she handles crises, how she avoids gossip of any sort, how she maintains confidential and privileged information, and even little things like the way she answers the phone—is a constant Torah lesson for the community around her. All of these actions can potentially be uplifting and inspiring models of behavior; if they are, she has greatly enhanced and advanced the work of the rabbi—which, in the final analysis, is to uplift and inspire more and more Jews.

Thus, in a very real way, precisely

because she is watched and observed, the *rebbetzin* has a golden opportunity to do *melechet Shamayim*. Without giving sermons or teaching classes or writing slogans across the blackboard, she has the possibility, in her own quiet way, to create a *Kiddush Hashem*, a Sanctification of God's name, no less significantly than does her husband.

There are, for example, things that the *rebbetzin* alone can do. She can set a model for how to run a family and a Jewish household. More importantly, she can also set a model for *tzeniut*, modesty. She can show that it is possible to dress stylishly but still maintain the standards of *tzeniut*. Over the years, more than one woman has told me that she was reassured about her choice of a fuller Jewish life when she noticed that one can be a completely observant Jewess and still be very presentable. Beyond this, the *rebbetzin* can demonstrate that modesty is not limited to sleeve lengths, but also includes one's attitudes and ways of talking and behaving in general.

Some women are eminently suited to the role of *rebbetzin*; some are emi-

nently unsuited. Some thrive in the role, others find it restricting. A warm, sympathetic and understanding *rebbetzin* can do much to compensate for a rabbi who is less than perfect. Conversely, a cold, supercilious, aloof *rebbetzin* can undo much of the effective work of an outstanding husband. It is, to say the least, a daunting task.

On a private level, the *rebbetzin* plays a very constructive role in the personal life of the rabbi. She lends him encouragement in times of stress and gives him hope in times of spiritual low points when—as is inevitable in the rabbinate—he occasionally feels that he is butting his head against a stone wall of apathy, convinced that no one cares about being a Jew or that no one is listening.

Furthermore, she can help balance the scales for her husband, reminding him not to take too seriously the hero worship and adulation that often accompany his position, and also to not take too seriously the carping and negativity that can accompany it just as often. Her job is to guide him toward keeping his eye on the ultimate goal: to bring Jews, one by one by one, under the influence of the teachings of Torah.

A wise and sensitive community will be patient with a young *rebbetzin*, allowing her to be her husband's helpmeet and to gradually carve out her own niche within the community. For some *rebbetzins* this niche is a very public one: lecturing, giving adult classes, teaching in Jewish schools, counseling, assisting in every aspect of synagogue life. For others, this niche is more subtle and private. Obviously, the rabbi's wife will be involved with the synagogue sisterhood, offering counsel and guidance when asked. And it goes without saying that—especially in smaller communities—she is the natural resource for education and encouragement about *taharat hamishpachah*, family purity, and the mikvah. Here, too, her contributions can be public—teaching special classes, for example—or private and personal, always depending upon her personality and the needs of the individuals she is dealing with.

*In my early years in Atlanta, when the mikvah was often the object of ridicule and perceived as an old wives' tale on the part of self-styled sophisti-*

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*cated Jewish women, it took great courage for a woman even to show some tentative interest in taharat hamishpachah. One such very modern woman consulted me about going to the mikvah, but made it very clear that absolutely no one in the community could have any inkling of it. I assured her of complete confidentiality. I met her at the mikvah at midnight, after normal hours, with my own keys. The mikvah had a separate entrance, and was connected to the main shul by a special emergency security door. I was familiarizing the woman with the various areas—the changing room, the linen room—when she suddenly went over to the security door, asking what it was. Before I could say, “No, don’t op—” she opened it. Immediately, ear-piercing alarm bells sounded from every direction. I barely managed to hide her in the changing room before I was surrounded by two policemen, three firemen, the shul president, the shul executive director and the sisterhood president. At least the woman’s privacy was assured as I faced the crowd myself.*

When all is said and done, however, the rabbi's wife is entitled to her own life. If she wishes to pursue a career, that is her right. If she wishes to place most of her energies into raising a family, that too is her right—and her duty. Congregants need to bear in mind that she is an independent entity, and is not under contract to the synagogue. She will undoubtedly want to do whatever she can to help the synagogue in various ways, but how she does this is her decision. She should not, for example, be expected to fill the role of an unofficial staff member of the shul, or to be the rabbi's personal secretary. On the other hand, it goes without saying that an effective *rebbetzin* is always accessible and

available to members of the community who wish to consult with her.

Access and availability, however, have their limits. For example, while the rabbi's home needs to be open to guests, particularly on Shabbat, the *rebbetzin* should not be seen as running an open house week after week. I have known rabbis who would often invite ten to twenty people for Shabbat meals—which is lovely for the congregants but grossly unfair to the families. An understanding congregation will not expect the *rebbetzin* to be “the hostess with the mostest” week in and week out. While she and her husband might want to invite guests for a Shabbat meal on many occasions, they are entitled to set aside certain *Shabbatot* for their family alone.

The rabbi has precious little time to spend with his family. His is a 24/7 commitment—especially on Shabbat, when he is under additional stress. Most significantly, the children of rabbis, who also live under great scrutiny and pressure, need more love and attention from their parents to make up for it. Shabbat is the natural time for rabbis and their wives to re-bond with their children, to become fathers and mothers again and to give their children the support and attention that they require.

If I had to do it all over again, would I choose to be a *rebbetzin*? The answer is a definite and clear “yes.” This is, of course, colored by my very positive experience with our special Atlanta community, which was, and remains, a very warm, caring and giving place. To have been part of their sorrows as well as their joys and to have, in a sense, grown up together with them remains a precious privilege that I cherish. But even in a broader and less personal sense, my answer would still be “yes,” because of the opportunity to have been able, in a very small way, to help people understand and appreciate the beauty, majesty and joy that is part and parcel of Torah life. As challenging as it can be to try delicately to balance public and private roles, and as uncomfortable as it is to be constantly in the public eye, I cannot imagine a life more fulfilling, rewarding or satisfying. I am forever grateful to the One Above for having given me that opportunity. ■