

Jewish Divorce Talk

Episode Three – Intimacy Talk

Baer: Hello and welcome to "Jewish Divorce Talk," a show about divorce, separation, co-parenting and other unique considerations that arise when couples divorce in the Jewish world.

On each episode, I'm joined by experts and guests who discuss divorce and related issues from different angles, and give their opinions and perspectives that often challenge the way people view divorce in the Jewish community, countering the stigma and driving for reform. I am your host, Eliana Baer, New Jersey divorce lawyer, and a partner at Fox Rothschild, a national law firm with over a thousand attorneys across 29 offices, offering over 70 diverse services and specialties.

On this episode, I'm joined by Sarah Fraser, founder of the Secrets of Jewish Women. Sarah is a trained, certified and experienced counselor and college teacher, specializing in providing clients with powerful resources for enhanced self-care, self-image and intimacy in marriage. With over 30 years of experience, training, mentoring and teaching clients, Sarah is a trusted scholar in the area of intimacy and relationships within the context of traditional Jewish marriage.

Hi, Sarah. Welcome to the podcast. It's so nice to have you here with me today.

Fraser: Thank you for having me.

Baer: So, I've actually read a lot about you and I've gone through your videos, which are unbelievable and really break down, almost as a science, this issue of intimacy and how to improve a couple's intimate life. And thank you for all the work you're doing, because the way you break it down is just so unbelievable.

I was surprised to learn that you have a really fascinating background, including the fact that you didn't grow up in the Frum community. Can you just tell me a little bit about your background, your experience and how you came to Orthodoxy a little bit later in life?

Fraser: Okay, so, let's start, I guess at around 17. That's a good age to start at.

I did not graduate high school with the class. I had detentions way into the summer. So, suffice to say I was not college material. I became a professional dancer as backup for bands at night, and I went to Leewell School of Ballet in Manhattan during the day. So, it was a bit out of the box.

Baer: That's awesome.

Fraser: Yeah. I also left home at 17 as well, so I was very much on my own. And I remained very, very close to my grandparents. And my grandmother, while I was washing out my Paskin one day, said to me, "What are you gonna do with your life? Like, what are you gonna do?"

So I said, "I don't know. I really don't know what I'm gonna do."

And she says, "Well, you got the hair and you got the makeup, so why don't you become a hairdresser?" So I was like, okay. So, she sent me to hairdressing school and I studied under Paul Mitchell and Vidal Sassoon. So, I'm quite old as you can see. You know that that's a long time ago.

Baer: You're great.

Fraser: I don't even know if they're alive anymore . Yeah, so we did that, and I of course primarily focused on men and men's haircuts. And so I did that for many, many years listening to them sit in the chair complaining about the bald spot and what have you and their wives and everything else.

I did that and then I decided to up it and go into television. And I was trying to get my union card, because that's what hairdressers do in New York. You have to be in a union. So, I was sent to various different locations and I worked at CBS, NBC and what have you.

And then I ended up with the \$64 question from the head of the union, which was, "What are you gonna do for me?" He's like, "You're a nothing. You're a nobody. Your father doesn't own Fabergé." So, I knew at that point that I was finished. Because I wasn't gonna do anything with this thing. You should have seen it. And I just got up and walked out and I realized that I either had to go to California to continue being a hairdresser, 'cause I didn't wanna go back into the salons, and I really didn't know what to do.

So, I was reading a book, James Michener's *The Source*, and it was all about Israel and the architectural structures. So, I decided to go there and go look up, you know, and see soldiers. They sounded like they were really cute.

And so I went there and I ended up one day walking around in Jerusalem, and ended up at the Jaffa Gate. And this really nice guy came over to me with a three-piece suit on with a bunch of these people, I guess worked for him, and asked me if I had a place for Shabbat. And I'm like, "I don't even know what that is. Like what is Shabbat?" He goes, "You don't know what Shabbat is?" I said, "No, I don't know what Shabbat is. Tell me what Shabbat is."

So he comes to my kibbutz and he picks me up with the car and the suitcases and he takes me to Neve Yerushalayim. And I get to meet Rabbi Leff. I walk in there with the hair and the jeans and the platform shoes and the whole nine yards and I asked him, "You're gonna let me live here?"

He says, "Yes, you can live here." I said, "You're gonna gimme food?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Well, what do I have to do for this? What is it? Go ahead. Let me have it."

Baer: " What's the catch?"

Fraser: Yeah, there's gotta be something wrong with this. He said, "No, you just have to show up at eight o'clock every morning and go to the classes."

So I did. I got up every morning at eight o'clock to Rabbi Rokeach's Halakhah classes. And I did this every day, and I became part of the Neve Yerushalayim family with Rebbetzin Heller and all of them. They just became my family.

And I eventually ended up meeting my husband, Zev, and I had my four children. At that point I opened up my own cosmetology school in Jerusalem. It was called the Jerusalem Cosmetology Institute. And I dealt primarily with the 17-year-olds that were coming to Israel on their break after high school. Before college, they go to Jerusalem to get a Jewish education.

I started seeing things that I really didn't know how to cope with. Some very, very, very bad stuff and a lot of depression and anxiety. It was very bad. I saw that they were like, cutting and throwing up. It was a lot of kleptomania. It just was nonstop. And I didn't understand what I was looking at, so I went to Rabbi Leff's Institute of Narrative Therapy to become a therapist. And I got trained by Rebbetzin Tehilla Abramov as a college teacher so I could get more updated myself into what I was seeing with these kids.

And that's basically how I started. Dealing with weight loss issues, and I had tremendous amounts of clientele because I wasn't only dealing with students and classes, I was dealing with the models because in my school we didn't work on the dolls. I gave out free services. So, I had a lot of people coming in there. And they would send me problematic couples and women that were struggling with sexual issues in their marriages because they didn't quite know how to deal with it.

And you know, I had come from the schmutz and have a college degree in schmutz. So, it's like they came to me and that's what I did.

Baer: Wow. That is one of the most interesting stories I've ever heard. I mean, the way that you drew, I guess, on your prior knowledge and your prior experiences, it seems like really informed the way that you developed as a professional and developed your career in the Jewish community.

What specifically drew you to almost specialize in the area of Jewish intimacy?

Fraser: So, even though I was dealing with a lot of different issues, psychological issues, and as I said to you, it came not only the kids coming from abroad, but it came from married women also. And I started noticing that the fundamental, root problem was the sexual part of the marriage. So rather than deal with it individually, weight loss or depression and all that-- also, it was much more interesting to me to deal with it on the sexual level. I found that the sessions were much swifter. And it wasn't like this ongoing, continuous, he said, she said and the fighting and the whole... like it got rid of the whole thing because we were dealing primarily with this particular part here. It was really instruction and education that they lacked from the get-go.

When they first started out there wasn't a focus, especially with the men, cognitively, on how to control themselves, you know, prior to this encounter that they were gonna have that they'd never had before. Of course this is gonna get messed up, you know?

And it was just unbelievable. It really was. And I think it's a very important thing that we all get on top of and that's why I'm doing what I'm doing.

Baer: Absolutely. And eventually, obviously you made your way back to the United States and you started this valuable resource, really, the Secrets of Jewish Women. Can you tell me a little bit about what that is and how you came to start that organization?

Fraser: The mission is primarily focused on having a place where couples or, you know, singles or just about anybody can come and be in a non-judgmental environment. Because, to have people telling you what to do... I feel like people need to open up and they can't, if they're getting judged and being criticized and what have you. So, I would have to say that it's openness. And people want the education. They wanna know, they really do, but they don't want it rammed down their throat. And they're very conflicted because of the things that they learned in school. There's a lot of halakhah and there's a lot of things that they're encountering within a personal relationship that they're very conflicted over.

And so, I'm not a Rav and I don't **costume** Halakhah. They have to have a Rav. I help them find somebody that's on their path. Because not all Rabbeim or you know, can give over. That speaks to a person personally. So I help them do that. I help them find people to speak to and we fix the problem.

Baer: Yeah, and it seems like there's really a void in that regard in the Jewish community. What you do seems to be, to me, so unique. I haven't encountered anybody else doing what you're doing.

Did you specifically note that void and then attempt to address it with Secrets of Jewish Women?

Fraser: Yeah, I do. Because a lot of kallahs when they're gonna get married, they start fishing around for kallah teachers. And so, I hear from them why they're not finding the right fit and what the friends have said about this one and all that. And they're just not getting the straightforward gaps filled in and the direct truth about what to do.

They want practical ways of dealing with things and they wanna be informed. They want to have a close relationship with their husbands and they don't know what to do. Sometimes, you have to physically show them, which is out of the box on a lot of levels. But you know, you establish a relationship. By the end of the time you're teaching them, they trust you. They realize you're not some wacko, and you have to sometimes physically show them so that they understand what they have to do. They just don't know, and they've gotta be taught. And so do the boys.

Baer: Absolutely. And I note that you offer many workshops, many diverse workshops that help couples develop this skillset.

Can you tell me a little bit what you offer and how they're basically targeted to affect this type of change that you're trying to bring about within the firm community?

Fraser: So, I have workshops for couples. And so what is that? I speak to her on the phone. Because they're able to express themselves when they're not face-to-face with you. So, I think the phone is the best way to go in the beginning, especially about this topic since it's so hard to talk about.

So, I get her on the phone first. And then I talk to him. And they're very communicative and they open up on the phone. And they become more vulnerable on the phone. Which is good because you know, they're right there.

And then I see her. And then I could tell, where's the rigidity? What's wrong here with this picture? What's happening here with her sexually? And then I bring the two of them in together. And yes, we get

on the mat, on the floor-- dressed, everybody's dressed, calm down. And I see exactly what's going on. And it's so easy to diagnose it if it's in front of you.

And they walk outta here with homework, to go try this, that and the other thing. And they let me know how it worked out, what I said. "That wasn't right. We tried this, we tried that, we do this, we do that." And then I usually see her again. I don't generally get to see him again because it's like we're done.

Baer: Right.

Fraser: You know what I mean? And this isn't this long, heart-rendering therapy. It's just like, this is it. Sometimes it's just a mechanical problem.

Baer: And the way that you do it is just so unique and so blunt in terms of your verbiage, in terms of your descriptions. Certainly like nothing else I've ever encountered.

And it must be so difficult, because in the Jewish community, we tend to stigmatize these issues and tend to keep them very under wraps and very secretive. Don't talk about this. Don't talk about that. Even to the point where anatomical body parts are typically described as, poo poo, peepee, whatever it is, in everything possible to avoid these terms.

So, how do you overcome that stigma that, I mean, we all have to acknowledge exists within the Jewish community. How do you overcome that and just get people to ease up and be more comfortable?

Fraser: Well, that's it right there. You ease them up and make them comfortable, and then you just say it as it is. And then you hear them coming back at you with actually intelligent questions, using terms that relate to the body parts. Like, we're all talking about the same thing and there's actual understanding and communication here.

And being educated just fixes it. I really think, since this is what I saw in my school, you need to start in the graduating class of both the Yeshiva and the seminaries. And I think the parents need to insist that there needs to be classes given on the subject from an experienced person.

You know, they don't like that exactly, because it doesn't really fit the box, but who else is going to be able to give it over properly?

Baer: Absolutely.

Fraser: They haven't had, fortunately for them, the unfortunate experience of being out there. So, it's like it has to come from a person who has the experience. Where else is it gonna come from? So how do I deal with it? I just do.

Baer: Right. You just go for it.

Fraser: Yeah. We just talk about it. It's a relief. They're relieved. I see relief on their face when they leave. Sometimes you cry after. It's a relief.

Baer: Absolutely. And do you view this as the biggest, I guess, challenge facing the Orthodox world in terms of intimacy issues? The lack of education, the lack of knowledge, the lack of proper terminology use? Because I suppose it's a cyclical issue with a self-perpetuating issue. Do you see that as a challenge and is it a surmountable challenge?

Fraser: I think the Frum community has done a great job of keeping the internet out of their homes. I do. I really do. The trouble with it is, is that at some point these kids are gonna venture out. Everybody's gotta go to work, everybody's gonna get touched with the over exposure and that's what I saw in my school.

They come out of the bubble. And they come out of this secure environment. And they don't know how to deal with it. I don't know if I answered the question right.

Baer: No, you did. The question was, is this the biggest challenge in terms of the self-perpetuating issue?

Fraser: Yes, yes.

Baer: Right, because of the lack of education and then the lack of knowledge going out into the world. And then you get to the over-exposure, that's a different facet of it, absolutely, the over-exposure.

Fraser: Yeah.

Baer: These kids are so cloistered. And then they go out and it's definitely something to contend with in terms of expectations.

Fraser: Also, the kallah teacher, I really feel needs to have some interaction with the chosson teacher. It's critical.

Baer: Yes.

Fraser: It's like, what are you teaching him? What is it? We have to all get on the same page. It can't be, we don't talk to the women about women's body parts. Like how does a man give this over to a man about a woman's body?

That doesn't make sense to me.

Baer: Right. That brings me to my next point, because I deal with divorce in the Frum community, a lot. What I hear, by that time, it's already too late in terms of fixing the problem. They're already in this cycle where it's just not fixable because they've developed such unhealthy habits throughout the marriage.

Fraser: Oh, right.

Baer: And it tends to start with the chosson/kallah classes. And those classes tend to be less focused on developing a healthy sexual relationship and more focused on Halakhah. How do you think that the Frum community-- I mean, you give one example of interface between the chosson/kallah teachers. That to me is a novel concept. I've not heard that before, but that seems to be a really fantastic way to

start addressing the issue. But is there anything else we can do in terms of the education we're giving over in particular? .

Fraser: Yeah. Think of this: When the kids wanna learn how to swim, you give them swimming lessons. When they wanna drive, you give them driving lessons. You wouldn't let them go behind the wheel of a car without driving lessons. How do you let two children go into a marriage without giving them training on being married to one another? So, I developed a book and it's a 12-week course for the kallah teachers and the chosson teachers.

What is it? It's to give them the Halakhah. You must give them the Halakhah. Halakhah stands. We don't touch the Halakhah. But, there's gotta be conversations about these other topics that are so critical that they are going to come up and confront them and throw them off guard, to the point where they are not going to know what to do with.

And what the natural tendency is, is that they withdraw. They go into silence. And they don't know how to bring up these subjects because they don't wanna argue. They have nobody to really ask. They don't go to their parents unless, of course they have parents, like, let's say, us, that can actually speak to our kids.

But not everybody is so fortunate to have that. So who are they going to go to? So, they go to their friends. They go to porn to find the answers, which is so destructive. They mustn't do that.

So again, back to the book: They need to have a course where they stay with the kallah and chosson all over the first couple of months of the marriage so that they can check in with them and they can discuss these specific subjects that I have in here. Twelve very, very good subjects to discuss for communication to understand one another.

You're coming from two different families. I don't care how much we love each other in the beginning of the marriage. We're so motivated and in love. Within the first three months, four months, we're going to start to fight. We are going to fight, and we need to learn how to communicate. This is critical here.

So, this is what I'm recommending. Stay with them. Let yourself be a resource for them. If something's going wrong that you can help them find a Rav, or be the person they can talk to if they can't talk to their family members. And we move them along until they get it down.

Baer: Right. And I think that sometimes kallah teachers tend to be one and done. I gave over the halakhas, I didn't establish really that relationship with the kallah. And then when issues arise, because they're told so frequently that intimacy is such a secret private event, such a private thing, they don't think to go back to their kallah teachers to say, "Hey, there's an issue."

So, what do you tell a kallah to do when something doesn't feel right? When something feels just wrong and off and inconsistent with a healthy sexual relationship?

Fraser: That's a tricky question because you need to establish the relationship with the kallah, if you're the kallah teacher. There shouldn't be such a thing that they don't have the chemistry.

Years ago the mother used to give this stuff over to the daughter. Even the fathers used to give this stuff over. That just doesn't happen anymore. We don't talk about this anymore in our homes. We just don't do that. We leave that to the teachers, and the teachers aren't qualified to do that. And they're not doing it. They just don't have the skills and the tools to be able to talk about over-exposure and these kinds of subjects.

So, it really comes down to, again, education. And the kallah needs to know that she can go back to her kallah teacher. He needs to know he can go back to his chosson teacher. They should have already set them up with a Rav who they can talk to.

You need to instill a structure of family that they can have as a resource so that they have you to talk to. That, it just can't be that they have nobody to talk to.

Because they move away from their family, their origin, original family. She moves someplace, sometimes to the other side of the world. She's in an environment, she knows nobody. Who does she have? So she has him, just her chosson and he knows as much as she knows. And so they're kind of like bouncing off of each other.

Baer: Right.

Fraser: And they don't know what to do.

Baer: Enmeshing in the dysfunction.

But I think that point that you mentioned, and I haven't heard that before, just about establishing an alternative infrastructure for these people at the outset. That, I think, is so critical and so novel in terms of how to deal with these issues. Because as you said, it used to be part of the family structure. And now that family structure no longer exists and you have to set one up for them.

Fraser: The parents ... They pay for the band. They pay for the dresses. They pay for the cake. They pay for the whole shebang. It's like, pay for the kallah teacher to teach your kids for the next 12 weeks how to behave and how to live cooperatively within a marriage.

You need to do that. Because if you don't do that, they're gonna be coming around, very unhappy when you see their faces in several months from now. It's on the parents to take some responsibility. I'm sorry, I don't want anybody to get mad at me, but it's like, take some responsibility and incorporate this into the cost.

And this structure is available. Take advantage of it and help your kids get started on the right foot. Because if you don't do this, and you can't do it, and she didn't do it, we're gonna be ending up in your office.

Baer: Absolutely. And that's such an important point where the focus tends to be on the mechanics of the wedding, on the band, on the food, which is important. And certainly within the Jewish culture, weddings are of paramount importance. Sets you up for a healthy Jewish marriage going forward.

But in order to ensure that it's healthy, you need to also invest on the front end so that they don't end up in my office on the back end. And I think you've given such novel and really important advice to help that happen.

And I wanna focus a little bit on the chosson, right? Because you have the kallah. We have kallah classes that are prevalent and maybe there's some movement on that end. But what I particularly see, and what I've observed, is that you have these very young men. Understandably, older teenagers who are a little, we'll call it overzealous about sexual intimacy at the outset. They haven't had a relationship with a woman, let alone a sexual relationship with a woman. And it tends to set up these unhealthy patterns. Which -- you have developed novel approach, at least with kallah classes. How can chosson teachers take a page out of your book -- quite literally, your intimacy book -- to develop better skills, habits, education for these young men who are really adolescents. Their frontal cortex isn't developed yet. How do we do that?

Fraser: Well, that's really it. They need to be trained. The chosson, teachers need to be trained how to do this. Okay, you gave them the halakhas. What else you gonna give them?

This is critical that they need to teach them how to control their mind so that they can attend to their wives. Which is what you want to achieve at the night of the wedding. You want her to feel like the guy is present and not like a bull in a china shop who's gonna just destroy her and we're gonna go do this again.

No, thank you, sorry. That's not what you want to do. So in order to achieve the end result, the guy has to learn how to control his urges, which are natural and normal and are there, Baruch Hashem, but it has to be channeled correctly. And time has to be put on that from the chosson teacher.

The chosson teacher needs to be trained in this method. I have a whole page in the book on all this stuff. And it's like, allowing him into a room with a naked woman in the state he's in is just asking for trouble. It's going to happen.

It's --of course. And the poor thing. You know what I mean? Look what he's just done. And it's like, he didn't want to. That's the kind of stuff that makes you cry.

Baer: Absolutely.

Fraser: When you hear about the damage that was done unintentionally -- and the resentment from her, rightly so-- at this night, the long awaited night, they waited for and it's a disaster, a nightmare. Why?

Baer: Absolutely. And--

Fraser: Why?

Baer: You have given such good strategies, novel, novel insights into what we could do better as a community to address these issues. I mean, just in terms of the education, the infrastructure. Being very

open and honest about even just bodily autonomy, the anatomy, et cetera. That is just earth shattering within this community.

But if you could synthesize it to your top tip for a young person entering a marriage, what do you think that would be? Your primary number one tip?

Fraser: Well, I'll tell you, I had a kallah tell me that she was taking kallah classes with this kallah teacher and she wasn't quite feeling it. I say, if you're with a person who's teaching you and you're not feeling it, and you know that you need more information, you need to go get it. And you need to go find someone else. You know? You don't have to be pigeonholed into something just because you started it. So, I think, kind of, preempting that there may be a problem up ahead for the kallah herself.

So, she needs to be educated that she's not stuck. She shouldn't remain stuck and feel like she's going into this situation uneducated. This girl, she was very smart. She tells me, I wanna know what's going on. I don't wanna feel like I'm dragging it out of her, like pulling teeth, to find out what's the real deal here.

So, I told her, I said, "Stay with her." Because I don't wanna take somebody away from somebody else. I said, "Stay with her. Well, you know, six weeks, whatever it is. See, if you're not feeling it by then, let me know."

Because unequivocally the girl must be educated as well. There's so many things she can do to prevent and protect herself from this onslaught. And together the chosson, if you're in tune with the chosson and the chosson teacher, we could slow it all down. And actually do it right.

Baer: A hundred percent. A hundred percent. And what you do is just so heavy in terms of the subject matter. Sometimes you said they leave your office and you cry and it's gut wrenching. Much like what I do sometimes, absolutely. It's the same thing.

You're dealing with people's personal problems sometimes at a time of great distress and it's sometimes a lot to bear. So, how do you from, a personal perspective, on a lighter note, how do you personally decompress, de-stress, cope with this? And I guess, just not let it interfere with your own personal life?

Fraser: So, yeah, I think that's what motivated me to write a book. Because I want to try to do something. You don't want to be a victim. And you want to try to be proactive here and try to help and do something.

So, I think I take solace in the fact that I'm doing the best I can. I'm trying. I'm only one little person. How many people am I actually going to touch? It's like, if everybody will get on board and let's all do the same thing, then maybe we can actually have a reach and we can actually do something to change the situation.

So, when you ask me what am I doing, that's what I'm trying to do. And that's how I make myself feel better. It's like I'm not in control. God's in control. I'm just trying to put one step in front of the other. I'm making mistakes, I'm not doing it a hundred percent, but I'm trying. And I'm trying to go forward and I feel like that's all I can do.

Decompressing, I don't know. I go swimming. I try to keep in shape. I'm, like, old, like, you know, you don't want to --

Baer: Not old.

Fraser: I'm really old, so I don't want to--

Baer: Please, you have to give me your cosmetology tips so that, you know, I can look as glorious as you do.

Fraser: Yeah. Like, this is a lot of stress. Stress will do it. Yeah.

Baer: Tell me about it.

Fraser: It's the hormones going. Yeah.

Baer: Oh my goodness.

And where can people find out more about you? I mentioned at the beginning your Instagram page is just, it is like a gold mine of knowledge, of resources, everything. So, please tell people where they can learn more about you, where they can find your videos.

Fraser: That's it. There on my website, my phone number is there. Call me up. Let's talk. I don't know. I'm here.

Baer: That's amazing. That's amazing.

Fraser: Let's figure it out. I don't know. That's it.

Baer: Absolutely. Yes, and please do. If you're listening to this, take Sarah up on her offer to call.

Just a wealth of knowledge there that everybody needs to have. From the top down, from the top institutions down to the kallah herself. Before, during, after the marriage: Sarah is your resource. I have to say, I've been very impressed by what you're putting out there, by your content, which is why I asked you to come on the podcast.

Because when people end up in my office, it's too late. It's too late to fix the problem. And it's so heartbreaking because I see these patterns emerging that could have been avoided if they had just had the proper research. Had they had you from the beginning, they wouldn't come to me.

So, absolutely, thank you so much for the important great work you're doing. And please keep it up. Keep going, because the world needs you. The Jewish world needs you.

Fraser: Thank you. Thank you for speaking with me.

Baer: And thank you for coming on the podcast. It was a very enjoyable conversation.

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Fraser: Very nice meeting you.

Baer: And of course you can find out more about me at foxrothchild.com/elianabaer, where you can also find my latest blogs. You can find me on LinkedIn at Eliana Baer and on Instagram @elianatbaeresq. If you've enjoyed this episode and you want to listen to more, please like and subscribe to this podcast on Apple or wherever you get your podcasts.

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