

FAMILY ISSUES

Interview With 'Unmatched' Author Sarah Lavane

By Jewish Press Staff

"Unmatched: An Orthodox Jewish Woman's Mystifying Journey to Find Marriage and Meaning" by Sarah Lavane has been creating a buzz in the dating and *shidduch* world. She joins us here to tell us more about her memoir that sheds much light on the "unmatched" who live in a "matched" community.

What inspired you to write a memoir about your dating experiences?

Almost two decades ago, a very young girl wrote a "bad date stories" book. When I read it, I was very disappointed as I expected I would be. It was a poorly-written book that mocked all her bad dates and really did not address any of the issues. Back then, I thought I could definitely write a better book that served a purpose. I suppose that was the seed. As the years passed, the compulsion to write that book grew but every one of my attempts fell flat till I began with a writing challenge nearly four years ago.

How vulnerable did you feel writing this book?

Extremely. I'm not shy but I am a private person so it made me very uneasy to reveal personal details. Yet the compulsion to share the story was there for years and years. There were so many times I wanted to drop the entire project because I couldn't envision actually putting the story out there. I felt very vulnerable and fearful so I convinced myself to just write it for me and not worry about the rest. Since the book has launched, I've had such powerful and positive responses which made it all worth it.

Were you concerned how your family or others would react?

Yes, of course. I shared it with my family before publishing. I wasn't going to go ahead without their blessing. There were definitely stories in there I had never shared with them before. They were surprised by some of the stories they hadn't been aware of, but very supportive. I was also concerned with the characters I mentioned in the book. I did my best to disguise them. I changed details to protect their identity and dignity. I was also careful to relay the story with as little judgment as possible and allow the reader to form their own.

Was it a challenging book to write?

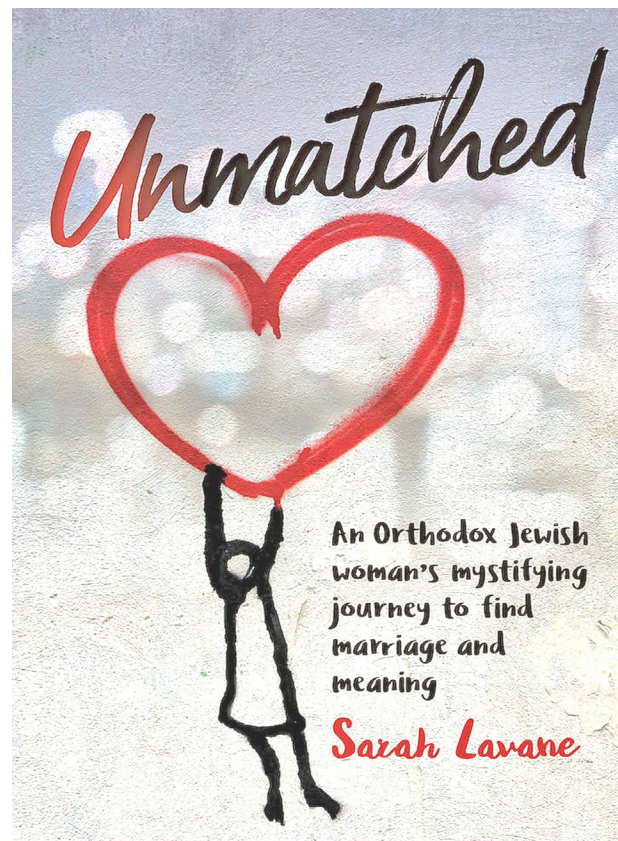
Yes, very much so. I wanted to write about difficult subjects in a modest way as well as some sad subjects in an uplifting and charming way. I've been asked if this book is depressing. I would say definitely not. It's entertaining but addresses tough subjects too. Many have told me they laughed and cried along the way but mostly they were sorry when the ride was over. One reader told me she finished at 1:30 a.m. and had to pace her room because she didn't quite know what to do with herself when she was done.

Was there any subject in particular you were more fearful of addressing?

No one addresses the difficulty of being single and being *shomer negiah*. Everyone navigates this their own way. There are people who stick to *halacha* and suppress themselves. Some guiltlessly cross boundaries whether it's first, second or third

base. Others give up and go off the *derech*. None of those options seem healthy to me. Many, like me, walk the tightrope of wanting to do the right thing but slipping up every now and then. Each of these choices has a price. A lot of singles have difficulty reconciling their desire to do the right thing with their need to feel human. It's tough precisely because there is no satisfactory answer to this dilemma.

Additionally, it's not discussed because we are a discreet nation. Addressing it in the book was challenging. I wanted to bring it up in a modest



way and still appeal to the broadest audience spanning liberal to *machmir*. Writing about it was tough and made me feel extremely vulnerable. It is a memoir after all. I was afraid of judgment on every side. Those more strict would question my behavior and those more lenient would wonder what the big deal was. I think the fact that I address it at all, is one of the reasons this book has garnered such strong reactions.

Why did you feel so compelled to write it despite all your fears?

I felt the Orthodox world didn't fully comprehend this subject and should. I needed the "matched" society I was living in, to understand the "unmatched" amongst them better. A whole segment of society was written off as a "singles crisis." We are their friends, neighbors, colleagues, relatives and need to be understood. I wanted to put the human face on this community issue.

When I started this, I did not feel like an author setting out to write a book. I was just a person with a long-time compulsion to share my story. This book wasn't "planned" so much as "felt."

What does your book address that other books on this subject haven't?

Reality. Many books tend to give advice. Mine doesn't. I'm certainly no expert on the matter. But I do record so many of my own mistakes and les-

sons learned.

Additionally, I simply tell the story in a down to earth way. Too many books by *frum* publishers are idealistic, unrealistic and tend to gloss over issues. I write about everything from rejection, humiliation, fear, hope, love, struggle, pain, fears, sexual tension, heartbreak, loss, faith, anger at G-d. People experience all these universal emotions. I've had quite a few readers contact me either crying or thanking me or saying how they can now forgive themselves or how they finally feel heard or understood. It's striking a nerve for sure.

I've also had married people tell me that they never truly understood what people who aren't married go through till they read the book. They say they will never look at a single person through the same lens again.

Why did you start the book with your childhood and not when you began dating?

Though it's not an autobiography, it is a dating memoir, not a dating book. I dip a bit into my background to help put things into context. Especially in dating, people are often boxed into labels but none of us fit neatly into a single box. I thought that background knowledge would help readers understand my character better.

Is G-d a character in your book too?

Hmm. I never thought of G-d as a character but He is definitely a big presence in this book. As a religious Jew my behaviors are very much molded by my belief and practices. So a big part of my challenges, struggles, thoughts, actions and decisions, is formed by G-d's presence in my life.

Any particular scene that resonated most with readers?

I don't want to respond with a spoiler, but there is one scene towards the end of the book that seems to stay with readers. Some readers asked how I felt about revealing such a personal experience. I had talks with my editor about whether or not to include that powerful scene. Everyone has tough choices, conflicts or pain in life, I felt this story was too important to leave out. Some said it was a total surprise but I never planned it as a surprise. I included it to illustrate a tough conflict and how I dealt with it.

What was the most shared reaction to your book?

So many readers have commented that they were utterly absorbed by it, could not put it down, read it straight through, stayed up all night, or that their spouse who hadn't read a book in years, stole it from them. That was unexpected but very thrilling to hear.

What do you hope your book will accomplish?

As I say in the book, I want to bring solace and comfort to the "unmatched" as well as empathy and awareness to the "matched." And from the reactions I've been getting, it's gratifying to see that the book has indeed already begun to do just that.

Visit unmatchedstory.com for excerpts, reviews and more info.

"Unmatched" is available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble and selected Judaica stores.