

Shabbat Zachor • Parashat Tetzaveh

י"א בַּאֲדָר תשפ"ג

An ORA initiative



Agunah Awareness Shabbat

Ahead of International Agunah Day on Ta'anit Esther, we
dedicate this Shabbat to agunot around the world.

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ORA | אורה

FREEING AGUNOT. PREVENTING ABUSE.

LETTER FROM ORA'S CEO

Advocacy starts and ends with education—learning more about get refusal, and understanding the role we can all play in creating positive change.



I don't know about you, but I always find that International Agunah Day falls out at the worst time of year. We are busy preparing for Purim, putting the finishing touches on costumes and mishloach manot, and rushing to be ready in time for megillah reading. In this chaos, who has time to focus on an issue as momentous and challenging as get-refusal?

Why is this, of all days, the one we devote to agunot?

The most obvious answer of why Ta'anis Esther is observed as Agunah Day is due to the story of Esther herself. Despite her heroic acts saving the Jewish people, Esther is unable to save herself. Even after the Jews survive and turn on their persecutors in the Purim story, **Esther remains in the palace, trapped in an unwanted marriage.** Additionally, Esther's very real fears that Achashverosh will kill her if she makes the wrong move reminds us of the many who struggle in abusive marriages, fearing their spouse's actions and retaliations.

But the Purim story also connects to agunot on a deeper level. In so many ways, the Megillah centers on the importance of collective action, both for good and for evil. In the beginning of the story, the Jews' widespread (and poor!) decision to attend Achashverosh's feast sets off a chain of events that leads to their imminent destruction. But later on, as Esther prepares to risk her life by confronting Achashverosh, the Jewish people join her in fasting and praying, using their collective energies to support Esther and petition G-d for a favorable response.

Many commentaries discuss the unusual omission of G-d in the story of Purim. Perhaps the Megillah is forcing our attention on our collective actions, demanding that we understand the role we played in bringing about both our near-destruction and our salvation. **International Agunah Day, too, is an opportunity for collective action.** Just as our communal apathy is harmful, our communal engagement can make a powerful impact.

Advocacy starts and ends with education—learning more about get-refusal, and understanding the role we can all play in creating positive change. We hope this journal allows you to understand this topic—both its suffering and its hope—with more clarity.

Because we can create a healthier and safer Jewish community, even on our craziest, busiest days. When we come together, anything is possible.


Keshet Starr, Esq.
CEO, ORA

@KeshetStarr 



COMMUNAL SUPPORT, LOVE, AND GRACIOUSNESS

In 1908, a little known twenty-year-old writer published a story about a failed marriage. He called it “Agunot” and, based on the story, used the pseudonym S.Y. Agnon (pronounced Shy). In 1966, Shmuel Yosef Agnon—using the name he kept from that very first story—won the nobel prize in literature for “his profoundly characteristic narrative art with motifs from the life of the Jewish people.”

Originally, the term agunah was used to describe a woman in a marriage where it could not be determined if the husband was alive. **Jewish law does not allow someone to remarry without a divorce document, known as a get.** Without evidence that the husband is deceased and without a get document, women could be chained to a marriage that they couldn't even be sure still existed.

Nowadays the issue of agunot has expanded far beyond those original cases. A husband must divorce his wife of his own volition—he cannot be forced. If a husband refuses to give a get—even if we know for certain that he is alive and even if we know exactly where he lives—a woman held hostage in such a dead marriage is an agunah. She needs a divorce document to remarry and her husband refuses to grant one.

Agnon's story is not about these kinds of cases of agunot—it's not about when the husband's status cannot be determined and it is not about an instance where a recalcitrant husband refused to grant a get.

Instead, it's about a marriage between Dina, the daughter of a wealthy Jerusalem family and Ezekiel, a Polish scholar who is brought to Jerusalem in order to marry Dina. But both Dina and Ezekiel are interested in someone else—Dina is in love with an artist named Ben Uri and Ezekiel is in love with a girl from home in Poland.

Far from the contemporary issue of agunah, the story of Dina and Ezekiel touches upon a broader issue—estrangement. The dissonance inside a marriage, the alienation of being in a new land, the distance between the love in one's heart and the actual context of their lives.

As literary critic Adam Kirsch wrote about this story in The New Yorker:

But the most shocking thing about “Agunot,” given the time and the place in which it was written, is that it portrays another kind of failed “marriage”: between Jewish immigrants and the land of Israel. Ezekiel, who represents the best of Eastern European Judaism—its piety, devotion, and intellectual power—cannot find happiness in Jerusalem.

Quoting from the story:

“His feet are planted in the gates of Jerusalem and stand on her soil, but his eyes and his heart are pledged to houses of study and worship abroad, and even now, as he walked in the hills of Jerusalem, he fancies himself among the scholars of his own town, strolling in the fields to take the evening air.”

In many ways, it is the underlying dissonance that the story addresses that makes the contemporary plight of agunot all the more relevant.

The work of ORA, led by the visionary Keshet Starr, has dedicated its mission to **highlighting and resolving the plight of modern agunot.** At the heart of the issue of agunot, like Agnon's story, is the story of estrangement. Estrangement within marriages, families, and sadly, for many, from the Jewish community. The very existence of the issue for many seems like an irredeemable part of our community. But it is through the work of ORA that we not only heal those in estranged marriages, but we remind the entire Jewish community that this is a matter of central and grave concern for us all.

In 1929, Sarah Schenirer, the founder of the Beis Yaakov movement, wrote a brief essay that touches upon the issue of Agunot. Nearly a century ago, many Jews looked at the very existence of this issue as a broader condemnation of our community and our convictions. **Speaking on behalf of the Orthodox community, Schenirer wrote, “no one takes the pain of the agunah more seriously than we do.” And now almost 100 years later it is organizations like ORA who remind ourselves and the wider community that it is up to us to take this pain more seriously than anyone.**

Like Ezekiel in Agnon's story, standing firmly in Jerusalem wondering if he will ever return to the world he left, the issue of agunot forces us to negotiate between worlds and sensibilities both old and new.

Agnon's story begins with midrashic imagery. God is described as weaving a tallis with the thread of the deeds of the Jewish people. This tallis is meant to wrap Knesset Yisroel—the congregation of the Jewish people. But if the behavior of the Jewish people is not loving, is not gracious, is not empathetic, then the thread of this grand tallis begins to fray and could even tear.

And perhaps that's what we are still contending with. Creating a collective tallis through our **communal support, love, and graciousness that can protect the Jewish people in worlds old and new.** And it is through the work of ORA that we as a community ensure that our Godly protection does not fray.

Rabbi Dovid Bashevkin

@DBashIdeas



Rabbi Dovid Bashevkin is the director of education for NCSY, the Clinical Assistant Professor of Jewish Values at the Sy Syms School of Business at Yeshiva University, as well as the host and founder of 18forty. Dovid has been rejected from several prestigious fellowships and awards.

GET-REFUSAL: WHOSE PROBLEM IS IT?

We should be asking ourselves what kind of a society we want to create, be a part of and raise our children in.



A recent scandal in my community centered around a local pediatrician, refusing to give his wife a get. Many were quick to offer unwavering support for the wife, publicly urging the community to stop using the husband as a doctor. However, many others condemned the blacklisting approach, which attacked the pediatrician's livelihood, and questioned the relationship between his professional skills and his domestic problems. At the core of this argument lies a profound question: **Should we, as a spectating public, take sides in what should arguably be the private dissolution of a no-longer functioning marriage?**

When scandalous stories like this one come up, community members usually bury their heads in the sand or scramble to determine who the victim is, basing their support or condemnation on personal bias and often hearsay. When the public is asked to take a stance, to view a recalcitrant husband as an abusive man and, for example, stop using him as a doctor, they have a hard time standing behind this kind of hyperbole. **It is difficult for people to reconcile the bat-wielding, face-punching clichéd image of an abusive husband with that of their friendly, local pediatrician, whom they have known for years and have invited to their Shabbat table.**

I am sure that this doctor, as is the case with many other get-refusers, **believes that his case is the exception** and that his actions are entirely justified. He might not be a wholly terrible person, he might even be kind and warm and giving, but he most certainly is failing to recognize that get-refusal is abusive in nature and a manipulation of systematic power. **Pinning another person down in a dead marriage is unethical and denying them their right to freedom until a personal objective is met is extortion.** While there may be sympathy to be had towards someone who truly feels they need to use the get as leverage, it is not enough to warrant an acceptance of the practice, under any and all circumstances, as any and all exceptions will undermine the rule and its effectiveness. It is often impossible to distinguish a perversion of justice from a prevention of injustice, as such claims are always subjective and biased. It seems equally unrealistic to rely on the benevolence of someone, already in a highly compromised emotional state, to voluntarily surrender their halachically backed strategic advantage for the sake of the greater good.

Cue the judging public, which is not always as bad as it sounds. **Behavioral rules and norms, kept in check by our desire to be accepted and our fear of being outcast, contribute to the functionality of a system, which relies on objectivity as a safeguard against potentially dangerous subjectivity.** While there are many ambiguous factors involved in a divorce, there are many very unambiguous foundational and ethical ethos of Jewish individuals and communities. **We should be asking ourselves what kind of a society we want to create, be a part of and raise our children in. We should be questioning what kind of men we want to raise our sons to be and what practices we have that will contribute to or challenge that.**

Supporting get-refusal supports a system that is fueled by self-centered egoism, with abject disregard for the emotional welfare of others. It is too much to ask divorcing individuals, in the midst of one of the most painful and off-putting experiences of their lives, to become objective, empathetic and self-sacrificing. Tying a get into divorce negotiations holds another person's future hostage, and no one, regardless of their personal fears (merited or not), should have the right to do that. **We have an obligation, as a societal whole, unbiased towards individuals, yet ideally biased against systematic abuse of power, to refuse to accept get-refusal as an option, to not take sides, but to take a stance against something so harmful and destructive.**

We shouldn't wait to form an opinion until we are forced to decide if we are happy with our pediatrician's personal life. **We should decide now, with empathy and love for all our fellow humans, to treat others the way we, ourselves, would like to be treated, and expect nothing less than that within the communities we create.**

Sheva Ganz

Sheva Ganz is a licensed psychotherapist, certified divorce specialist and certified mediator. She is the co-founder of the Jewish Divorce Project, a podcast aimed at exploring the relevant issues that Jewish divorced individuals encounter and experience. Through her specialized work in this field, Sheva hopes to redefine the way we divorce, promoting a co-operative approach to divorce, and supporting single parents in creating loving and "unbroken" homes.



AGUNOT AROUND THE WORLD

Resolved cases

Current cases

Educated

Halachic Prenups

Helpline calls

College fellows



Our **6,000+ helpline calls** included individuals from:

22 countries
31 states



We're here to help:

844-OSF-LINE (673-5463)

onestepforward@getora.org

ONE STEP FORWARD: A JEWISH DIVORCE HELPLINE

Do I need to be an Agunah to call ORA for help?

"What are my options? Where should I go? How do I proceed at this point in time?"

Questions like these are among the many that individuals ask themselves when contemplating divorce or navigating the Jewish divorce process. Through ORA's helpline, we offer a **safe and supportive space** for individuals to ask and address these questions. We're here for men and women at any stage of the process- if they're just starting to think about divorce or already separated for years. We empower our callers to move ahead in their journey and feel validated with regards to the many concerns and frustrations that they may be experiencing.

One Step Forward helps **more than three hundred women and men each year** who reach out for information, guidance, and support. Well over 90% of our callers report that they experienced some form of domestic abuse and unfortunately that abuse often continues into the divorce process in various forms, including get-refusal.

Through our helpline, callers receive critical information about the Beth Din process and what to expect as they proceed forward in whichever direction they wish to move. Callers can also receive information about local resources that might be helpful to them, including legal aid, social services, peer support opportunities, and more. And, of course, callers have the unique opportunity to speak with a professional in an environment suffused with **validation, care, and compassion.**

The divorce process, and especially situations of get-refusal, can be very difficult and isolating. You shouldn't have to go through this alone. Reach out to us and let us support you through this journey.

בכו תבכה בלילה
ודמעתה על לחיה

אין לה

פנחם



איכה



MAKING A KIDDUSH HASHEM



A number of years ago, ORA was asked to organize a rally in front of the home of a man who for many years refused, against the ruling of Beis Din, to issue his wife a Get. One of the local rabbanim informed us that his elderly mother, a Holocaust survivor, who was also actively supporting his behavior, lived with him and the Rabbi was concerned about her health in the event of a rally in front of their house. It was a legitimate ethical and halachic concern. **Whose life takes precedence, the Agunah we were trying to assist or someone who survived the Holocaust?** In this particular case, the concern was personal. Many of the rally attendees had parents or grandparents who were also survivors. The question was discussed with our halachic advisors and their response resonated to the core of what it means to be involved in ORA. Against our human instincts and emotions, we were informed we should proceed with the demonstrations.

How can you let a Jewish woman, a mother and a member of the Jewish community suffer by the evil actions being perpetrated against her? While some members of the Jewish community label ORA's demonstrations as a Chilul Hashem, the opposite is true. **The Kiddush Hashem is that we care about the suffering of fellow Jews and do everything in our power to ensure it doesn't happen in our communities. The Kiddush Hashem is that we care enough to ask the tough questions and follow through with action, even if the response is contrary to our personalities.** Not helping someone in need due to feeling uncomfortable would be the ultimate Chilul Hashem.

In the above mentioned case, the rallies proceeded and eventually the recalcitrant husband issued a Get.

The ultimate goal of every public demonstration is not only to help members of the Jewish community. **The goal is to demonstrate our desire to sanctify Hashem's name in the most public way, when called upon to do so by the Torah.**

-ORA board member

Try to remember...

...fighting for a get is time consuming:

Between Beit Din and civil court, juggling work and childcare, things like cooking dinner and arranging play dates can feel near impossible. Every person's needs are different, but for many agunot, offering to cook dinner or babysit can be incredibly helpful and supportive.

... get-refusal is abuse:

"Get-refusal and the ongoing chained status of agunot is perhaps the single most painful area of Halakha...We must therefore remember that anyone who refuses to give or receive a get is fundamentally abusing Halakha."
- Yardaena Osband, ORA Board Member

...when you're planning your next Shabbat/Chag meal:

For many families, Shabbat is a respite from the hustle and bustle of the week, and a chance to reconnect with loved ones and community. But for many agunot, Shabbat can be quite isolating. Extending an invitation for a meal can go a long way.

...when organizing community events and programs:

Agunot don't fit into the stark boxes that we often construct of married, divorced, or single community members. Make sure events are inclusive regardless of relationship status.

WHAT CAN I DO TODAY TO PREVENT FUTURE GET REFUSAL?



Sign a Halachic Prenup or Postnup!

The Halachic prenup or postnup is a contract that couples should sign in order to prevent get-refusal.

It has two primary elements:

1. **Binding arbitration:** Each spouse agrees to appear before a specific, predetermined beit din and abide by its decision with respect to the get.
2. **Spousal support obligation:** The prenup or postnup contains a financial disincentive to get-refusal, amounting to \$54,750 per year, which is enforceable in civil court.

A **reciprocal version** of the prenup or postnup helps ensure that both men and women are protected from abuse of the get.

How does signing a prenup or postnup help prevent get-refusal?

When the Jewish community makes the signing of the Halachic Prenup a community norm, then everyone who needs it will have it. No one signs the prenup because they think they will need it in the future, but by signing a prenup, **you are normalizing it and making it a standard practice in our community.**

For any questions or to submit your prenup, email: prenup@getora.org.

What does signing a Prenup express?

"I would never take advantage of you by using the get as a weapon."

"I will not manipulate halacha to my advantage."

"No matter what happens between us, the get will NOT be an issue for us."

"I respect you."



Project Ahava is a new program designed to **prevent future cases of get-refusal** by promoting healthy and loving relationships, as well as the Halachic Prenup.

We're using digital and print ads to **promote healthy relationships and the Halachic Prenup**, and conducting broader educational initiatives in the dating world. From podcast appearances, new articles, and workshops about healthy relationships, **our goal is to reach people who are dating, and encourage them to protect the Jewish community from get-abuse by committing to sign a Halachic Prenup.**

To learn more about this initiative, visit: www.getora.org/projectahava

Want to learn more about ORA's general work or get involved? Please reach out, we'd love to hear from you!
Email us at info@getora.org or visit our website: www.getora.org

I AM AN AGUNAH

“

"As much as I do want my get, I will never again lose my dignity or let anyone bully me."

"I am grateful for all the support I have received from my shul and community over the years and even though it has been the most excruciatingly painful time of my life, it makes it less so when I am part of a community that cares."

"Just because she carries it well doesn't mean it isn't heavy."

"Please do not forget me now that I am single. Keep the phone calls coming and your thoughts with me. I am the same friend to you that I was. I am grateful for your invitations and I need your friendship now, if not more than before."

If there was one thing I would say to my community, rabbi and leaders...

"I would tell them to have more understanding of a woman's rights and feelings during the Get process."

"A woman might not know when and how the process goes."

"A chance to explain the process to her will give her self assurance during this very difficult time."

”

Tehillim Call
in support of Agunot
around the world

International Agunah Day
Ta'anit Esther, March 6th

11:00am EST • 10:00am CT • 8:00am PST • 6:00pm IL

Meeting ID: 832 3461 3656 Passcode: agunot

TEHILLIM: PRAYING FOR THE FREEDOM OF ALL AGUNOT

Anat bat Sol
 Aviva bat Esther
 Aviva Rivka bat Tzivia Dina
 Batya Ruchama bat Sarah Nina
 Chana Ahuva bat Sora Nena
 Chana bat Esther
 Chana bat Shifra
 Chana bat Tzivia Miriam
 Chana Nagila bat Bracha Leah
 Charna bat Sarah Tzirel
 Charna Reizel bat Rochel Leah
 Chava bat Chaya Sarah
 Chaya Lonna bat Rivka Shulamit Menucha
 Chaya Rachel bat Hadassa Esther Leah
 Devorah bat Sol Elkabetz
 Devorah Leah bat Yocheved
 Devorah Rivka bat Yitta
 Dina Miriam bat Penina
 Elana Sara bat Miriam Yaffa
 Elisheva bat Gisyas Basya
 Esther bat Garis
 Esther bat Perel
 Esther Leah bat Chaya
 Hadassa Yata Pesha bat Malka Basha
 Haya Sara Rivkah bat Tirza Rachel
 Jaya bat Nechama
 Kayla bat Tzivia Malka
 Leah bat Nuzhah
 Leah bat Rita Teresa Frieda
 Margalit bat Lillian
 Marganit bat Chana
 Mazal bat Ifrada
 Michal Gabriella bat Rivka
 Miriam bat Chana
 Miriam Bat Ester Malka
 Nachuma bat Zissy
 Noa Liz bat Miriam
 Nechama Devorah bat Esther Malka

Nuphar bat Yael
 Orah Bina bat Adina Esther
 Pessel Gittel bat Rivka
 Pnina Fanny bat Chana
 Rachel Bat Elena
 Rachel bat Yona
 Raizel bat Sarah Reva
 Rena Elisa bat Yosefa Miriam
 Rivka Dina bat Shaindel Shifra
 Rochel bat Leah Basya
 Roset Vered bat Yehudit Oddet
 Sahar bat Sara
 Sara Baila bat Rivka
 Sara bat Elka
 Sara bat Esther
 Sara Chana bat Esther Rivka
 Sara Rivka bat Bluma
 Sara Rivka bat Yaffa Nechoma
 Sara Rizel bat Chava
 Sarah bat Judith
 Sarah Tania Perla Sultana bat Kochava
 Sheindel Golda bat Sarah
 Sarit bat Yehudit
 Sharon bat Rivka
 Shoshana bat Sara
 Shterna Sara bat Yehudit
 Sima bat Esther
 Sofy bat Sarah
 Tamara bat Magda
 Toibe bat Bluma
 Tova Rachel bat Matte Chana
 Tzipora Leah bat Chaya Leeba
 Tzivia Sarah bat Gedula
 Yael bat Simcha
 Yaffa bat Miriam
 Yaffa Yovla bat Leah Miriam
 Yafit bat Shahin
 Yehudit bat Iska

תוֹצִיאֵנִי--מִרְשֶׁת זוֹ, טָמְנוּ לִי: כִּי-אַתָּה, מַעֲזוּדִי.
 Bring me forth out of the net that they have hidden for me; for Thou art my stronghold.

I SIGNED A KETUBAH, SO I ALSO SIGNED A HALACHIC PRENUP.



SIGN A HALACHIC PRENUP IT'S A SIGN OF A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP

Project Ahava is a new program designed to prevent future cases of get-refusal by promoting healthy and loving relationships, as well as the Halachic Prenup.



Learn more about
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