



Jewish Community Center of Paramus
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A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday June 24, 2022 ~ Parsha: Shelach Lecha

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

This Is Why I Became an Expert in Jewish Divorce

How did I get into the Jewish divorce business? It's a question I have been asked often over the past 14 years. In 2008, after three years of intensive study and exams, I was certified by the Joint Beit Din of the Conservative Movement as a *Mesader Gittin*, a Rabbi who is qualified to conduct Jewish divorce proceedings within the Conservative movement. There are only about 36 Rabbis in the world (among the 1600 Rabbis throughout the world associated with Conservative Judaism) with this distinction. I consider this certification an honor and a privilege. The training and studying to receive this certification were the most difficult and intensive professional development I have engaged in since my Rabbinical ordination in 1989.

Why did I do it? After all, it is difficult and emotional work. It is among the most labor-intensive tasks Rabbis can engage in. I did not "need" to do this training. But there was a reason I did the work. Throughout my Rabbinical training I had heard stories of women who had been treated poorly (and that is putting it mildly!) during their Jewish divorce proceedings by the rabbis and Jewish courts established for this purpose. In so many of those instances, the difficulty of the process as well as the bad feelings were exacerbated by the refusal of their former husbands to grant their wives a divorce according to Jewish law, even years after the conclusion of civil divorce proceedings.

But nothing prepared me for the personal accounts of several women in my first congregation in Knoxville Tennessee, and the difficulties they encountered during their own Jewish divorce proceedings. Even after many decades, there was bitterness and even estrangement from the Jewish community and anger at Rabbinic authorities who failed to take their needs into account.

Anyone who has ever studied Jewish law knows that there is a basic inequity with regards to Jewish divorce law. This inequity can lead to abuse in many cases, leaving women in a state of limbo where they may not remarry, according to Jewish law. Throughout Jewish history, Rabbis found ways to address these situations. But in the last 100 years, for a variety of reasons, most Rabbis involved with Jewish divorce have failed to do so, leading to an increase in the number of *Agunot*, women who are still "chained" to their ex-husbands. Indeed, this *Hillul HaShem*, this desecration of God's name, has even become the story line in episodes of our most popular TV shows. Fans of the [Sopranos](#) might remember the episode where Tony Soprano sends his "associates" Silvio and Paulie to "encourage" a Hasidic hotel owner to grant his wife a divorce, which he had refused to do. Now we might laugh at this scene, but it is

hardly a laughing matter. Indeed, in an example of art imitating life, three NJ Rabbis in 2015 were convicted of planning to torture Jewish men who refused to divorce [their wives](#).

I trained as a *Mesader Gittin* for one reason only. I could not and would not allow this mockery of all that Judaism holds dear, this misogyny masquerading as Jewish law to go unchallenged. The Torah understands that Jews should be married according to the laws and traditions of the Jewish people. And if divorce becomes necessary, the marriage must be dissolved the same way. Of course, divorce is a particularly difficult experience. So the Rabbis who are responsible for it must make it as dignified and just as an experience as possible. That was what was missing from the experiences of those who shared their negative ordeals with me. I was determined to master the process and do better.

I thought of this issue as [Israeli](#) newspapers reported yesterday that finally, after 22 years of efforts, a woman was granted her Jewish divorce. To escape the order of an Israeli Rabbinical court to grant his wife a divorce, her husband fled to the United States where he still lives to evade his responsibilities. According to the Israeli news report, "... under the Israeli chief rabbinate's interpretation, as well as that of most authorities on Jewish law, there is no way to dissolve a legally valid marriage without the consent of the husband. Rabbinic courts can impose sanctions, including prison time, on husbands who are recognized as refusing to give a religious divorce, but they cannot force them to give one."

I reject that statement. It is not that it is false. It is, however, inaccurate. Under most normal circumstances that statement would be true. But there are steps that can be taken by rabbis with knowledge of the sources to intervene in extreme cases. The Israeli courts failed to do so. And so have so many other Rabbinical courts throughout the world.

I will not repeat their mistakes, I do my small part to correct his injustice.

Real damage to real people has been caused by Rabbis who would not use all of Judaism's tools to address the needs of women in these difficult situations. This is why I became an expert in Jewish divorce. Though difficult, it is among the most rewarding work I do.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Arthur Weiner