What the Agunah Crisis Means to Me



It’s no secret I spend too much time on social media. It’s a fascinating but sometimes harrowing world. I’ve developed real friendships, learned about serious issues, and connected with incredible people I would have otherwise had no idea existed. Overall, it has been an incredibly enriching experience. But I have been subject to consistent and, by and large, correct criticism: I don’t wade into all that many serious causes or issues online. Outside of a cute caption here or there, I avoid politics like the plague. I rarely chime in on trending hashtags or causes. I shy away from most divisive issues. Someone once sent me an old Jewish joke that basically sums up the way I am online:

> Someone sent me this old joke and said this is basically how I interact on twitter.
>
> And, you know what, they’re right too!
>
> ??????????????♂ pic.twitter.com/GhcPvtNwSN
>
> — David/Dovid Bashevkin (@DBashIdeas) January 21, 2021

I think I have this approach for three reasons.

Firstly, I genuinely hate arguments. I am a board-certified people pleaser, which is not a personality that does particularly well online. I hate burning bridges. I want to interact with people—even those I disagree with. Does that come at a cost? Absolutely. There are many issues, opinions, objections that I would otherwise share but choose not to. Does that make me a wimp? Sometimes, yes. But that's a choice and even with its relative merits and issues, it suits me best.

Secondly, as so many have noted, social media does not lend itself to complexity. A 2016 study by the Pew Research Center found that the tenor of conversation on social media around contentious political issues can be angrier or more divisive than necessary. Ideas are more easily misunderstood or unable to be shared with the depth or nuance needed to properly consider. That doesn't mean that we shouldn't share complex issues on social media or even that our tone should be the single arbiter of how or what we share, but it is an enduring and residual concern of mine about what and how we can speak constructively together online.

I know I haven't yet spoken about the actual topic of *agunah*. So before I share my final reservation, allow me to first explain why on earth I am beginning with a discussion of social media as an introduction to the topic of *agunah*. In Jewish law, a woman can only *halakhically* unravel the bonds of marriage with either a divorce document, known as a *get*, or the death of the husband. An *agunah* is a woman in a chained or stranded marriage—whose husband is alive, but for a variety of reasons either cannot or will not give a *get*. The intense pain surrounding this issue is not new. It is discussed in the Talmud and all later commentaries have volumes and volumes about the approach to this issue. So, what makes this issue new and why are we speaking about it now on 18Forty?

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Over the last two months a groundswell of support and focus on social media has brought renewed attention to the plight of *agunot*, specifically women stranded in a marriage where the husband refuses to give a *get*. As discussed in stories in both *Tablet Magazine* and, by my dear friend and mentor Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt in an article for *Religion & Politics*, there is a fascinating crossover happening now between the issue of *agunot* and social media. As Avital writes:

For all the ills of social media, in insular religious communities it is offering a free platform for once-marginalized voices—and for exposure of wrongdoing, in a space where there are fewer gatekeepers. In some ways, it is a welcome development, one that could only happen thanks to independent digital media and to women demanding visibility.

This, let me be absolutely clear, is a welcome and much-needed advance in an often overlooked issue. I first noticed the movement when I opened up Instagram (which I don't do all that frequently) and saw I had been tagged in at least a dozen posts asking me to post a message on my wall, which I immediately did. This, however, leads me to my final concern about social media and why, in this instance, I actually pushed the concern aside and decided to become more involved.

So lastly, social media can often feel performative. The culture on social media—the drive for likes, weighing in on trending hashtags, making some silly joke about what everyone else is talking about—can sometimes erode the otherwise organic sense of sharing what you are passionate or currently thinking about for a larger groupthink. This pressure can be particularly pronounced when it relates to issues in a population of which you are not a part. Should I be posting the latest hashtag surrounding a social justice cause or, as is sometimes the case, is it actually counterproductive to the needs of the population it is ostensibly trying to serve? This was evident following the death of George Floyd when social media activists organized a "blackout" that at best, did not serve the cause and more likely, caused real damage to organizing efforts. It reminds me of a sketch on *Saturday Night Live*, "A Sketch for Women," that had (my personal two favs) Kyle Mooney and Beck Bennet writing a sketch for women that featured the whole female cast of *SNL*, but didn't let them speak:

So why was this issue different than so many other fraught issues I avoid discussing on social media?

First and foremost, it is absolutely needed: these are women held hostage in their marriages, unable to move on without the concentrated efforts of their supporters. But the very real pain is not the only part of this. Too often the plight of *agunot* is framed exclusively as a women's issue. Gender undoubtedly plays a serious role, but it is not just that. The modern-day struggle of *agunot* melds together a host of important issues: the boundaries of *halakhic* creativity, gender distinctions in Judaism, social media activism, and, considering the efforts made to address this issue, modern Jewish history.

Also, there can be a sense that this issue only exists on the fringes of the Jewish community—people who entered unhealthy marriages that could have been avoided. This narrative is 100% false. It is in no way the fault of the victim and it doesn't just happen to "other people." I personally know two wonderful families who have dealt with *agunah* issues. And they both live on the same block of a beautiful neighborhood.

But perhaps more than anything else, the possibility of *agunah* is something with which anyone in a *halakhic* marriage in the Jewish world must contend. Creating a communal culture where we demonstrate commitment to *halakha* and building healthy marriages is something that requires everyone's involvement. Personally, I like that marriage in my community is a high stakes prospect that can't be instantly dissolved because of a bad day. But, at the same time, any steps we can take to ensure we don't allow the stakes of *halakhic* marriage to be wielded as an abusive weapon need to be taken. And that's a discussion we all need to begin together.