

★ NEW FILM RELEASE ★

Women Unchained

Directed by Beverly Siegel
USA | 2011 | 60 minutes | color
English & Hebrew with English subtitles

Festivals, Screenings & DVD Sales:

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The National
Center for
Jewish Film



'Get-o-omics': The Economics of Agunot

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen | February 23, 2011

That there are Orthodox Jewish men who hold a get, or Jewish divorce decree, over their estranged wives' heads out of spite and to extort money from the women's families — making the women agunot — is a sad reality. The creators of a new documentary film, "Women Unchained," hope to shed new light on this seemingly intractable issue, and create communal pressure for change.

"Women Unchained" follows six Orthodox Jewish women in their quest to receive a get, or Jewish divorce, from their husbands. The film, directed by Beverly Siegel and co-produced by Leta Lenik, will have its world premiere in Jerusalem on March 7 at the Orthodox Union's Israel Center and on March 8, International Women's Day, at Jerusalem's Cinematheque, as part of the Women and Religion Mavoi Satum Film Festival. "Women Unchained" will have its first U.S. showings at the Pittsburgh Jewish Film Festival on March 27 and at the Rockland County Jewish Film Festival on March 31. The filmmakers and experts on the issue will take part in panel discussions following the screenings.

The movie is narrated by Mayim Bialik and tells the story of women from several different Orthodox Jewish communities, from Monsey, N.Y., Brooklyn, Los Angeles and Jerusalem. It details the sad reality of "get-o-omics," when men demand money in exchange for a get, and includes interviews with advocates for agunot, including the late Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, who set up an innovative religious court that annulled such dead marriages, and with Brooklyn District Attorney Charles Hynes.

"The divorce rate is over 30 percent among frum Jews. That's why there is such a problem," Siegel told The Sisterhood. "If you're in America and you're not Orthodox you may think it doesn't affect you. But if you have a child after not getting a get and that child moves to Israel, that's a problem because to open a marriage file there they have to prove that they're a kosher Jew, that their status is clean." A child born of a marriage not sanctioned by Jewish law, like one after a first marriage does not end with a kosher divorce, is considered a mamzer.

A recent court decision in Israel gives leverage to agunot there, but its reach doesn't extend to the Diaspora.

"Our goal with this project is to educate and advocate for change," said Siegel, who has worked as a documentary filmmaker and in public relations, and lives in Pittsburgh and Chicago. "My hope is that rabbinic leaders will use their halachic creativity to solve the problem. I don't know what it will ultimately take, but we have to keep advocating and to keep exposing the truth."

Unchain My Heart: Get Film Seeks Solutions

By Steve Lipman | March 22, 2011



Actress Mayim Bialik, center, narrated documentary produced by Leta Lenik, left, and Beverly Siegel.

Leta Lenik, a Chicago-born dancer-choreographer-turned-filmmaker, had wanted for years to make a documentary about the problems many Jewish women have in obtaining a get (Jewish divorce), but she didn't get going in earnest until Beverly Siegel, a fellow documentarian from Chicago, called in 2003. Siegel had been approached by the parents of a woman whose husband would not give her a get.

Lenik, who lives in Rockland County's Wesley Hills, and Siegel spent seven years working on "Women Unchained," an hour-long documentary about get extortion — the payments that husbands, often with the tacit support of rabbis, demand before giving a get. The documentary will have its premiere on Sunday at the Pittsburgh Jewish Film Festival. The film will make its area premiere next week as part of the Rockland County

Jewish Film Festival, panel discussion to follow.

"Women Unchained," shot in New York, New Jersey, Chicago, Miami, Los Angeles and Jerusalem, focuses on the stories of five agunot — "chained" women who are unable, according to Jewish law, to remarry until they receive a get — in the United States; four eventually got their gets.

One agunah in the film, identified as Ariel, is a 40-year-old woman who waited a year and a half for her get, while her parents negotiated with her now-ex-husband, who prolonged the process by making exorbitant financial demands. Other women profiled in the documentary had to wait much longer, for the same reason.

There are an estimated "hundreds" of agunot in this country, according to the Brooklyn-based Agunah International organization.

The production, with narration by actress Mayim Bialik and an original score by guitarist C Lanzbom, features interviews with agunot, attorneys and rabbinical experts on the agunah problem.

"We couldn't get a [recalcitrant] husband to talk to us," Lenik said in a telephone interview from Jerusalem, where the documentary had its Israeli premiere last week to standing-room-only, religiously mixed crowds at the Jerusalem Cinematheque and the Orthodox Union's Israel Center.

The agunot and rabbis in "Women Unchained" advocate the importance, for both men and women, of signing a halachically valid pre-nuptial agreement, enforceable in civil court, before marriage. The child of a woman who remarries without a get may be considered a mamzer, unable to marry another Jew.

"We're trying to advocate for change," Siegel said. While many Jews who do not follow Jewish law may consider a get unimportant, a mamzer status could affect a child who becomes observant, she said. "How do you know how your children are going to end up?"

She says the documentary has "a very modern sensibility; it makes you laugh, it makes you cry."

"There has to be something" — within the bounds of Jewish law — "to alleviate the situation," said Lenik, who became a fulltime filmmaker a decade ago after working with her husband, documentary maker David Lenik. She has worked on scores of industrial and fund-raising films, and produced "Hungry to be Heard," a 2008 documentary about eating disorders in the Orthodox community.

"Women Unchained" emphasizes ways to help agunot, and more information on the matter is available on a Facebook page set up by the filmmakers. "We wanted to keep our film very solution-oriented," Lenik said. "I don't think the solution is going to come from the rabbis. The solution will come from Jews putting pressure on the rabbis."

THE JEWISH CHRONICLE

Getting a 'get' comes to forefront in film

By Justin Jacobs | 04.04.11

The opening weekend of this month's JFilm Festival ended with a healthy dose of Jewish debate on March 27 at the SouthSide Works Cinema after the screening of "Women Unchained," when a panel of speakers unleashed their opinions on the documentary's topic: religious men blackmailing their wives by refusing to sign a Jewish divorce document, called a get.

The packed crowd listened attentively and asked pointed questions to the panel of Darryle Gillman, of the Agunah Project and whose story inspired the film; Beverly Siegel, the director of "Women Unchained"; Rabbi Walter Jacob, rabbi emeritus of Rodef Shalom Congregation and president of the Abraham Geiger College in Germany; and Rabbi Daniel Wasserman of Shaare Torah Congregation.

In the documentary, Siegel chronicles the struggles of Orthodox women who have fought to obtain a get, the document that would make them religiously divorced and able to move on with their lives. The derelict husbands, none of whom are interviewed, are revealed to have blackmailed their wives for possessions and money with the support of their local rabbinate. The film breaks down the expenses of one case: including assets all but stolen by one featured woman's husband, obtaining her get cost over \$400,000.

Get extortion, the film explains, is a growing problem with complex implications for even nonreligious couples in Israel, where Orthodox religious policies are applied to the entire population.

"As far as doing something [to alter the cross-denominational necessity of a get in Israel] that will be recognized by the Orthodox rabbinic court in Jerusalem, my only comment to that is 'forget it,' " said Jacob, referencing work he had done with multi-denominational rabbis to reach an agreement on divorce practices.

Wasserman stressed that the policy isn't the problem, but rather the people wrongly implementing it are to blame.

"Jewish law remains the future of the Jewish people," said Wasserman. "It is holy. It is beautiful. But it's also in the hands of human beings. Just as you can take a hammer and build with it ... Habitat for Humanity, homes for people, the same hammer can be used in the hands of someone to destroy lives. When that happens, we have to find a way to respond."

The most feasible solution to get extortion, said the panelists, is for a couple to sign an explicit prenuptial agreement preventing such abuse.

"We don't like talking about prenuptial agreements because a marriage is supposed to be beautiful and romantic," said Wasserman, "and it should be. For my own children, I'll tell them to sign it."

But, further, Wasserman said that the problem extends beyond legal documents. The get, after all, is one itself; it must be given by the husband to grant a divorce.

"We are not doing a good enough job teaching our children how to be menschen and realizing there are certain things we just don't do," he said.

Siegel described the mixed reactions she got when explaining the documentary to people, which range from, "This problem only affects the Orthodox,' which isn't true," she said, to, "Oh, that's so sad.' It is sad. It's also a terrible crime against another person. We can't leave it at sad."

Siegel spoke to the resistance of many in the Haredi community to sign prenuptial agreements, thereby allowing for a window to possible get extortion.

"The reason you get from the Haredi community is, 'It's just not something we do,' " she said. "Well why not? Your community has the problem, why don't you do it? There was a time not long ago when people didn't talk about cancer, or disabilities. We have to expose this problem to daylight to foster solutions."

Pre-nup agreements growing in popularity, survey shows

By Ruth Eglash | 02/23/2010

71% believe agreement would prevent either partner from becoming a 'siruv get'.

Prenuptial agreements are increasing in popularity, with many viewing them as the best way to avoid a refusal to grant a divorce, a new survey by the International Coalition of Agunah Rights (ICAR) revealed Monday.

Published ahead of International Agunah Day on Thursday, the Dahaf-commissioned poll found that 71 percent of the public favors a legally binding agreement prior to marriage, believing it would prevent either partner from becoming a siruv get, (a person refused a writ of divorce under Jewish law) or an agunah (a "chained" woman whose husband is unable to grant her a divorce).

"We were surprised by the high number of people who said they believed a prenuptial was necessary," Robyn Shames, director of ICAR, an affiliation of 27 organizations working to find a solution to the problem of women whose husbands are unable or unwilling to grant them a Jewish divorce, told The Jerusalem Post.

"However, while most people say they support such an agreement, when it actually comes down to it, they refuse to sign," continued Shames, pointing out that many people see these contracts as being unromantic, or as tempting fate.

Indeed, 39% of those questioned by the survey cited considering a possible breakup while planning a wedding as their main objection to signing a pre-marriage contract, which typically organizes the financial management of the newly established family. The majority of those against the concept were women.

"Anyone who gets married could potentially become a siruv get in the future," emphasized Shames, adding that in recent years ICAR has been working to promote prenuptial agreements as a way to combat what is viewed by many as an inequality in Jewish laws pertaining to divorce.

While either a man or a woman can refuse to grant a divorce under Jewish law, the regulations are far more stringent toward the wife, who cannot remarry under any circumstances until her husband grants a get.

In Israel, the problem is more acute, rights groups say, because there is no separation of religion and state and all Jews, even those married in nonreligious ceremonies abroad, must divorce in accordance with the rabbinical courts.

This, said Shames, was why ICAR believes that signing a prenuptial agreement is so essential.

"We believe it is preferable to think of a prenuptial as a declaration of love and mutual respect for your partner and to recognize that if the need to separate ever arises, it will not cause disagreements that in turn create ongoing pain or regret for everyone," she said. "If you go into marriage of own free will, you should also be able to get out of it of your own free will."

As part of its work for International Agunah Day, which takes place annually on Ta'anit Esther, ICAR is set to launch an on-line campaign on YouTube aimed at encouraging couples to sign an agreement. Groups involved in fighting for the rights of agunot will also hold several film festivals throughout the country starting Thursday and continuing through next week.

Information on prenuptial agreements and how to go about making them legally binding can be found on ICAR's Web site www.icar.org.il