

The Wed-Locked Agunot: Orthodox Jewish Women Chained to Dead Marriages by Susan Aranoff and Rivka Haut Quotes

We regret having to use pseudonyms for rabbis, for naming them would hold them accountable as individuals for their conduct.¹

Countless agunot, innocent of any wrongdoing but sentenced to years of loneliness and suffering, have been crying out in pain. They live in a state of limbo, forbidden to remarry and bear children. The Orthodox rabbinate, entrusted with providing moral leadership and interpreting and implementing halakhah (Jewish law), has failed to respond to these women's cries, insisting that under Jewish family law a man is empowered to keep his wife in marital chains even if he has abused and abandoned her. God has commanded, the rabbis maintain, that these women can only be freed from their marriages when their husband-tormentors consent to freeing them. The rabbis, saying that they must be faithful to God's commandments, insist they are powerless to help these women.²

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We believed, however, that the rabbis could do more within the bounds of the halakhic (Jewish legal) system to help *agunot*, and we challenged them for their inaction. We heard the outcry of innocent agunot, and we resolved to do something about it.³

The evolution of the ketubah reveals the efforts of the ancient Talmudic sages to protect women who were widowed or divorced from being plunged into poverty. Modern rabbis have, regrettably, taken the opposite tack. Extortion as the price for a gett is routinely accepted by rabbis. In case after case, rabbis cooperate by acting as go-betweens in extorting financial concessions from women as the price of the gett. Often, batei din leave these women and their children impoverished, on the brink of homelessness. Rabbis rationalize their cooperation with unscrupulous husbands by citing the halakhic requirement that the husband grant the gett willingly. Consequently the rabbis are predisposed to satisfy the husband's demands, allowing him to walk away from the beit din with major financial gains and other undeserved concessions.⁴

Deborah was victimized by both her husband and the rabbis but, incredible as it may sound, she was more fortunate than agunot who remain chained forever. Wax was a scoundrel. He exploited the beit din's willingness to cater to his escalating financial demands,

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but when he had squeezed out every possible concession, he cashed in, gave the gett and found a new wife as behooves a rabbi. Deborah was lucky to have a circle of courageous friends who were not intimidated by pressure and physical force.⁵

In the Torah there is no clear statement relating to child marriage or a minimum age for marriage. Nor is there a clear statement relating to a father's right to give his daughter away in marriage. But a father's controlling interest in his daughter's sexual status is inferred by the rabbis from the Torah's rule that if a man rapes a virgin who is still in her father's household, not yet betrothed or married to anyone, the rapist must pay monetary damages to her father (Deuteronomy 22:29), rather than to her, the actual victim. In other words, the father has a monetary interest in the virginity of his daughter. Virgin brides warrant a higher bride price.⁶

Strong disapproval is also found in BT Tractate Sanhedrin, page 76a, where the verse in Leviticus 19:29 "Do not degrade your daughter, make her into a harlot" is interpreted, according to Rabbi Mani, as referring "to a man who marries off his daughter to an old man." In BT Tractate Kiddushin, page 41a, we find: "A man is

⁵ 92
⁶ 132

forbidden to betroth his daughter when she is a *ketanah* until she matures and says; 'I want this man.'⁷

The damage done by the *gett* scandal is not only the human suffering of the *agunot* and their children and families recounted in this book. The damage to and weakening of the Jewish community extends far beyond that. Some *agunot*, whose stories we will never know, withdraw from the struggle and are lost entirely to the Jewish community. The injustices done to *agunot* drive others away from Judaism.⁸

Buy the book: <https://www.amazon.com.au/Wed-Locked-Agunot-Orthodox-Chained-Marriages/dp/0786479671>

Read online: <https://archive.org/details/wedlockedagunoto0000aran>

⁷ 134

⁸ 221