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Aliza Lavie 370. (Photo by: Yesh Atid)

Yesh Atid MK: Plight of agunot is solvable

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MK Aliza Lavie initiates Knesset session “chained women” whose husbands refuse to give them a bill of divorce.

The Knesset held a special session on Wednesday morning to discuss the issue of agunot, or “chained women” whose husbands refuse to give them a bill of divorce, thereby preventing them from getting remarried.

The conference was an initiative of Yesh Atid MK Aliza Lavie and the International Coalition for Aguna Rights, ahead of International Aguna Day, which takes place as it does every year on the Fast of Esther, which is marked this year on Thursday.

Women’s rights groups state that there are thousands of women in Israel whose husbands refuse to grant them a “get,” or bill of divorce, with hundreds of new cases every year.

The conference was attended by several MKs, including Eliahu Ben-Dahan of Bayit Yehudi, a rabbi and former director of the rabbinical courts, and Shai Moshe Piron, also a rabbi and No. 2 in Yesh Atid.

Speaking during the session, Lavie attacked the religious establishment and institutions which she said were “sold for a political price and held today [in the hands of] unfitting people.”

Lavie added that “the plight of ‘chained women’ is solvable” but requires “halachic courage,” in order to overcome the problem. She said the 19th Knesset can solve both the issue of chained women in particular and problems pertaining to the relationship between religion and state in general.

In Jewish law, a woman must obtain a get from her husband before she is able to marry again and have children. Without this bill of divorce, she is essentially trapped unless she agrees to her husband’s terms or turns to the rabbinical courts to order him to give the get, which they are

generally reluctant to do.

A woman can also refuse to accept a get and thereby prevent her husband from getting remarried until her terms are met, but rabbinical courts can also give dispensation to a man to remarry without a divorce – an outlet which is not available to women.

Attendees at the session heard from Sherri Ziskind, whose husband refused to grant her a get, who said that one of the rabbinical judges dealing with her case had once told her that during his 40 years in the position he had never obligated a husband to grant a bill of divorce.

Ziskind also alleged that she had been taken aside at one stage and told that if she paid \$135,000 she would receive her get within a day. Other women in attendance who had or are still having such difficulties mentioned similar incidents.

Ben-Dahan said that such cases should be referred to the police, while emphasizing his work as director of the rabbinical courts, noting that he has established an official Knesset lobby for the rights of women whose husbands refuse to give them a get.

The Bayit Yehudi MK added that divorce proceedings in the rabbinical courts should be heard by one judge instead of three in order to expedite the process. He also noted that he had already introduced a bill to the Knesset to create agreements with foreign countries allowing men who flee the country in order to avoid giving a get to be extradited back to Israel. The bill would also increase the possible sentence a rabbinical court can hand down for a man refusing to give a get from five to 10 years in prison.

Piron noted that the problem would not be solved if it was a “struggle only of women,” saying that he wanted to see “many more men participating in the struggle.”

Shirin Musa, a Muslim woman born in Pakistan and an advocate for the divorce rights of women of all religions, also attended the hearing, saying that the problem of chained women is common to many faiths.

“This is not just a problem in Judaism, the problem exists in Christianity, Islam and Hinduism,” she said. “I’m here to learn from Israeli women... it doesn’t matter which religion you belong to, the suffering is the same and therefore we need to fight this phenomenon.”



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