**Introduction**

**What is the Agunah phenomenon?**

The Hebrew term Agunot (Agunah in singular) refers to Jewish women (and in very rare occasions men) who are unable to be free from their marriage either because they were abandoned by their husbands, or because the husband disappeared and there are no evidence concerning his death. The word Agunah literally means anchored", suggesting that such women are chained to their marriage, since according to Jewish law only the husband can grant the wife a *Get* [writ of divorce].

The term Agunot (Agunah in the singular) in Hebrew, refers to Jewish women unable to divorce because they have been abandoned by their husbands. The word literally means anchored, suggesting that such women are chained to their marriages, since, according to Jewish law, only the husband is able to grant the wife a Get [divorce]. Although, in the past, most Agunot were abandoned wives, there are various other ways of attaining this status. Toward the latter part of this book, we shall ask whether this definition reflects 20th and 21st century Agunot.

The Agunot phenomenon has been researched extensively from a Jewish judicial (Halacha) perspective. Historical research of the phenomenon, however, is lacking. Noa Shashar's Vanished men, published in 2020 is one of the very few exceptions.[[1]](#footnote-1) This book offers historical research on phenomenon between 1851 and 1900, focusing on Eastern Europe. As we shall see, our information on Agunot in this period in vast, however unresearched.

The plight of Agunot was one of the most discussed issues on the social and cultural Jewish agenda and yet the phenomenon was hardly researched by historians. This book is an attempt to open a historical investigation on the phenomenon, starting at the year 1851.

The traditional way of coping with the phenomenon of Agunot was to ask the rabbis for advice. A rabbi usually alerted other rabbis about the absconding husband as part of the effort to find him and obtain a get for the abandoned wife.[[2]](#footnote-2) Rabbis were also very instrumental in offering legal aid to Agunot.

This changed with the advent of Jewish journalism in the mid-nineteenth century. Women began to search for their absconding husbands by placing advertisements in newspapers and other journals. With these new avenues open to them, women no longer depended solely on rabbinical help for finding a solution to their plight.

**The state of research on Agunot 1851-1900:**

While Noa Shashar investigated pre 1850 Agunot, historical research of the phenomenon in the second half of the nineteenth century is virtually non-existent.[[3]](#footnote-3) CheaRan Freeze devoted 13 pages to Agunot in her path-breaking research on Jewish divorce and marriage in the Russian empire in the late nineteenth century.[[4]](#footnote-4) Freeze was the first historian to regard Aginut (The state of being deserted in Hebrew) as an important aspect of the nineteenth century Jewish family history.

Arthur Hertzberg, and, recently, Gur Alroey probed this phenomenon as part of their research of Jewish immigration.[[5]](#footnote-5) Margalit Shilo investigated Agunot in the small Jewish community in Jerusalem in nineteenth century.[[6]](#footnote-6) Mark Baker was the only researcher who primarily focused on this topic, but his work only covers four years, from 1867 to 1870, and is limited to only one source - the Hebrew Newspaper Ha-Magid.[[7]](#footnote-7) Baker limited his research to the editorial policy of Ha-Magid's editor towards Agunot. My research was the first reflecting on mid-19th and early 20th century Agunot as a unique phenomenon.[[8]](#footnote-8)

This research on Agunot offers new perspectives on the changes of Jewish women status in the 19th century, especially in Eastern Europe. This book offers an innovative insight regarding Jewish women's sufferings. Since 1856, rabbis were no longer the sole route religious women could take to solve their problem. Jewish media and open public deliberations became as important in reshaping attitudes towards women and their plight in the Jewish public sphere. Thus, the Agunah problem serves as an important indicator of modernization and secularization of the Jewish society in the 19th century.

The book concentrates on Eastern Europe. For our purpose, Jewish Eastern Europe is a cultural term rather than a geographical one, though even the latter is a complex one.[[9]](#footnote-9) For our investigation Eastern Europe includes: Russian Empire,[[10]](#footnote-10) Habsburg Empire (especially Galicia),[[11]](#footnote-11) Duchy of Poland (Congress Poland), Romania, Hungary[[12]](#footnote-12), Caucasus, and Bulgaria. They all had in common distinct cultural patterns.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The book contains 5 chapters:

The first chapter maps mid-19th century Agunot.

The second chapter deals with reasons for desertion and concentrates on the husbands.

Chapters three through four deal with public reactions to the phenomenon.

The last chapter contains thoughts regarding the changing nature of the Agunot phenomenon in 19th and early 20th century various regimes.

The book is based on a data collected during the past decade and organized in a databased accompanying this book.[[14]](#footnote-14) The database includes 5,399 cases. 4,678 cases relate to Eastern Europe (86.65%).

**Gratitude**:

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1. Noa Shashar, *Vanised Men. Agunot in the Ashkenazi Realm, 1648-1850*, (in Hebrew), Jerusalem: Carmel Press, 2020. On Sephardi Jewish deserters, see: Jessica V. Roitman, 'Feckless Fathers, Fraught Families: Abandonment and Cultural Change in the Early Modern Jewish World', in: Yosef Kaplan (ed.), *Religious Changes and Cultural Transformations in the Early Modern Western Sephardic Communities*, (Studies in Jewish History and Culture, vol. 54), Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2019, 541-564 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Shashar, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The halachic aspects have been much researched, especially by the Agunot Research Unit at the Centre for Jewish Studies at the University of Manchester: <http://www.mucjs.org/Agunotunit.htm>. See also, Aviad HaCohen, *The Tears of the Oppressed: an Examination of the Agunah Problem: Background and Halachic Sources*, New York: Ktav, 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ChaeRan Freeze, *Jewish Marriage and Divorce in Imperial Russia*, Hanover, N.H. & London: Brandeis University Press, 2002, 230-242. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Arthur Hertzberg, *Jews in America - Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter: a History*, London & New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, 198-199; Gur Alroey, '"And I Remained Alone in a Vast Land": Women in the Jewish Migration from Eastern Europe', *Jewish Social Studies*, n.s., 12 (3), 2006, 39-72 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Margalith Shilo, *Princess or Prisoner? Jewish Women in Jerusalem, 1840-1914*, Hanover, N.H. & London: Brandeis University Press, 2005, 190-197. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Mark Baker, 'The Voice of Deserted Jewish Women, 1867-1870', *Jewish Social Studies*, new series, 2:1 (1995): 98-123 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See: Haim Sperber, 'The Agunot Phenomenon from 1851 to 1914 - an introduction', *Annales de démographie historique*, 136, (2), 2018, 107-135 & 'Agunot, Immigration, and Modernization, from 1857 to 1896', in: Leonard J. Greenspoon, (ed.), *Mishpachah: The Jewish Family in Tradition and in Transition*, (Studies in Jewish Civilization, Vol. 27), West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2016, 79-108 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Shaul Stampfer, 'The Geographical Background of East European Jewish Migration to the United States before World War I', in I. A. Glazier & L. De Rosa (eds.), *Migration across Time and Nations: Population Mobility in Historical Contexts*, (London & New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985, pp. 227-228; Israel Bartal, *The Jews of Eastern Europe, 1772-1881*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Barbara Alpern Engel, *Marriage, Household and Home in Modern Russia: From Peter the Great to Vladimir Putin*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021). Gregory I. Freeze, 'Bringing Order to the Russian Family: Marriage and Divorce in Imperial Russia, 1760-1860', *Journal of Modern History*, 62 (1990), 709-746. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Sándor Nagy, 'Family Formation, Ethnicity, Divorce, and Marriage Law: Jewish Divorces in Hungary, 1786–1914', *The Hungarian historical review: new series of Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 8 (4), (2019), 812-842. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Steven Lowenstein, 'The Shifting Boundary between Eastern and Western Jewry', *Jewish Social Studies,* n.s. 4(1), (1997), 60-79; Heiko Haumann, *A History of East European Jews*, Budapest: Central European University press, 2002, especially part 3: The Crisis of the Jews in Eastern Europe and a New Identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Haim Sperber, *A Social History Database of Jewish Deserted Wives, 1851-1900*, Brighton, Chicago & Toronto: Sussex Academic Press, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)