

Jewish Divorce Assistance Center Launches In Los Angeles

By Amy Dubitsky

Divorce is never easy, but one woman's experience inspired her to try and make it a bit easier for Jewish families in Los Angeles.

"Family is so important in Judaism and when it breaks down, it can be so traumatic. Until recently, discussions about divorce were swept under the rug with other difficult subjects like abuse and cancer, but now the issue of divorce is rampant in the Jewish community," said Chavi Hertz, who divorced a few years ago.

Her own children were already grown when she divorced and she had the familial and financial support she needed to smoothly make the transition to her new life situation. "I was fortunate that I was independent," she said, "but so many don't know what steps to take next, and I realized how difficult divorce must be for those that don't have a sufficient support system."

Hertz developed the idea for a divorce resource center and raised the funds to get it started. Paul Gelb, an attorney and close confidant of Hertz's, suggested that she partner with the Organization for the Resolution of Agunot (ORA); an organization where Gelb sits as a board member.

Hertz and Gelb approached Rabbi Jeremy Stern, executive director of ORA, with their concept. "Chavi's ideas and goals aligned with ours, and we believe that assisting couples to navigate amicably through the divorce process will help avoid incidence of *agunot*," said Stern, who is originally from Los Angeles but lives in Israel. The Jewish Divorce Assistance Center (JDAC), it was decided, would open as

an independent program with its own office in Los Angeles, under the umbrella of ORA.

Hertz tapped Sarah Nissel to be the director of the new project. Nissel is a lawyer who grew up in her Manhattan home knowing the importance of helping others: her mother was a psychoanalyst, and her father was a pulpit rabbi. Nissel, with her personal background and legal knowledge, seemed the perfect fit to lead JDAC.

JDAC launched officially in October, but Hertz and Nissel have been laying groundwork for months. "I took Sarah to meet all of the rabbis in the area and explain the goals of JDAC," says Hertz. "They were all very supportive and constantly responded by saying, 'Where have you been?'"



**Sarah M. Nissel, Director,
Jewish Divorce Assistance
Center of Los Angeles**

Nissel made it clear that while JDAC will refer couples to therapists if they would like to continue to work to save their marriage, it is primarily for when both a civil and a halachic divorce plans are in motion. "We know," says Nissel, "that very often there has been a severe breakdown in communication between the husband and wife, but we try to facilitate a way for both parties to understand that by working hard to communicate just one last time in a reasonable way, this process can be quicker, cheaper, more pleasant and more effective."

Nissel explained that divorce lawyers are very expensive and using them to argue over every item may leave both parties in a lesser than desirable financial position. Allowing the JDAC to assist with initial mediation and setting realistic goals for both sides first can result in a more favorable outcome for everyone. JDAC's services are all provided at no cost.

Rivka Felix (a pseudonym to protect he privacy)

filed for divorce last year, but was not making any progress in moving her divorce forward with her lawyer. "My rabbi told me: call Sarah – she can help," Felix said. "I only wish I had called her sooner. She was able to look at things from a halachic standpoint, while being child centered. She was amazingly articulate, kind, helpful and mediates from a friendly standpoint."

Nissel makes it clear that it doesn't matter which party contacts JDAC; she and the organization don't take sides. "Now things are progressing in a supportive way," Felix said. "Sarah is a lawyer, but she is nobody's lawyer." Nissel works with each party to set up a reasonable list of goals.

Nissel explained, "I've had cases where a divorcing parent says 'I just want this done so that I don't have to speak to my spouse again.' In those cases, I try to communicate that this is a place where your interests and your children's don't align; it is understandable that you don't ever want to see your spouse again, but if you have children together, you will be a part of each other's lives forever. Once we put that out there, it's often easier to come up with a more reasonable plan for communication and custody."

Through networking with community rabbis, *batei din*, and other local professionals, Nissel has already begun working with 20 couples. This enormous response prompted JDAC to recently hire an additional case manager to work with Nissel.

"Divorce is hard," said Felix. "If someone says it's not, they aren't telling the truth. Make the call to JDAC – the kindness and compassion are unbelievable. I have been helped in unbelievable ways."

These sentiments are repeated in one of the first letters received by the organization from a husband it is working with: "I can't tell you what it means to know you are here."

For more information go to www.jdacla.org or call 323-473-5222.