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Dear Chair Smith, Vice-Chair Waldstreicher, and Members of the Maryland Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee,

On behalf of Jewish Women International, the leading Jewish organization working to empower women and girls by ensuring and protecting their physical safety and economic security, promoting inter-generational leadership, inspiring civic participation, and engaging men as allies in ending gender-based violence, I write to thank the Maryland Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee for holding a hearing on House Bill 0833, Divorce and Annulment – Removal of Barriers to Remarriage.

We submit this letter today to recognize the religious barriers that can exist for women seeking divorce. In Jewish law, when a couple divorces, the husband must willingly grant his wife a Get (divorce document) and she must willingly receive it. In some cases, a man may refuse to grant the Get, and, in a perverse rule of law, allowing him to move on with his life; but a religious woman without a Get is still considered by the community to be married to her husband, thus trapping her in a defunct marriage. Such a woman is called an agunah, a “chained woman.” Get refusal is increasingly recognized as a form of abuse which is antithetical to Jewish law and tradition.

As an organization that works to combat abuse in all its forms, JWI recognizes Get refusal as a form of abuse and a tool some men use to exert power and control over their spouses. Mandating an affidavit be filed stating that religious barriers to remarriage have been removed before a court can grant a secular divorce, as this bill does, will restrict a husband’s ability to further control his wife and help women break the chains to an abusive marriage.

We thank the Committee for investigating this critical issue and urge the members to support this important bill.

Sincerely,

Meredith Jacobs
CEO