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LAW FIRM BUSINESS

Getting the Gett

A mother and son law practice has developed a niche handling Orthodox Jewish divorces.

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LOS ANGELES — Family law took on a new meaning at Leichter Leichter-Maroko LLP in 2013 when Ariel Leichter-Maroko joined the practice started by his mother 45 years ago.

Although the firm handles a full range of family law matters, it has developed a niche handling the divorces of Orthodox Jews.

The market is substantial in Los Angeles, where roughly 670,000 Jews live. A fraction are Orthodox but adherents of other branches of the religion sometimes abide by Orthodox marriage rules.

"Because it is quaint, because they think it's more authentic, or because the grandparents want it," founding partner Alexandra Leichter explained.

If an Orthodox Jewish woman wants to terminate a civil marriage, she must also obtain a Jewish divorce document called a *gett*. Without the *gett*, she is considered married in the eyes of the community and is forbidden to remarry or have children with another man.

"It's not universal amongst Jews. It's a small group, but it's very much an issue," Ariel said.

A woman must rely on the rabbinical courts to validate the *gett*. For that to happen, it must be given voluntarily.

"You can't have a civil court order the guy to give a *gett*, and then he does it because he was ordered to; that [would be] a forced *gett* and it's not valid," Ariel said.

Prior to starting her practice, Alexandra read articles about Jewish divorce law that didn't



Alexander Drecun / Special to the Daily Journal

sit well with her. But, at the time, "there wasn't a whole lot of extortion."

"There were some cases here and there, but there weren't a lot," she said, "I just never paid attention to what the problem could be until a case came to me about 40 years ago."

The case that caught her attention involved a prior attorney who "screwed up royally," and a wife ending up with "virtually nothing in exchange for her freedom to remarry."

The husband was initially willing to give his wife a *gett*, she said. Then "the rabbi told her she could wait until the divorce was over, and the husband realized he could use this as a method of extortion."

Family law attorney Daniel J. Jaffe has known Alexandra for 25 years and describes her as "tenacious."

"It takes a very positive attitude and approach to the positions she is taking in court, and I believe she's very persuasive," Jaffe said.

In a divorce case that ended recently, one of the firm's clients

was offered a good settlement, but did not want to sign it unless her husband added that he would give her a *gett*. He refused. Alexandra convinced the client to sign the agreement, assuring her the firm would figure out how to obtain the *gett*.

Alexandra suspected the client's ex-husband — who is Israeli — might take a trip to Israel after finalizing the divorce. Two weeks later he did, and Alexandra gave her client the phone number of an agency that helps women get out of such marriages.

"They got him arrested at the airport and hauled him in front of a court in Tel Aviv," Alexandra said. The prospect of being detained in Israel until a judge could hear his case was enough for the ex-husband to give the *gett*.

Few other family law firms "understand the process and what you have to do to make sure that you tiptoe around the issue and either try to get the *gett* before or try to get the judge to make orders," she said.

In another case, Alexandra rep-

resented a woman whose husband was trying to get a bifurcated divorce. She added a condition for the bifurcation: The husband must remove all impediments to the wife's ability to remarry.

According to Alexandra, the judge took one look at the husband and said, "Have you given your wife a *gett*?"

Apparently, the judge had read an article Alexandra wrote on the topic.

"I didn't appear, but he knew who I was. I was probably the only one in the entire state who would put something like that in," she said.

After receiving her law degree from Loyola Law School in 1972, Alexandra started the Beverly Hills-based practice with Samuel Paul Strumwasser, an older classmate who graduated from law school at 49.

"Nobody wanted to hire me, unless I wanted to work as a legal secretary," she said. "I had done that. Been there!"

After they passed the bar, Strumwasser called her and said, "You know what? We're misfits. Nobody is going to hire me, I'm too old. Nobody is going to hire you, you're a girl. So why don't we start a practice together?"

They worked on anything that walked through the door.

"Personal injury, medical malpractice, business litigation, family law ... You name it, I did it! Even criminal law," she said.

The partnership came to an end in 1979 when Strumwasser committed suicide.

Alexandra continued the practice, becoming a certified family law specialist in 1980 "with the

first group,” she said. “That’s when family law practitioners became specialists.”

Family law attorney Julie McAlaren said there is a fierceness to Alexandra’s advocacy that “is almost unparalleled in our family law community.”

According to McAlaren, during her first trial as lead counsel, Alexandra was one of the trial attorneys she “looked up to and wanted to emulate.”

I “remembered seeing Alexandra in court once, refusing to sit down after a judge repeatedly tried to cut off her argument,” McAlaren said.

“She was respectful, but wouldn’t back down and it is a memory that sticks with me to this day any time I walk into court,” she said.

Although the firm represents “about half women, half men,” Alexandra will not represent a man who refuses to give his wife a gett before the divorce proceeding starts.

“I just don’t do it. I will not do it. I say, ‘If you want me to represent you, give your wife the gett and then we will start,’” she said. “He says, ‘Then I lose all leverage,’ and I say, ‘exactly.’”

Family law attorney Roberta B. Bennett describes Alexandra

as a “formidable adversary with strong opinions and a wicked sense of humor.”

According to Bennett, although Ariel has less experience than his mother, “he more than makes up for it with his smarts and competence [and] is not afraid of taking creative approaches in trying to settle cases or at trial.”

After receiving his law degree from Northwestern University Pritzker School of Law in 2005, Ariel — also a certified family law specialist — became an associate in Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP in Palo Alto.

“It was a larger law firm, and he wanted to go out on his own, so he came down here,” Alexandra said. “I had an office available.”

Alexandra and Ariel worked in the same office but, initially, they weren’t working together. Ariel started his own family law practice in 2008.

“A lot of the referrals that I got were obviously from my mother; we were in the same office,” Ariel said. “And from my father, who used to do a lot of family law.”

Four years ago, the mother-son team officially joined forces — forming Leichter Leichter-Maroko.

“One might think it difficult for a mother and son to be law partners. I think they have very

different personalities that complement each other in their representation of clients,” said family law attorney Stefanie M. Hall, who describes Alexandra and Ariel as top-notch in the practice.

“They have an incredible work ethic,” Hall said. “Alexandra is like the Energizer Bunny. I can recall working with both of them until 2 a.m. on more than one occasion,” she said.

Alexandra and Ariel believe that understanding religious, cultural, linguistic and other differences of the firm’s clients is important because “how we conduct each case will have lasting effects on the lives of ... clients, their significant others, and most importantly the children,” Alexandra explained.

Although the firm exclusively handles family law, there are some tangential issues for which they make exceptions.

Ariel recently filed an adversary proceeding in bankruptcy court on behalf of a client his mother represented before he started law school.

“The case was done. There was a judgment,” he said. Years later, the client came back when her ex-husband tried to modify child and spousal support. The child had developmental problems, and

the ex-husband tried to get out of paying support, Ariel said.

“Four requests within four years,” he said.

After his last appeal was denied, the husband cut off support anyway, citing financial ruin, Ariel said. He filed bankruptcy in 2010 but Leichter Leichter-Maroko’s client could not afford a bankruptcy attorney. Ariel read up on bankruptcy law and filed an adversary proceeding to get the support and legal fees declared nondischargeable.

“As soon as I filed that ... he converted his case to a Chapter 11, which made it a lot more complicated,” Ariel said. “I’d never set foot in a bankruptcy court. I just knew that there was something called a chapter seven and something called a chapter 11, and I really had no clue about anything else.”

The case ended in June after seven years of motions. “He paid up every dollar, including interest,” Ariel said. The case was a “big, big mess,” but extremely satisfying, he said.

“I hadn’t had too many more clients who were more deserving than this one. It was such a lopsided case in terms of bad guy, good guy. And you just don’t get that very often.”