

Birkat Eirusin: A Blessing for Holy Sexuality

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As a Jewish feminist deeply committed to the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in Jewish life, I have long found elements of the traditional Jewish wedding — particularly a man acquiring a silent woman whose price is based on her sexual history — to be troubling.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ רוּחַ הָעוֹלָם מַתִּיר אֲסוּרִים מִפֶּחַד בּוֹשָׁה וְכִלְיָמָה וּפּוֹתֵחַ לִבְנֵי לְקַדּוֹשֵׁת הַגּוֹף וְעֵדְתָהּ וְכוּן לִבְנֵי לְהִתְאַרֵס בְּצַדֵּק וּבְמִשְׁפָּט וּבְחֶסֶד וּבְרַחֲמִים. בְּרוּכָה אַתָּה ה' מְקַדְּשֵׁת יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל יְדֵי אֲהָבָה בְּכַבּוֹד וּבְאַמְתָּ.


Blessed are You, our God, Source of Life, who frees us from fear and shame and opens us to the holiness of our bodies and their pleasures. You guide us to entwine our hearts in righteousness, justice, lovingkindness and compassion. Blessed are You, who sanctifies Israel through love that is honorable and true.®

In order to mask the more objectionable aspects of this ceremony, contemporary liberal Jews de-emphasize the halakhic ritual and use secular romantic images and translations that gloss over the literal meaning of the text. These “solutions” might make us feel better about participating in the ritual, but they don’t address the heart of the problem on either the halakhic or the human level. When we replace the language of halakhic transaction with sweeping statements about (heterosexual) marriage as the ultimate state of being, we alienate LGBT people and single people of all sexual orientations.

I believe it is possible to transform the Jewish wedding so that it is not a celebration of male dominance and heterosexual triumphalism. For years, feminist Judaism has been recasting the ceremony as the sanctification of a partnership of equals, so that its rituals work for same-sex couples and for egalitarian opposite-sex couples. Perhaps the greatest challenge

remaining is *Birkat Eirusin*. What is to be done with a blessing thanking God for the biblical sexual prohibitions? We have done so much to move past the focus on the Levitical sexual prohibitions that have been used to perpetuate the exclusion and oppression of gay people. Why would we want to recall that under the *chuppah*? Many progressive ceremonies simply omit this blessing, losing the reference to the ritual of betrothal. The challenge is in engaging with the blessing, not deleting it.

The original goal of the betrothal ceremony was to declare the intention of the marriage and to secure the sexual exclusivity of the couple. In that context, the language of the blessing makes sense, acknowledging the sexual boundaries inherent in a commitment of monogamy. If we are to understand this blessing as one that addresses the sexual aspect of the relationship and the commitment to sexual boundaries, then certainly it remains relevant and even important. There is no other place in the wedding ceremony that acknowledges sexuality. While a blessing about biblical sexual prohibitions is archaic and alienating, one that celebrates healthy sexuality within relationships can be extremely meaningful.

When my sister and her partner wrote the liturgy for their wedding, they chose to use the assonance of “*eirusin*” (betrothal) and “*matir asurim*” (freeing the oppressed) to transform language evoking oppression and marginalization into a blessing celebrating coming out and a liberated sexuality. My partner and I adapted it for our own *chuppah*. It is a blessing that acknowledges the holiness that is possible in a committed sexual relationship — one that is appropriate for couples of any sex or gender. 

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