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Sh'ma שמע

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

Inside
Jewish Weddings

Reflections by **Rachel Florman, Amitai Adler & Julie Pelc Adler, Ben Dreyfus & Elizabeth Richman, Benj Kamm & Emma Kippley-Ogman**

Kiddushin — the betrothal part of a wedding ceremony — is all about acquisition. Over the years, when faced with decisions about wedding ceremonies, some people confront the inequities of the betrothal head on and devise new rituals. Others keep the traditional texts in Hebrew and Aramaic and provide creative transformations in English. Still others feel comfortable enough with the text as it is, or they choose not to focus on the gender disparity or the question of acquisition. The commotion around kiddushin — new textual language and experimentation with ritual — is an example of Judaism as a work in progress. June is the month of weddings, and this issue of *Sh'ma* is our offering to the mix on getting married. We take an old legal formulation, a social norm, and air it out according to new sensibilities. In essays that explore texts and in reflections that showcase some interesting new rituals happening under the *chuppah*, we wish all who are marrying this summer, *mazal tov*. —S.B.

A Few Words on Kiddushin

DANYA RUTTENBERG

The traditional wedding ceremony has two parts: kiddushin (betrothal) and *nisu'in* (the finalization of the marriage). Though *nisu'in* and its seven special blessings that are recited under the wedding canopy merit much discussion, this essay and issue of *Sh'ma* will focus on kiddushin.

Within the kiddushin part of the ceremony, the groom hands the bride a ring and indicates explicitly that he is doing so with the intent to betroth her and thus performs an act of acquisition, of *kinyan*. The Mishnah (*Kiddushin* 1:1) explains, "A woman is acquired [in marriage] in three ways…She is acquired by money, by writ, or by intercourse. 'By money,' the House of Shammai maintains, 'a *dinar* or the value of a *dinar*.' The House of Hillel rules, 'a *p'ruta* or the worth of a *p'ruta*.'" This idea is developed in the *Gemarah* (talmudic discussion) on this mishnah, when it asks,

> How do we know that money effects betrothal? By deriving the meaning of "taking" from the field of Ephron. Here it is written, "A man takes a wife" (Deuteronomy 22:13) and there it is written, "I give you money for the field; take it from me" (Genesis 23:13). Moreover, "taking" is called acquisition, for it is written, "the field which Abraham acquired" (Genesis 49:30). Or, alternatively, "They will acquire fields with money" (Jeremiah 32:44). Therefore, it is taught, "A woman is acquired"… The mishnaic voice initially uses the language of the Torah [that is to say, of acquisition] and at the end uses the language of the rabbinic tradition [that is to say, of kiddushin]. And what does the language of the rabbinic tradition connote? That he [the groom] makes her forbidden to all [men] [miKuDeSHet] like something that is heKDeSH. (*Kiddushin* 2a-2b)

Few would agree that the husband's acquisition of a wife is in accordance with our contemporary understanding of what marriage is or should be.

The text tells us that a woman is acquired in the betrothal ceremony, which is now performed as part of a wedding, in very much the same way that one might acquire a field — using the same means: money. This text also makes explicit the meaning of kiddushin. Contrary to popular sentiment that kiddushin derives from *kadosh*, to sanctify and render holy, [l'KDSH], the betrothal ritual is a way of

dedicating the woman (making her *hekdesh*), rendering her forbidden to other men, just as an object dedicated (made *hekdesh*) to the Temple is forbidden for all other purposes.

In contemporary practice, this acquisition is generally executed by *kinyan kesef* [acquisition through money], most commonly by the groom's placing of a ring (worth the value of a *p'ruta* or more) on the bride's finger and reciting a formula of dedication/acquisition. The bride need not utter a word, as her silence is understood to be consent.

What is this acquisition? Some argue that the groom purchases the bride, noting the Mishnah and Talmud's parallels to the acquisition of a slave, animal, or land. Others argue that he acquires not her entire being, but rather her sexuality, the right to monogamy. Still others argue that he acquires not her, but rather the obligations of husband to wife, including those to feed, clothe, and have intimate relations with her. (There is no parallel acquisition by the wife of the husband.)

Even in the best possible scenario, this process is decidedly unequal. The groom is actor and agent, acquiring responsibilities, and while the bride's consent is required, her speech is not; she can be entirely passive. Few would agree that the husband's acquisition of a wife is in accordance with our contemporary understanding of what marriage is or should be. Needless to say, the ritual also presumes the heterosexuality of the partners — their gender roles are necessary and built into the mechanisms at hand.

This issue of *Sh'ma* highlights some of the recent work on the kiddushin problem. Is there any way to have an egalitarian wedding ceremony in which nobody is acquired or, possibly, both partners acquire each other? What about a ceremony where both partners are actors, where gender is not the defining feature of the relationship or the ritual meant to formalize it? What recognizable features of the wedding ceremony might be adapted? How, and to what extent? At this point, there is no standard, no authorized formal ritual that a couple might undertake under the wedding canopy; we're early in this process of study and experimentation. And given the range of ideas and attitudes about Jewish law, there may never be such a standard.

In rabbinical school, I became interested in this question and began cataloging through a blog* some of the approaches I was hearing and reading about and stumbling upon in my research; it was a way to make space for discussion and debate, to air the pros and cons, the problems and the potential applications of the various ideas being proposed. This, after all, is the age-old process through which Judaism grows, evolves, and reveals itself again and again.

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*Her online notebook on kiddushin can be found at http://alternativestokiddushin.wordpress.com

The Object of His Acquisition

VANESSA L. OCHS

Long ago, a young man acquired me. I permitted this; I dressed up for the occasion. I was party, in all ways, to my acquisition — though I was only partially aware that I was losing ownership of myself. I accompanied my fiancé to the jewelry district in New York as he purchased a ring that would symbolize, when he placed it on my extended finger, that I was handing myself over to him. Sitting in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, I had pored over folkloristic motifs of birds, flowers, and pomegranates, and laid out a design for the *ketubah* (marriage contract) that would outline the specific details of my acquisition: his setting aside "200 silver *zuzim* due" for my "maidenhood" and the dowry that I would bring from my "house, in silver, gold, valuables, clothing, and household furnishings," which he would accept "in the sum of 100 silver pieces."

I paid no attention to the meaning of the Aramaic text of the document, even though I am sure a flip through a Jewish encyclopedia would have revealed it to me. I can't say that I knew my groom had committed himself to provide me with "food and clothing and necessities and… [my] conjugal rights according to accepted custom." I can't say I knew what "conjugal rights" were or that they were mine to have; I did wonder if my parents would let my husband and me sleep together when we visited.

As for the groom, did he consider what he was committing to, by virtue of this document? Though he was a philosopher, I know he was not pondering what it meant for one person to acquire another. He had this curious policy on religion: You did what the tribe demanded of you and then you moved on. We did not speak about the matter of my acquisition — nor did

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we discuss it with the rabbi who married us, although we did talk, at length, about strategies for how we might get my divorced parents to march peacefully down the aisle (we failed: My father and his family, displeased with the choreography we proposed, did not attend.)

What did we think the text of the *ketubah* actually said? We both assumed that it named us, our parents, the day and place of the wedding, and stated that my parents were providing, not the stainless steel silverware and used family station wagon (mustard yellow, with wood paneling) that they actually gave us, but some traditional number of sheep and goats. That is to say, in a world devoid of silver *zuzim*, a world in which none of the brides in my circle were "maidens," we assumed that the text had no significance or consequence, legal or interpersonal: It was but a chant of foreign syllables, an expertly written amulet passed from one person to the next, which sealed our bond in the historic way of Jews. As our rabbi read the *ketubah* aloud in Aramaic under the *chuppah*, our hearts heard a blessing for our marriage and a showering of divine protection. Before my groom placed the ring on my finger, as I heard him say the word "*mekudeshet*," I heard only the echo of "*kadosh*" — a holy day and marriage that God was witnessing.

Some years after my acquisition, the writer Anita Diamant wrote *The New Jewish Wedding*, a book that gave Jewish couples the skills to understand their wedding ceremony and the mandate to shape it along with their officiant. A couple who resisted assuming the traditional roles of "acquirer" and "acquired" could opt out of the old practice of kiddushin and choose alternative practices, such as *brit ahuvim*, which likens a marriage to a mutual covenant between business partners.

When I counsel couples before their wedding, I know they have often already given serious thought to the problems that kiddushin poses for both partners. They have googled translations and alternative texts. But most still want a traditional ceremony; they want it badly and unreflectively, in much the same way that the bride wants her white dress. And if they choose an egalitarian *ketubah*, they often want the traditional one read aloud in Aramaic and signed, too, and they might frame it on the back of their egalitarian *ketubah*, the one that hangs prominently in their living room. If they are learned, if they are both ardent supporters of the rights of women in religion and the rest of life, they will try very hard to find other Jewish texts that make the acquisition seem less like an acquisition, and if they can't find a way to stretch the text, they will weave their own *midrashim*.

Why are so many Jewish couples still willing to perpetuate a ritual of acquisition that is so obviously problematic? When it comes to weddings, I suspect, there is the element of magic. People want to "do it right," thinking that their compliance with what is almost irrational will offer a bit of holy glue to hold their marriage together when so many others fail. An Israeli feminist lawyer told me that her secular, feminist women friends could easily fly to Cyprus for a civil wedding rather than submit to the religious ceremony imposed by the Israeli rabbinate. But the majority choose the "traditional" ceremony. They dip in the mikveh as they are made to do, and they get acquired, just as I had been when I didn't know better.

I haven't revised my *ketubah* in favor of one that makes me owner of myself.

But I do know better, and still I haven't revised my *ketubah* in favor of one that makes me owner of myself. How difficult would that be — a new document, fresh witnesses? What am I waiting for?

Discussion Guide

Bringing together a myriad of voices and experiences provides Sh'ma *readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of these ideas, we offer the following questions:*

1. Why do Jewish couples continue to perpetuate a wedding ritual of acquisition that is out of alignment with their Jewish and philosophical thinking?
2. What features of a Jewish wedding ceremony might be adapted to more closely reflect contemporary liberal practices?
3. If the Orthodox rabbinate in Israel were to relinquish control over personal status issues, what would be the implications for marriage and divorce?

Reshut Hakallah: The Symbolism of the *Chuppah*

KAREN MILLER JACKSON

The *chuppah*, or marriage canopy, is often likened to the home that the *chatan* and *kallah*, the groom and bride, are embarking on building together. However, not all traditional sources support this view. Halakhic sources depict the *chuppah* as a home, but it is a home that belongs to the *chatan*, and its role in the ceremony is to mark the transfer of the woman from her father's house to her husband's house. One must look to the aggadic sources for a view on the symbolism of the *kallah's* entry into the *chuppah* that is more in line with our modern sensibilities. Within the *aggadah*, the *chuppah* represents the beginning of a mutual and equal relationship between the *chatan* and *kallah,* who are on the verge of establishing a home together.

The dominant view in halakhic sources is that the *chuppah* is the *reshut*, or domain, of the *chatan*, and this is why he enters it first and then brings the *kallah* into his home. According to the *Shulchan Arukh* (*Even Ha-Ezer* 55:1) the marriage has only taken place once the bride has entered his house, which in the halakhic sources is the symbolic purpose of the *chuppah*. This symbolism seems to be further reinforced by the *minhag* (a custom in which my husband and I partook at our own wedding) that the *chatan* enters the *chuppah* and then comes back out when the *kallah* arrives, in order to accompany her inside. This *minhag* is widely understood as representing the woman's leaving the domain of her father and entering the domain of her husband. It is as though the groom, being a good host, greets the bride and says, "Welcome to my home."

This interpretation of the *chuppah* can be extracted from certain aggadic (non-legal narratives) as well. When *bnei Yisrael* were about to receive the Torah at Mount Sinai, the *midrash* states that Moshe told the people to leave the camp and go to the mountain because God, the *chatan*, was waiting to meet His *kallah*, the people, in order to accompany them into the *chuppah* (Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer, chapter 41). A similar image can be found in the liturgy of Kabbalat Shabbat, "*L'cha dodi likrat kallah*," "Come, my beloved, to meet the bride." Like the halakhic sources, these aggadic texts portray the encounter at the *chuppah* not as a mutual meeting, but rather as the bridegroom's welcoming the bride into *his* house.

The *Song of Songs* and the aggadic sources that expound upon it provide a different perspective on the role of the bride at the *chuppah*. The book in and of itself is understood by most commentaries as an allegory for the loving relationship between the nation of Israel and God, in which Israel is portrayed as the bride and God the groom. In Chapter 4, the bride sings out to her husband:

> Awake O north wind, and come south;
> blow [*haphichi*] upon my garden [*gan*], so that [the smell] of the spices may flow out.
> Let my beloved come to *his* garden and eat from its choicest fruit.
> I have come to my garden, my sister, my bride…

The *kallah* refers to the garden first as hers (*my* garden), and then as his (his garden). Only in response to the *kallah's* offer does the beloved accept her overture and call the garden his own. Moreover, it is the *kallah* who is in the *chuppah* first, awaiting the arrival of her *chatan*.

Based on these verses, the *midrash* makes a statement that is radically different from the perspective found in the halakhic sources:

> Rabbi Hanina says, the Torah teaches you appropriate behavior [*derekh eretz*], that the *chatan* should not enter the *chuppah* until the *kallah* gives him permission [*reshut*], as it says, "Let my beloved come to his garden" (*Shir Hashirim* 4:16) and afterward it says, "I have come to my garden" (*Pesikta deRav Kahane*, Chapter 1).

The need for the permission (*reshut*) of the *kallah*, as it is expressed in this *midrash*, suggests that the *chuppah* need not be viewed exclusively as the *reshut* of the *chatan*. Rather, it is a shared, mutual dwelling into which they are both about to enter for the first time. One can then interpret the *minhag* of the *chatan* meeting the *kallah* and accompanying her into the *chuppah* in an entirely different way. The concept — that the consent of the *kallah* must be granted before the wedding ceremony in the *chuppah* begins — alters the symbolism of this *minhag*. The *minhag* is no longer about the transfer of the woman from one man's space to another's,

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but rather is representative of the voice of the *kallah*, whose message is that she is ready to enter into and share a new home with her *chatan*. Instead of representing the striking absence of a role for the *kallah* at the *chuppah*, it symbolizes her noteworthy presence.

These sources make clear that different interpretations of the *minhag* can be drawn by different communities. From the halakhic material, one may derive a more traditional view of the *chuppah* as symbolic of the husband's domain and the bride's movement from her father's to her husband's house. The *midrash* and *Shir Hashirim*, on the other hand, offer a view of marriage as a joint endeavor, in which both individuals participate and share responsibilities. Far from representing the woman's transfer from one domain to another, the *chuppah* in these sources signifies a home built on joint consent and mutual involvement.

Under the *Chuppah*

RACHEL FLORMAN

I was a senior in high school when Steve Martin's *Father of the Bride* came out. I don't remember anything about the movie. But I do remember leaving the theater determined that when I got married my father would not give me away. I was vigorously opposed to the idea that a change in marital status might indicate a change in my relationship with either of my parents.

Sixteen years later, I was planning my wedding. My fiancé, Jonathan, agreed that we should skip the procession. We decided instead to begin our ceremony with family and friends joining us, literally, in the creation of our *chuppah*. We were attracted to the *chuppah* as a symbol of our home and of the people and events that would define it.

JUSTIN IDE

At the wedding, as our friend Clare Burson played a traditional klezmer *dobriden* on the fiddle, 40 friends and family members came forward one by one, carrying handmade lanterns. Each participant hung his or her lantern from the *chuppah* frame, contributing to an expanding glow of light. Jonathan and I were the last to hang our lanterns and, as we did, the rabbi joined us under the *chuppah*.

Through this ceremony, Jonathan and I wanted to acknowledge the importance of friends and family in our lives. We both depend on the love and support of the people who surround us; our relationship with each other builds on our relationships with others. The act of assembling the *chuppah* expressed our combined communities' support of the life that Jonathan and I were beginning with our marriage. The roof of lanterns provided symbolic light and warmth, offered as a wish for our future home.

The preparation for the event was itself collaborative. In the months before the wedding, my parents, friends, and relatives helped figure out the logistics of the project and helped produce the lanterns and the frame. We planned and worked together in person, via email, over the phone, and by holding sketches up to Web cams as we video chatted. With the enthusiastic efforts of so many contributors, the process of making the components was an enormously important part of the *chuppah*. The ceremony itself became an emotional culmination as I watched key people in our lives construct the space, both literally and symbolically, where we would be married.

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Remaking Ritual

JANE KANAREK

One of my favorite examples of rabbinic responsa literature, or *teshuvot*, was written by Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, the great legal decisor of 20th-century Orthodox North American Jewry. In this *teshuvah*, Feinstein prohibits the bride from giving a ring to the groom during the wedding ceremony, whether during the *chuppah* itself or even shortly after (*Iggrot Moshe*, Even Ha-Ezer 3:18). Although Feinstein opens his response by admitting that once the groom has presented the bride with a ring and betrothed her, the woman's actions are irrelevant, he nevertheless continues with a strongly worded prohibition. It is the reasons for the prohibition that I find to be most instructive.

None of the reasons for prohibiting two-ring ceremonies come from marriage law. They come from the legal realms of idolatry, ritual purification, forgetting law, changing law, and property damage. For example, Feinstein cites a discussion from the *Babylonian Talmud* (*Shabbat* 14b) about immersion for the sake of ritual purification. In this case, people were immersing themselves in pools of disgusting water that had collected in caves. After immersion, they would pour water on their heads and bodies in order to wash off the stinking water. While the first immersion effects the transition

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from impurity to purity, and the second water would normally be ritually ineffective, the sages nevertheless decreed that the poured water would once again render the person impure. Two talmudic sages offer reasons for the decree. First, Abaye contends that people might mistakenly think that *both* the immersion and the poured water are necessary for purification. Then, Rava argues that Abaye's reason is insufficient. After all, people would still be immersing in the required pool of water. He contends instead that the decree is based upon the fact that people might come to think that only the poured water is necessary for purification.

The parallel to kiddushin with two rings is clear: even if the man gives the ring first and betrothal is legally effected, we might eventually come to a mistaken conclusion from seeing such ceremonies. We might conclude that in order for betrothal to be effective, either both people need to give the ring (immersion in two kinds of water) or the woman alone can give the ring (the poured water). At the very least, this would be a violation of forgetting law and potentially even more serious, of changing law. The rhetoric of the stinking water leaves no doubt that this is a repugnant course.

And yet, regardless of Feinstein's rhetoric of nonsense and allusions to idolatry, I admire this *teshuvah*. Feinstein understands the power of our ritual actions to effect legal change. He understands that when I do double-ring ceremonies, I am aiming for a certain amount of legal forgetfulness. I do want it to become legally insufficient for only the groom to give a ring and betroth the bride. I want both bride and groom to betroth one another and for both actions to be necessary in order for kiddushin to be legally binding.

This desire is not only because of a wish for reciprocity of action. When both bride and groom betroth one another, it radically changes the nature of the ownership metaphor that is an inextricable aspect of kiddushin. Marriage is one of the deepest forms of ownership, the acquisition of another person's sexual and emotional being. In its ancient formulation, kiddushin grants unilateral ownership. But bilateral kiddushin changes the picture. Now, each person freely grants ownership of himself or herself and, in return, freely accepts ownership of another person. Instead of patriarchal possession, we move to a deep and reciprocal obligation and responsibility.

It is, perhaps, for these reasons that Feinstein's prohibition of two-ring ceremonies stems not from technicalities of marriage law. Rather, he prohibits reciprocity because such a change touches at the heart not only of what marriage means but also of how we achieve legal change. Nevertheless, I admire this *teshuvah's* analogical brilliance because, paradoxically, it simultaneously cautions and teaches us about the ritual and legal power our own hands hold.

Jordan Bendat-Appell who graduated from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in June 2008, serves Aitz Hayim, a nondenominational synagogue in Highland Park/Glencoe, Ill. **Steven Exler** graduated from Yeshivat Chovevei Torah in Riverdale, N.Y., a year ago and serves as associate rabbi at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, an Open Orthodox synagogue in the Bronx. **Nicole Guzik** is a first-year rabbi with rabbinic ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America serving at Sinai Temple in Los Angeles. **Emily Mathis** graduated in 2009 from the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College, and serves as rabbi of Temple Beth Shalom in Peabody, Mass. They spoke with Rabbi **Jonah Steinberg**, PhD, associate dean at the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College.

The Wedding Officiant: A Roundtable

*Weddings are a time when much — beyond the wedding itself — surfaces. What role do officiating rabbis play beyond the technicalities of the ceremony itself? In the following roundtable, several recently ordained rabbis reflect on the parameters of their role as officiants, "*mesader kiddushin*"; on the "commodification" of clergy services; and on focusing pastorally on the time after the wedding. When one officiates at a wedding, does the rabbi aim to create a legal/spiritual fact on the ground or to inspire a lifestyle in the couple? Is limiting one's role to ritual a timid forfeiting of much needed rabbinic influence, or is it a gesture of welcome and respect and a way to avoid alienation?*

Jonah Steinberg:* As a wedding officiant, a mesader kiddushin, *the person who establishes the holiness of the ceremony, what would you rank as your primary goal?

Steven Exler: The title *mesader kiddushin* does not fully describe the role I see myself playing. I try to create a wedding day that serves as a springboard for a meaningful, Jewishly engaged life. I want the day to reflect the strength of the couple's relationship and how they grew as they created the ritual and experiences of the day. I also need to feel confident and comfortable that the wedding proceeds in accordance with halakhah. I pay a great deal of attention to the halakhic framework, so I might struggle with the interplay between these two goals.

Jordan Bendat-Appell: In the role of *mesader kiddushin*, my first goal is connected to the word kiddushin. I am trying to foster a sense of holiness for the couple. The wedding is the culmination of a long process of learning and

talking together. The experience is a glimpse of something much deeper than we usually experience. Though I'm cognizant of the halakhic process, I am paying attention to the emotional and spiritual sense of holiness.

Nicole Guzik: My goal is that the couple be more concerned with the day after their wedding ceremony than the ceremony itself. The wedding can become so much of a checklist: Did we talk about circling? Check. Did we talk about which verses to recite during the exchange of rings? Check. It is my role to ensure that the couple is beginning a conversation about what defines a Jewish home. And I want couples to know that they can come to me after the ceremony as they continue to refine what the phrase "Jewish home" means.

Emily Mathis: I want the process to enable and encourage the couple to reflect on their relationship and also to draw on the richness of Jewish tradition. The ceremony is meaningful when the couple comes to it having been affected by the tradition, if they want to draw on that experience as they move forward in their lives. Rather than telling them which blessings we'll say and what things we'll do, I want the process of leading up to the ceremony to be one that they own as they head forward in their life.

Steinberg: Are there aspects of the ceremony that, if neglected, would challenge or invalidate your sense of a proper Jewish wedding?

Exler: In addition to the halakhic piece, it is critical that the wedding be filled with sanctity. When a couple is only focused on the moment for themselves, to the exclusion of the people who surround them — their community — something is lost. Halakhically, the two witnesses represent that a commitment of marriage is made between the couple and as members of a community. I try under the *chuppah* to invite the couple to take a moment to look around at the family and friends who are gathered with them in concentric circles around their life — even the people who couldn't be with them that day. If that is missing, it wouldn't be halakhically invalid, but I would feel that I hadn't fully discharged my responsibilities to make the wedding a springboard into their future life.

Guzik: Early on, I mention to a couple that I may not be the right rabbi for them. It's one way to avoid halakhic hazards under the *chuppah*. And, for the most part, couples appreciate that honesty.

Steinberg: What issues would get in the way of your performing a marriage?

Guzik: One example is that I expect the groom to wear a *kippah* and that *kippot* will be passed out for the ceremony. Some couples hear this and know they need a different rabbi.

Mathis: When I am officiating, there must be covenantal words, but not necessarily in the traditional sense. I would keep components of a traditional wedding — an exclusive sanctification of the couple for one another, the *sheva brakhot* (seven wedding blessings), and a *ketubah* — though, again, the language may depart somewhat from the conventional wording. I want the couple to fit within Jewish community and Jewish tradition while recognizing that tradition changes and evolves.

Bendat-Appell: Emily, is it important for you that there be consistency between the Hebrew text and English? Would you, for example, change the English translation of the *sheva brakhot*?

Mathis: I am comfortable changing both Hebrew and English to a certain degree. I want the words that are said to be authentic and meaningful for a couple and for me.

Steinberg: How do you respond when people come to you with requests or expectations that challenge your own rabbinic commitments?

Bendat-Appell: I've ended up in trouble by sticking too closely to policies; while at first blush I may be uncomfortable, I often find that when we start talking, the sticky points can be worked out. It requires some process and conversation.

Steinberg: Have you been involved in a wedding that has expanded your own parameters or changed your own rabbinic practice in any way?

Exler: I love liturgy and the opportunity to be creative within my community and my personal halakhic boundaries. Yet when I began officiating at weddings I felt anxious about liturgical innovation, even when it wouldn't contravene halakhah. At one wedding, the couple wanted additional language under the *chuppah* that would move the ceremony toward an egalitarian ethos, to speak to each other in ways that reflected more of the egalitarian nature of their relationship. It really gave me an outlet to get to know them, to talk about the kinds of words and phrases that were meaningful to them, and to give some voice to my own liturgical creativity. At first, I wasn't sure I was comfortable, but the couple's desire gave me the

Upcoming in *Sh'ma*

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What Jewish conversation would you like to have? Send suggestions for future *Sh'ma* topics to SBerrin@shma.com.

strength to understand that I was doing something meaningful for them. I am grateful that they pushed me to grow with them.

Guzik: One time, a bride asked me to join her and her female relatives at the mikveh before her wedding. Since then, I always make sure to address mikveh with brides and talk about the immersion — about who they can include in the experience, and about mikveh and *taharat hamishpachah* (laws of family purity).

Exler: There is a great power to the dynamic in both of these stories — that couples are pushing us, as rabbis, to grow. Because I'm a rabbi, couples come to me and together we create a vision for ceremonies and rituals and experiences that are meaningful for the participants. This creates a dynamic of pushing each other and helping each other grow, and some couples certainly broaden a rabbi's horizons. That is something I love about this particular lifecycle.

I struggle with the rabbi being seen as another vendor or as another commodity.

Steinberg:* As mesader kiddushin*, is there any dissonance between your own values and the rituals you wind up using?

Mathis: The traditional words of a betrothal blessing are written in the voice of a man's acquisition of a woman and I am not comfortable with that formulation. But I've adapted rituals and found language to make those blessings work.

Exler: Dissonance, in terms of language, the nature of the ring transfer, and the structure of kiddushin, provides for some fruitful conversation about how to strike a balance between Jewish law and tradition on the one hand, and personal expression and certain general and Jewish values on the other. We talk about the wedding as a microcosm of their married lives.

In terms of double-ring ceremonies, as an Orthodox rabbi I must stay faithful to the halakhic sources, which do not support a bidirectional kiddushin exchange. Though the ceremony might reflect a relationship of equal partners, the actual exchange that takes place is not bidirectional. There are meaningful ways to strike a balance, such as the ring ceremony described by my teacher, Rabbi Dov Linzer, in which — in addition to the *chatan* giving the *kallah* a ring to effectuate kiddushin — the *kallah* gives the *chatan* a ring under the *chuppah* as a means of formalizing the *ketubah* obligations.

Mathis: For our own wedding, my wife and I retained the concept of kiddushin because of its root, which refers to the sacred setting-aside of us to one another exclusively and completely; we also established a *shutafut*, creating a sacred partnership. It is the aspect of *kinyan* (acquisition) that I want to separate myself from, not the kiddushin.

Guzik: I struggle with the rabbi being seen as another vendor or as another commodity. Especially for couples who are not shul members, it is very hard to put a price on our services, especially when we're trying to bring holiness into the moment.

Bendat-Appell: Serving as *mesader kiddushin* is an interesting window into the role of rabbi, the nature of Jewish communities. If I don't know the couple, I'm more likely to be treated as a vendor; people who know me tend to bring me into the discussion about the ceremony. Still, Steven's language about the celebration being as much an embodiment of our values as the ceremony is important. I need to bring that concept into conversations with couples so that the food served and the party planned are aligned with the values of the ceremony.

Guzik: How do we make each part of the lifecycle experience reflect Jewish values? I definitely speak with couples about kashrut at the celebration, but not about the budget of the celebration overall. Steven, how do you start that conversation?

Exler: I would want to have the conversation early on, using the same principles of expressing my values, hearing what the couple wants, balancing the desire to include as many people as possible in celebrating the joy and sanctity of the union and relationship. I also want to encourage modesty and ethical responsibility.

Mathis: I also want to recognize the boundaries of my role — the way a pediatrician might suggest that I send my child to a particular school or a therapist might have ideas about the ways we spend our money, but we haven't hired them to tell us "how" to do it; that's not their role. Their role is to facilitate our child's health or our psychological wellbeing. While I might want to encourage a certain set of values, I also want to respect and recognize the limit of what I can effect. Nicole, your question about commodification helped me recognize that when I work with a couple, I want to help them create a deeply human and, at the same time, sacred experience. We do have examples of that role for which we pay money.

A Journey Toward Marriage

HAVIVA NER-DAVID

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Wedding season is approaching, which means that wedding preparation time is here. As the founding director of the Israel-based program Reut: The Center for Modern Jewish Marriage, I run programs for engaged couples that help prepare them not only for the wedding day but also for their marriage. Our seminars and retreats include interactive sessions on *zugiyut* ("couplehood"), sexuality in marriage, marital fiscal health, mikveh and rhythmic sexuality, understanding and personalizing the Jewish wedding ceremony, and the legal issues involved with marrying in Israel.

While I have much to say about each of these topics, I will focus here on the last two items on the list (although, all aspects of marriage preparation are related to *zugiyut*). Since all issues of personal status in Israel are in the hands of the rabbinate, all marriages and divorces must go through that body; there is no such thing as civil marriage in Israel. All marriages are religious. This means that all legally recognized Jewish weddings in Israel must follow the rabbinate's interpretation of Jewish law. This presents a serious ideological problem for couples who do not agree with the rabbinate's interpretation of Jewish law, who want an egalitarian ceremony, or who simply do not abide Jewish law.

A few options exist for such couples. To be legally recognized as married in the State of Israel, a couple can marry abroad (Cyprus is the most popular destination) in a civil ceremony and then register as married in Israel. These couples can also have a religious (or secular) ceremony inside or outside Israel (not sanctioned by the rabbinate) that reflects their personal ideological and/or religious approach to marriage.

Though I do not recommend this option, it works for couples who feel a need to be registered as legally married. But for couples who do not feel this need, I recommend marrying in a ceremony of the couple's design with a rabbi of their choice and then not registering as married. I prefer this option because once a couple is registered as married in Israel, if they end up seeking a divorce, the procedure must go through the rabbinate, even if the wedding ceremony took place abroad. But if the couple does not register as married, they can draw up a legal contract laying out the legal terms of their relationship, and if they end up divorcing, they can terminate this contract and draw up another, if need be (to divide assets, figure out custody issues, etc.). Choosing to not register avoids involving the rabbinate, which is advisable since the Israeli religious courts are misogynistic when it comes to divorce; Orthodox Jewish law permits only the husband to initiate divorce.

Some options are completely egalitarian and bilateral, so that there is no act of unilateral acquisition and therefore no need for a *get* (Jewish writ of divorce).

Couples who marry without a rabbinate-recognized ceremony create a ceremony (with the help of a rabbi or other knowledgeable individuals) that reflects their understanding of marriage and relationship. After walking couples through the traditional ceremony (so that they understand its structure and meaning), we explore alternative options that retain (to varying degrees) the Jewish flavor but deviate (also to varying degrees) from the model of husband acquiring wife. Some options are completely egalitarian and bilateral, so that there is no act of unilateral acquisition and therefore no need for a *get* (Jewish writ of divorce). I have had the honor of helping couples create ceremonies that reflect their vision of what their marriage is about (and even officiating at a few). Exploring their values — what is common and what is different in their approach to marriage — not only cements their relationship but also provides an opportunity for the wedding, the ritual of marriage, to express those values. At the conclusion of the program, we recite *tefillat haderekh*, the prayer one recites when setting off on a journey.

Rabbi **Haviva Ner-David**, PhD, is founding director of Reut: The Center for Modern Jewish Marriage, as well as of Sh'maya: A Spiritual and Educational Mikveh in the Galilee. She is the author of *Life on the Fringes: A Feminist Journey Towards Traditional Rabbinic Ordination* (JFL Books, 2000) and the forthcoming *Giving Chanah Voice: A Feminist Rabbi Reclaims the Mitzvot of Baking, Bathing, and Brightening* (Ben Yehuda Press). She writes a regular column for the *Jerusalem Post*, *Zeek*, and the *Forward*'s blog "The Sisterhood," and is on the board of Women of the Wall and Rabbis for Human Rights. She lives on Kibbutz Hannaton with her husband and six children.

Civil Marriages in Israel: A First Step

NAAMAH KELMAN

Two years ago, when I co-officiated at a wedding for two American Jews in Jerusalem, my co-officiant and I declared spontaneously at the ceremony's conclusion: "By the power *not* vested in us by the State of Israel, we declare you husband and wife." Humor aside, it is both deeply frustrating and distressing that non-Orthodox rabbis in Israel have no legal or state-sanctioned status to officiate at weddings, divorces, conversions, or funerals. In Israel, religion and state remain entrenched in the hands of an increasingly ultra-Orthodox rabbinate.

And yet, Reform and Conservative rabbis actually do find ways to "officiate" at these critical lifecycle events. In the late 1990s, when it became clear to the Reform and Conservative movements that the Supreme Court would rule against our demand to officiate, we embraced a different strategy. Together, we informed our constituents as well as secular Israelis that we would be willing — regardless of the state's blessing — to perform Jewish, Israeli, egalitarian, meaningful weddings. The Reform movement, to which I belong, requires that the couple be married in a civil ceremony for the purpose of registering as a couple at the Ministry of Interior. According to international law, Israel must register couples married abroad in state-sanctioned ceremonies. Cyprus is the closest country to facilitate this procedure, but some couples travel to Europe or elsewhere. The Reform movement also demands that a prenuptial agreement, rendered by a lawyer, be signed before marriage, which would help protect the woman in the event of divorce, since the only way to obtain a divorce is through the rabbinate. Such a "prenup" has been found to help women strengthen their cases for property rights and other matters in rabbinic courts, where men can use the system to extort wives who are seeking a divorce.

Approximately 2,000 Israelis each year are opting for alternative ceremonies or contractual arrangements that are written by lawyers. Over the past years, the number of Israelis seeking official *rabbinut* weddings has decreased, according to a source I spoke with at the Office of Government Statistics, despite the fact that the overall population has risen. One might conclude that Israelis are no longer exclusively opting for weddings officiated by the rabbinate — even though that is the only "official" address for such matters.

It happens that my co-officiant at that wedding, my brother, Rabbi Levi Weiman Kelman, is one of the few Diaspora-model congregational rabbis in Israel. Levi officiated not only at my daughter's baby naming (*simchat bat*) and bat mitzvah, but also at her wedding. Weeks before her wedding, my daughter, her fiancé, and the two sets of parents flew to Larnaca — a port city on Cyprus's southern coast — to witness our children's civil marriage. The flight — on a 747 jet — was filled with Israelis, primarily Russian speakers, who were traveling to Cyprus to marry. In fact, more Israelis get married in Cyprus than local Cypriots!

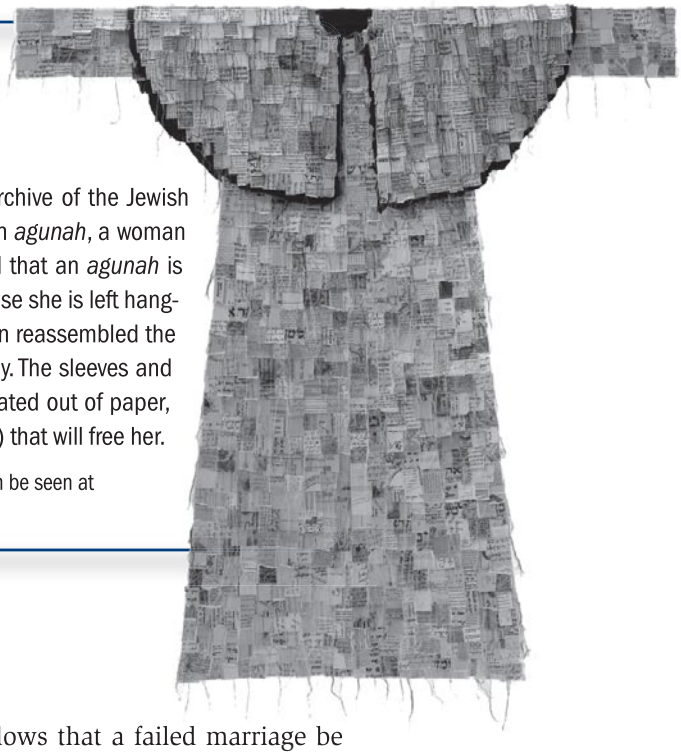
I left their quaint ceremony in a state of fury. How appalling that a basic civil right — marriage — is denied to thousands of citizens in this so-called "only real democracy" in the Middle East. Though my daughter and son-in-law were eligible for a rabbinate-officiated ceremony, they chose not to have one because they didn't want an Orthodox rabbi to officiate. But many Israeli citizens whose Jewish status is unclear are not even eligible, even though they've been raised here, served in the Israeli army, and are upstanding citizens. Only if they agree to an Orthodox conversion would they be allowed to be married by the rabbinate. Most refuse.

Would civil marriage in Israel alleviate this problem? Civil marriage would indeed have an immediate impact on thousands of Israelis from the former Soviet Union who are ineligible to marry in Israel. It would save families the expense of flying in and out of Cyprus, and, most important, it would pave the way for non-Orthodox Israeli marriages, in general, to become a viable and accessible choice. A civil marriage would be performed and registered at "city hall," by a government bureaucrat, after which the couple would celebrate at a wedding ceremony of their choice. This option would also allow two persons of different faiths to marry. The issue of same-sex marriages would be a more complicated political battle; but civil marriages might help prepare the ground for this later on. Finally, civil marriage would anticipate civil divorce, which would defang the current *rabbinut* hegemony over divorce. However, civil marriage will not resolve the

Rabbi **Naamah Kelman** who is associate dean of Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion in Jerusalem, is working on her doctorate on the subject of alternative weddings in Israel.

issue of Jewish status for immigrants and children of immigrants whose Jewish identity is not recognized and who are unwilling to undergo Orthodox conversion.

Will civil marriages threaten the unity of the Jewish people? I do not believe so. Sadly, families most concerned with the "religious" purity of their children's spouses have long ago isolated themselves from the rest of us. While I hope that one day Reform and Conservative marriages will be state sanctioned in Israel, civil ceremonies could be the first step toward fulfilling a basic human right guaranteed for all citizens of Israel.



Coat of the *Agunah*

153 x 151 cm

Digital scans of antique *ketubot,* threads

Itore to shreds the reproduced scans of antique *ketubot* from the archive of the Jewish National Library at Hebrew University as a metaphor for the state of an *agunah*, a woman chained to her marriage. I then sewed together each piece as a symbol that an *agunah* is hemmed in by every word of the *ketubah*. I left the threads hanging because she is left hanging, her status completely in the hands of her recalcitrant husband. I then reassembled the pieces into a large and cumbersome coat that she must wear continually. The sleeves and hem are sewn shut — she is trapped and unable to free herself. It is created out of paper, because it is paper (her *ketubah*) that entraps her and it is paper (her *get*) that will free her.

Andi Arnovitz is a printmaker/paper artist living and working in Jerusalem. Her work can be seen at www.andiarnovitz.com.

Sanctifying Endings

MELANIE MALKA LANDAU

Finding legal strategies to address the problem of divorce and *agunot* (chained women whose husbands won't grant them a religious divorce) were of critical importance to the Manchester University Agunah Research Unit, whose draft report was issued last summer. The unit focused its efforts on finding solutions that would take into account the most intransigent halakhic perspective in order to achieve a global set of solutions of which at least one would be acceptable to all Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox rabbinic authorities. While the effort is to be applauded, the report neglected to question the appropriateness of kiddushin as the model of marriage for contemporary Jews, which while regretful is understandable, given their target audience.

The non-reciprocal nature of kiddushin, as well as the unresolved problem of *agunot*, have prompted many thinkers, Orthodox and not, to conceptualize alternative forms of sanctifying long-term commitments within heterosexual relationships. These alternatives have a profound impact on Jewish divorce. One example is conditional marriage, detailed in Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits' *Tenai be'Nissuin uve'Get*,[1] which ostensibly maintains the initial acquisition (*kinyan*) but allows that a failed marriage be retroactively annulled in the case where a husband refuses to grant his wife a divorce. In this model, divorce ceases to be problematic because the husband either grants a divorce within a specified time or the marriage is considered retroactively nullified.

Derekh kiddushin is another marriage alternative. It bypasses the acquisition, which is part of the betrothal, by creating a cohabitation relationship that Rabbi Meir Simcha Feldblum rehabilitated in the late 1990s from ancient rabbinic tradition.[2] Feldblum's rendition of *derekh kiddushin* does not require divorce because, though it sets out a cohabitation agreement, the agreement falls short of the nonreciprocal rabbinic requirements for establishing marriage. Scholars have criticized *derekh kiddushin*, saying that it is no different than concubinage, a model that does not represent the holiness of marriage. Egalitarian betrothals are, in recent years, more common, and their status has elicited an array of opinions from contemporary Orthodox authorities, similar to analyses of *derekh kiddushin*.[3]

Historically, there has also been divided opinion as to the nature of relationships requiring a *get*. The Babylonian Gaonim and

[1] Eliezer Berkovits, *Tenai be'Nissuin uve'Get* (in Hebrew). Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1966.

[2] For full text, see Meir S. Feldblum, "The problem of *agunot* and *mamzerim* — A suggested overall and general solution" (in Hebrew) *Dinei Israel* 19, 203-216.

[3] The main difference may be that in the egalitarian kiddushin model, both partners may say "*harei at/ah mekudash/mekudeshet li*," still maintaining the language of kiddushin as opposed to the *derekh kiddushin*, where the statement, also said by both parties may be, "*harei at/ah meyuhad/meyuhedet li*."

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some medieval Ashkenazic authorities writing on agreements pertaining to cohabitation comment that except for when it is recognized as a transient affair, marriage intent should be assumed and therefore a *get* would be required. Maimonides applies a more limited definition of intention to marry.[4]

But even if a divorce is not halakhically required in a *derekh kiddushin* relationship, the end of a relationship must be given some formal treatment. Because the approach that men can unilaterally divorce is no longer an acceptable option for many, how are we to create an ending that is both fair and just as well as ritually and spiritually appropriate? A kernel of thinking comes from a line of the poet T. S. Eliot, who wrote that "in my beginning is my end." The prescribed end of something actually influences the beginning, and the relationship as a whole is created by that structure of power. This sentiment is shared by feminist political theorist Susan Moller Okin, who argues that to ensure gender equality in the marriage, one must create a sense of just reciprocity not only in the ceremony that formalizes the marriage but also in the exit strategy. Her analysis suggests that the "relative potential of the exit options for the two parties is crucial to the power structure."[5]

One option would be to mimic the process of civil divorce, even in cases where there had not been a civil marriage. In Australia, for example, civil marriage is required when a religious marriage occurs. But even where there is no civil marriage, cohabitation relationships are acknowledged as legally equivalent to marriage.[6] In such instances, a couple that separates can apply to the family court to settle financial matters and child custody issues. The civil divorce requires twelve months of separation before the divorce is decreed, a span that could be reduced in cases of abuse or other criminal conduct.

Creating some ritual to mark the end of a relationship (the drama of the ritual of *get*, if not its legal ramifications), acknowledges the significance of the milestone. In some cases, the former partners may be on terms to complete part of the ritual together, but nonetheless, part of the ritual should include a singular reflection and acknowledgment by each partner about ending the relationship and an honoring of self, witnessed by supportive community. Sometimes, people are most isolated at these crucial lifecycle times; it would be helpful and instructive to offer a nurturing Jewish environment for individuals to experience both their vulnerability as well as their connectedness to community.

Creating new forms of partnership and also separation should draw on established paradigms. While fulfilling the technical requirements of divorce, these new forms should also express the values that underlie the human experience of separation and the transformation of relationship.

[4] Getsel Ellinson, "Civil Marriage in Israel: Halakhic and Social Implications" *Tradition*, 13 (1973) 24-34 at 27. Note that some argue that the presumption only applies to *kesherim* (kosher people) who care about licentiousness such as Responsa Ribash,6; Maggid Mishneh at Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Divorce, 10:19. Also see *Mishpetei Uzziel*, EH,59 where he argues that there is no divorce necessary for a woman married in a civil ceremony only.

[5] Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family*, 138.

[6] Except for same-sex couples who can cohabitate but not get married, according to the state.

Brit Ahuvim and Not Kiddushin

AMITAI ADLER AND JULIE PELC ADLER

When we decided to use the *Brit Ahuvim* (Lover's Covenant) marriage ceremony designed by feminist theologian Rachel Adler (Ami's mother), we did so not out of nepotism but out of a conviction that it is the best halakhic alternative to kiddushin. We have both studied the halakhot of kiddushin and we both felt that, as egalitarian feminists, kiddushin is simply unacceptable: however one were to spin it, kiddushin is ultimately about a man purchasing himself a wife. The parties are never equal; it takes an immense amount of halakhic contortionism to even approach equality in kiddushin. Best, we decided, to follow Ami's mother's proposal, and simply sidestep the entire morass.

Brit Ahuvim is grounded in the *halakhot* of partnership, and it was invented specifically to be an egalitarian Jewish marriage ceremony that is simply not kiddushin: it doesn't seek to change kiddushin or reinvent it, merely to be an alternative. We did considerable revision to its initial text, not to rewrite the concept and halakhic foundations, but to fill what we saw as some of the halakhic loopholes left open regarding divorce procedure (there previously was none extant) and the possibility that a *bet din* would label the marriage a *safek kiddushin* or "questionable kiddushin" (by means of repeated declarations that it is not a kiddushin, and a contractual condition retroactively annulling the contract should a *bet din* label it a *safek kiddushin*). This latter issue, of course, is ultimately insoluble; someone will always have a stricter halakhic view.

Our *Brit Ahuvim* would be a serious halakhic endeavor, something that reflected our dual commitments to egalitarianism and halakhic reform using halakhic tools, something that was still tied to tradition and joy. We wanted a marriage ceremony that would be flexible and innovative enough to be replicated by others – egalitarian couples across the Jewish spectrum, both heterosexual and LGBT.

Amitai Adler is a Conservative rabbi, a teacher, and writer. **Julie Pelc Adler** is a Reform rabbi, currently director of Jewish student life at Santa Monica College Hillel, and the director of the Berit Mila Program of Reform Judaism/NOAM.

Restoring the Moon:
The Ritual of *Kiddush Levanah*

STEVEN GREENBERG

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The monthly Jewish ritual that sanctifies the new moon, *Kiddush Levanah*, is generally recited outdoors during the second week of the lunar cycle, most often at the conclusion of Shabbat. The form we now have was written in the 16th century as a response to a famous midrashic reading of the creation story: The sun and moon are both created as great lights. When the moon asks the Creator how two great luminaries can share power, God responds by diminishing the moon. She complains, but the deed is done, so God promises to atone monthly for having unfairly made her the lesser light. The sources of the prayer's first paragraph are biblical and rabbinic, but the messianic prayer that follows is pure Jewish mysticism. "…And let the light of the moon be as the light of the sun, and as the light of the seven days of creation, just as she was before she was diminished, as it is said: 'the two great lights.'"[1]

Rashi understood the moon's diminution and its future restoration in the world to come as a veiled reference to women, and that in the world to come, women will be renewed like the new moon.[2] This prayer, introduced by R. Yitzhak Luria, is chanted before a waxing moon, and imagines that the moon's feminine light will someday be restored to its full equality with the sun's masculine light. If God atones for diminishing the moon and for the subjugation of Eve to Adam after the sin in the garden, then the way things are is not the way things ought to be or ultimately will be. The disharmonies and fractures are just the beginning of a great drama, the last act of which will include God's joyous restoration of the moon.

In time, two will be able to rule with one crown, and power will be shared without the imposition of an embedded hierarchy. Only the fullest of loves makes that possible and this midrash offers such an image where equality and partnership sustain the love. Might it be that gay relationships are perhaps a harbinger of the moon's restoration, a forward guard to the coming redemption?

Remarkably, this text provides a narrative that also carries us back to both themes of creation and redemption. While gay unions may not recapitulate creation and redemption as do heterosexual unions, it appears that the same two tropes are present. Heterosexual unions are about the love of Adam and Eve that bears new life; homosexual unions are about the flaws of the creation that we are called upon to fix, the invention of a love that shares a single crown.

The mystical prayer for the restoration of the moon serves as a foil to the degradations of the biblical creation story that unconsciously inhabit the traditional wedding.

While straight unions offer a promise of a future redemption in flesh and blood, gay unions help to pave the way for us to heal the very problem of difference, and in a gesture no less redemptive than the rebuilding of Jerusalem, to restore the moon to her former glory.

In practice, the ritual of *Kiddush Levanah* includes the giving and receiving of peace. Under the moonlit sky, each of those assembled sanctifies the new moon and then turns to one another and says, "*Shalom aleichem,*" peace be unto you, to which a reverse greeting is returned, "*Aleichem shalom,*" unto you be peace. This greeting of peace is shared with three different people and often with a clasping of hands. This overtly mutual interplay between giving and receiving could be an ideal moment to articulate how the love of two can radiate out toward the whole community; it could be an ideal setting for a gay wedding.

The mystical prayer for the restoration of the moon serves as a foil to the degradations of the biblical creation story that unconsciously inhabit the traditional wedding. Before the first couple leaves the garden, Eve's destiny is set in both desire and subjugation, "Your urge shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you."[3] For thousands of years, the ongoing subjugation of Eve has become Adam's abiding interest, prettified by gowns and flowers. *Kiddush Levanah* reveals the fractures of the story, grasps them as a challenge to God's goodness that will in time be fixed, and calls upon us to ensure that the love we honor at a wedding will be shared with the wisdom of heart by which two can rule with a single crown.

[1] In *Siddur Abodat Israel*, p. 338, Yehuda Baer suggests that this addition to the *Kiddush Levanah* is a tradition from the medieval German pietist, R. Yehuda HaHasid. However, in the five-volume commentary on Jewish liturgy, *Netiv Binah*, the author, Issachar Jacobson, admits to not being able to find the origins of this prayer. He believes that it derives from a mystical source. *Netiv Binah*, vol. 3, p. 343.

[2] Rashi on Megillah 22b, dh. *roshei hodashim*. I thank Rabbi Pinchas Klein for bringing this source to my attention.

[3] Genesis 3:16b

Rabbi **Steven Greenberg** is director of the CLAL Diversity Project and author of *Wrestling with God and Men: Homoseuxuality in the Jewish Tradition*. He is a rabbinic scholar-in-residence at Keshet, an advocacy, training, and education organization for GLBT inclusion and Hazon, a Jewish environmental organization. This essay is adapted from "Contemplating a Jewish Ritual of Same-Sex Union: An Inquiry in the Meanings of Marriage" in *Authorizing Marriage? Canon, Tradition, and Critique in the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions*, edited by Mark D. Jordan.

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Birkat Eirusin: A Blessing for Holy Sexuality

AYELET S. COHEN

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.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ רוּחַ הָעוֹלָם מַתִּיר אֲסוּרִים מְפַתֵּחַ בּוּשָׁה וּכְלִימָה וּפוֹתֵחַ לִבֵּנוּ לִקְדוּשַׁת הַגּוּף וְעִדָּנָתוֹ וְכִוֵּן לִבֵּנוּ לְהִתְאָרֵס בְּצֶדֶק וּבְמִשְׁפָּט וּבְחֶסֶד וּבְרַחֲמִים. בָּרוּכָה אַתְּ ה' מְקַדֶּשֶׁת יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל יְדֵי אַהֲבָה בְּכָבוֹד וּבְאֱמֶת.

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.

Rabbi **Ayelet S. Cohen** has served for ten years at Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, the world's largest LGBT synagogue serving Jews of all sexual orientations and gender identities. She is a co-editor of *Siddur B'chol L'vavcha*. She was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

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While the phrase "*ani l'dodi v'dodi li*" finds itself ever present in the ritual of Jewish weddings, in its context in *Shir HaShirim*, it is not a statement about ritual legality, but rather, a romantic description of sexuality and an emotional prescription for healthy relationships.

Shir HaShirim stands in sharp contrast to many of our patriarchal legal texts, as it describes women's sexuality in vivid terms and brings to mind the unique halakhah of *onah*, where women are empowered to demand fulfillment for their sexual and emotional needs. In this respect, the context of our text suggests a profound tip in the gender scale that honors a woman's role in love.

"*Ani l'dodi v'dodi li*" does communicate a need for balance, but not necessarily one of simple equality. It is a statement that I am to my beloved the way she needs me, and she is to me the way I need her. We do not assume that our needs are the same.

Of course, our verse is ultimately a statement about humanity's relationship to God. Here too, we could uncover countless examples in Torah where what we are asked to give to God is not always what we would want ourselves and vice versa.

— Uri Topolosky

אֲנִי לְדוֹדִי וְדוֹדִי לִי
"I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine."

Song of Songs 6:3

These deceptively simple words are certainly the best known of any from *Song of Songs*, embossed on countless wedding invitations and calligraphed over a myriad of *ketubot*. This poetic phrase offers rhyming, consonance, concision, and easy Hebrew. Its parallelism signals reciprocity of loving and feeling loved, suggesting mutual love and commitment of equal partners as the ideal framework for marriage.

However, other Jewish wedding-related texts and rituals repeatedly undermine that ideal through sexist or gender-imbalanced language and structures. Kiddushin — betrothal — positions the groom as unilaterally (albeit consensually) acquiring exclusive rights to the bride, making her *mekudeshet* — consecrated, set aside — only for him (BT, *Kiddushin* 2b). She is her beloved's, but he is not hers.

Various laudable attempts have been made to ameliorate these problems by reformulating kiddushin as egalitarian or by creating new wedding rituals and eschewing kiddushin altogether. As an Open Orthodox Jew and rabbi, I consider myself bound to uphold traditional Jewish law, both its overwhelmingly positive elements and even its deeply problematic aspects. Thus, I continue to search for solutions that fully affirm gender parity within the framework of halakhah. For me, "a*ni l'dodi v'dodi li*" — in all its straightforward equality — is an elusive, asymptotic or messianic ideal, but one that should be continuously aspirational, not only for both partners in every couple, but also for Judaism.

— Aaron Levy

Rabbi Levy's beautiful description of *ani l'dodi v'dodi li* shouldn't be reserved for messianic times. He openly and courageously identifies "problematic aspects" of Jewish marriage law, yet he is unwilling to be fully bound by the implications of his reading because of the other side of his "Open Orthodox" identity. His feeling of paralysis in the hold of Judaism/God/Torah ironically mirrors a wife's position in his characterization of kiddushin.

Jewish marriage need not be so unilateral and being bound by halakhah need not be so confining. In the words of the ever-innovative Rabbi Moshe Feinstein: "Could a limit and boundary have already been imposed on *Torah*?" (YD 1:101)

We can do more than struggle with "problematic aspects" of halakhah's rigid bind. *Ani l'dodi v'dodi li* is an inspiration for a halakhah that is our full partner in unfolding Torah and our own selves in the most profound ways within our own world — that is, a relationship that guides us to sincerely live out all that Judaism/God/Torah claims of us.

— Aviva Richman

I applaud Rabbi Levy's acknowledgment of the gender normative nature of the Jewish wedding ritual and his hope for a time when the narrative of equality becomes the standard. However, he is content to leave that problem for the messianic age, arguing that Judaism simply can't match the ideal of our core text.

I would suggest a different path — one that calls upon Jews to recognize the inherent imbalance and to work toward a solution in the present. It is easy to say that equality is aspirational, but how long must Jews who identify as LGBTQ wait for a community that will fully welcome them with open arms? How long will we accept women being exchanged like chattel at the market?

From where I sit at the table of Jewish tradition, the neutrality of "*ani l'dodi v'dodi li*" must be our path. It represents the best in our humanity; that moment when two people connect in such a profound way and offer themselves fully to one another. Failing to affirm equality among all Jews at that most sacred moment is simply untenable.

— James Greene

Rabbi **Aaron Levy** is the founding director and spiritual leader of Makom: Creative Downtown Judaism (www.makomto.org), a joyous, grassroots community building traditional and progressive Jewish life in Toronto.

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Marriage and Family

Marriage and Metaphor: Constructions of Gender in Rabbinic Literature by Gail Labovitz, Rowman and Littlefield, 2009, 289 pp, $50.00.

Levirate Marriage and the Family in Ancient Judaism by Dvora E. Weisberg, Brandeis University Press, 2009, 246 pp, $70.00.

REVIEWED BY LEONARD GORDON

Kristina Grish's confident assertion in *Boy Vey! The Shiksa's Guide to Dating Jewish Men*, that Jewish men are "generous and thoughtful, thanks to a matriarchal culture that taught them to appreciate women's strength … and intelligence" resonates as a cultural stereotype. By contrast, the scholar smiles at the presumption of any such entity as "Jewish men," instead identifying an evolving concept so plastic and contingent as to be virtually meaningless. The two new books reviewed here, Gail Labovitz's *Marriage and Metaphor: Constructions of Gender in Rabbinic Literature* and Dvora Weisberg's *Levirate Marriage and the Family in Ancient Judaism*, are the work of scholars. This newest generation of rabbinic scholarship revisits the texts of ancient Judaism and exposes the origin of some of our most abiding and egregious prejudices.

Both of these works were published with the support of the Hadassah-Brandeis Research Institute on Jewish Women; the authors reference one another, and both focus on rabbinic literature to question the underpinnings of modern Judaism's support for the so-called traditional family. Despite these important points of connection, these are very different projects. Labovitz's close textual analyses emerge from the intersection of linguistic theory and Jewish studies. She forces a confrontation with a metaphoric constellation in rabbinic literature that has abiding consequences for gender roles in marriage. Weisberg, who traces the fate of biblical legislation that requires a man to marry his deceased brother's childless wife (levirate marriage) through different rabbinic traditions, excavates an early history of one aspect of Jewish marriage and family.

Evoking speech act theory, Labovitz reminds us that language is so pervasively metaphoric that entrenched metaphoric systems become invisible. These metaphors are, however, not benign. For example, the fact that English speakers think about differences of opinion in terms of war (arguments have winners and losers; we marshal evidence and attack one another's position), has consequences for how we behave and feel when we disagree. Analyzing the texts addressing marriage as *kinyan*, the purchase of the wife by the husband, Labovitz brings the reader to recognize that this underlying premise of Jewish marriage has a range of enduring implications, from a wife's lack of control over the fruits of her labor to women's exclusion from the realm of Torah study.

Labovitz persuasively disputes earlier apologetic characterizations of rabbinic thought and legislation as expanding the freedom and autonomy of women. Instead, she underscores the value and necessity of developing alternative metaphors to replace the classic ones, as author/scholar Rachel Adler does, in constructing new marriage rituals that might better promote the egalitarian relationships to which many Jews aspire.

Weisberg asks what we can learn about rabbinic family values by looking at the extreme situation of levirate marriage (classically articulated in law in Deuteronomy 25:5-10). Here we have a marriage between two partners that under other circumstances would have been seen as incestuous, a perfect case for the early rabbis, who relished the opportunity for the legal gamesmanship offered by marginal cases. Making reference to anthropological data on family relations in a diverse array of cultures, Weisberg finds that the rabbis overturn the Bible's preference for levirate marriage of release (*halitzah*), valorizing the needs of the living (including the preferences of the widow) over the claims of the dead. Moreover, Weisberg finds in the history of levirate marriage evidence for a rabbinic preference for the nuclear over the extended family. The smaller unit of wife, husband, and child is given primacy as interpretations that might widen the definition of family are gradually rejected.

It is not an accident that these new forays into rabbinic literature come at a time when we can no longer entertain long popular myths about the stable Jewish family: Jewish husbands

Rabbi **Leonard Gordon** leaves Philadelphia and the pulpit of the Germantown Jewish Centre this summer to serve as rabbi at Congregation Mishkan Tefila in Chesnut Hill, Mass.

do not drink or batter, and Jewish women are devoted, if overbearing, mothers. In the face of increasing divorce rates, as well as a surge among affiliating Jews who come from households that do not conform to antiquated idealizations, in a world of blended families, interfaith and multifaith families, interethnic adoption, fluid gender identity, diverse and changing sexual identities, and polyamorous unions, these myths are weakening. As early as 1989, David Kraemer's anthology, *The Jewish Family: Metaphor and Memory* demonstrated diversity in Jewish families from rabbinic to modern times. We learned about wealthy women who farmed out childrearing to facilitate their work lives and about the "slave girl syndrome" impacting medieval Jewish families.

Weisberg extends this historical research in her informative history of levirate marriage. Labovitz advances the project to a new level, revealing, through her readings, false dichotomies in our thought processes themselves.

Involuntary Transit Through Evolving Consciousness

JONATHAN SCHORSCH

I was young once. By my teenage years, as far as I was concerned, I knew everything, what was right and what was wrong. Mine was the only authentic perspective, my perception the only one that saw things as they truly were. Narrowness, conformism, compliance and naïveté surrounded me — and, I promised myself, I would escape it, fight it. I would rectify it all: the world's unjust distribution of goods and happiness, people's parochialism, complacency and fears. So I raged. I smashed. Idols fell all around me: religion too timid to change the world, too myopic to challenge evil; a boring, irrelevant yet narcissistic Judaism wallowing in victimization and the past. I swore I would not replicate these mistakes. I yearned for life, energetic struggle, unflinching honesty, the "really real." I was so much older when I was young, as Eric Burdon and the Animals boasted (or mourned) in a song from the mid-1960s.

I moved on. I left my childhood behind. I suppose I even grew up. Miraculously, I must have wizened somewhat. By my 30s, I had a wife, children, and a career. Some time into my older children's adolescence, I noticed a pain I could no longer conceal. Someone had entered my workshop and was busily chipping away at much of what I had loved, cared for, and spent so much time and energy building. It was my own children! They seem to have mistaken the treasures that my wife and I had built ourselves for idols: Our environmentally friendly, quasi-hippy ways were deemed aberrant and embarrassing, ineffective and silly; our critique of contemporary capitalism and governmental failures and our search for alternatives were considered cynical; our lack of a television and opposition to much of popular culture were causing our children's mental and social debilitation. Worse still was the fact that the serious yet easygoing, communal, neo-hasidic Judaism that my wife and I had nurtured as haven and inspiration fit neither into proper conventional Judaism nor rational secularism. We were aberrations — stupid, backward, and superstitious; religious tyrants imposing groundless beliefs on those less powerful. Terachs, indeed.

Our domestic intergenerational conflicts evolved into a routine of sorts. I realized that it was not my idols (ideals) that were being smashed. It was me. I had become the idol; I had become the towering statue of a false and tyrannical dictator. My orientation, values, and beliefs could not be separated from my essence; they were me. I had become the piñata whose breaking would shower confidence, freedom, independence, and legitimacy on my children as they sought their own promised lands. Indeed, only my breaking would bestow such sweet benefits. No wonder every blow to my religiosity, to my priorities, to my tastes felt like a mortal wound. That may have been their aim.

On occasion, usually but for a flitting moment, it dawns on me that I am also — however impossibly, however necessarily — the god who watches the scene in the idol workshop unfold. Detached, I take in the combatants, their claims, their animosities, their furious battles, their casualties. I understand, and empathize with each party. I recognize that in some cases only the impure ashes from the conflagration itself can bring about purification, that the seed shell must be allowed to decay for

Avram's Father's Idols

A YEARLONG CONVERSATION

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This marks the last column to reflect on the *midrash* of Avram destroying the idols in his father's shop. Over the course of this year, we've asked our writers to think about the idols they must still transcend to "get to Canaan."

Jonathan Schorsch is associate professor in the department of religion at Columbia University. His book, *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World*, won the Salo Baron Book Prize from the American Academy for Jewish Research.

the seedling to sprout, that the ideals of the parents can become the idols the children must shatter. These lessons, to be found in any number of books, I only really learned and internalized from the toughest teacher of all, experience. Becoming a parent had broken through my narcissistic blindness to perspectives other than my own childish one. My failures had kindled the intelligence of withholding judgment regarding the failures of others. Coming out stronger (sometimes) from difficulties awoke the recognition that unknown powers within could indeed be found and tapped. At good moments, then, my "higher self" is ready, even willing to have my children break me apart for their own sake. After all, who am I to demand absolute respect? Should the life I helped fashion be immune to criticism? To give life lovingly, surely I can survive a little disobedience, some insults, some bitter resentment. Haven't I already surmounted a thousand little deaths with resurrections of sorts?

Rarely, though, is my less-transcendent self capable of such detachment. With great sadness, I see that the smashing of idols has itself become an idol. American pop culture, modernity in general — in some sense even certain ways of being Jewish — seem fixated on destroying parental idols and ideals, unable or unwilling to sift through what is handed down by previous generations for wisdom, intent on wholly remaking the world anew. The idols may well have deserved reshaping, and the truth is that not all parents parent well, but the conflict has left us a world littered with the shards of countless broken hearts. How difficult it can be to consider the pain we have caused, that has been caused to us, that we continue to cause — and to move forward still.

With time, my children will grow, will become even wiser. They will craft their own ideals. One day, I hope they will recognize, as I have come to learn from the revolving mirror of life in which I periodically glimpse myself — that the clay that forms these new idols and ideals comes from the dust of the shattered old ones, that our unknown inner powers were likely, as not, sown by our parents.

Marriage by Document

BEN DREYFUS & ELIZABETH RICHMAN, BENJ KAMM & EMMA KIPPLEY-OGMAN

As the four of us planned our weddings last summer (two weddings, one week apart), we engaged in intense text study, consulted with teachers and friends, and explored many variations on Jewish wedding ceremonies in search of a ritual that would reflect our egalitarian values and partnerships. Our search led us to *kiddushin bi-shtar*, espousal by document, a rabbinic model used only rarely in the past 2,000 years.

We began by clarifying what we wanted: a powerful, replicable ritual firmly rooted in Jewish text and tradition that would initiate a marriage of partnership between two equal spouses of any genders.

Our study and deliberation focused on kiddushin. We believed many elements of classical kiddushin worth preserving: holiness in relationships, marriage as a fundamental change in personal status, and being set apart for our partners. Other elements, however, were more problematic, particularly if we took kiddushin seriously as a legal act and not merely as "ritual": its similarity to acquisition, its unilateral nature, and its creation of a legal situation in which only one party can initiate divorce.

The Mishnah prescribes three methods of effecting kiddushin. The most common is *kesef* (using a ring or other object of value), but we chose the rarely used *shtar*, or document, to construct a truly egalitarian kiddushin. Among other reasons, we chose *kiddushin bi-shtar* because the *tenaim*, or conditions, that we placed on the kiddushin could be written directly into the document that effected kiddushin, unlike with *kesef*. The Talmud also draws a distinction between a *shtar kiddushin* and a *shtar mechirah*, a document of sale. This distinction helped mitigate some concerns about kiddushin and acquisition.

Just before each of our individual ceremonies, the two partners finished hand-writing a document of kiddushin that they would give to each other under the *chuppah*. Each document included the condition that one partner's kiddushin would go into effect, and stay that way, only as long as the other partner's kiddushin was in effect. We gave our documents sequentially, but they went into effect simultaneously. And if, God forbid, one of the kiddushin should be terminated, the other kiddushin would automatically terminate as well, eliminating some concerns about divorce.

The central text of these documents, similar to the central text of most kiddushin, is, "You are hereby sanctified to me with this document according to the law of Moses and Israel." How we understand this law continues to evolve and grow.

Ben Dreyfus is a PhD student in physics education research at the University of Maryland. He blogs at Mah Rabu (mahrabu.blogspot.com). **Elizabeth Richman**, ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary, serves as the rabbi-in-residence and program director at Jews United for Justice, a Jewish social justice organization in Washington D.C. **Benj Kamm** lives in Brookline, Mass. and serves as North American program coordinator for Encounter, an organization dedicated to creating human connections in understanding between Jews and Palestinians as well as between Jews and other Jews. **Emma Kippley-Ogman** will serve as assistant rabbi of Congregation Kehillath Israel in Brookline, Mass., following her ordination from the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College in June.

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Each month, *Sh'ma* creates a "conversation-in-print" — that is, it brings together an array of voices that cross the spectrum of Judaism: secular and religious, communal and nonpartisan, engaged and dispassionately scholarly. We raise relevant questions thoughtfully and wrestle lovingly with Jewish concerns as we attempt to navigate the intellectual, communal, and spiritual challenges of contemporary Judaism. Our focus is on ideas — their complexity, their range, and their power. *Sh'ma* is a vibrant intellectual arena that hosts intelligent and creative conversations about ideas that reside outside of any particular institution. Our readers open *Sh'ma* to find what they cannot find elsewhere — the concise, accessible, informative, and intelligent discussion of Jewish issues. Sometimes focusing on personal belief, other times on communal policy issues, we look to *Sh'ma* for incisive articles that illuminate a range of opinions.

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"They are deeply committed to Jewish tradition and Jewish continuity; spiritually curious and at times adventurous; at home, at least to some extent, with the world of Jewish texts and the texture of Jewish rituals; appreciative of the many genuine intellectual, ethical, and political benefits of secular modernity, though not unaware of its fraught relationship with Jewish life; people for whom their Jewish identity is a vital component in an ongoing process of self-creation and expression by the light of their understanding of morals, community, and spirituality, a process they share with other families of humanity, and with concerned individuals everywhere."

Yehudah Mirsky, fellow at the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute

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Suggested Further Reading

- Anita Diamant, *The New Jewish Wedding*
- David Kraemer, *The Jewish Family: Metaphor and Memory*
- Michael Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity*, especially pages on kiddushin (68-89)
- Gabrielle Kaplan-Mayer, Sue Levi Elwell, and Kerry M. Olitzky, *The Creative Jewish Wedding Book: A Hands-on Guide to New & Old Traditions, Ceremonies & Celebrations*
- Gail Labovitz, *Marriage and Metaphor: Constructions of Gender in Rabbinic Literature*
- Dvora Weisberg, *Levirate Marriage and the Family in Ancient Judaism*
- Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics*, Chapter Five "Brit Ahuvim: A Marriage of Subjects"
- http://alternativestokiddushin.wordpress.com
- www.ritualwell.org/lifecycles/intimacypartnering
- http://www.jofa.org/social.php/life/marriage

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Ethics
Sigi Ziering

This year, our Sigi Ziering column focuses on the ethics of kashrut. Each month, an esteemed guest columnist wrestles with what Jewish texts and our tradition teach us about the food we eat: the preparation of food, the people who prepare our food, the food and restaurants that are deemed kosher. This column is sponsored by Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband, Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. Visit shma.com to view the series and responses.

Slaughtering a Turkey, Considering Kashrut

TALI BIALE

Let me say this straight-out: I don't keep kosher. I never have and, truthfully, I don't ever intend to. My family is culturally very Jewish, but when it comes to following specific rituals and laws, our penchant for skepticism and rebellion tends to win out. Why, then, would I write an article about the very laws I like to ignore? Primarily, my deep commitment to and love of food. Food has taken me to Bologna, Italy, a place where food is more a way of life than a simple source of nutrition; through the hot, sweaty kitchen of one of New York's best-known restaurants; and, most recently, to a small farm in rural Vermont, where I shoveled manure, threw hay bales, and chased sheep into their pasture in exchange for a chance to eat food right out of the ground. If food could motivate such travels, surely it could bring me to contemplate a set of laws so integral to my religion. I wanted to understand these laws and see if, kashrut cynic that I am, even I could discern in their midst some life lessons.

Last Thanksgiving, I made a choice that evoked endless questions and discussions, garnering equal amounts of heartfelt praise and sincere disgust: I slaughtered my own turkey. When November rolled around, I decided to head north from New York to the farm in Vermont where I had lived the previous year to help with the slaughter of 26 home-grown turkeys. I knew I wanted to serve one of those turkeys at my Thanksgiving dinner, supporting my farmer friends and feeding my guests the most natural, organic, free-ranging turkey I could find. Originally intending to buy the bird already beheaded, defeathered, and ready to roast, ultimately I decided to take more responsibility for the turkey's demise. I had spent the better part of my summer and fall raising this bird; I felt I should see the animal through both its life and death. Just as I had ensured that it lived a good life, I wanted to give it a quick and humane end, acknowledging everything required for this bird to become dinner.

The rabbis created the laws of kashrut because they understood that the questions of what and how we eat are fundamentally linked to the notion of who we are. By setting up dietary boundaries, kashrut formed Jews' collective identity, strictly separating them from their surroundings and reminding them to treat every meal as sacred. That Thanksgiving turkey, and the meal surrounding it, became the most sacred meal I have ever eaten. It was a clear acknowledgement of who I am and what matters most to me — cooking food that I know for people I love.

In an age when Jews feel relatively secure in our communal identity, I grew up thinking that kashrut just didn't fit into my life. Although I don't intend my kitchen to follow the laws of kashrut and I do not separate milk and meat, I have found that the lessons we absorb from kashrut are now, perhaps more than ever, of paramount importance. When so much of our food is prepackaged and bears little resemblance to its origins (before its detour through a lab or factory), we would do well to remember that food is sacred and eating is undeniably an act of self-expression and self-identification. Kashrut asks us to take a step closer to our food: to know where it came from and how it made its way onto our plates, and to acknowledge the process of eating. Viewed in this way, maybe I'm not that far from keeping kosher after all.

Tali Biale keeps one foot firmly rooted in New York while the other dangles somewhere in rural New England. In the city, she teaches cooking to children in Harlem, practices yoga in Brooklyn, and cooks for her friends. In the country, she convinces farmers to feed her and let her work for them for free.