



Re-Envisioning Jewish Commitment and Marriage for the 21st Century

Unit 1: Tying the Knot: The Meaning Embedded in the Ceremony

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“She is your partner and covenanted spouse”

וְהָיָא חֲבֵרָתָהּ וְאִשֶּׁת בְּרִיתָהּ

Malakhi 2:14

INTRODUCTION

If you, your child, grandchild or someone you love is getting married (or would like to anytime soon), there is a lot to think about. In fact, all of us need to take a close look at the issues associated with marriage, because the way we construct this institution ultimately determines some of the most basic aspects of Jewish communal life. From how we mark the most beautiful and hopeful times, to protecting ourselves from the complexities and challenges of divorce, the laws and traditions of marriage are an essential part of how we live.

This Social Justice study series investigates Jewish marriage from four perspectives:

1. The philosophical underpinnings of marriage as reflected in the traditional wedding ceremony texts,
2. The Jewish legal structure of marriage and how this has evolved over the last two thousand years,
3. The inequities in Jewish divorce law and the resultant problems,
4. Three possible solutions to these problems.

The first unit is relevant to all marriages, while the second, third and most of the fourth unit are intended for heterosexual couples in which both partners are Jewish. For those who want to explore the choice not to marry, not to marry Jewishly, or not to marry a Jew, I recommend [this study unit written for ICJW by Adina Ben-Chorin](#). Same sex couples will want to explore the traditional liturgy analyzed below, but will confront the traditional legal institutions of marriage through a [different lens](#).



Tying the Knot: The Meaning Embedded in the Ceremony

Is marriage a holy redemptive covenant between equal partners, or a patriarchal institution in which men control women’s bodies? The simple answer is “both.” Before confronting the challenges of the [traditional institution](#) of marriage, it is worth examining the way embracing our [time-honored customs](#) enrich our life generally and this important life-cycle event specifically.

Let us focus our attention on the [Nissuin](#) section of the marriage ceremony and its [seven blessings](#).

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The [Talmud](#) lays out a set of seven blessings that to this day are a central part of the wedding, or [chuppah](#), and the following [week of celebrations](#). These blessings reflect some of the deepest rabbinic aspirations for the marital union.

The Seven Blessings: From Macro to Micro

The seven blessings are ordered as a kind of telescoping lens, zooming in from the macro to the micro. They begin with the way marriage impacts us at the most cosmic and universal levels, and end with its most intimate, private aspirations, and then conclude by uniting the various levels in a single climactic blessing.

	Hebrew	Transliteration	Translation
1	בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִלְדֵּי הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְרֵי הַגֶּפֶן.	<i>Baruch Ata Adonai Elohainu Melech HaOlam, Boreh Pri HaGafen.</i>	Blessed are You, my Lord, our God, Sovereign of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.
2	בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִלְדֵּי הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהַכֹּל בְּרָא לְכַבוֹדוֹ.	<i>Baruch Ata Adonai Elohainu Melech HaOlam, SheHakol Barah Lichvodo</i>	Blessed are You, my Lord, our God, Sovereign of the universe, for everything was created for God's glory.
3	בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִלְדֵּי הָעוֹלָם, יוֹצֵר הָאָדָם.	<i>Baruch Ata Adonai Elohainu Melech HaOlam, Yotzer Ha'Adam</i>	Blessed are You, my Lord, our God, Sovereign of the universe, Maker of humanity.
4	בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִלְדֵּי הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר יָצַר אֶת הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ, בְּצַלְמוֹ דְּמוּת תְּבַנִּיתוֹ, וְהִתְקִין לוֹ מִמֶּנּוּ בְּנֵן עַדִּי עַד : בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, יוֹצֵר הָאָדָם.	<i>Baruch Ata Adonai Elohainu Melech HaOlam, Asher Yatzar Et Ha'Adam Betzalmo, b'Tzelem Dmut Tavnitto, VeHitkin Lo Mimenu Binyan Adei Ad. Baruch Ata Adonai Yotzer Ha'Adam</i>	Blessed are You, my Lord, our God, Sovereign of the universe, who made humanity in Your image, patterned after Your likeness and, out of this very self, established a building for eternity. Blessed are You, my Lord, Maker of humanity.

At the most abstract level, the opening blessings remind us that all of creation is designed to declare God's glory. Zooming in at the level of humankind, the third and fourth blessings remind us that God created humanity in God's image with a special ability to endure in perpetuity: "*binyan adei ad*". This "building for eternity" is established "from this very self," and we are left to wonder which of three possibilities is intended. Should "from Himself" be capitalized to refer to the Divine in whose image we are created, highlighting the divinity in both men and women? Or perhaps it refers to the couple whose union results in children, thus hinting to procreation as a central goal in the nuptials. Alternatively, it may refer to primordial Adam from whom Eve is created. If we adopt this third reading, it reminds us that [Adam was lost without Eve](#). Her creation was significant on its own account, but also relieved Adam's existential loneliness and made him a "complete building." Taken together, the marital partnership fulfills the individual physically, spiritually, and emotionally.

From Universal to National

In the fifth blessing, we move from a universal human focus to particularistic national aspirations:

5	<p>שׁוֹשׁ אֲשִׁישׁ בְּיַהוּזָה תִּגַּל נַפְשִׁי וְתִגַּל הָעַקְרָה, בְּקִבּוּץ בְּנֵיהָ לְתוֹכָהּ בְּשִׂמְחָה: בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, מְשַׂמַּח צִיּוֹן בְּבָנֶיהָ.</p>	<p>Sos Tasis VeTagel HaAkarah, BeKibbutz Bane'ha Letocha BeSimcha. Baruch Ata Adonai, Mesame'ach Tzion BeVaneha</p>	<p>May the barren one exult and be glad as her children are joyful gathered to her. Blessed are You, my God, who gladdens Zion with her children.</p>
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Who is the once barren woman that becomes a rejoicing mother of the happily gathered children? In traditional texts, “Zion” refers to either the Jewish people as a whole, or the city of Jerusalem, but perhaps here could even reflect God directly. The happiness celebrated in this blessing is not that of the married couple, but belongs to those in the surrounding community who experience the couple’s union as a collective triumph. Seeing them celebrate reminds us of Isaiah’s prophetic vision of redemption ([Isaiah 61:10](#)):

שׁוֹשׁ אֲשִׁישׁ בְּיַהוּזָה תִּגַּל נַפְשִׁי בְּאֵלֹהֵי יְיָ הַלְבִּישְׁנִי בְּגָדֵי יִשְׁעַ מְעִיל צְדָקָה יַעֲטֵנִי בְּחַתָּן יִכְתֹּן פָּאֵר וְכַבְלָה תַעֲרָה כְּלִיָּהּ:

I greatly rejoice in the LORD, My whole being exults in my God. For God has clothed me with garments of triumph, Wrapped me in a robe of victory, like a bridegroom adorned with a turban, like a bride bedecked with her finery.

The Couple’s Private Joy

The last two blessings lay out a romantic vision of marriage that is built on joyous partnership and mutual self-fulfillment.

6	<p>שְׂמַח תְּשַׂמַּח רְעִים הָאֲהוּבִים, כְּשִׂמְחָה יִצְרִיחַ בְּגַן עֵדֶן מִקְדָּם: בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, מְשַׂמַּח חַתָּן וְכַלָּה</p>	<p>Sameach TeSamach Re'im HaAhuvim, KeSamechacha Yetzircha BeGan Eden MiKedem. Baruch Ata Adonai, Masame'ach Chatan VeKalah</p>	<p>Bring great joy to these loving friends, as You gave joy to Your creations in the Garden of Eden. Blessed are You, my Lord, who gives joy to the bridegroom and bride.</p>
7	<p>בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִלְּדָד הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר בָּרָא שְׂשׂוֹן וְשִׂמְחָה, חַתָּן וְכַלָּה, גִּילָה רִנָּה דִּיצָה וְחִדּוּה, אֲהָבָה וְאַחֻוּה שְׁלוֹם וְרַעוּת, מִהֲרָה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ יִנּוּ יִשְׂמַע בְּעָרֵי יְהוּדָה וּבְחַוְצוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם, קוֹל שְׂשׂוֹן וְקוֹל שִׂמְחָה, קוֹל חַתָּן וְקוֹל כַּלָּה, קוֹל מְצַהֲלוֹת חַתָּנִים מְחַפְּתִים, וְנִגְרָרִים מִמְּשִׁתָּה נְגִינָתָם: בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, מְשַׂמַּח חַתָּן עִם הַכַּלָּה.</p>	<p>Baruch Ata Adonai Elohainu Melech HaOlam, Asher Barah Sasson VeSimcha, Chatan VeKalah, Gila Rina, Ditza VeChedva, Ahava VeAchava, VeShalom VeRe'ut. MeHera Adonai Elohainu Yishama BeArei Yehudah U'Vchutzot Yerushalayim, Kol Sasson VeKol Simcha, Kol Chatan VeKol Kalah, Kol Mitzhalot Chatanim MeChupatam, U'Nearim Mimishte</p>	<p>Blessed are You, my Lord our God, Sovereign of the Universe, who created joy and gladness, bridegroom and bride, happiness and jubilation, cheer and delight, love, fellowship, peace and friendship. Soon, my Lord our God, may there be heard in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem, the sounds of joy and</p>

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		<p><i>Neginatam. Baruch Ata Adonai MeSame'ach Chatan Im Hakalah.</i></p> <p>gladness, the sounds of bridegroom and bride, the joyous sounds of bridegrooms from their wedding canopy and of young people at their feasts of song. Blessed are You, my Lord, who makes the bridegroom rejoice with the bride.</p>
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In the sixth blessing, we finally bring our attention exclusively to the bride and groom, and as we do so the focus is only joy, love and partnership. They are seen as a singular creation “*yitzirkhah*”, and simultaneously loving partners. It is as if they are the only two people in the world, existing in their own [Garden of Eden](#). Mutuality of their relationship is key – there is no hint of hierarchy, property rights, or shared labor.

As [Rachel Adler](#) states in her [artful analysis](#):

“[In the blessing] the couple in the garden are not depicted as the worker and his helper, as in Genesis 2, but rather as “loving companions”, reminiscent of the gentle, egalitarian lovers in the Song of Songs. This expression, *reim ahuvim*, does not occur in Scripture. But its vocabulary resound in the great verse *v’ahavta le’reakha kemokha*, “You shall love (*ahav*) your companion (*re’a*) as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18)” ([Adler 189](#))

This mutual innocent love and unbridled joy come full circle and engulf the couple, the entire Jewish people, the land of Israel and even all of creation in the seventh and final blessing. This blessing invokes the prophecy of Jeremiah 33:10-11:

כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה עוֹד יִשְׁמַע בְּמִקְוֵי-הַיְזָה אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם אֹמְרִים חֲרָב הוּא ...
 קוֹל שִׁשׁוֹן וְקוֹל שְׂמִחָה קוֹל חֲתָן וְקוֹל כַּלָּה קוֹל אֹמְרִים הוֹדוּ אֶת-יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת כִּי-טוֹב יְהוָה כִּי-
 לְעוֹלָם חֲסִדּוֹ מִבְּאֵיִם תִּזְדַּח בַּיִת יְהוָה כִּי-אֲשִׁיב אֶת-שְׁבוֹתֵי-הָאָרֶץ כְּבָרְאִשְׁנָה אָמַר יְהוָה: (ס)

Thus said the LORD: Again there shall be heard in this place, which you say is ruined... the sound of mirth and gladness, the voice of bridegroom and bride, the voice of those who cry, “Give thanks to the LORD of Hosts, for the LORD is good, for God’s kindness is everlasting!” as they bring thanksgiving offerings to the House of the LORD. For I will restore the fortunes of the land as of old—said the LORD.

“Every joy is unique, freshly experienced, surprising. Joy heals us by making us new. The blessing triumphs over inexorable suffering and sorrow, proclaiming the inevitability of joy. Thus, the bridegroom and the bride in the blessing are simultaneously the human couple in their pristine innocence, still unwounded by one another, and the divine bridegroom and covenant bride, veterans of long strife and many betrayals, but healed at last, their love made new.” ([Adler 190](#))

These seven blessings paint a majestic picture of a loving relationship between equal partners. They are said under the wedding canopy, and again at every significant gathering over the course of the wedding week, and enable our private particularistic joy to be seen as part of a national and even universal healing. The passion of

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the “loving partners” is romantic, covenantal, mutual, and non-hierarchical. This model of love remains every bit as attractive in the 21st century as it was when it was composed some two thousand years ago. By participating in an ancient ritual, we anchor ourselves in a rich tradition as well as the sacred community that has collectively created it.

Conclusions

Through a close reading of the Seven Blessings at the core of the Jewish wedding, we have demonstrated that much is to be gained from grounding ourselves in Jewish tradition. The blessings give expression to a timeless yearning for mutual, romantic partnership. They also make clear that marriage is not just about us as individuals. Rather, the blessings demonstrate how private love promises healing for the broken unions of the primordial couple, the Jewish nation, Zion and her God.

While all of this paints an idyllic picture of marriage, it is certainly not the only one that exists in our tradition. As Rachel Adler has [argued](#), the first half of the traditional marriage ceremony, called [kiddushin or erusin](#), reflects neither mutuality nor romantic love. Furthermore, it creates legal conditions that reflect and enshrine the patriarchal context in which they were composed. In the coming units, we shall investigate these institutions.

Suggestions for Further Study:

Conflicting visions dating back to the Torah:

I have introduced here the idea that two conflicting gender relationships are imaged in marriage: the one in Nissuin, discussed here, between mutual partners, and the other in Kiddushin of woman as an object (discussed in the next unit). Many have connected these two models with the two tellings of the creation of humans in chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis. In [Genesis 1:27](#), male and female are creating simultaneously, where as in [Genesis 2:18](#), women are portrayed almost as an afterthought and as a “helpmate in opposition.” Much wonderful literature has been produced examining each of these stories. My personal favorite is that of Judy Klitsner, in [Subversive Sequels](#).

Perhaps the most famous contemporary analysis of these conflicting visions of humans is “[The Lonely Man of Faith](#)” by Rabbi Y.D. Soloveitchik. Arrange a study group to compare these two chapters on a number of levels: gender, environmental, and the position of humanity. Which analysis inspires you more?