

A Dialogue of Lovers: Refashioning the Ketubah and Ring Ceremony

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TWENTY YEARS AGO, MY HUSBAND, DAVID DRELICH, and I were happily engaged in the planning of our wedding. We wondered how to approach the traditional Jewish ceremony and the ancient language of the ketubah. There were no shortages of difficulties — the notion of the groom “acquiring” the bride, the lack of voice given to the bride in the proceedings, the archaic monetary exchange of 100 or 200 zuzim in the ketubah, for starters. But we found ourselves particularly puzzled over another issue: when does the groom actually make the declarations to the bride that are then attested to by the witnesses who sign the ketubah? Nowhere, it seemed. The groom never says these words aloud, neither before nor during the wedding. In a religion that is so often literalist, this seemed a surprising lapse.

Not being strict halakhists ourselves but wanting our witnesses to attest to what they actually heard, we were determined that the words in our ketubah should more closely dovetail with the commitments that we would make under the huppah, binding ourselves to each other both verbally and in writing. We liked the opening of the traditional ketubah — how it starts like a proper contract but then widens into language that is almost sentimental: *I will work for you and honor you and nourish you and support you in the ways of Jewish men who work for and honor and nourish and support their wives faithfully*. But then the traditional language veers right back, becoming increasingly specific, legal, and obsolete: *The trousseau that she brought to him from her*

father's house, in silver, gold, valuables, clothing, furniture and bedclothes, all this said bridegroom accepted in the sum of one hundred silver zuzim, and the bridegroom agreed to increase this amount from his own property with the sum of one hundred silver zuzim, making in all two hundred silver zuzim, etc.

Now in centuries past, the ketubah served a number of important purposes. It was a legal document that attested to the new status of the bride; it was a record of an economic transaction; it was also a monetary obligation upon the husband that deterred frivolous divorce. But in our day, these functions are handled by other types of legal documents and arrangements; the specifics of the traditional ketubot used in North America are entirely obsolete. Moreover, the detailed legal language of the ketubah seems discordant with the solemn but loving atmosphere of a wedding.

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In the last several decades, hundreds of new ketubah texts have been developed, virtually all of them abandoning the traditional legal language in favor of a joint statement describing the couple's vision for their marriage. Lots of modern language is available about "sharing our hopes and dreams" and "striving for intimacy." And yet, we wanted our ketubah to preserve some of the ancient language, hallowed by so many generations of marriages. We wanted to retain the notion of promises and declarations that the groom makes to his bride, while extending the same privilege to the bride as well. We wanted the pledges from one to the other to continue back and forth; we didn't want to begin with a shared vision but to move toward it through the individual declarations of groom and bride. We wondered what a ketubah might look like if it were re-imagined as a dialogue between a loving couple rather than something drawn up by their attorneys!

And so in our refashioned text, the promises and commitments flow from David to Gilah, then back to David, then back to Gilah. A version of these statements then became the script for the ring ceremony under the huppah. Being able to speak more than the traditional one line under the huppah

was satisfying; instead of inserting “vows” which didn’t feel fully Jewish into the ceremony, we could use a dialogue to have our voices heard.

But we also didn’t think our own words could equal the beauty and simplicity of Scriptures, especially on the topic of love and trust. So we selected quotations from Song of Songs, from Psalms, and from the haftarah of our aufruf [Isaiah 54:2, 10; 55:3B] to elevate our speech. Of course, the language of Isaiah and Song of Songs is traditionally understood as God speaking to Israel. But just as Song of Songs overlays divine love onto the love of a human couple, incorporating these scriptural verses added a whole new spiritual dimension to our ketubah and ring ceremony, and to our own process of finding each other, uniting as *rei-im ahuvim*/beloved friends, and building a covenant of trust and peace.

Finally, we decided that while we wanted a ketubah in both English and Hebrew, we saw no need for them to be an exact translation of each other. Gilah was more comfortable creating a text in Hebrew, David more at home in English. Why not have two texts side by side that echo each other, with each contributing language to the ceremony, but also maintaining its own unique resonance in its language? Here, then, are the texts we created for our ketubah and the parallel language we spoke under the huppah during the exchange of rings. (The texts are printed here without the particulars so that they can be more easily used by readers.)

Studying the ancient marriage contract and its various incarnations over the centuries gave us an appreciation of how the ketubah was used to protect Jewish women from the ongoing power differential in Jewish marriages. The need for such protection is by no means obsolete, but the ketubah no longer serves that function. Instead, a modern ketubah can offer a couple the opportunity to ritualize their hopes and promises into a dialogue of meaning, based on equality and mutuality and love and trust.

Hebrew Side of the Ketubah:

ב _____ בשבת _____ ימים לחדש _____ שנת חמשת אלפים
 ושבע מאות ו _____ לבריאת עולם למנין שאנו מונין כאן
 _____ איך החתן _____ בן _____ אמר לכלה _____
 בת _____ מצאתי את שאהבה נפשי הוי לי לאנתו כדת משה
 וישראל ואנא אפלח ואוקיר ואיזון ואפרנס יתיכי ליכי כהלכות
 גוברין יהודאין דפלחין ומוקירין וזנין ומפרנסין לנשיהון בקושטא
 ואיך הכלה _____ אמרה לחתן _____ זה דודי וזה רעי הוי
 לי לאישי מן יומא דנא ועד עלם ואנא אפלח ואוקיר ואיזון
 ואפרנס יתך כהלכות נשין יהודייתן וקבל החתן את דבריה ואמר
 לה הבה נכרות ברית ככתוב ואכרתה לכם ברית עולם חסדי דוד
 הנאמנים הרחיבי מקום אהלך ונחיה יחד רעים אהובים ונבנה
 בית נאמן בישראל וקבלה הכלה את דבריו ואמרה לו הבה
 נכרות ברית ונקדש את חיינו בתורה אהבה ומעשים טובים כי
 ההרים ימושו והגבעות תמוטינה וחסדי מאתך לא ימוש וברית
 שלומי לא תמוט ואמרו החתן והכלה כל זה אנו מקבלים עלינו
 לקיים במלאת דעת ורצון נפש כמיטב יכולתינו ויהי נעם ה'
 אלהינו עלינו ומעשה ידינו כוננה עלינו ומעשה ידינו כוננהו
 חתן _____ כלה _____

וקנינא מן החתן לכלה ומן הכלה לחתן והכל שריר וקים

נאום _____ עד

נאום _____ עד

נאום _____ עד

נאום _____ עד

English Translation of the Hebrew Side:

On the _____ day after Shabbat, the _____ day of the month of _____, in the year five thousand seven hundred and _____ since the creation of the world, as we customarily count time, in _____, _____, _____.

How the groom _____ son of _____ said to the bride _____ daughter of _____: *I have found the one whom my soul loves.* Be a wife to me in accordance with the laws of Moses and Israel. And I will work for you and honor you and nourish you and support you in the ways of Jewish men who work for and honor and nourish and support their wives faithfully.

And how the bride _____ agreed and said to the groom _____: *This is my beloved, this is my friend.* Be a husband to me and I will be your wife from this day and forever. And I will work for you and honor you and nourish you and support you in the ways of Jewish women.

And the groom agreed and said to her: Let us make a covenant, as it is written: *And I will make with you an everlasting covenant. Enlarge the place of your tent* and let us live together, beloved friends, and let us build a loyal house among the people of Israel.

And the bride agreed and said to him: Let us make a covenant to make our lives holy, with Torah, love, and good deeds. *For the mountains may move and the hills be shaken, but my trust will not leave you nor my covenant of peace fade.*

The groom _____ and the bride _____ said: All this we take upon ourselves to fulfill, with a full understanding and willingness of spirit, to the best of our abilities, *And may the grace of God be upon us and establish the work of our hands.*

Acquisition has been made from the groom to the bride and from the bride to the groom. All is valid and confirmed.

English Side of the Ketubah:

On the _____ day following Shabbat, the _____ day of the month of _____, in the year five thousand seven hundred and _____ since the creation of the world, as we customarily count time, in the community of _____, _____, _____, the groom _____ declared to his bride _____: *I have found the one whom my soul loves.* I will love you and honor you and provide for you, all our lives. And I will comfort you and bring you joy, as husbands do for wives. The bride _____ in turn declared to the groom _____: *This is my beloved, this is my friend.* I will cherish you and care for you and trust in you, all our lives. I will be a friend and partner to you, and open my heart to yours. The bride and the groom together promised to establish a home within the traditions of Israel, a shelter of kindness, a place of creation and growth. The bride and groom determined to seek wisdom, to value all life, and to weave their lives into the fabric of their community. The groom also declared to his bride, I will provide for your welfare even beyond this marriage, if that comes to pass, according to law and our written agreement. Hearing these promises and declarations, the bride _____ consented and became a wife to _____. And the groom _____ consented and became a husband to _____. *And may the grace of God be upon us and establish the work of our hands.*

Groom _____ Bride _____

This contract has been acquired and accepted by the bride and by the groom. And everything is valid and confirmed.

Witness _____

Witness _____

Witness _____

Witness _____

Ring Ceremony:

GROOM: *Matzati et she-ahavah nafshi. I have found the one my soul loves. Harei at m'kudeshet li, b'taba'at zoo k'dat Moshe v'Yisrael.* Behold you are consecrated unto me with this ring in accordance with the law of Moses and Israel.

BRIDE: *Zeh dodi v'zeh rei-i. This is my beloved, this is my friend.*
Be a husband to me and I will be your wife from this day and forever.

GROOM: And I will love you, and honor you, and provide for you, all our lives. And I will comfort you and bring you joy, as husbands do for wives.

BRIDE: I will cherish you and care for you and trust in you, all our lives. I will be a friend and partner to you, and open my heart to yours.

GROOM: *Hava nichrot brit v'nichyeh yachad rei-im ahuvim v'nivneh bayit ne'eman b'-Yisrael.* Let us make a covenant, and let us live together, beloved friends, and let us build a loyal house among the people of Israel.

BRIDE: Let us make a covenant to make our lives holy, with Torah, love, and good deeds. *For the mountains may move and the hills be shaken, but my trust in you will not depart nor my covenant of peace fade.*

