
Seven Wedding Blessings

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AMONG THE LOVELIEST OF TRADITIONAL JEWISH LITURGICAL CEREMONIES ARE THE SEVEN WEDDING BLESSINGS WHICH HAVE COME DOWN TO US FROM CENTURIES PAST, RECORDED IN—OF ALL THINGS—the Talmud (Ketubot 8a). There, tucked amid the spiralling twists of debate and legal argument, are the *sheva brakhot*, the seven blessings, word for word. Resonating with echoes of creation and paradise, the blessings are an astonishing mixture of public and private joy. A longing for national redemption mingles with the redemptive power of personal love, culminating in what Anita Diamant has called “an orgy of words, a mantra of the varieties of human joy.”¹

Many Jewish weddings now include a recital of the seven wedding blessings—often by friends and family—in English as well as in Hebrew. Traditionally, the blessings are repeated each of the seven nights following a wedding at a special celebration also called *sheva brakhot*. Unfortunately, the English translations of the *sheva brakhot* available in most prayerbooks hide the beauty and spiritual meaning of the original blessings in archaic and somewhat cryptic language. People relying exclusively on the translations may find them almost as inaccessible as the Hebrew!

Some prayerbooks, for example, offer this translation of the fourth blessing: “Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast made man in Thine image, after Thy likeness, and hast prepared unto him, out of his very self, a perpetual fabric. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, Creator of man.” Both the simple meaning of the prayer, as well as its

¹ Anita Diamant, *The New Jewish Wedding*, Summit Books, 1985, p. 184. The book contains several translations of the *sheva brakhot* by different authors.

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connection to the deeper themes invoked in the wedding ceremony, evaporate in this formulation.

The translation reproduced below, done for the wedding of my friends Paul and Sandra Scham, is one of many that have been created in recent years using different ways of naming God as well as non-sexist language. This translation stays relatively close to the original, occasionally departing from it in the interests of poetry and modernity.

Translating the *sheva brakhot*, however, turns out to be not only a question of language. In composing this seven-fold celebration of marriage, the Rabbis tapped a rich and varied vein of biblical and interpretive sources touching on the nature of man, woman, divine and human love, and primordial joy. One controversy that still rests within the folds of the traditional blessings concerns the two different accounts of the creation of man and woman given in the Bible.

The Rabbis in the Talmud speculated whether woman was created simultaneously with man, as suggested by the first creation story (GEN. 1:27), or constructed later as an addendum to the male, out of “Adam’s rib,” as suggested by the second creation story (GEN. 2:22). The third and fourth blessings of the *sheva brakhot* parallel the two creation stories. Both blessings conclude with the identical phrase (*yotzer ha-adam*, creator of man). But the fourth blessing (cited above) includes, in addition, the somewhat cryptic references to the creation of woman from man in the Garden of Eden.

The issues embedded in the rabbinic debates of precisely who was created when, and who was created in the image of God, have deep resonances. The Talmud’s discussion of the wedding blessings upholds what for me is certainly the less appealing notion—that woman was built later out of man, rather than created alongside him, and that man more closely reflects the image of God. Fortunately, the ambiguity of the Hebrew phrases in the fourth blessing allows for other interpretations.

In this translation, I have changed the duplicative *yotzer ha-adam* to refer, in the third blessing, to the vision of God fashioning each person as an individual, and in the fourth blessing, to the creation of an entire human species with the ability and wisdom to perpetuate itself through time.

Curiously, in translating the blessings, I was surprised to find myself gravitating towards the traditional opening of each blessing. Perhaps because “Blessed are you” echoes the familiar Hebrew opening words, *Baruch Ata*, it sounds more like a Jewish blessing than alternatives such as “You are blessed,” or “Be Blessed,” or “You abound in blessings.”

But equally important, it seemed to me that a wedding is one time when we truly can bless God—not just in the sense of thanking God, or praising God, or affirming God, some of the commonly understood meanings of the term. The *sheva brakhot* are recited over two full cups of wine. The wine is poured into a third cup and then back into the original two. The newlyweds sip from the wine and share the third cup with their guests. The *sheva brakhot* ritual thus enacts the sense of blessing expressed in the words just recited. Along with the wine, the couple’s joy reverberates through the community.

Weddings are moments of fulfillment and largesse, moments when the personal love of two people expands and overflows, touching friends and family, and drawing closer the community that witnesses and participates in the wedding. As the fullness of God’s blessing washes over us we can lift up our heads, smile within our souls, and—in an act that perhaps God too needs—bless God back. And so complete the circle of blessing in the world.

שבע ברכות *Sheva Brakhot*

- 1
ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם
בורא פרי הגפן.
Blessed are you, God, who brings forth
fruit from the vine.
- 2
ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם
שהכל ברא לכבודו.
Blessed are you, God who shapes the
universe. All things created speak of
your glory.
- 3
ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם
יוצר האדם.
Blessed are you, Holy One, who
fashions each person.
- 4
ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם
אשר יצר את האדם בצלמו
בצלם דמות תבניתו
והתקין לו ממנו בנין עדי עד.
ברוך אתה יי יוצר האדם.
We bless you, God, for forming each
person in your image. You have
planted within us a vision of you and
given us the means that we may
flourish through time. Blessed are you,
Creator of humanity.
- 5
שוש תשיש ותגל העקרה
בקבוץ בניה לתוכה בשמחה.
ברוך אתה יי משמח ציון בבניה.
May Israel, once bereft of her
children, now delight as they gather
together in joy. Blessed are you,
God, who lets Zion rejoice with her
children.

6

שמח תשמח רעים האהובים
כשמחר יצריך בגן עדן מקדם.
ברוך אתה יי משמח חתן וכלה.
Let these loving friends taste of the
bliss you gave to the first man and
woman in the Garden of Eden in the
days of old. Blessed are you, the Pres-
ence who dwells with bride and
groom in delight.

7

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם
אשר ברא ששון ושמחה חתן וכלה
גילה רנה דיצה וחדוה
אהבה ואחוה ושלוה ורעות.
מהרה יי אלהינו ישמע
בערי יהודה ובחוצות ירושלים
קול ששון קול ושמחה
קול חתן קול וכלה
קול מצהלות חתנים מחופתם
ונערים ממשחה נגיתם.
ברוך אתה יי
משמח החתן עם הכלה.
Blessed are You, who lights the world
with happiness and contentment, love
and companionship, peace and friend-
ship, bridegroom and bride. Let the
mountains of Israel dance! Let the
gates of Jerusalem ring with the
sounds of joy, song, merriment, and
delight—the voice of the groom and
the voice of the bride, the happy
shouts of their friends and compan-
ions. We bless you, God, who brings
bride and groom together to rejoice in
each other.



*At celebrations after the wedding cere-
mony, the first blessing is recited last.
—Translated by Gilah Langner*