



This *brit hitvada'ut* (“covenant of coming out”) is a new ritual and liturgy intended for individuals coming out in Jewish communities. It can also be adapted for people of all faith backgrounds, and for groups to recognize or honor GLBT people in general.

The ritual combines elements of birth ritual and *bar mitzvah* ritual, and is intended to last approximately fifteen minutes. After an invocation and introductory passage, there is a ritual enacting the *mikva* (ritual bath), in which forty steps are taken to reflect the forty units of water in the ritual bath. The community, rather than water, acts as the physical “bath,” which in Jewish tradition marks transition and rebirth. Next follows a reading, intended to be read to the person coming out by their community. Finally, the ritual concludes with two blessings/statements of commitment. First the rabbi (or other leader in the community) bestows a blessing upon the celebrant, and commits to honoring and respecting him/her. Next, the celebrant asks for blessing upon her/himself, and commits to honesty, love, and other important values.

There is space throughout for personalization, improvisation, cuts and pastes. Part 3 or part 4 could be done independently. The ritual could be omitted if only a textual service is desired—or the reading could be omitted if the physical ritual is of more interest. In addition, the entire ritual can be deepened if, prior to the ceremony, the celebrant attends an actual mikva and immerses according to tradition. Immersing in the mikva is done before conversions, weddings—anytime there is a rebirth or renewal.

Hebrew versions of the blessings at the end are available upon request, as are Biblical, Kabbalistic, and other citations to references within the text.

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# *Brit Hitvada'ut:* A Coming Out Ceremony

## I. INVOCATION

*To be recited by a rabbi, friend, or leader of the community.*

Then Joseph could no longer restrain himself before all who stood before him. And he cried, “Go away from me - everyone!” And none of them stood beside him, while Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and he gave over his voice to crying.... And Joseph said to his brothers, “Please, come near to me.” And they came near. And he said, “I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into Egypt.” (Genesis 45: 1,4)

*And Joseph made himself known – hitvadab Yosef.* This is the Hebrew word for coming out: *hitvada'ut*. From the root *yada'*, to know. As Adam *knew* his wife, as we all know the deepest truths of ourselves. And as we occasionally, at sacred moments such as this one, make them known to others.

We are here for just such an occasion: to mark, as a community, the coming out of \_\_\_\_\_ as \_\_\_\_\_. Why gather together to mark this occasion, with words and with ritual? Because as the story of Joseph relates, coming out is also coming near. Come near — let me tell you my truth. Come near — let me count you in the circle of intimates. And so, like Joseph’s brothers, we come near, as a community.

We are also here to celebrate love, since that is the essence of what is being proclaimed today. There are those, including many in our own religious community, who say that love is a choice, and that some kinds of love are the wrong choice. But as the Song of Songs says, “Many waters cannot quench love, nor can floods drown it.” Love is not the sort of thing one chooses—like God, love chooses you. Like God, love chooses you. The question is: how will you respond?

Today is a response. A response of *kedusha* - holiness; *bracha* - the acknowledgment of blessing; and *brit* - a statement of commitment. But first, please join me in marking this occasion with the traditional blessing of thanksgiving:

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם שהחיינו וקיימנו והגיינו לזמן הזה

*Baruch ata Adonai, eloheinu melech ha'olam,  
shehechyanu, v'kiyemanu, v'higyanu lazman hazeh.*

*Blessed are you, God, who fills and rules the universe, who has kept us alive,  
sustained us, and brought us to this moment.*

## 2. RITUAL

*The explanation preceding the ritual may be spoken by the rabbi or a member of the community. If the celebrant immersed in the mikva prior to the ceremony, the words in the brackets are added.*

Coming out, *hitvada'ut*, combines two classical Jewish rituals: birth and bar/bat mitzvah. First, like the many heroes of our tradition who learn, or reveal, their true identities later in life — Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Joseph, Esther — so too \_\_\_\_\_ is being reborn today. And second, s/he is becoming a full, healthy adult, with privileges and responsibilities.

In the Jewish tradition, the ritual for being “reborn” is the *mikva*, the pool of living water used before weddings, conversions, and at other sacred moments of transition. [Earlier, \_\_\_\_\_ immersed in the *mikva* according to tradition.] Now, we will re-enact the *mikva* as a community.

According to tradition, the *mikva* must contain 40 units of water. Forty is the number of transition and rebirth in the Jewish tradition. Moses spent forty days on Mount Sinai. The Flood rains fell for forty days. The Israelites spent forty years in the desert. And now, \_\_\_\_\_ will take forty steps, surrounded by our community, at the end of which we will welcome him/her as a new person, reborn, renewed.

*At this point, the congregation should either form a circle, or clear a passageway through the group. As the congregation sings a niggun (wordless melody) or favorite song, the celebrant either walks along the inside of the circle, making eye contact with each person, or walks through the passageway. The celebrant should take forty steps — slowly, one step at a time. To count the steps, either a friend or relative can walk with the celebrant and keep track, or a drumbeat could be sounded on each step so people can count.*

### 3. READING

*After the celebrant has taken forty steps, s/he turns and faces the congregation. The following passage is then read to the celebrant by family, friends, and community, with loved ones each reciting a stanza. Alternatively, the poem may simply be read on the bimah while the celebrant sits or stands nearby.*

As Esther revealed herself to the king,  
As Joseph revealed himself to his brothers;  
So you have revealed yourself to us  
So we see you  
So we honor you

As Jacob was transformed into Israel  
As Sarai was transformed into Sarah,  
So you have been transformed  
By your courage  
By your honesty

As Hannah when she prayed for a son  
As Abraham when he bargained to save souls  
So you have been honest, righteous, holy  
So we hear you  
So we honor you

As the Israelites came out of Egypt  
As David, Elijah, Jonah, and Tamar all came out of hiding  
So you have come out  
Of constriction  
Of secrets

As Moses stood before Pharaoh  
And as Zelofchad's daughters stood before Moses  
So you stand against injustice, against all who would deny you your rights  
So we stand with you  
So we honor you

As Miriam when she danced at the sea  
As David when he danced before the ark  
So you have come to us in joy  
In celebration  
In song

And like all those whose names are unrecorded,  
Concealed, burned, defaced or blotted out,  
So you claim a hidden heritage  
So we welcome you  
So we honor you

#### 4. CLOSING BLESSINGS

*These two blessings are in the traditional form of the Misheberach. The first is to be recited by the rabbi or community leader (or, alternatively, the parents of the celebrant). The second is to be recited by the celebrant. The celebrant's Hebrew and English names should both be used where appropriate.*

We have welcomed \_\_\_\_\_ as a reborn member of our community. We now conclude by taking one further step: recognizing him/her as a Jewish adult. We do this by bestowing blessings, and making statements of *brit*, covenant and commitment.

##### 1. *Rabbinic blessing*

May God, who blessed our ancestors,  
Jonathan, David, Ruth, and Naomi,  
fair-voiced Jacob and strong-voiced Deborah,  
bless \_\_\_\_\_ ,  
who has come out before this congregation  
in courage and in strength,  
in loving kindness and in truth,  
and has privileged us to share in this moment.  
May \_\_\_\_\_ be blessed with wisdom and understanding,  
love and strength,  
spirit and steadfastness,  
with a foundation of righteousness and a heart of compassion.  
We commit this day to honor and protect, to love and respect,  
and to fulfill the words of the prophet:  
“These things shall you do: speak truth to one another,  
and judge truthfully and for peace in your gates.”  
(Zechariah 8:16)

##### 2. *Celebrant's covenant*

*Different names, including personal GLBT heroes, may be added  
(or substituted) and personal statements may be included.*

May God, who blessed my ancestors,  
Sappho, Whitman, Michelangelo, and Wilde,  
James Baldwin, Leonard Bernstein, Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein,  
bless me as I enter the tribe of two-spirit people,  
God's proud, long-hidden children,

the people of the rainbow.  
We are called lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered.  
We are gifted, we are artists, we are diverse, we are strong.  
We are like and unlike, we are normal and queer.  
We are prophets, called *berdache*, *winkte*, witch, *kadesh*.  
And today I take my place among them.  
As my ancestors have done for centuries,  
I pledge this day to be a *bar* [or *bat*] *mitzvah*, a person of commitment.  
I commit myself to honesty, to truthfulness, and to love.  
I commit myself to learning about my newly-claimed heritage, and sharing  
it with others.  
I commit myself to equality, dignity, respect, and compassion.  
I commit myself to Godliness, to Spirit, to joining heaven and Earth.  
*[Celebrant may add personal commitments, thanks, or other statements.]*

Please answer me as I conclude with the traditional Jewish blessing for sexual and  
gender diversity:

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם שעשני כרצוני

*Baruch ata adonai, eloheinu melech ha'olam, she'asani kirtzono.*

Blessed are You, God, who fills and rules the universe,  
and who made me according to Your will.

*Congregation answers: Amen! Mazal Tov!*