

A Few Words on the Language of Kiddushin

Rabbi Ayelet Cohen

For most couples who are familiar with the Jewish wedding ceremony, “*harei at mekudeshet li*” is powerfully resonant. I have found that for many couples it is emotionally significant to say those words – it makes them “feel” married. Offering an alternate statement, whether for a woman in an opposite sex couple, or for same sex partners, feels “less than.” A helpful analogy is the conversation in the civil arena, where pundits and politicians search for any word other than “marriage” to describe unions for same sex couples, because they say that “marriage” should be reserved for heterosexuals. This argument offers a pale version of so-called equality for same sex couples, while reserving the real thing, the authentic language, for heterosexuals. If we truly believe that these unions are of equal status, there is no problem using the same word for them.

Obviously, the *halakhic* issues are more complicated. But, if we practice a truly egalitarian Judaism, and believe that men and women are of equal *halakhic* status and that marriages between a man and man, woman and woman, and woman and man are of equal status, then *kiddushin* poses a real challenge.

Many scholars and rabbis have persuasively argued that we must abandon language of *kiddushin* if we are to achieve true egalitarianism in wedding ceremonies. I agree that we need to reframe the ritual. Two equal people cannot acquire one another. A partnership ritual, such as that suggested by Rachel Adler, seems much more appropriate for an egalitarian couple of any sex in this age. Yet the formula of “*harei at*” continues to feel like the “real thing.” I believe that the emotional resonance of these words is significant. So much of the significance of weddings lies in symbolism and emotion. This is why we craft elaborate public rituals rather than perfunctory business transactions.

Whereas the transaction of *kiddushin* feels outdated and inherently unequal, the idea of using language of *kedushah* to sanctify the ritual and infuse the marriage with holiness is compelling. Combining the partnership ritual that Rachel Adler describes in her *brit ahuvim*, placing the rings in a pouch and raising them, with the traditional formula of “*harei at/harei ata*”, achieves an egalitarian ritual with deeply resonant language. Some couples, like Tamara Cohen and Gwynn Kessler, have suggested coining a new phrase: *hitkadshut*, to retain the language of holiness while maintaining a greater agency: “I sanctify myself to you,” rather than “you are sanctified to me.” Many couples, less versed in the intricacies of rabbinic language but intent on having a “real Jewish wedding” prefer the traditional formula, and I encourage them to use it.

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Materials for Ceremony

Sheva Brachot — Seven Blessings

Rabbi Ayelet Cohen and Rabbi Marc Margolius

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם בורא פרי הגפן.

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם שהכל ברא לכבודו.

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם יוצר האדם.

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם אשר יצר את האדם בצלמו בצלם דמות תבניתו ונתקין לו ממנו בנין עדי עד. ברוך אתה ה' יוצר האדם.

שוש תשיש ותגל ציון בעקירת שנאת חינם מתוכה בשמחה
ברוך אתה ה' משמח ציון באהבת שלום.

שמח תשמח רעים האהובים כשמחה יצרה בגן עדן מקדם. ברוך אתה ה' משמח רעים האהובים/
כלה וכלה/ חתן וחתן / חתן וכלה.

חתן וחתן / ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם אשר ברא ששון ושמחה, רעים אהובים
אלקינו 'מהרה ה. גילה רנה, דיצה וחדוה, אהבה ואחווה, ושלום ורעות, / כלה וכלה
ישמע בערי יהודה ובחוצות ירושלים, קול ששון, וקול שמחה, קול חתן וקול כלה / קול
כלה וקול כלה / קול חתן וקול חתן, קול מצהלות אהובים מחפתם, ואהובות ממשחה
נגינתן. ברוך אתה ה' משמח האהובים / כלה עם הכלה / חתן עם החתן / חתן עם הכלה

Blessed are You, God, Source of Life, everything reveals your glory.

Blessed are You, God, Source of Life, creator of humanity.

Blessed are You, God, Source of Life, who creates the fruit of the vine.

Blessed are you God, Source of Life, who has created the variety of humanity in the Divine image, and entrusted us with the responsibility of building the future. Blessed are You, God, creator of humanity.

May Zion rejoice in the uprooting of senseless hatred from its midst. Blessed are You, God, who causes Zion to rejoice through love of peace.

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May these loving companions rejoice as You have caused Your creations to rejoice in Eden from the beginning. Blessed are You, God, who brings joy to loving companions.

Blessed are You, Source of Life, who creates joy and happiness, loving companions, gladness, singing, joy, and delight, love and intimacy, peace and friendship. May we soon hear throughout Jerusalem voices of joy and happiness, sounds of gaiety and love in all its variety, the jubilant voices of lovers from within their chambers, the sounds of loving partners feasting and singing. Blessed are you, God, who rejoices with lovers.

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Birkat Erusin — Betrothal Blessing

Rabbi Ayelet Cohen and Rabbi Marc Margolius

The betrothal blessing expresses the commitment to enter into this next stage of a sexually exclusive, committed partnership.

Although the standard text concerns prohibitions, this reframing of the blessing affirms the holiness and wholeness of a healthy, liberated sexuality, and sanctifies the couple's commitment to a relationship founded upon rigorous honesty and mutual respect.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ רוּחַ (מֶלֶךְ) הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרָא פְּרֵי הַגֶּפֶן.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ רוּחַ (מֶלֶךְ) הָעוֹלָם מְתִיר אָסוּרִים מִפְּחַד בּוֹשָׁה וּכְלִימָה וּפּוֹתֵחַ לְבָנֵינוּ לְקְדוּשַׁת הַגּוּף וְעֵדֶנְתוֹ וְכוּן לְבָנֵינוּ לְהִתְאַרֵס בְּצֶדֶק וּבְמִשְׁפָּט וּבְחֶסֶד וּבְרַחֲמִים. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' מְקַדֵּשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל יְדֵי אֱהָבָה בְּכָבוֹד וּבְאֱמֶת.

Blessed are You our God, Source of Life, who creates the fruit of the vine.

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, loving kindness and compassion. Blessed are You, who sanctifies Israel through love that is honorable and true.

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Rabbi Ayelet S. Cohen served for ten years at New York City's Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, the world's largest LGBT synagogue serving people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. Passionately committed to progressive and feminist Judaism, she is an activist and an advocate for full inclusion and celebration of LGBT Jews in the Jewish world and for LGBT civil rights. A scholar, teacher, translator, and writer, Rabbi Cohen is an editor of *Siddur B'chol Levavcha*, a prayerbook featuring queer and feminist liturgy. Her articles and essays on Jewish and LGBT issues appear in numerous books and periodicals. She lectures and facilitates workshops on Jewish, feminist, and LGBT issues. She is a member of the Rabbinical Assembly and the New York Board of Rabbis, and serves on the board of Rabbis for Human Rights—North America.



Rabbi Marc J. Margolius is the spiritual leader of West End Synagogue, a Reconstructionist congregation in Manhattan. He also currently directs alumni programs for the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, a center for the cultivation of Jewish contemplative practices among rabbis, cantors, educators and lay leaders. Rabbi Margolius previously conceived and directed for five years the Legacy Heritage Innovation Project, an initiative supporting systemic educational transformation in congregations across North America, Europe and Israel, and served as Director of Jewish Life and Identity for the Jewish Community Centers of Philadelphia.

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