

Covenant of Love - ברית רעות - June 1997 - Sivan 5757

Rabbi Stuart Kelman - Berkeley, CA

Note: This *Brit Reyut* was constructed on the assumptions underlying a teshuva that I wrote regarding gays and lesbians in the early 1990's. Titled: "Community and Diversity - A Teshuvah on Gay and Lesbian Couples at Congregation Netivot Shalom", it can be found at: http://www.netivotshalom.org/Netivot_files/diversity.html

Setup: Chairs are arranged in a "U" setup around one table, with an easel and chair to the rear of the *sukkah* and a small table. On the table are two candle holders (with wind covers), a lit votive candle (or *yahrtzeit* candle); one bottle (opened) of wine with a *hechsher*, two pens, two glasses wrapped singly in a napkin and taped, and matches.

Procession begins: (Music: There's a Place for You")

Four people come in carrying the *sukkah*.

2. Four people say the following verses and meditations singly:

a. חביב עליו אדם שנברא בצלם אלוהים. חבה יתרה נודעה לו.
שנברא בצלם.

Beloved are human beings, for they are created in the image of God.

Greater still is the act of love in that we know that we are created in the image of God. (Avot)

b. נר אלוהים נשמת אדם

The light of God is the soul of a human being.

[name] and [name] each light a candle (on the small table) and say:

Elohai, my God, the soul that you placed within me is pure. You created it, you fashioned it, you breathed it into me and you preserve it within me.

(Everyone sings together: *Elohai neshama*. (Debbie Friedman melody))

c. Candles come together as souls are joined, increasing light, increasing peace. (Each partner places candles in holders)

d. These individual souls have a longing to be in partnership, in covenant; to live a life with another.

[rabbi] Welcome: *Berucha at lashem* (Ruth 3:10). [repeat sentence]

"I've said it twice - once for each of you. Just a few weeks ago we read this greeting said by Boaz in the book of Ruth. I felt it was appropriate to say this to you this afternoon (repeat: *berucha at lashem*)

Everyone sings: *Beruchot habaot tachat ...* (Debbie Friedman's version)

[rabbi] Our ceremony begins formally with two blessing and ends with

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seven. Two blessings: the first over wine, is Judaism's way of celebrating joy:

a. ברוך אתה בורא פרי הגפן

Blessed are You, Adonai, ruler of the universe, creator of the fruit of the vine.

b. ברוך אתה ... שהחיינו וקיימנו והיגענו לזמן הזה.

Blessed are You, Adonai, ruler of the universe, for giving us life, for sustaining us, and for bringing us to this joyous moment. (perhaps sing it)

Sukkah

[rabbi] The *shechinah* herself is reminiscent of the shelter of the Sukkah, a temporary dwelling, the early time of courtship between God and the people of Israel, a time of kindness and a time of new love. So we ask God to spread over us the Sukkah of Shalom - the Sukkah of Peace.

Sing: *u'fros alynu sukkat shelomecha*

Between the two sets of *berachot* is an exchange of property and the signing of a written document.

7. Chalifin

[rabbi] *Chalifin* is an “exchange” - a legal form of acquisition effected by the handing of an object in exchange for another object (in this case, rings) and the offering of words of love (from *Shir Hashirim*), the Song of Songs, the Bible's book of love poetry.

The partners exchange rings by dropping the ring into the hand of the other and by the other person raising her hands as a sign of acceptance. They then say in Hebrew, English and Spanish:

אני לדודי ודודי לי *I am my beloved's and she is mine.*

Yo soy de me a-ma-da, e me a-ma-da es mia

8. Shtar (soft music/singing in background)

[rabbi] *Shtar* is a deed or writ. Its purpose is to formally, legally and in writing establish a relationship and make it official. It requires witnesses. For the exclusive use of this ceremony, [name and [name] and I used a specific text on which we based the *shtar*, which I would now like to read..... [attached]

I would like _____ and ____ to come forward and sign as witnesses.

9. Rabbi's derash

10. *Sheva Berachot* (Hebrew English and Spanish) [see next page]

11. *Birkat kohanim* (sing and alternate Hebrew and English) [instructions to

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stand]

YevarechechaMay God bless you and guard you

Yaer ... May God show favor and be gracious to you

Yisa ... May God show you kindness and grant you shalom.

12. [rabbi] This is a day of joy - and a day tinged with sadness, for we remember today those who were a major part of your lives, but who are no longer with us, specifically

13. We conclude with a classic Jewish mixture of joy, remembering Jerusalem and looking forward toward a whole, complete and peaceful future.

Haporas sukkat shalom aleynu, v'al kawl yisrael, v'al kawl yoshvei tevel, v-'al yerrushalayim - vimru amen.

May God spread the sukkah of peace of peace on you, on the community of Israel, on those who live on this earth - and on Jerusalem. And let us all say: amen.

Each breaks a glass

siman tov

שבע ברכות - THE SEVEN BLESSINGS

1. ברוך אתה ... שהכל ברא לכבודו.

Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, who created all things for Your glory.

2. ברוך אתה ... יוצר האדם.

Praised are You creator of life.

3. ברוך אתה ... אשר יצר את האדם בצלמו, בצלם דמות תבניתו, והתקין ממנו בנין עדי עד. ברוך אתה ה' יוצר האדם.

Praised are You who created us in God's image, that together we might perpetuate life. We praise You, creator of life.

4. שוש תשיש ותגל העקרה בקיבוץ בניה לתוכה בשמחה. ברוך אתה ה' משמח ציון בבניה.

May Zion rejoice as her children return to her in joy. We praise You, Adonai, who causes Zion to rejoice in her children.

5. שמח תשמח רעים האהובים כשמחך יצירך בגן עדן.

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מקדם. ברוך אתה ה' משמח רעים האהובים

Grant perfect joy to these loving companions, as You did for the first lovers in the Garden of Eden. We praise You, Adonai, who creates this joy of lovers.

6. ברוך אתה ... אשר ברא ששון ושמחה, גילה רינה דיצה, וחדוה, אהבה אחוה שלום ורעות. ברכינו עם חיים של חסד ואמת ואמונה. ברוך אתה ה' הפורס שלום עלינו ועל כל עמו ישראל ועל כל יושבי תבל.

Praised are You who created joy and gladness, happiness, love and harmony and companionship.. Grant us a life of loving-kindness, truth and faithfulness, peace, serenity and security. We praise You, Adonai, who spreads your Sukkah of peace over us, over the people of Israel and over all of humanity.

7. ברוך אתה ... בורא פרי הגפן.

Praised are You who creates the fruit of the vine.

RABBI'S DRASH (containing a partial explanation of the ceremony)

We made it!!! When I think back on the process that the three of us and our shul have gone through, it seems truly amazing that the three of us are standing today under this sukkah.

Yes, this canopy may look like a huppah - it may even be held by four people. But the fact is that we have fashioned a ceremony that is different from a typical Jewish wedding. As we have seen already and as you have written in the booklet, terms have been changed and concepts modified to produce this *brit reyt* - this covenant of love. In 1995, when I first published my teshuva, my response to the question of the role of gay and lesbian couples in our congregation, I said that we can now hold a *berit reyt* ceremony. And I promised that I, along with others, would begin to work on such ceremonies “that are appropriate to the occasion. It is important that the community become conscious that these rituals are different from those used in a marriage.” At that time, I was not yet prepared to officiate at such a union.

Well, it's two years later, and here we are. During these two years, we've struggled to achieve the balance between something different and something similar. What has emerged is the first ceremony of its kind here at Netivot Shalom. It will undoubtedly go through other revisions. And I want to acknowledge the depth of commitment by members of this congregation who care deeply and passionately about the inclusion of gays and lesbians in all facets of congregational and Jewish life. I also want to acknowledge my colleague Rabbi Morris Allen for our conversations and his masterful and

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similar thinking. And to the two of you, who were willing to wait until I was ready to conduct this ceremony - and felt comfortable doing so.

We struggled and reinvested specific symbols with unique meaning- all in order to come together sanctifying your love and recognizing it publicly with this *brit reyt*. Indeed, it is a *brit* - a covenant. How are covenants made? People gather in a prearranged seating (usually) and frequently under some sort of covering. Words of greeting are offered, documents signed, and often some sort of possessions are exchanged - and certainly, there is food! In the cast of this *brit reyt*, all of this is done in the structure of *berachot* - blessings - two at the beginning; seven at the end.

Today, we have created a unique ceremony built around *berachot* (blessings) and with a *shtar* (writ) and *chalifin* (exchange of possessions) adding the breaking of a glass. This is the celebration of a *brit*, a covenant.

So much for my political statement! *This brit reyt* is not a political statement. It is a *brit* - a covenant attesting to the fact that we are ALL created in God's image.

I believe that this concept of *sukkat* is the key to understanding what is going on here today. It also contains a message for the two of you. The lessons to be learned are based on that fragile *sukkah* that our ancestors brought with them in the desert. The rabbis of old argued about the very nature of these *sukkot* - were they real ore were they symbolic of God's presence?

In a (remarkably relevant to this setting) article by Jeffrey Rubenstein (Judaism, v.45#4, fall, 1996) called "The Symbolism of the Sukkah", he writes first of the imaginary side and says that:

According to the dominant rabbinic tradition, seven 'sukkot of clouds of glory' surrounded the Israelites throughout their desert travels following the exodus. The *sukkah*-clouds shielded them from the blazing sun above, protected them from the hot sand below, and guarded them from dangers such as thorns, scorpions, and even the weapons of their enemies. Six clouds covered the six sides of the Israelite camp while the seventh, the pillar of cloud of God's presence (shechinah) stood in the middle. The festival *sukkot* in which we dwell each year symbolize these clouds and hence the protection, love, and presence of God. This sense of the divine is not only communicated through the symbolism of the *sukkah* but is experienced in the shade that the roofing of the *sukkah* casts. Shade offers protection from the sun and became the dominant metaphor for protection and peace in the Jewish tradition. In the shade of the *sukkah*, one experiences the 'shade of God' and the same sense of divine protection, love and nurture which the Israelites felt while sojourning within the clouds of glory.

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There is, however, a second strand in rabbinic tradition which believes that the Israelites dwelled in 'real *sukkot*' throughout their desert ravel, and not in the 'sukkot of clouds of glory'. The ordinary, flimsy *sukkot* the Israelites inhabited were part of the hardships of the exodus and their difficult life in the desert This second dimension of the symbolism of the *sukkot* conceives it as a symbol of the transience, temporariness and insecurity of this world.

To be sure, this symbolism is in some tension with the symbolism of the clouds of glory. But that is part of the power and complexity of religious symbols, which are multivalent and polysemous, operating on several levels and expressing different meanings simultaneously. Indeed the complex, sometimes contradictory, nature of the human condition and experience of the divine.

So, what lessons do we learn from the *sukkot*?

May God stand in the center of your lives - and cast love to you in all you do.

May God nurture the works of your hands and your relationship - helping keep it as alive and fresh as it is this day.

May the symbol of the *sukkah* remind you also of the difficulties you face - the hardships of life in general, and as partners. All wasn't and will not be completely smooth. But remember, the fact that God still stands in the middle, in the center, is Judaism's way of offering hope.

May God guard, bless and protect you in all your life's journey - separately - and together as life partners.

When you put all these blessings together, the *sukkah*, the flimsiest but one of the most enduring institutions in Judaism, will and can survive all the elements. We hope and pray that your union will as well.

[to the couple] The essence of this ceremony, as I've said, is *brit* - covenant. Of publicly expressing the fact that the essence of your love is equal to any love between any two people. There is nothing wrong with this fact - and what we are affirming today is that there is something very right about it.

[personal words to each partner separately and then as a couple]

We started this ceremony with the words of Boaz who said to Ruth -

לה ברוכה את לה blessed are you to God. Earlier on in Chapter 2 of the Book of Ruth, Boaz comes in from the fields and greets the reapers with the words:

ה' עמכם - may God be with You. But something happens at that point in the story - there is a response - but not only by Ruth alone, but by the whole community of reapers who respond: **יברכך ה'** - May Adonai bless you.

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The verse is not only a description of all the reapers response, it is the response of all of us as a community as well. All of us here who also participate in the *is berit reyut* say to you: **יברכך ה'** - May Adonai bless you.

שטר - THE WRIT

**ב... בשבת ב ... יום לחדש ... שנת ... לבריאת עולם למנין
שאנו מונים כאן ב ... במדינת ... [שם] בת [שם] ו [שם] בת
[שם] בנוכחותם של משפחותיהן וידידיהן אמרו זו לזו:
בבואן יחדיו בברית רעות זו. בהשראת אהבתי עליך
וחיינו המשותפים אני מבטיחה לכבד אותך ואת אשר
תבחורי, לתמוך בך הן בשעת צער וכאב והן בשעת
שמחה, להיות לך לחברה לאוהבה ולשותפה. לשמוח
בצמיחתך ובאושרך ולהכיר ולכבד תמיד את הניצוץ
האלוהי אשר בך. הנני מאשרת את מחויבותי להיות אתך
למשפחה, לבנות בית אפוף בעשרה ושמחתה של
המסורת היהודית ובערקה מחייבי החיים, להוקיר את
הערכים המשותפים לנו, ובו בזמן לכבדו לקבל את
הבדילים בינינו, ולטפח את בריתנו עם קהילתנו
כשמצוות חסד רחמים ותיקון עולם מנחות את דרכינו.
והכל שריר וקיים.**

**עדים
רעים
רב**

On the ... day of the week, in the month of ... the ...day of 57... according to the Jewish calendar, known in the secular calendar as [name] and [name] exchanged the following promises in the presence of their family and friends. Inspired by my love for you and the life which we have shared, I vow to respect you and your choices, to support you in times of sadness and pain as well as joy, to be your friend, your lover and your companion, to celebrate your growth and happiness and to always honor and acknowledge the divine spark within you. I affirm my commitment to be a family with you, to build a home surrounded with the richness of joys of the Jewish tradition and life-affirming values, to treasure the values we share, while also respecting and embracing our differences, and to nurture our commitment and bond with

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community, guided by the precepts of kindness, compassion and life partners, and affirm our sacred covenant with each other according to the traditions and customs of our people. Our pledges are valid and abiding.

Witnesses
partners
rabbi

CONCEPTS USED TO CREATE THIS BRIT REYUT

ERUSIN - (Lit. “betrothal”); a formal betrothal, which cannot be annulled without a bill of divorce. It occurs prior to *kinyan* and *nisu'in*.

GET. A deed or legal document. When used without further specification, the term denotes generally a writ of divorce.

HALIFIN - (Lit. “exchange”); a legal form of acquisition effected by handing to the seller an object in nominal exchange for the object bought. One object is exchanged for another.

HUPPAH- (lit. canopy); The bridal chamber. The bride entered into the chamber thus completing the act of marriage.

KETUBAH - (lit. written document) (a) a wife’s marriage settlement which she is entitled to recover upon divorce or the death of her husband. The maximum settlement for someone never married is 200 zuz; for a widow 100 zuz. (b) the marriage contract specifying the mutual obligations between husband and wife and containing the amount of endowment and any other specific financial obligations assumed by the husband.

KIDDUSHIN - lit. sanctification. (a) the act of betrothal; (b) the money or article given to effect the betrothal [according to the laws of Moses and Israel]

KINYAN - lit. acquisition. The legal acquisition of either landed or movable property, and the transfer from the possession of one to that of another.

NISSU’IN - The ceremony of home-taking, which completes the marriage [taking of the wife by huppah and kiddushin]

SHTAR - lit. deed or writ. Requires two witnesses to make it official.

SUKKAH - lit. booth. Used especially for the holiday of Sukkot (Lev. 21:34ff) The roof must be made of something that grows from the ground,

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such as reeds, branches or leaves of a prescribed size, quantity and quality.

MARRIAGE [(a) the social institution under which a man and woman establish their decision to live as husband and wife by legal commitments, religious ceremonies, etc. (b) the legal or religious ceremony that formalizes the decision of a man and woman to live as husband and wife.

WEDDING. The act or ceremony of marrying.



Rabbi Stuart Kelman, Phd, is the Founding rabbi of Congregation Netivot Shalom in Berkeley, CA. After a lengthy career in Jewish education, he entered the world of the synagogue. He currently serves as the Dean of the Gamliel Institute - an on-line certification program in Chevra Kadisha work, the first program of its kind anywhere.

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