

## **Why the Ketubah Was Not Composed By Hallmark**

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I have never, not even once, seen a Ketubah with an accurate English translation. I've seen a lot of ketubahs and I've seen many with English paragraphs just under the Hebrew or Aramaic text, but usually that English is a lovely, poetic expression of feelings and emotions, hopes and dreams that the couple anticipates as they begin their married life together. And there's certainly nothing wrong with that appearing on the ketubah...but it has no bearing on what the document actually says. *Because I don't know if there was anything less romantic ever composed about marriage than the Jewish wedding contract.* Details about silver *zuzim*, monetary transactions, *tachshitim*, valuables, *manei d'levusha*-- clothing, *shimushei dira*--house furnishings—it sounds more like an Ikea commercial than a document about love and romance. In fact the word “love” doesn't even appear once in the ketubah! Instead there are the intricate details of mortgages and dowries, and contractual obligations abound; dates, names, locations...*and I love it.* In fact, I insist on it. In this day and age you can get all kinds of ketubahs. The other day I went on the website Ketubah.com where many brides and grooms shop for and personalize their ketubahs, and there was a menu that included: Orthodox, Conservative (w/English or without), Reform, Interfaith, Same Sex, English only, Sephardic, Canadian Reform [that one has ‘eh’ on the end of each line], and even an option to write your own! When I am blessed with the opportunity to officiate at a wedding, I ask the bride and groom to get the traditional text, which can be accompanied by whatever English rendition they desire. But I submit to you, that to this very day, I have never seen anything even pretending to be a translation of the original.

I was thinking about this...next week is Sari and my 16<sup>th</sup> anniversary—but also because of how the Torah describes the relationship between God and the Jewish people in our parasha.

Consider the flow of the portion...The relationship between God and the Jewish people begins a new and profound chapter when the Jewish people finally enter the land of Israel. The very first thing that happens once they reach that new place is they bring a gift...in this case a basket of first fruits that they harvested from the new land. When presenting that basket to the priest, they recite their history...where they first met, some of the struggles and challenges they've overcome, some of their more wonderful and proud moments right up to that point when they are

giving a gift of gratitude for all their blessings. And with that affirmation, God promises to protect and care for the Jewish people, *uletitcha elyon al kol ha'goyim*, and place you above everyone else...now that's romantic right? It reminds me of the line in Eshet Chayil, Proverbs 22, which I chant every Friday night to my wife, the line that says *Rabot banot asu chayil, ve'at alit al kulana*...there are many wonderful women, but I place you above them all!

In the very next scene, the Jewish people are arrayed on two mountains: 6 tribes on Mt. Gerizim, and the other 6 on Mt. Eval. There the sequence of blessings and curses are proclaimed, and after each one, the entire community responds, AMEN. If you are attentive and faithful and devoted and responsive then I will reciprocate, says God, by blessing you I whether you be in the city or the country; I will bless the issue of your womb, your soil, your cattle, your basket and your kneading bowl. I will bless your comings and goings, and I will rout your enemies before you. But if you are unfaithful and unresponsive to me, then tumult and chaos will ensue in all kinds of ugly ways.

Friends, is that not what happens when two would-be spouses stand together under a huppah, exchanging rings, articulating promises of fidelity, vowing to uphold their end of the bargain. That's why I love the traditional ketubah; I love it because it is so much more grounded in real life than some of the Hallmark English renditions that I come across. It addresses physical and material as well as emotional support. It talks about the nitty-gritty truths of spending a lifetime together, long after the fairy tale luster of the wedding day fades. There is a great story of a married couple who came to the Baal Shem Tov because they were suffering all kinds of challenges in their marriage. The Baal Shem Tov listened as each of them expressed their disappointments and dissatisfactions with the other. Finally he said to them, I want you to go home, take the ketubah down off your wall and read it to each other. Just read it to each other and be reminded of the promises and commitments you made to one another when you stood together under the huppah; when you were so rapturously in love with each other. Remember how you felt on that day, and let it rekindle the romance you feel you've lost.

The parasha also gives fabulous marriage advice...One of the curses that God promises will occur when the relationship, the marriage is joyless. *Tachat asher lo avadta et Hashem Eloheicha besimcha, uv'tuv levav meir'ov kol*. You will be wiped out, that's what the Torah says, you will be wiped out if you don't serve God in joy and gladness...Judaism cannot be rote

and routine; Torah cannot be experienced as a burden or a lifestyle devoid of passion or excitement. And if that is the case in our metaphysical marriage with God, how much more so is it the case in our marriages with our spouses. I see people divorce all too often because they say they've lost the romance and the passion they once had. When I dig a little deeper I find that so often they are locked in routines and patterns that don't give them an outlet to enjoy being with each other; they have forsaken ecstasy for regularity; spontaneity for schedules; their marriages are joyless and they suffer the consequences. The great Hassidic master Rebbe Nachman of Breslov taught as a mantra: *Mitzvah gedolah lihiyot be'simha tamid*, it is a great mitzvah, a sacred obligation to strive to be happy all the time. By happy, I don't think he meant giddy and frivolous; I think he meant that it is a mitzvah to feel satisfied and grateful and joyful over the life and blessings we are afforded. I don't think there's any greater blessing in life than the other human being who has vowed, promised, pledged to stick with you when times are great, and when times are challenging...to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part. No, Jews don't say that at weddings, but you get the point.

It's amazing, the marriage motif is among the most common metaphors in the Bible for describing the relationship between God and the Jewish people. Sometimes, as in the case of the prophet Hosea, the spouse in the metaphor is unfaithful. Sometimes, the Jewish people stray and they don't uphold their end of the bargain. But the most amazing thing about that is that God is always ready to take us back. No matter how far we've gone, no matter what idols we've worshipped or other gods have led us astray, God is endlessly merciful and forgiving. This is the time on our calendar when we focus on the renewal and restoration of our relationships—*ben adam le'makom* between ourselves and God, and *ben adam le'chaveiro*, between ourselves and the other people in our lives. May this holy season bring you spiritual and physical renewal...May it reaffirm the commitments of faith and love, and may all our relationships be reignited with passion and commitment in 5774.

Shabbat Shalom