

It was a moving experience to read Pam's article below with the description of our Gett ceremony with Rabbis Dan and Zalman. I remember the power of that ritual in healing much of the pain we experienced during the process that led to our divorce, supporting our continued work together in raising our children and pointing to the foundation of spiritual and personal friendship between us that continues to this day. I strongly recommend this ceremony for divorcing couples who feel a connection to Jewish practice.

—Michael Baugh, L.C.S.W.

A Renewal Ritual of Divorce to Supplement a Traditional Gett

by Rabbi Pamela Frydman Baugh © 2007

Introduction

We live in a time when men and women have different internal and external realities during a committed relationship and when such a relationship is concluding. For many men, a relationship concludes, with time being marked from the conclusion of lovemaking, whether it is a heterosexual or same sex relationship. For a woman, the marking of time from the conclusion of lovemaking is certainly important and relevant, but it is not, in most cases, a marker of the conclusion of fidelity.

Civil law is evolving quickly relative to the evolution of human emotions in matters of love and marriage. Honorable men of great integrity often fall into the abyss of thinking that because they are separated from their wife or long term partner that beginning another relationship is alright since the commitment of fidelity appears to them to have concluded. It may, therefore, be advisable for a man or woman to have a religious divorce, and/or to file a petition for civil divorce or legal separation—or the parallel procedure in your state or nation—before entering into a new sexual relationship in order to avoid the appearance of infidelity in the eyes of one's spouse, one's children and the community.

Both the *Ketubah* and the *Gett* were forward looking progressive documents involving compassionate processes during the historic period in which they were introduced and implemented, because in those days, the man was considered—both by the law of the land and by religious law—to be a free person, whereas the woman was considered to be chattel. The modern *Gett* helps us to maintain a connection between the *halachikly* based streams of Judaism and *clal yisrael* in its entirety. Since the Conservative Movement and all Orthodox and *Haredi* Movements require a *Gett*, I believe it is imperative that we counsel all divorcing Jewish couples to obtain a *Gett* as well as a civil divorce, so that both partners are free to enter into the relationship of their choice in the future, and for the protection of future children.

However, because of the one-sided nature of the traditional process of writing and giving/receiving a *Gett*, I believe that the traditional *Gett* ceremony, while comporting with the

letter of Jewish law, no longer comports with the spirit of that law. It states in Leviticus 19:15 that in matters of justice, we must not respect persons; in other words, everyone is, or should be, equal in the eyes of the law. However, the traditional *Gett* ceremony relates to women as chattel, and since, in this day and age, men and women are equal in the eyes of civil law and generally in society, I believe that the *Gett* ceremony—while providing important religious and spiritual closure—no longer comports with the spirit of Leviticus 19:15, and must therefore be supplemented by a process that honors both members of the divorcing couple as equal in the eyes of God, family and community.

The **Conservative Movement** has created a wonderful method for addressing this, which allows a couple to become divorced Jewishly without having to come face to face with the man giving the woman a *Gett* while she gives him nothing in return. Representatives of the Conservative Movement who oversee the process of *gittin* are generally more than happy to write a divorce for whomever is willing to complete their paperwork and pay the fee. I have recommended this service to congregants and constituents over the years and they have reported that the process worked very well for them.

For those who may wish to marry in Israel, Europe or elsewhere outside the United States, I recommend an Orthodox *Gett* rather than—or in addition to—a Conservative *Gett*, or a *Gett* written in a Jewish renewal setting according to *halachah*, since these *Gittin* may not be recognized, as of this writing, by the rabbinate in most nations of the world.

Gay and lesbian couples are not required by Jewish law to give one another a *Gett* upon conclusion of a relationship since same sex marriages are not part of *halachah* as of this writing.

For everyone—straight and gay, observant and non-observant—I believe that it is important for both men and women to consider an alternative religious and spiritual ceremony in addition to the required civil divorce and Jewish divorce via *Gett* required for Jewish heterosexual couples. Below is a template for one such alternative ceremony. See also “[Gittin’ The Release You Need](#)” by Rabbi Goldie Milgram. Over time, it is my hope that there will be a collection of templates from which officiants and couples may choose.

Giving The Husband An Alternative *Gett*

It is very powerful for a man to stand before his wife and put a traditional *Gett* into her hands and declare that she is “*muteret lechol adam*” permitted to any man. There is something freeing and vital and important in the process for both the man and the woman. At this time, however, I believe that it is also of paramount importance that a woman have the opportunity to give her husband a *Gett* and declare to him that he is “*mutar lechol isha*” (permitted to any woman). Because of the difference in sensibilities between men and women about what constitutes the end of the commitment of marriage, and hence fidelity, I believe that it is especially important that women have this opportunity. And for both members of the couple, I believe that an egalitarian religious and spiritual ceremony provides an opportunity for healing and closure that is unspeakably valuable.

When I was divorcing my husband a few years ago, one of my colleagues recommended that I consider giving my husband a *Gett* during a ceremony that would help us to heal from the Orthodox *Gett* ceremony that I had requested, and to which my husband had readily agreed. I thought my colleague was being overly protective. I had studied *Sefer Kav Naki Meihalachot Gittin* and had written an *halachik Gett* for a divorcing couple, so I felt that I was making my determination based upon knowledge, and not just faith in the *Gett* system that I had chosen. To my surprise, however, I discovered during the Orthodox ceremony that my colleague was quite right.

As I stood before Michael and received the Orthodox *Gett* into my hand, and walked away and then back, I felt something inside of me becoming free, but the process was not enlightening and the result was incomplete. In my case, the Orthodox rabbis were as kind and respectful as one can imagine, but they chose not to include my Hebrew name on the *Gett*. Why? The reason they gave is that in order to fit all of our names and how we are known and called (*hamechuneh ud'mitkareh*), the width of the paper required to fit the *Gett* into the required twelve lines with the personal information in the first six lines was unwieldy. In fact, however, the process by which they arrived at their decision was unnerving. How, they asked me, did I receive my Hebrew name since my parents gave me only Yiddish and English names at birth? I explained that my Hebrew name was given to me at the Torah. "*Az siz avada possel*," (so it is certainly invalid) was the response they offered one another as quickly and seamlessly as possible, almost as if they hoped I didn't understand our *mama lashon* (mother tongue).

During the alternative ceremony, I had an opportunity to give Michael a *Gett*. I crafted a statement in English so that he could understand it. I recited each of my names and his names as they had been written in the Orthodox *Gett*, adding my Hebrew name as it was written on our Ketubah. As a rabbi, I needed the exercise of composing the words and meeting the standards of what would have gone into the formal *Gett* were I to have been the man and Michael the woman. But the primary value and significance of my giving Michael a *Gett* was far beyond standards and formatting, and had to do with the fact that he was already in another relationship and the alternative *Gett* ceremony provided me with an important and meaningful opportunity to acknowledge and bless him in that relationship—and the relationship that would follow—in addition to our private moments during which I had already done so.

I want to be quick to point out that in our case, Michael entered into another relationship after our marriage was over and he had told me that he was beginning a new relationship, he asked for my blessing and I gave it. I found, nevertheless, that declaring before a rabbinic colleague that Michael was permitted to any woman was freeing in a way that neither of us expected and which we continue to appreciate years later.

I recommend that the woman in a heterosexual relationship, and both women in a lesbian relationship prepare and hand to her spouse/partner a *Gett* or recite the equivalent of a *Gett* in which she states that she divorces her partner/spouse and that s/he is permitted any other partner. This is best done free of the particulars that may still be an important part of the process of letting go of one another, such as anger, resentment, recriminations, expressing what the couple wants to hold onto, caring for children, and other sentiments described in the rituals below. An expression of "this is my name and this is your name and I divorce you and you are permitted to

any other man/woman” is a powerful symbolic and psychological tool, gift and vehicle of healing.

If you are officiating at an alternative *Gett* ceremony for a couple in which the woman is not a rabbi or Jewish scholar, I recommend offering the woman a template in her native language that she can use, or to which she can refer when crafting an alternative *Gett* in advance of the ceremony during which she will read (or read and present) an alternative *Gett* to her partner. (There is a form of *Gett* in English on page 503 of *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice* by Isaac Klein and there is one on Reb Zalman’s *Dem Ganze Kolel* CD available through OHALAH and from Reb Zalman.)

Giving the Wife An Alternative Gett

A man who does not understand the Hebrew and Aramaic content of the *Gett* he gives his wife during a traditional *Gett* ceremony, or who does not feel complete with the traditional process for any reason, may wish to give his wife an alternative *Gett* when she gives such a *Gett* to him during an alternative ceremony.

I believe that the exchange of alternative *Gittin* is also well advised for gay men.

Making a Cut in the Alternative Gett Document

Divorce is a cutting and tearing. This is explicated by the cutting of the traditional *Gett* before it is presented by the husband to his wife. You may want to invite the divorcing couple to make a cut into their alternative document of divorce before presenting the document to their spouse/partner. Be sure to explain that the cut does not sever the document in two. Rather, it cuts into the heart of the document just as divorce cuts deeply into the heart of those who are divorcing.

Releasing and Unbinding

Rabbi Dan Goldblatt, in consultation with Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, created this Ceremony of Releasing and Unbinding using a *tallit*. Any *tallit* may be used so long as it is a *tallit* that can be disposed of at the end of the ceremony, such as a small *tallit* from the synagogue’s collection that has been torn or otherwise damaged, but on which the *tzitzit* are still relatively intact. After the Releasing and Unbinding Ceremony and Havdallah are completed, it is advisable to place the used *tallit* in a *gniza* and to bury it when the opportunity presents itself.

As the Releasing and Unbinding Ceremony begins, the couple is invited to sit at a table across from one another. The officiant places the *tallit* between the couple with two *tzitzit* in front of one partner and two *tzitzit* in front of the other partner. The rabbi invites the couple to designate the *tzitzit* at their right hand as a symbol of those feelings, thoughts, actions and possessions that s/he wishes to keep after the divorce, and to designate the *tzitzit* at their left hand as a symbol of the feelings, thoughts, actions and possessions that s/he wishes to let go of during the alternative divorce ceremony and beyond.

The couple is then invited to take turns. One partner unties one knot or unwinds one winding of the *tzitzit* string on the left side and states to one's partner "I release you from...." or "I forgive you for...." or "I am sorry that I...." or "I wish we could have...." or "I wish I could have...." When the partner finishes his/her sentence, the other partner can be in silence, or can nod, or can say "I forgive you" or "thank you" or "I do too," etc.

Interspersed with the untying/unwinding and letting go, the partners may use their turn to hold the *tzitzit* on the right and mention something they want to hold onto to. It is especially important for spouses/partners who have children or who are in business together or are otherwise bound continually beyond the divorce to be able to acknowledge what they want to continue to hold onto. However, it is important for every couple to have a sense of something they wish to hold onto, if possible.

The role of the rabbi is to frame the exercise for the couple so they feel they are equals in the task, so they each feel safe expressing their anger, sadness, appreciation, hope, regret, forgiveness and other feelings in a way that allows each to own the feeling and take responsibility for it, and in a way that hopefully allows the partner to hear and understand it. Encourage each partner to respond supportively if possible. Slow down the process if one or both partners seems to be overwhelmed with feeling, or unable to follow the guidelines, or unable to tolerate the sharing of the other.

Compliment and support each partner without taking sides. When a partner is saying something that is an obvious stretch or a risk, it is sometimes helpful to nod without speaking. Be sure you are supportive of both partners even if one is following the rules and the other is having difficulty doing so.

The couple takes turns either untying a knot or unwinding one winding of the string of the left *tzitzit*, or holding the right *tzitzit* until the couple has exhausted all that they want to let go of and hold onto, or until 45 minutes to an hour have passed.

After 40 minutes, let the couple know how long they have been sharing and let them know how many minutes they have left. Do not ever stop the sharing without at least a few minutes of warning after which a bit more sharing can be done, as stopping without the extra few minutes can reenact the sense of abandonment that is often present for one or both partners during divorce.

Comfort, Solace, Hope and Blessing

Rabbi Dan Goldblatt was *m'sader gittin* for our alternative ceremony. Since Reb Zalman helped to craft the alternative *Gett* ceremony, and he had been our *m'sader kedushin*, Dan arranged for Zalman to speak with each of us for a couple of minutes by telephone after the *tallit* ceremony and before *havdallah*. If there is a person who is close with both members of the couple—or if there are two people, one close to each member of the couple—who can join in the ritual long distance for a few minutes, this can be a very powerful transition between the releasing and unbinding on the one hand, and the ceremony of *havdallah* described below. The goal of this new presence is to provide comfort, solace, hope and blessing. If there are no such outside

people who appear by phone, then it is important for the *m'sader gittin* to take a few minutes to speak with each partner in the presence of the other, in order to provide words of comfort, solace, hope and blessing.

Havdallah

Using two shabbat candles, and wine or grape juice poured from two separate bottles, the *m'sader gittin* performs a ritual of *havdallah* to signify the end of the marriage, the holiness of the moment of its ending, and the love that remains in the family that transcends the end of the marriage.

By using two candles, *havdallah* can begin with one flame from the united candles, and then the candles can be separated as the rabbi recites appropriate words of *hamavdil*. I recommend beginning with the words of the traditional *havdallah* during your preparation, and borrowing from those words, or the feeling of the words, as you craft appropriate words of *havdallah* for the particular couple who are divorcing.

Bring the wicks of the two candles together when you light them, recite your personalized *havdallah* and, at some point during *havdallah*, or at the end, separate the candles so that each has a flame that continues to burn on its own, and speak with the couple about how the separated candles are symbols of their continuing separate lives. Then it is time for drinking wine. Everyone present at the ceremony should have a glass into which wine or juice is poured before *havdallah* begins. The wine/juice for the divorcing couple should come from one bottle, and the wine/juice for the rabbi should come from the other bottle. It is important to acknowledge this to the couple. The use of wine from a separate bottle helps to create an ending to the ritual and the marriage. In the future, everyone can drink wine or juice poured from the same bottle, but at this moment, there is a bottle that is only for the divorcing couple; it is their wine of divorce.

I recommend reciting the traditional *borey pri hagafen* before drinking the wine or juice, and *borey m'orey ha'esh* when separating the candles, in addition to whatever words you may wish to say to the couple to explain and define the use of these symbols in their divorcing and continuing in their separate lives.

It is important to end the *havdallah* ceremony with warmth, hope and faith in addition to the tears and other feelings that will likely be palpable. A hug or hand shake at the end between the rabbi and each member of the couple is essential. It is up to the couple whether they are able to hug one another or to shake hands; hopefully they will wish to do so, but you should not insist on it.

Including Children

The traditional *Gett* takes future children into consideration. In this day and age, I believe it is important to also take into consideration the children of the marriage that is ending as well as children from previous marriages.

It is imperative that children NOT attend the Releasing and Unbinding Ceremony, because in order for that ceremony to be effective, the couple needs privacy to speak about their intimacy and to speak about matters that are not the business of their children, even if the children are fully grown.

The *havdallah* ceremony is a wonderful place to include children. At the time of our alternative *Gett* ceremony, Michael and I arrived with our sons, and our sons were aware that they would be without us for some time before they would be included in the ceremony with us. The rabbi greeted our sons, explained that mom and dad would have some private time with the rabbi to prepare for their divorce spiritually and religiously in addition to all the other things mom and dad were doing to prepare for their divorce. The rabbi explained that when the private time was over, the rabbi would invite our sons to come in and join us.

When our sons joined us, our rabbi explained that we had had a very important healing time together and invited our sons to join us in *havdallah*. The rabbi poured wine into our sons' glasses from the second bottle of wine from which the rabbi was also drinking. The rabbi explained to us and our sons that the wine in the second bottle was their wine. It was not the wine of divorce, because our sons were not part of the divorcing even though they were deeply affected by it.

After the wine was poured and before the *havdallah* ceremony, the rabbi invited Michael and me to each take a turn speaking with each of our sons to express our love for each son and our wishes and hopes for them in the present stage of their lives. We also took turns telling them that we would each always be there for them and that we would be there for them together when that was needed. The rabbi also invited each of our sons to speak with each of us to express their love for each of us and to bless each of us. Years later, we are still in the glow of their blessings.

Everything we shared with our sons during *havdallah* had been shared before. We tell them we love them all the time. We assured them when we told them we were divorcing that we would each always be there for them. It was, nevertheless, important and valuable to say these things again at the *havdallah* ceremony, both because they enriched the moment with love and positivity, and also because that is, after all, a very important part of divorce, namely to divorce in such a way that we can continue to provide for those who depend upon us, even though the relationship that may have brought them into the world or into our home is dissipating and going, as do all things, back into the source.

Preparation for the Ceremony of Havdallah and Releasing and Unbinding

The preparation for the ceremony of *Havdallah* and for the Ceremony of Releasing and Unbinding is at least as important as the rituals themselves. It is essential to explain to each member of the couple what you plan to offer them during the ceremony and to invite each member of the couple to prepare for the ceremony by thinking about, and perhaps even making a list of, what each will want to hold onto and what each will want to let go of during the Ceremony of Releasing and Unbinding.

It is important to help each member of the couple to understand what will happen when s/he is presenting a document of divorce to his/her partner and what will happen when s/he listens to and receives the document. Preparing the couple to give and receive the document is as important as helping each member of the couple to prepare the document itself.

A heterosexual couple who has or will appear before a *beit din* to obtain a *halachik Gett* may want to have just the wife present an alternative *Gett* in order to restore the sense of balance that may be conspicuously missing for the modern egalitarian couple during the *halachik Gett* ceremony. When helping a couple to make this decision, it is important to keep in mind the power balance and imbalances between the couple who are divorcing. If the husband or wife is a leader in the community or an otherwise prominent person and his/her spouse is not, the need for the less prominent partner to prepare and present an alternative *Gett* may be especially significant during the process of their divorce and healing.

It is also important to speak with the couple about *Havdallah* in advance of the ceremony. Be sure each member of the couple is familiar with the traditional *Havdallah* ceremony and when and how we use the ceremony at the end of Shabbat and festivals. If the couple has made *Havdallah* during their marriage, it may be important to talk about how each will continue to make *Havdallah* with a braided candle and spices, and how the *Havdallah* of Divorce is a different ceremony. Traditionally, *Havdallah* demarcates *bein kodesh l'chol*. The *Havdallah* of Divorce demarcates *bein kodesh l'kodesh* just as *Havdallah* between Shabbat and a festival that begins on Saturday evening.

Marriage is holy and the members of a married couple are holy. During and after divorce, we each continue to be holy beings created in the image of God, but the rejection and tearing of divorce often shields this reality from our eyes and hearts. When preparing the divorcing couple for *Havdallah*, try to help each person to remember that s/he continues to be beloved by family, friends, colleagues and God. Remembering our inner holiness is key when letting go of anger and bitterness, and it is also key to committing to a new relationship. Many people run from intimate relationships or avoid relationships or move from one relationship to another after divorce because of the illusion that we can escape the excruciating pain by doing so. Remembering our holiness and experiencing that we are still beloved, even when we have lost our beloved, can help a person to stand and face his or her life and move forward more successfully and meaningfully.

Preparing the couple and helping them through the rituals of preparing and giving an alternative *Gett*, releasing and unbinding from the marriage through the ritual with the *tallit*, making *Havdallah* with and for the divorcing couple, and helping them and their children to continue to be a blessing in one another's lives is among the holiest of tasks to which we can be called.

Concluding Blessing

May we each be comforted in our mourning and grieving for what was and cannot be again. May we cherish what it was that fed us and helped us to grow and be nourished and sustained. May we have love in our hearts even when there is anger and bitterness still to be healed and

unraveled. May we find ways for men and men, and women and women, and men and women to understand one another's rhythms and needs in union and in separation, in marriage and in divorce. In these days when more than half of all marriages end in divorce, may we have courage to bring our entire selves to the divorce ceremony as much as we bring ourselves to the ceremony of marriage and union. Whether our *zivug*, our soul mate, is the mate of the moment or the mate of the lifetime, may we honor the presence of our mate in our lives even after the golden moments of union have faded into the parting caused by the end of marriage, whether through death or divorce.

Keyn yehi ratzon.