

GITTIN' THE RELEASE YOU NEED by Rabbi Goldie Milgram

Reb Zalman initially implored me to obtain a halahic divorce. It was one of my students who helped me get clear on the matter for myself. "Wait a minute Reb Goldie, are you saying that you would disenfranchise the personhood of women by having only observant men sign your very own Jewish divorce decree? I came to study with you because I believe in a gender equal Judaism. Are you saying that you don't?"

I went to talk to my father about it. He said, "Look, we visit all kinds of serious issues upon our children all the time. Their lives will always be affected by your decisions, usually the more unconscious ones. You have the right to place major issues on their agenda. This is a colossal example of how the political is personal. You have to decide what options you want for these theoretical children and your rationale and then go with your ethics." I chose an egalitarian divorce, and always present all the options to those I work with because this is a free country, and everyone is free to choose what is right for them.

Facilitating a Jewish divorce ritual is always a source of anticipatory anxiety for me. Often I am doing this for people I know, respect and love – both of them. As their rabbi, I am the appointed midwife for their souls' dis-entwining, as they remove the kiddushin, the "holiness" which sanctified them as for each other alone. I designed the ritual which follows in story form, almost a decade ago, and find it has stood the test of time.

Today is the divorce of two long-time congregants. I've ask them to stand back to back, I am between them. Resting upon each person's open palms is an identical copy of their get, document of Jewish divorce. They are each facing three of their closest personal friends, who are sitting at quite a distance away on opposite sides of the room.

The ritual continues as I explain: "People who love and care for you are here. Look up at your friends, members of the minyan of your life, you can go to them in a moment. For now, please look at the darker print on the get which you are holding. Now, in accord with the order agreed upon earlier tonight, please take turns reading this declaration of severance aloud."

One partner's sad, yet strong voice begins: "Your doorway is no longer my doorway. I no longer have the right to comment on your actions, your well-being is now in your own hands. I do this lishmi, lishma, u'lesheim geirushin – "for my sake, for her sake and with the intent of effecting a divorce."

The other partner repeats the same phrase, only corrected for gender. I find myself silently praying to be able to bring through an appropriate blessing for the moment. It is over ten years since they first contemplated divorce, they really tried everything to make it work and this marriage could not be saved. The children have chosen to be present, they are eleven, thirteen and fourteen. Each parents signed a co-parenting agreement in the presence of the children and read it aloud to them earlier, it will become part of the civil divorce document. They then

blessed the children, who in turn handed me a letter to read aloud that they had written full of their own wisdom and blessings for their parents.

“Dear Mom and Dad: We are proud of you for deciding to stop fighting and have the courage to get new lives for yourselves. We know you love us and will continue to take great care of us. Meanwhile, we need you and love you both very much and hope you will be much nicer to each other having taken this big step. The rabbi says we can each give you a blessing, well, we made a combined one, for each of you to stay in therapy, learn a lot and someday try again with someone new because when we go away to college we don't want you to be lonely.”

Earlier in the ritual they each were offered the opportunity to speak about forgiveness. One spoke of forgiving being called terrible names and of anger at finances hidden and withheld. The other surprised everyone by speaking of offering forgiveness for the private detective that her partner had assigned to report on her every movement. I had heard about it from the children several times. “That is not the real you,” she tells her soon-to-be-former partner, “I know someday you will find your center and regain your happiness.” The document was then read aloud to the witnesses, one man and one woman from the congregation, the details checked and rechecked, they take turns signing it.

Standing between the partners who are still facing away from each other, my hands hover over their heads, though I doubt they are aware of this. I adapt a phrase from the liturgy for the ending of the Sabbath, for moving from sacred time into the every day. “N'vareh et HaMavdil beyn kodesh l'hol....Let us bless the One Who Differentiates between those who have been reserved for each other in holiness and those who are now wholly separate and free. This completes your ritual of divorce.”

“A copy of your documents will be placed on file at the two rabbinical associations to which I belong. While you may have an impulse now to turn to comfort each other, it is no longer your province to do so. Your friends are waiting to receive you, walk toward them and they will take you each out through separate doorways.”

All parts of the spectrum allow for shlihut, a messenger to represent one of the two parties if the person chooses to designate one and not attend. I can recall several occasions where we prepared the documents with only one party present and then went to the door of their partner who waited inside, read the statement of closure, and obtained her/his signature on a receipt for the get. This allows for those who need ritual to have it, and those who prefer not to be present for the whole experience to still have Jewish closure on their Jewish marriage.

See also [Renewal Ritual of Divorce](#), by Rabbi Pamela Frydman Baugh.