

A Ritual of Release

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A COUPLE IN OUR COMMUNITY CAME TO US asking that we form a Bet Din, a rabbinic court, to conduct a *get* (divorce) ritual for them. The couple had been together for sixteen years and had married nine years ago in a Jewish wedding ceremony. They had decided to end their marriage only a few weeks before they approached us. Because both members of the couple are women, no civil divorce preceded the *get*.

The three of us met to plan the *get* ritual, but decided it was too soon to facilitate this couple's complete severing of their bonds of *kiddushin*, the sacrament of marriage. Their decision was too recent, their still-emerging emotions too unprocessed. Yet we understood their desire to ritually mark their intention to separate and pursue individual lives that might still be joined in friendship, but no longer in marriage. Out of our discussion, the following Ritual of Release emerged. "Stage directions" for the ritual are in italics and parentheses.

Opening Reading

Everything has its appointed hour;
There is a time for all things under heaven:
There is a time for relationship, for being set apart from others in *kiddushin*, and sometimes, there is a time for separating. This is a time to begin separating.
Kiddushin is a circle of two.
We will now open the circle.
Where there have been knots, let there be an untying, an unbinding.

Where there has been holding, let there be release.
 Let there be a time for reflection, feeling, and movement toward
 a new wholeness.

Un-Circling

(Explanation to be read to the couple and any witnesses)

Ana B'Koach is a prayer ascribed to the first century sage Rabbi Nechuniah ben Hakanah. The prayer contains 42 words, the initials of which comprise the secret unpronounceable 42-letter name of God. The first line asks the Holy One to unbind the bonds that tie us and to remove all obstacles. Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi teaches that it is a prayer of transition — to be prayed at the time of death, or when moving from the end of the week into Shabbat, or, as now, for the two of you, at the moment of change in the status of your relationship.

You walked seven circles during your kiddushin ceremony in the process of binding yourselves to each other. As we chant the seven lines of this prayer, we ask you now to unbind yourselves by tracing these seven circles in reverse. As you walk this path, feel the ties release as you walk away from your union. We pray that the Holy One will be with you, guiding you on this journey of unbinding.

(While the Bet Din or witnesses chant the first three lines of Ana B'Koach, — in English or Hebrew or both — one member of the couple "uncircles" the other by walking backwards, tracing three circles around the other who stands still. For the next three lines, the second partner "uncircles" three times, while the first partner stands still. Both stand still for the final line.)

*Ana B'Koach G'dulat Y'minkha Tatir Tz'rurah
 Kabel Rinat Amkha Sagveinu Tahareinu Nora
 Na Gibor Dorshei Yichudkha K'Vavat Shamreim
 Barkheim Tahareim Rachameim Tzidkatkha Tamid Gamleim
 Hasin Kadosh B'rov Tuvkha Naheil Adatekha
 Yachid Geiyeh L'amkha P'nei Zokhrei Kedushatekha
 Shavateinu Kabel Ushma Tza'akateinu Yodeia Ta'alumot*

With the great power of Your right hand, we beg You, release the bonds.
 Receive the prayer of Your people; elevate us, make us pure,
 Awesome One.

Guard, O Mighty One, those who seek Your Oneness.
 Bless them, purify them; have mercy on them, Your righteousness
 always grant them.

Powerful, Holy One, in Your great goodness, lead Your congregation.
 Solitary, Proud One, turn to Your people who remember Your holiness.
 Accept our pleas, hear our cries, You who know the hidden things.

Rabbi:

Be still in the knowledge that the Holy One is holding you now
 and at all times.

(Couple stands still)

Rabbi:

Barukh shem k'vod malkhuto l'olam va'ed.
 Blessed is the name of His kingdom forever and ever.

Declaration of Release and Blessing for Walking on Individual Paths

Rabbi:

When you were first drawn together, you found Shekhinah, the
 Divine Presence, abiding with you. She now calls to you to find Her
 elsewhere. She calls to you to release each other to come more fully
 into your own.

*(Rabbi hands a "declaration of release" to each member of the couple, which they
 take turns reading to each other.)*

I, _____, release you _____, from the sacred
 bonds that held us together. You are free and responsible for your
 life, just as I am free and responsible for my life.

*(Rabbi asks both members of the couple to take hold of the ketubah and hand it
 to the rabbi.)*

Rabbi:

Just as I now, on behalf of your community, hold your ketubah for you, know that your community holds you — both of you, and each of you.

(Rabbi blesses each member of the couple using his or her Hebrew name as the basis for the blessing.)

Rabbi:

Barukh atah Yah, matir asurim.

Blessed is the One who releases the bound.

(Rabbi takes possession of the ketubah temporarily; it will be used again during the get ritual and then permanently taken from the couple.)

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The most profound moment of this ritual occurred during the “uncircling.” Both members of the couple cried freely, and later expressed feeling something shift energetically in those moments. This initial Ritual of Release helped propel the couple through further unbinding, separating, and working through their emotions. A few months later, we performed the *get* ritual they originally had requested. All of us found this Ritual of Release to be a crucial first step, one which could benefit many couples in the beginning stages of their separation from each other. Many people who separate and divorce feel separated and even isolated from their communities. This ritual enabled us as their rabbis and community members to hold them and offer support.

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