

Ritual possibilities Within Traditional Gittin in a Pluralistic/Post Denominational Setting

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Background and Purpose:

This work is a description of creative rituals and use of Jewish liturgy surrounding a traditional get. The goal in creating these rituals seeks to balance three primary objectives. One is maintaining the halakhic status of the get. Another is counterbalancing the overwhelmingly passive role of the woman. The last is creating authentically Jewish ritual and liturgy which speaks to the psychological/emotional dynamics and power of both divorce and kabbalat get. Originally created in 2003 when preparing to receive my own get, this work describes both the actual rituals of my own get process as well as others possible. Some of these rituals may be facilitated or accompanied by clergy; many of them do not require assistance, only teaching and guidance. The exception to this is the get itself.

Sources:

Most of the elements of the rituals outlined here are drawn from other Jewish ritual and liturgical contexts and are neither new nor original¹. They draw upon classic and traditional Jewish themes and rituals and are adapted and woven into the get/divorce context. They come from Torah, siddur and other life cycle contexts. Textually, ideas have also been drawn from Rabbi Debra Orenstein's book, *Lifecycles: Jewish Women's reflections on Life's Passages and Personal Milestones*, Volume 1. Pages 1-6 of this work describe rituals leading up to the time of receiving a get. Pages 7-12 incorporate rituals at the time of actually receiving a get and around that immediate time.

Themes and Rituals leading up to receiving a get:

In creating the rituals for a *get*, recurring themes surface calling for manifestation in ritual. Most specifically, the themes of mounting teshuvah, havdalah, kedusha, release, rebuilding and blessing are in order and, in fact, seem to be common themes in the formal and anecdotal research done for other get rituals. I draw attention to this because in creating these rituals for others, there must be an appreciation that like every relationship and divorce is different, so too

¹ I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge those sources from which I drew to create this particular series of rituals. They are: My chevre who are the students at teachers at The Academy for Jewish Religion and in the Aleph Smicha Program, who offered their ideas and support leading up to my get; those people in my life who opened their hearts to share their stories with me and allowed me to do the same. May your love and generosity transform your own pain; may your openness lead to your own and others' healing.

are the emotions surrounding every get. I would invite anyone creating get rituals to carefully examine the emotions at the time of the get to weave in the appropriate thematic rituals into the process. These were mine and others are certainly possible.

Separation and Mourning Before the Get

Mourning is often an acute emotion at the time of divorce. Many experience this during the time leading up to receiving a get. Therefore, those rituals that most drew upon traditional avelut/mourning rituals were not part of rituals incorporated at the time of kabbalat get/receiving my get. Rather, they become part of those rituals during the months prior leading up to the get. Again, depending upon the circumstances, those themes and rituals can be either accentuated or deemphasized at appropriate times based on what is emotionally called for.

Kaddish

The Rabbis see the binding of two lives in marriage as the creation of a brand new soul. In addition to the individual and pre-existing souls of each partner in the marriage, created, too, is the soul of the couple in the marriage that dwells within each of them and in their home. As anyone who has tried to understand the dynamics of a couple knows, the true understanding of this soul can only really be known by the couple. It makes sense, then, that divorce is a death of that soul. The midrash tells us that three things are such an existential breach that their sound can be heard across the entire universe. While there are at least two versions of this midrash, both versions include the sound of a man divorcing the wife of his youth as being powerful and painful enough to reverberate across the cosmos.

Jewish mourning rituals are among the most powerful in our tradition. While caution should be exercised lest their power be diluted during times of physical death, I found adapting them to the divorce situation helpful. Reciting the Kaddish from the time divorce is immanent or finalized can be a powerful and cathartic experience. I would recommend this with a limitation, however. It is an accepted practice to stand for the Mourner's Kaddish when reciting it on behalf of a physical death for a loved one. I recommend maintaining this limitation and would encourage reciting this prayer while seated² when reciting it for the end of a marriage. I feel that saying the

²In those communities and for those who maintain this practice, standing for Kaddish is an important non-verbal call to the community for support and attention upon the death of a loved one. During an initial separation, this community-wide non-verbal call may not be advisable.

Kaddish out loud yet seated carried an appropriate degree of intensity without compromising its overall liturgical power.

Of course the Kaddish is only related to death and loss by liturgical association and tradition. The words have nothing to do with death. The words of the Kaddish draw our attention to our personal relationship with Gd, and that relationship as a source of strength and comfort. Although it has now become more customary to say Kaddish after the physical death of all loved ones for the better part of a year, traditionally one could end the formal mourning period of a spouse after 30 days of Kaddish. I would recommend that if Kaddish is used as part of a divorce ritual, that it be recited for a period of no less than 30 days and certainly no longer than 11 months. In addition to the Kaddish, the Birkhot Hashachar prayers³ can be buoying and comforting. I would advise anyone going through this to (re)familiarize him or herself with these prayers as well as others from the siddur that may be applied either directly or metaphorically to the situation.⁴

Teshuvah

Whether or not the experience falls in the autumn, themes present in the teshuvah work of Elul can be apt. There is rarely if ever partner in a divorce without any responsibility for the marriage's failure. Rather than understanding teshuvah as repentance and sin, the work is to concentrate on admitting (even privately) and accepting ones own responsibility and its demise. to the to the extent that mourning a marriage can utilize Elul's themes in prayer or meditation, i.e., teshuvah, soul searching/cheshbon hanefesh/accounting of the soul, forgiveness (either of oneself or others), renewal and rebirth, I believe they are helpful and appropriate. Specific liturgical suggestions would be Psalm 30⁵, Vidui⁶, and the bedtime Shema.⁷

Psalm 30 draws our attention, as does the Kaddish, to our personal relationship with Gd. At a time when we may feel abandoned and betrayed, this Psalm reminds us that we are not alone or unprotected, even as we go through adversity and confusion. Vidui can help balance out the despair we might feel of being victimized. It is important to understand that all relationships have

³Particularly opening my eyes, guiding my steps, freeing me from (emotional) captivity, giving me strength. I am sure the other prayers in the sequence offer additional associations for this circumstance.

⁴See appendix I (Birkhot HaShachar prayers).

⁵See appendix 2 (Psalm 30)

⁶See appendix 3 (Yamim Nora'im Vidui)

⁷See appendix 4 (Bedtime Shema)

different circumstances. Yet, at the same time, I believe that all relationships take place as part of a dynamic. As such, there is always at least some degree of personal responsibility on the part of both parties. Taking responsibility for one's own part of a failed marriage is an important step in healing and rebuilding a life. The Vidui can be a powerful vehicle for that kind of personal reconciliation.

Finally, look at the bed time Shema. Said at the time of day and the time of life when we feel most vulnerable, lonely and exiled, the themes of forgiveness and protection in the prayer are poignant and powerful images with which to end the day. Reading the prayer may be difficult when one is likely filled with tremendous anger and resentment. I believe, however, it is important to both honor and hold all these emotions at play and, at the same time, acknowledge that through time, compassion and prayer as spiritual chiropractic, other emotions can begin to emerge.

Mikvah

Images from Yamim Nora'im such as a new book, a clean slate and the opportunities that come with it are apt. Another is the ritual of mikvah. If it is a woman's personal practice to go to the mikvah in her married life, she should consider continuing through this period of mourning leading up to her get. Dwelling in the presence of the absence of her partner while she is technically still married is an important part of marking this time. Later, mikvah at the end of this "formal" mourning period is a good way to punctuate this period of time. Similar to the liminal period of time (without saying Kaddish) between reciting Kaddish for the last time at 11 months and reciting the Kaddish again at the first Yahrzeit, so too should there be a liminal time between tevilot (immersions) marking the end of mourning and kabbalat get (receiving of the get).

Regardless of whether it is part of a woman (or man's) regular ritual to go to the mikvah, mikvah can be a powerful healing divorce ritual. This first suggested visit is at the end of the "formal mourning period" (which might also be helpful for men going through divorce). For this visit, two are specifically different in a divorce context. The first would be a tevilla (immersion) for each year of the relationship. That could be either the number of years of the marriage or of the relationship itself. The second is the Y'hi ratzon prayer. Many mikva'ot display this prayer to be

recited after the "al tevilla" bracha. It asks that the Beit HaMikdash be rebuilt quickly. The exact text of the prayer⁸ is;

May it be your will before you, my Gd, Gd of my forefathers (and my foremothers) that the *Beit HaMikdash* be built quickly and in our days; give us our portion in your Torah.
Y'hi ratzon milfanecha adonai eloheinu v'elohei avoteinu (v'imoteinu) she'ivaneh et ha Beit HaMikdash bimhera v'yameinu v'ten helkeinu b'toratecha.

Understanding the blessing in context:

The term "Beit HaMikdash" is a seemingly straightforward term. However, variations in kavvanot or the intention/understanding of the term are appropriate in these contexts and have been personally meaningful:

Throughout Jewish thought--in traditional rabbinic literature as well as in literal translations of the siddur, "Beit HaMikdash" is translated, immediately known as the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, the physical one, the one that was destroyed almost 2000 years ago. It is the one place we were sure that Gd dwelt- where we could find Gd. In fact, there are many whose fervent daily prayers are directed toward rebuilding that specific structure; that will bring the Messiah as understood that will ultimately bring peace, justice and wholeness to our troubled world. It is certainly the intention at the Chabad mikvah where the prayer is posted.

There are additional understandings that are equally authentic, both in translating the term as well as in doing our important basic part to bring on the ultimate tikkun/repair and healing to our world, starting with healing ourselves. The word "beit" means house or home. It is the structure in which we physically and metaphysically dwell, find comfort and reconnect with ourselves and the divine within us. Dwell, not live or reside. Live and reside, at least in common English parlance can suggest a purely physical/legalistic/practical existence, like the place you might go to get your mail and keep your stuff-although it could also be invested with more. The word "dwell" has a more complex metaphysical connotation, for which examining the Hebrew root will be helpful. In describing what Gd does in the Temple, the verb *shochen* (sh.ch.n.) ("dwell") is used in the Bible. The same root is used in the word *Shechina* in describing the aspect of

⁸ See appendix 5 (*Y'hi ratzon*), also found in some siddurim at the end of the *Amida*

Gdliess we are able to perceive, touch and access in our lives and how we are able to bring Gd into the world through our sacred relationships.

Mikdash is the place of sanctity or holiness; the place set apart from the rest of everything in the entire world. That is the true essence of the shresh/the root k.d.sh and all other words we make with that root. A Beit HaMikdash, then, is also a holy place of dwelling; A place of partnering with the divine. Therefore, it can truly be understood as our bodies, our relationships, our homes and the tone we set there with our families. So while during a marriage the kavvanah for "Beit HaMikdash" in this prayer means home and, at the center of it, marriage. Alternatively it is a recommitment to rebuilding and renewing the structure of Beit HaMikdash in ones life, however that/those structures are understood. During a divorce, the term "Beit HaMikdash" can transform. The bayit can be seen as one's own life and body transformed- which this prayer can remind is unique and sacred-and one's only shot. If this is done spiritually prepared at the end of a formal mourning period, a final immersion for each year of marriage can feel like a complete, holistic and sacred rinsing. The process may allow the woman to embody a new life with energy I needed to re-create her life with the strength and sacred guidance she may know she always had but may have felt so lost, clouded over and distant.

Connection to the Matriarchs.

One can feel tremendous power in being surrounded, held, buoyed by warm fresh water-standing completely naked-stripped of all pretense and being vulnerable-and saying these words out loud and alone. The river of connection flows deep and strong to generations of Jewish women who worked and fought to hold their families together in integrity and love, who despite disappointments and setbacks, used their strength to forge and maintain the values upon which they committed themselves to raising their families and running their homes.

Of course, out loud and in kavvanah, the imahot/matriarchs can be held intimately close. At different times it can be Sarah, who had to play different roles within her relationship with Abraham, silently⁹. Other times it was more Rivka, whose sometimes overt, sometimes behind-the-scenes strength and leadership arguably steered the course for the entire Jewish people, all within commitment and love to Isaac, despite his shortcomings¹⁰. Other times it was Rachel,

⁹ See Genesis 12: 10-20

¹⁰ See Genesis 24:11-28:9

whose passion, compassion and sacrifice can be an inspiration¹¹. However, especially toward the end of a doomed marriage, it can often times be particularly Leah¹². Unloved, she bore the weight and responsibility of the home and most of the children, perhaps lost herself and sacrificed important relationships in the process.

Rituals at the time of Kabbalat Get

Psycho-spiritual Themes and Rituals surrounding Kabbalat Get/Receiving the Get)

For purposes of the timing of these particular rituals, the emotion of mourning should be giving over to a feeling to make a havdalah, separation or distinction. It should be a marking a point of transition characterized by a commitment to rebuilding something new while at the same time respecting and carrying what came before. The get rituals from here exemplify this theme and the rituals and imageries from this point forward are meant to hold this kavvanah.

There is a perhaps strange minhag of saying "yasher koach" to a person who has just gone through the get process.¹³ The midrash tells us that after Moses smashed the first tablets of the covenant, the Holy One of Blessing said to him "yasher koach sheshivarta," or "you used your strength righteously in smashing them." A failed marriage can be likened to the first set of tablets and the covenant they represented. They were given in love and pure intention and had a time and place in the lives, development and maturing of the people. They played an important role in the overall covenant. But they were not meant to be. As holy as they were, the people could not live with them and needed a new set, a new paradigm with which they were to lead their lives, which were equally holy. However this set needed to be written with the experience of life and learning; trial, error and failure (The Golden Calf). That first set had their time and place, but were not to last. We needed to learn how to write new covenants, using what we learned from the first. It is this new set by which we live and to which we cling. At the same time, we preserve the broken pieces. We carry them with us everywhere as we travel through life as a reminder of what we need to learn. We store them in a box safely as a holy yet unusable and inappropriate part of our lives. Angels hover over the box to maintain a safe distance between us and the fragments as protection.

¹¹ See Genesis 29:6-35:22 and Jeremiah\$

¹² See Genesis 29:16 to 31:14

¹³ Thanks to Judith Rose, who reminded me of this midrash and connected it to my get the morning I received it.

Mikvah: the final visit

The night or morning before receiving a get, a last trip to the mikvah as a Jewishly married woman may be recommended. Only this trip should be different. If possible, go with a friend and during alternative mikvah hours if possible. For example, some mikva'ot have special hours for brides, conversions or special and contemporary rituals and ceremonies. The mood at the mikvah can be very different then. Rather than only the private monthly rituals of the married woman, the tone is one of communal sisterhood. Being at this distinctly Jewish feminine place with many other women celebrating and marking different thresholds of life can turn a somber lonely ritual into a celebration of the totality of life.

Once in the mikvah, recite the brachot. Hold the mitzvot of integrity and oneness in your kavvanah. Concentrate on locking in and integrating oneness and shalom within yourself, your sources of strength and comfort-- whether they are Gd, friends, family, work, community and/or anything else. Do only one final immersion to symbolize that integration and integrity. Get a manicure, pedicure, massage and have a relaxing meal with a glass of red wine with a friend.

Kabbalat Get/Receiving the Get

As mentioned in the introduction, receiving the traditional get is just what the verb tense implies, passive. Again, these rituals do not alter the structure of the get process itself by, for example, trying to make it "egalitarian" or attempting to granting the ex-husband a get at the same time. This is despite however valuable (even psychologically needed) this concept may be. Others have written some beautiful pieces, such as in Rabbi Debra Orenstein's book, *Lifecycles: Jewish Women's reflections on Life's Passages and Personal Milestones*, Volume 1. Therefore, all the elements of the rituals described below do not alter or threaten the halakhic or philosophical underpinnings of a traditional get.

The rituals below ensure the get remains universally Judaically valid throughout all of Judaism, while at the same time imbuing it with tremendous meaning and empowerment. In addition, the woman emerges as a free woman as an active empowered participant and, at several times, the initiator of the rituals.

At the Get Itself

As is traditional, the people around the table in the Rabbi's study are the rabbi, the sofer/scribe, 3 edim/witnesses, the ex-husband and the woman. The woman should bring one or two trusted and supportive friends to offer some gender balance in the room.

Vidui

There is a point early on in the process where the husband asks the sofer to write a bill of divorce for him. This could be seen as the very beginning of the get. This is an important moment in the process where an emotional "clearing of the slate" can take place. In order for the get to act as a psycho-spiritual emotional closure to the relationship, a tone needs to be set. This is the symbolic end of a marriage and its soul. An important part of closure is to acknowledge that both people have played a part in the failure and hurt of the relationship. True, each person may shoulder more blame of one or more types of hurt, but the effect is cumulative, reciprocal and shared. The Yamim Nora'im Vidui prayer¹⁴ (not the Vidui said at the deathbed) expresses this perfectly. It covers sins from aleph to tav, A to Z, reflects both physical and emotional errors and is expressed in the plural.

Just at this point in the get, the divorcing couple should read the Vidui prayer out loud at the same time to one another, expressing their reciprocal responsibility for the failures of the marriage. I found that reading this Vidui prayer, said in both Hebrew and English, was very powerful and set the proper tone for the process to continue, both for the get and for future communication with each other after the get. I recommend the translation in the Conservative Machzor that, rather than literally translating the sins, preserves the alphabetical acrostic listing of the sins from A to Z.

During the writing of the get

Untying tzitzit

The sofer's actual writing of the get takes the longest and is perhaps the emptiest time of the get. Parties to the get might find this the most uncomfortable part, sitting in the same room with each other waiting for the get to be written and desperately wanting the whole process done with. It is

¹⁴See appendix 3. It is also noteworthy that the Yom Kippur Vidui prayer is said privately by the bride and groom in their morning prayers the day of their wedding. Reciting this prayer just before the get creates a powerful liturgical bookend for the marriage. It is also interesting that a different version of the Vidui/confessional prayer is said just before death, again connecting the imageries of get to death. The use of Mikvah just prior to marriage and burial (during the process of tahara) is a further traditionally sanctioned ritual at such liminal, transitional moments.

tempting to make idle small talk to break the stress of the situation. This can be helpful, but can also take away from the appropriate gravity and solemnity of the moment. The same is true if either party walks away from the table/room.

At this time, I suggest the wife ask the ex-husband to participate in a ritual unbinding of their lives together in the form of untying tzitzit. She should bring her own personal tallit to the get for just this purpose (along with the Machzor for the Vidui, from which she can initiate both elements). If it is not her custom to wear a tallit, another could be used, i.e., his tallit or, even better, the tallit used at their wedding.

Aside from this playing a perfect symbolic role in untying the interpersonal, familial and emotional knots that bound them, it plays three additional roles. The first is that she has to sit and watch him perhaps impatiently wrestle with a physical challenge, that, at a different time in their relationship, she might have offered help with. This can be both a challenging and empowering moment; asking him and then watching him untangle knots that she might have earlier taken responsibility to untie. Another value is that she should plan to retie the tzitzit later in the day. That is, as soon as she receives her get, she should proceed to immediately doing something for herself that might normally and previously have been done for her--tying her own tzitzit. However, and this is important, she should ask her wasband to untie only one of the tzitzit-not all four. This is symbolic of the fact that although one part of her life is being undone and reshaped, it is not her entire life.

Ana B'Koach

While he is untying her tzitzit, she should chant the Ana B 'koach prayer. Understood as a prayer said at transitional moments, it asks Gd for strength and for guidance in untying the knots and blockages that get the way of our growth and transformation. Hanna Tiferet Siegel has a beautiful chant that can be used which incorporates the key phrase of the prayer. Either or both can chant at this time.. After he finishes untying the knots, read Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's magnificent translation of the prayer out loud.¹⁵ Give the untied strings to him as a gift to keep.

¹⁵ See appendix 6 (Ana B 'Koach, translation by Rabbi Zalman Schechter-Shalomi)

Receiving the Get/meshicha

One of the last segments of a traditional get is the woman taking a few steps while carrying her physical get as a way of symbolically (and halakhically) taking ownership and possession of it. Add the two additional elements below to this aspect of the traditional ritual which empower her. The first is that she should ask everyone in the room to take a step back and clear the way for her to take these few steps as a new symbolic walk. The second is that, if possible, she should walk in a circle, preferably around the table at which they had been seated or at which the get was written. This is evocative of the seven circles a bride walks at her wedding. If those wedding circles can be seen as being symbolic of her "marking her territory or space" or "staking her claim" around her new husband and home (or Beit HaMikdash), then this circle is her marking a new space for herself.

After the Get

Havdalah

Immediately after the get, the woman should spend time with women close to her for some final closing rituals to mark the havdalah. As mentioned above, there are many emotions potentially at play at a moment like this. Some sources talk about this being a moment evoking mourning and calling a kind of kriah, or ripping. Although needing to mark the moment by symbolically altering something, ripping and mourning may not feel right at this time for me. Alternatively, these rituals focus on different emotions of healing, rebuilding and transforming at this point by offering burning as an alternative symbol of the woman's altered status at this time. By burning, rather than destroying by ripping or cutting, one is transforming; transforming through the metaphor of fire as an emotional trial. Before, the burned object was one element. After the burning, it is now another element of ashes. Ashes, of course, can be used as fertilizer and the metaphor of things "growing out of the ashes" and is particularly apt.

The first part of the havdalah ritual should include the introductory paragraph of the traditional Havdalah blessing after Shabbat.¹⁶ Do not, however, use the Kiddush as part of the ritual; use the blessings for the besamim (spices) and m'orei ha-eish. Use the fire to burn the besamim. Offer kavvanot of holding on to the sweet as well as the spicy memories of the relationship as

¹⁶ See appendix 7 (Havdalah blessing)

well as the ability to see light reflected off ourselves and off the circumstances along with the blessings.

Havdalah and the tzitzit

After the Havdalah ritual, move onto the tying the tzitzit. This is a moment and opportunity to both learn an empowering and symbolic new skill (if previously unknown) and to begin rebuilding. This might also be a good time to tie techelet (the blue thread mentioned in the Shema as part of tzitzit) to one's tallit as a way of symbolically adding new color and texture to ones life, as well as to differentiate this time from time before. Regardless, tie one (of the four) tzitzit at this time as a way of acknowledging that although final, the get is but one place in transitioning in a new life and identity. The other three tzitzit of the tallit should be saved for other people, situations or times to tie that will be associated with growth, transition and even new relationships.

Offering blessings

After the tzitzit tying, offer blessings. Begin with soliciting and offering personalized blessings and good wished to be offered to and by everyone participating in the day. Blessings offered to the ex-husband might feel safer to be offered here in absentia (perhaps and especially if they were unable to be offered in person during the get itself due to the particular situation or emotional tenor). End with the offering the Birkat Cohanim /priestly blessing,¹⁷ which should be offered with either holding hands or resting ones hands lovingly on the head or face of the newly divorced woman.

Finally, I would close the ritual with chocolate, sharing with one another richness and sweetness and offering something of a perhaps particularly feminine nature.

¹⁷ See appendix 8 (Priestly blessing.)