

we discuss it with the rabbi who married us, although we did talk, at length, about strategies for how we might get my divorced parents to march peacefully down the aisle (we failed: My father and his family, displeased with the choreography we proposed, did not attend.)

What did we think the text of the *ketubah* actually said? We both assumed that it named us, our parents, the day and place of the wedding, and stated that my parents were providing, not the stainless steel silverware and used family station wagon (mustard yellow, with wood paneling) that they actually gave us, but some traditional number of sheep and goats. That is to say, in a world devoid of silver *zuzim*, a world in which none of the brides in my circle were “maidens,” we assumed that the text had no significance or consequence, legal or interpersonal: It was but a chant of foreign syllables, an expertly written amulet passed from one person to the next, which sealed our bond in the historic way of Jews. As our rabbi read the *ketubah* aloud in Aramaic under the *chupah*, our hearts heard a blessing for our marriage and a showering of divine protection. Before my groom placed the ring on my finger, as I heard him say the word “*mekudeshet*,” I heard only the echo of “*kadosh*” — a holy day and marriage that God was witnessing.

Some years after my acquisition, the writer Anita Diamant wrote *The New Jewish Wedding*, a book that gave Jewish couples the skills to understand their wedding ceremony and the mandate to shape it along with their officiant. A couple who resisted assuming the traditional roles of “acquirer” and “acquired” could opt out of the old practice of *kiddushin* and choose alternative practices, such as *brit ahuvim*, which likens a marriage to a mutual covenant between business partners.

When I counsel couples before their wedding, I know they have often already given serious thought to the problems that *kiddushin* poses for both partners. They have googled translations and alternative texts. But most still want a traditional ceremony; they want it badly and unreflectively, in much the same way that the bride wants her white dress. And if they choose an egalitarian *ketubah*, they often want the traditional one read aloud in Aramaic and signed, too, and they might frame it on the back of their egalitarian *ketubah*, the one that hangs prominently in their living room. If they are learned, if they are both ardent supporters of the rights of women in religion and the rest of life,

they will try very hard to find other Jewish texts that make the acquisition seem less like an acquisition, and if they can't find a way to stretch the text, they will weave their own *midrashim*.

Why are so many Jewish couples still willing to perpetuate a ritual of acquisition that is so obviously problematic? When it comes to

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weddings, I suspect, there is the element of magic. People want to “do it right,” thinking that their compliance with what is almost irrational will offer a bit of holy glue to hold their marriage together when so many others fail. An Israeli feminist lawyer told me that her secular, feminist women friends could easily fly to Cyprus for a civil wedding rather than submit to the religious ceremony imposed by the Israeli rabbinate. But the majority choose the “traditional” ceremony. They dip in the mikveh as they are made to do, and they get acquired, just as I had been when I didn't know better.

But I do know better, and still I haven't revised my *ketubah* in favor of one that makes me owner of myself. How difficult would that be — a new document, fresh witnesses? What am I waiting for?



Discussion Guide

Bringing together a myriad of voices and experiences provides Sh'ma readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of these ideas, we offer the following questions:

1. Why do Jewish couples continue to perpetuate a wedding ritual of acquisition that is out of alignment with their Jewish and philosophical thinking?
2. What features of a Jewish wedding ceremony might be adapted to more closely reflect contemporary liberal practices?
3. If the Orthodox rabbinate in Israel were to relinquish control over personal status issues, what would be the implications for marriage and divorce?