

# Humanity and Nation in Sheva Berakhot

Because the Rabbis exercised such care and precision in the wording of prayers and blessings, the *siddur* is an unparalleled source of insight into the essence of many *mitzvot*. Marriage is one such *mitzvah*. The language of the *Sheva Berakhot*, the seven blessings that celebrate marriage, reflects a highly nuanced understanding of marriage and its relationship to Jewish peoplehood in particular, as well as to humanity at large. To understand its message, we must first explore the dual nature of Jewish marriage, at once universal and national.

## THE UNIVERSAL NATURE OF MARRIAGE

Marriage looms large in Jewish life. From the first moments we call a baby by name, whether a boy at his *berit milah* or a girl at her naming, we express the hope that he or she will one day stand under the bridal canopy (*Shabbat* 137b).

Surprisingly, the Torah speaks very sparingly about Jewish marriage. When it does address marriage, it refers, with only a few exceptions, to *kiddushin*, which constitutes only the first part of the Jewish marriage ceremony (often described as “betrothal”). The few verses that discuss *kiddushin* are themselves notable. They are casuistic in nature, that is, they speak conditionally about procedures that are required should a man decide to betroth a woman. They do not explicitly establish an obligation to marry, only how to accomplish betrothal should a man and woman be so moved.

Consider the verse identified in the Talmud as the source for the first and most prevalent method of betrothal identified by the *Mishnah*, *kiddushei kesef* (betrothal through the exchange of money or its equivalent). This verse, in *Parashat Ki Teitzei* (*Devarim* 22:13), introduces the case of a man who makes a false accusation of adultery after betrothal but before full marriage (*nissu'in*): “If a man takes a woman, and comes to her and hates her...”

The subsequent verses describe the husband’s accusation of adultery by the wife in the period between betrothal and full marriage.

The Torah uses the same word for betrothal here that it uses in describing commercial transactions, such as the acquisition of land. This suggests that the same medium of exchange may be used to effect the legal change of status in both cases. In a real estate transaction, the buyer gives the seller money to effect a change in ownership; in *kiddushin*, the husband gives the wife a small amount of money to effect betrothal.

As in the case of commercial transactions, the verse does not describe an absolute obligation. Rather, the Torah delineates the proper procedure in the event that such a situation arises. A man is not obligated to hate his wife after marriage (generations of comedians notwithstanding). *Kiddushin* appears to be a contingent *mitzvah*, i.e., a stipulated procedure conditioned on the desire of the one who would fulfill it. We refer to this in halakhic parlance as a *mitzvah kiyumit*; it is conditional upon the desire of the parties to effect betrothal. This is to be distinguished from a *mitzvah chiyuvit*, an absolute obligation. There appears to be no absolute obligation to marry. Marriage may be a precondition for fulfilling other Torah *mitzvot chiyuviyot*, e.g., procreation, but there appears to be no Torah *mitzvah* to marry *per se*. The derivation of important laws and procedures for marriage can be incidental to the context of their source.

Furthermore, the Torah only obliquely mentions *nissu'in*, the second half of the marriage ceremony and the component that signals the beginning of married life as husband and wife. There is no explicit source establishing an obligation for men and women to experience *nissu'in*. We find *nissu'in* mentioned in the same *perek* in *Parashat Ki Teitzei* (22:22–24). The Torah characteristically notes in passing a distinction between a betrothed woman and a fully married one. If a married woman commits adultery, she and the guilty man are subject to the death penalty. When the Torah does not specify a particular form of execution, the intention is the least violent of the four methods used by the *Sanhedrin*, death by strangulation (*Sanhedrin* 52b). A betrothed woman and her partner who committed adultery, however, are subject to death by stoning.

The Torah notes other differences between a woman who has been betrothed and a fully married one regarding the cancelation of vows (*Bemidbar* 30:13–14). Here too the reference to *nissu'in* is incidental, making reference to halakhic consequences of a woman’s married status only and not to any obligation to marry.

Marriage, however, does appear prominently in the story of Creation in *Parashat Bereishit* (2:18–25). The pinnacle of the passage is the directive to a man to leave his parents and form a new unit with his wife: “A man should therefore leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and they shall become one flesh.”

In this context, we can appreciate Rambam’s introduction to the laws of marriage at the beginning of *Hilkhot Ishut* (1:1):

Before the Giving of the Torah, a man would encounter a woman in public – if he wanted to marry her and she agreed, he would take her to his house and have intercourse with her privately and she would be his wife. When the Torah was given, *Yisrael* was commanded that if a man wanted to marry a woman, he would acquire her first before witnesses and only then would she become his wife, as it says, when a man will acquire a woman and come unto her.

All this leads to the conclusion that the Torah acknowledges marriage to be a universal institution that pertains to humanity as a whole and not just the Jewish people. The Torah does establish uniquely -Jewish laws and procedures for marriage within the Jewish people but the institution itself is not uniquely Jewish. As we shall see, *Sheva -Berakhot*, which feature in the celebration of *nissu’in* both under the *chuppah* and at subsequent feasts during the days that follow, reflect the universal nature of marriage, albeit with a uniquely Jewish flavor.

## THE NATIONAL VIEW OF MARRIAGE

The particularly Jewish component of marriage flows from the sacred history of the Jewish people. In the seventh century before the Common Era, during the final years of the Kingdom of Judah, the prophet Yirmiyahu warned of the national fate that would befall *Am Yisrael*. As the Babylonians neared the City of David, Yirmiyahu foretold a bleak future of subjugation and the destruction of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*. The prophet bemoaned the moral and spiritual failings of the people and their leadership. His name became eponymous for the prophetic screech, the fiery rhetoric of fire and brimstone. The term jeremiad has been applied to political, social, and, of course, religious critiques throughout the ages and across cultures.

As events in Judea careened towards a cataclysmic end, Yirmiyahu consistently predicted the end of political and spiritual autonomy in *Eretz Yisrael*. But with the destruction itself, the prophet did a sharp turn. The messenger of misfortune became the herald of hope. As the Temple lay in ruins and the people prepared for exile, Yirmiyahu laid the foundation for their eventual return.

In chapter 33 of his book, Yirmiyahu contrasts the state of the land after the destruction to its future state after redemption. Though the streets may now be desolate, with neither man nor beast to walk them, the towns of Judea will yet reverberate with the sounds of Jewish civilization. And Yirmiyahu chooses one sound that most characterizes a vibrant people in its own land: “Voices of gladness and joy, the voices of the groom and bride...” Yirmiyahu’s promise has become a national prayer, on our lips as we accompany the bride and groom to the *chuppah*. More than that, though, it has transformed the Jewish wedding into an act of national survival.

## THE BERAKHOT: NUMBER AND STRUCTURE

Although the blessings of *nissu’in* are popularly called *Sheva Berakhot*, they actually have an official name in talmudic literature. They are called by the collective title *Birkat Chatanim*, just as the four blessings after a meal are called *Birkat Ha-Mazon*. This is a more appropriate title than *Sheva Berakhot* since there are actually not seven blessings associated with marriage but only six.<sup>729</sup> In fact, when the Talmud discusses varying practices in the days of the *Amora’im*, it omits the final *berakhah*, *Birkat Ha-Yayin*, the blessing on the wine, from the count:

Levi visited the home of Rebbi for the wedding of his son R. -Shimon and recited five blessings; R. Assi visited the home of R. Ashi for the wedding of his son Mar and recited six blessings.

As the *sugya* establishes, the point of contention between Levi and R. Assi was whether to recite one or two *berakhot* ending in “*yotzeir ha-adam*.” Both *Amora’im*, we can safely conclude, recited the blessing on the wine, not included in the count since it is not a blessing related to marriage. It accompanies *Birkat Chatanim* just as it does *Birkat Eirusin*, the blessing recited before betrothal, since all the *berakhot* are dignified through the use of a cup of wine.

Although *Birkat Ha-Yayin* should always be recited with *Birkat Chatanim*, its position shifts depending upon its independent halakhic function. Under the *chuppah*, it precedes *Birkat Chatanim* since *Birkat Ha-Yayin* dignifies the recitation over a cup of wine. At the conclusion of the wedding meal, it comes at the end since it dignifies the *Birkat*

---

<sup>729</sup>. See especially Rambam’s careful wording, *Hilkhot Ishut* 10:3.

*Ha-Mazon*, recited in the presence of a *minyán* over a cup of wine. This is another indication it is not part of *Birkat Chatanim* but rather serves as an accompaniment to it.

And there are other indicators to this effect, as well. *Birkat Ha-Yayin* is not part of *Birkat Chatanim* in that it is not absolutely necessary. In the event wine is not available, *Birkat Chatanim* may be recited on another beverage, as long as it qualifies as what *Chazal* call *chamar medinah*, the local drink people serve one another on social occasions. Many *Rishonim*, including the Rambam and the Ritva, maintain that *Birkat Chatanim* may be recited without any beverage at all. Rabbenu Tam in *Sefer Ha-Yashar* reports that R. Yehudai Ga'on instituted the -practice of reciting the -*berakhot* over a cup of wine only generations later. The *Sefer Ha-Tashbetz* declares reciting *Birkat Chatanim* over a cup of wine to be only a custom.

This all begs the question: If there are only six *berakhot*, why did the title “*Sheva Berakhot*” take hold so firmly? We can hazard a guess that the original intention of the phrase was actually meant to refer to the six *berakhot* of *nissu'in* together with the single *berakhah* of *eurusin*, for a total of seven.

## THE FIRST FIVE BERAKHOT

The two competing themes of marriage, the universal and the national, are prominent in the first five *berakhot*. They are grouped together by theme, with a progression from the universal to the particular.

### Universal

Blessed are You, King of the Universe, who created all for His honor.

Blessed are You, King of the Universe, Creator of Mankind.

Blessed are You, King of the Universe, who created mankind in His image, in the image of His likeness preparing for Him from Himself a building for eternity, Blessed are You, *Hashem*, Creator of mankind.

### National

4. May the barren woman rejoice fully through the happy gathering of her children to her, Blessed are You, *Hashem*, who makes Zion rejoice through her children.

### Universal

5. May You make the beloved companions rejoice fully as You made Your creation rejoice in the Garden of Eden, Blessed are You, who gladdens groom and bride.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FINAL BLESSING (BERAKHAH ACHARITA)

By the standard of frequency of recitation, the final of the six *berakhot* may be considered the most important. This blessing, referred to as *Asher Bara*, is on some occasions the only blessing of the six that is recited. For example, in the absence of a *minyán* for *Birkat Chatanim*, the other blessings are omitted. It is for this reason that it opens with *Sheim* (mention of God's name) and *Malkhut* (mention of God's kingship) even though it is recited immediately after other *berakhot*. As Rashi explains, since it sometimes stands alone, the form was standardized to always open with *Sheim* and *Malkhut*. In some cases of a second marriage, e.g., a widow marrying a widower, only the blessing of *Asher Bara* is recited. As another indication of its importance, it is the longest of the six *berakhot* of *Birkat Chatanim*.

After the initial formulaic opening of *Sheim* and *Malkhut*, the *berakhah* proceeds with praise before making a request. This structure is familiar to us in the blessings of the *Amidah*. As the Talmud stipulates in *Berakhot*, one does not petition the King without first approaching Him in praise.

The *berakhah* then extols the Lord for the creation of twelve phenomena. They are arranged in six pairs, corresponding to the six *berakhot* of marriage that make up *Birkat Chatanim*. Like the -*Berakhah Mei-Ein Sheva* (i.e., *Magen Avot*, the abbreviated *chazarat ha-shatz* recited Friday night) and the *Berakhah Mei-Ein Shalosh* (*Al Ha-Michyah*, an abridged version of *Birkat Ha-Mazon*), *Asher Bara* serves as an expression of the essence of the full set of *berakhot* it replaces.

The six pairs are:

*Sason Ve-Simchah* Joy and Gladness (joy)

*Chatan Ve-Khalah* Bride and Groom (relationship)

*Gilah Rinah* Rejoicing Song (joy)

*Ditzah Ve-Chedvah* Joyfulness and Delight (joy)

*Ahavah Ve-Achvah* Love and Fraternity (relationship)

*Ve-Shalom Ve-Rei'ut* Peace and Companionship (relationship)

They can thus be organized into two groups: three contain synonyms for joy, three with synonyms for the marital relationship. In this schema, the blessing exhibits a strong sense of symmetry, thematically arranged into AB/AA/BB.

Whether one accepts the suggested grouping or not, the essential point is incontrovertible: There are two themes at play in the list of nouns, and both of them are related to Creation. Joy and love are universal themes applicable to humanity in general and not just Jews. All human beings are created with the need to rejoice and to bond with others.

*Chazal* went a step further. In their view, the recitation itself evokes the story of Creation. When the Lord blessed Adam and Chavah in Gan Eden (*Bereishit* 1:28), He did so, according to R. Abbahu, over a cup of wine.<sup>730</sup> Other *midrashim* describe the *chuppot* that the Creator prepared for the first couple with the angels serving as attendants.<sup>731</sup> The Divine participation in the first marriage sets a pattern for future acts of *chesed* (kindness), thereby transforming the blessing of the celebrants into an act of *imitatio Dei* and a universal virtue.

The focus then shifts from the universal to the national:

Speedily, O Lord our God, may there be heard in the cities of *Yehuda* and in the streets of *Yerushalayim* the sound of joy and the sound of gladness, the voice of the groom and the voice of the bride.

The blessing recalls, of course, the promise of Yirmiyahu that our national home will be restored now and forever with the sounds of marriage -celebrations echoing in the streets of *Yerushalayim*. It is more than a promise; it is a national aspiration.

The marriage ceremony and the *berakhot* in which it climaxes reinforce the place of Torah at the core of our humanity. At the same time, the structure of the *berakhot* places the marriage ceremony, while only a contingent *mitzvah*, firmly within the context of the other Torah *mitzvot*. The interplay of the universal and national in *Sheva Berakhot* thus exemplifies how our most human impulses are governed by *mitzvah*, endowing them with personal and national context.

---

<sup>730</sup>. *Bereishit Rabbah* 9:28. Note the reading in the Paris Manuscript cited in the Theodor-Albeck edition (Jerusalem: 1965) that the Rabbis instituted seven *berakhot* following the example of the seven *berakhot* mentioned by the Torah in Gan Eden. This total may include *Birkat Ha-Yayin* or *Birkat Eirusin* as previously suggested.

<sup>731</sup>. *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* 12; *Bava Batra* 75a; *Bereishit Rabbah* 18:1.