

# S . E . P . A . R

## A Havdalah *Ritual for when a Marriage*

**N**aomi, one member of our Jewish women's group, asked us for a ceremony to mark her separation from her husband Joseph. Naomi and Joseph [their names have been changed here] had been married for nineteen years, and in the past several years conflicts between them had escalated to the point where Naomi felt that it was not possible for her to continue in the marriage. She chose to mark the occasion of their moving to separate residences with a ceremony.

The Princeton *Rosh Hodesh* Group had been meeting regularly to mark Rosh Hodesh, the beginning of each month of the Hebrew calendar. We create and participate in new rituals, particularly to help each other make life transitions of all kinds.

Linda Oppenheimer, Shoshana Silber and I created the ceremony. I had spoken with Naomi at length about her decision, and I drew on this knowledge in preparing the ceremony. She herself did not participate in constructing the ritual, except to let me know that she was open to whatever our creativity produced.

We took a long time developing the themes and symbols that we finally used here, and many ideas were discarded in the process. We chose to use and reinterpret the symbols of *havdalah*, the ceremony marking the end of the Sabbath on Saturday night—the wine, the spices, and the candles—along with a plant, to enable Naomi to mark this transition to a new phase of her life.

About twelve of us gathered in a living room to conduct the ceremony. I served as the leader, with everyone taking part. It was a moving experience for all of us, and we reproduce it here for other women's groups to use or adapt.

### What's needed:

2 candles and 2 individual candle sticks

fireproof bowl

wine and cups for all

fragrance: pine branch, potpourri, flowers, etc. (we used fragrant wood chips)

very small natural objects such as bark, leaves, pine needles, stones, clay (We used a flowering cyclamen, which was blooming in Israel at the time the ceremony took place; ivy is an other good choice.)

a nice ceramic pot with a hole in the bottom for drainage

potting soil and a trowel

newspaper to protect the table

matches

basin and a pitcher of water

copies of the ceremony text for all (We gave Naomi a copy that contained only the blessings she was to say aloud, so she couldn't anticipate all of what was to come.)

We began with an abbreviated *Ma'ariv* (Evening) service so that another member of the group could say *Kaddish* for her daughter. We used the Reconstructionist prayer book, *Kol Ha'Neshamah*, with Marcia Falk's alternative *Amidah*, from which we selected poems and blessings. We sang the blessings in Hebrew and English, using Faith Rogow's tune for "As We Bless." (This tune is on her tape "The Courage to Dare.") The readings introduced the themes of endings, separation, and death, setting the tone for the ceremony that followed.

We sang a simple *niggun*, a tune without words, written by me, which was meant to be wistful, sad, a little joyous, kind of a comforting lullaby when sung softly and slowly.

Lighting two candles, we poured wine for all, and recited three blessings together.

*We praise You, Source of Life, for the wine that helps heal our wounds and points to future joys. (We drank the wine.)*

*We praise You, Source of Life, for the fragrance that enables us to savor pleasant memories of shared experiences. (We passed around the fragrant wood chips.)*

*We praise You, Source of Life, for the flame that lights the direction to the future, guiding us on new paths. (The flames of the two candles were held together for the blessing, and separated afterward.)*

Naomi read these blessings aloud:

*Blessed is the One who separates and makes distinctions.*

*Blessed is the One who guided me to join my husband under the huppah [marriage canopy].*

*Blessed is the One who sheltered us in our home.*

*Blessed is the one who has helped me to decide to leave this marriage.*

*Blessed is the One who separates and makes distinctions.*

This part was very difficult for

## Comes Apart

BY RUTH BERGER GOLDSTON

Naomi. She said later that she was surprised, and relieved, to realize that she might imagine “the One” as being involved in her decisions to marry and to divorce—she had previously felt solely responsible, and blamed herself for the outcome. We sang the *niggun* again at this point, to give Naomi a chance to collect herself.

We wanted to give Naomi an opportunity to talk about her marriage, to tell its story to the group and to herself. I had included in the ceremony text the prompts listed below so that each of us could help Naomi reconstruct the history of the marriage and reflect on it. I gave a brief introduction to this part of the ritual and then asked the first question. The rest unfolded easily and naturally for about half an hour. Naomi said later that it had felt important<sup>5</sup> for her both to affirm for herself and also to share with us the things that had been positive about the marriage. As a group, we knew more about the pain and frustration that we had seen her experience than about the richness and excitement that had once been present in the relationship.

### Question Prompts:

- when you met what was/is attraction
- courtship and decision to marry
- wedding/early years/birth of children
- moment(s) of greatest joy/sadness
- what has made you the most angry
- regret what you feel you could have done differently
- Jewish life
- turning points; looking back, when were they?
- how have you changed since the beginning of this relationship?

–what do you know now that you wish you had known then?

–other questions

Once we had reached a natural stopping place, each person was asked to choose one of the small natural objects from the table and place it in the ceramic pot. I had earlier asked Naomi to bring something symbolizing her marriage to burn. She brought a copy of her marriage license that she had carried for many years as identification. She placed it in the bowl along with the fragrant wood chips, and lit them with both of the candles. We all watched quietly for several minutes while the certificate and the wood chips gradually turned to ash. While everything was burning, Naomi repeated the passage below phrase by phrase after me:

*I, Naomi S., affirm that I have chosen, with sorrow and with anger, with regret and with relief, to end my marriage to Joseph B. Before we were joined; as of now, we are separated. Before, we shared our home; now, we live in separate homes. I leave behind me forever my married life with Joseph. I look ahead to a new life for myself, a life that will grow from the sweetness and the bitterness of our marriage.*

*Blessed is the One who separates and makes distinctions.*

*Blessed one who enables us to make transformations and new beginnings.*

This was the emotional climax of the ceremony.

We mixed the ashes of the marriage certificate and the wood chips with potting soil and the objects in the pot, and we then placed the plant into the soil. I had originally imagined that Naomi would do this herself, but members of the group very spontaneously did it for her, and Naomi said later that it comforted her to have people take care of her in this way.

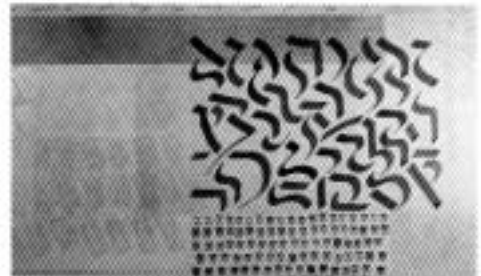
We ended by chanting our opening *niggun* again as we moved to a larger open space in the room. We stood in a close circle, with Naomi in the center. We had planned to do a kind of “trust fall,” in which a person is literally handed from and supported by one person after another around the circle. Instead, we found ourselves growing quiet, hugging and slowly rocking Naomi as a group. We gradually stepped back from her, and she hugged each of us individually as we again sang our *niggun* and “As We Bless.” We lingered in the spell of the moment, all of us bound together.

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# THE NEW, IMPROVED JEWISH DIVORCE: *Hers/His*

BY VICKI HOLLANDER



When the phone rang with the news that my *get* (Jewish divorce) ceremony could take place the following day, I was ready. My civil divorce had come through several days earlier, but it hadn't made me feel divorced. I was the one, not David (not his real name) who had insisted that we have a *get* as part of the divorce negotiations. We had been married ten years, separated one year. We had a beautiful four-year-old daughter. The ending of the marriage was, for me, painful and completely unexpected.

I know that many women feel hurt by the implicit sexism of the *get* ceremony, but I didn't feel that way. I wanted to stand before the entire Jewish community — including the most traditional — and have my new status declared and validated. I believed that a Jewish ceremony, unlike the civil event, might emotionally support me through a difficult transition: from being single, from parenting as a couple to parenting alone.

I also knew that I had to construct a parallel ceremony. Five males (one rabbi, two witnesses, David and the scribe) would be present along with myself) at the traditional *get* ritual. I decided to assemble my own cadre of supportive women friends. I worked out a schedule

of guard-duty shifts (a *shomeret*) in which different friends would accompany me through the day. I also decided to write my own *get* document, to create my own customs for the day, and to construct my own sort of support-network *minyana* (quorum).

On the one hand I felt unspeakably sad and afraid; on the other, I felt strong and dignified, ready to claim this ancient ritual as my own, to recognize that the Jewish divorce ceremony was a rite that was available to me for my own use in healing.

At dusk on the evening before the ceremony, I began a 24-hour fast: I lit a white candle and started to compose my own divorce document (what I call a "document of transition" see page xx) using special textured paper that I had bought for the occasion and a real ink pen. I was all alone, and I sat on the living room couch watching the candle flicker in the December dark, thinking, crying, preparing myself for the fact that tomorrow my marriage would be officially over. Going to bed that night, I felt quiet but not alone, in the grip of a large unfolding thing, but also feeling in control of what was about to happen.

The next morning, wrapped in my *tallis* (prayer shawl), I said the *viddui*, a prayer of confession generally recited before one's marriage, on Yom Kippur and on one's death bed. I wanted to acknowledge my part in the death of my marriage — the patterns I had perpetuated that were not healthy, the skills I lacked, the times I had not listened to my intuitive voice.

Paralleling Yom Kippur, I wore no jewelry and no makeup. I dressed in white, the color of the *kittel*. (The *kittel*, a burial shroud, is also traditionally worn by Jewish men on their wedding day and on various Jewish holidays.) In a white skirt, white blouse and cloth shoes I felt bleached, cleansed, pure and present. White felt right to me, a symbol both of death and of rebirth.

I stayed alone until mid-morning, needing time to feel sad, to reflect, to be with my God. I would have liked to have my family with me during parts of the day, but as my parents live in San Diego and my sister and brother-in-law in Cleveland that wasn't possible. My daughter had slept over at David's house and was now at school. I started to feel nervous and frightened, with a painful ache. So many relationships were now dying, and dreams, and parts of myself.

Joanne, my oldest friend in Seattle, picked me up at 10:30. We drove to the *shul*. Joanne sat by my side for a bout half an hour, through the first part of the ceremony. Around the large wooden table sat the two males witnesses, plus the officiating rabbi, the scribe and David. Except for the scribe, I knew everyone else in the room. I could feel their sympathy. There was small talk and joking around. I think they were afraid I would cry if there was much silence. Although as a woman I was legally powerless at this ceremony, I felt I had a great deal of authority. I had the power to get to the emotional core of the situation.

The ceremony began with the rabbi explaining the proceedings to us. He asked, formulaically, "Are you ready to go through with this?"

I answered, "Yes."

David answered, "Yes."

There was a terribly mournful feeling in the room.

After some more formalities, the officiating rabbi said we could leave for two hours while the scribe hand-wrote the *get*. Joanne drove me to my friend Bria's apartment. I had not yet shown anyone my "document of transition," and I wanted both to hear it read by someone else and to read it aloud myself. I hoped it would cut through the numbness. Hearing it and then reading it, I felt both grief and the beginning of resolution.

Bria drove me back to the *shul*, where a third friend, Joanna (not Joanne), met me. We entered the room for the last part of the ceremony, watching the completion of the writing of the *get*, the artful, calligraphic document inscribed with infinite precision. The officiating rabbi read it aloud in Aramaic, then he cut the parchment with a small blade, symbolically cutting our union, giving concrete form to the ending of our marriage.

He gave the parchment to David who dropped it into my open hands. I tucked

## DOCUMENT OF TRANSMISSION

On the \_\_\_\_\_ day of the week, the \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_  
574\_\_ since the creation of the world, the \_\_\_\_\_ day of  
\_\_\_\_\_, 199\_\_ as we reckon time here in \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_  
I, \_\_\_\_\_ daughter of \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_  
(Hebrew names) \_\_\_\_\_  
do depart from the bindings and vows of my marriage,  
(kedushin) that took place \_\_\_\_\_ years ago  
on \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_  
to \_\_\_\_\_, son of \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_,  
(Hebrew names) \_\_\_\_\_

This day I am no longer bound to the task and to the commitment to cherish and honor you in faithfulness and in integrity as my husband.

This day I am no longer bound to stand as wife, companion, and partner.

This day I am no longer bound by honor or by law to affirm and maintain kedusha within our relationship.

This day I am no longer set aside, special to only you.

This day the kedushin vows become null and void.

I am no longer bound by the vows of kedushin.

Hereby, I am no longer kedusha to you, no longer your wife and you are no longer kadosh to me, no longer my husband.

On this day according to our tradition I depart as a free woman.

I stand as a free agent in the Jewish community, in the world, and before myself.

I stand having completed our people's traditional way of unbinding a marital relationship.

I stand as a Jewish woman with dignity and with strength.

I stand restored to a single unit as a whole and complete person.

This shall stand as a document of release and a letter of freedom in accordance with the values of our people, Israel.

\_\_\_\_\_ (woman's Hebrew name)

\_\_\_\_\_ (woman's English name)

\_\_\_\_\_ Witness

\_\_\_\_\_ Witness

*\*This document draws upon the ketubah, the get, and my own writings*

it in between my left arm and my heart, as I was instructed to do. Holding the ripped document near my heart felt like a real enactment of what was happening: this most close and intimate part of my life was over. One small gesture captured a year and a half of what I had been feeling.

I then gave this beautiful, disfigured parchment back to the officiating rabbi, relinquishing it. I walked the traditional three steps backwards and three steps forward, signifying my acceptance of the

document. I didn't feel at all shamed by my allegedly "passive," distaff role in this proceeding. As I took the steps, I could physically feel myself standing tall and walking straight. It felt like the ceremony was mine.

I waited until the very end to hand David (my now ex-partner) my "document of transition." Though I had not gotten to hear my own document read aloud in this room, I had heard it read aloud with Bria, and I felt satisfied. I was glad to be performing the final, closing rite.

The ceremony was over. It had felt foreign, yet greatly comforting. I was participating in an ancient ritual of unbinding, following in the path of many people who had passed before me who also had been hurting and torn.

Joanne drove me back to my apartment. Slowly I bathed, adapting the customs of mourning rituals in which water is the symbol of purification and renewal. I changed from my white clothes in to comfortable, colored, happier clothes. I had bought myself a new pair of colored earrings for the occasion—a present to myself.

At around 5 p.m., eight additional women friends joined us, making a *minyán*. Each woman brought a dish for dinner. We had salads, casseroles, wine, bread, and almond tarts for dessert. The meal was a combination mourner's meal of consolation and of transition.

Lighting colored candles, we spoke of endings and of new beginnings, each of us spontaneously sharing some ending and beginning from our own lives. We sang the blessing over wine and talked about the meaning of this blessing — vines, rootedness, being connected with the earth, growth. It was a metaphor for our processes.

When we said the blessing over bread, we talked about how many coordinated actions are necessary to produce a loaf of bread—the finished product—

no less the mystery of the initial grain. The talk was simple, which felt right. "I am not all alone," I said. "All of you have accompanied me through this difficult, coordinated process. Today marks not only the enclosure of my marriage," but formally recognizes how my friends have been with me through all of this." I thanked everyone, acknowledging that in my neediness through this crisis, I had made demands on my friends.

When we said the *shechchianu* blessing (to mark my new beginning), we each reflected on what we wanted for ourselves now and in the future, what

dreams we had. What new possibilities existed for me now? There had been so many changes. I was so aware of being a woman with women.

As the evening neared an end, we all went outside. Arm in arm, in small groups in the moonlight, reminiscent of the mourning ritual, we walked round the block. (At the end of *shiva*, it is traditional to walk around the block, symbolizing the end of the mourning week.) My life's path would now be different.

When we came back to my apartment building, we formed a circle on the lawn. I talked briefly and quietly about my

feelings throughout the day. Then we hugged and parted.

The ritual had begun at dusk and it ended at dusk. I felt very full, very satisfied. The day had, after all, been mine.

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## Emerging on the Other Side of a Marriage

### Divorce Is a Mitzvah: A Practical Guide to Finding Wholeness and Holiness When Your Marriage Dies

by Rabbi Perry Netter, Afterward by Rabbi Laura Geller, Jewish Lights Publishing, \$16.95

### The Get: A Spiritual Memoir of Divorce

by Elise Edelson Katch, Simcha Press, \$10.95

**I**n the Talmud, the tractate on divorces appears before the tractate on marrying. The wry explanation for this curious order? It's better to learn the cure before getting the disease. If the metaphor holds, two recent books on Jewish divorce demonstrate that the cure can be as varied as the disease.

Rabbi Netter's *Divorce Is a Mitzvah* (the title is a line by Rashi) is a constructive, sensible, even hopeful book that attempts to mitigate the scars and the stigmas usually associated with divorce. He weaves the story of his divorce from a wife of seventeen years with practical information, psychological explanation, and readings of traditional Jewish sources. He is especially forthright on the importance of making divorce as safe as possible for the children, to which end he devotes two full chapters. Netter and his wife gathered their three children on the family/marital bed to break the news that they were divorcing; this to convey the message that despite the changes to come they would still be a family. The difficult but also healthy, holy path, advises Rabbi Netter, is for the ex spouses to actively co-parent the kids, to subordinate their pain with one another to meet the needs of their children.

Rabbi Netter wants the Get to be understood as a meaningful ritual rather than the businesslike implementation of a contract. The get, he believes, has the power to provide closure to a failed relationship; if approached consciously, its ritual can

allow man and woman a final, emotional un-coupling. He deftly narrates the grief he felt at his own get, and likens a divorce to a death — the death of a marriage, of innocence, and of an intact family. And he calls for more organized support for the divorcee within the Jewish community, something akin to the support we give to comfort a mourner.

Elise Edelson Katch's memoir, *The Get* testifies to how searing and unreasonable divorce can be. Edelson Katch, a prominent Denver therapist, has brought to print a haunting tale that, sadly, reads more like untouched diary entries than a crafted work. She and her husband were both nonobservant Jews, free spirited children of the 1960s, when they fell in love and married. When their daughter was three years old, they joined a *havurah*. Ten years later, during what Katch believed was a temporary separation, her husband, who had increasingly been drawn to a nearby congregation of "black hats," initiated proceedings for a Get. Edelson Katch tells of late night telephone calls from an Orthodox rabbi she never met who harassed her with whispered questions for information needed to write the Get: "What is your name, what is your father's name?" Her husband, who does not attend their daughter's bat mitzvah, dates a friend of Katch, and quite conveniently loses most of his assets, continually asks her for a get. Edelson Katch refuses. She is not ready; she

wants their civil divorce finalized first. When she does consent, she gets an orthodox *bet din*. In a room with three men who will not meet her eye, she feels deeply shamed. She too yearns for a meaningful context, a ritual to help her mourn the death of her marriage. I found it particularly piercing that Katch, who throughout the book conveys a sense of her own genuine need for spirituality, be it new-age affirmations or the lighting of Shabbat candles, should find her marriage so torn and herself so hurt by religion as the patriarchy.

—KAREN PROPP

### Trying to find a healthy, holy path to divorce