

A Ritual of Acknowledging Separation

By Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin

“Let there be no quarrel between us, for we were once family.”—GENESIS 13:8

The following ritual was designed to be performed by a woman surrounded and supported by her friends and family. The setting should be familiar, comfortable, and comforting. It should be performed as soon as possible after the parting. Particularly appropriate would be the Saturday night after the actual separation, following Havdalah (distinction-making ritual that separates Sabbath or holiday from weekday). Both marital separation and Havdalah mark the crossing of a threshold from one state and time into another.

Through the use of a cloth—specifically a portion of a pillowcase or sheet—and its act of tearing, this separation ceremony is meant to evoke images of marriage and divorce. In addition to the image of sexual intimacy, the cloth and its tearing also allude to the cloth of the huppah (wedding canopy) and the cutting of the get (bill of divorce) when divorce is final. The act of tearing may also summon associations with keriah (rending a garment in mourning). Indeed, the act of separation does signify the death of a couple, a family, and some of their feelings, particularly intimacy, love, and security.

Following the traditional rituals of loss and mourning in Judaism, this one uses symbols and acts to express our most profound pain. At the same time, it offers images and sentiments that, if received and believed, can lift us out of despair and past hurt, anger, and loss. Contemporary ritual and prayer should not limit themselves to the role of ratifying and affirming what we feel and believe right now; like the most powerful traditional liturgies, they should also provide the comfort, the vision, and the belief that the best can yet come to be.

There is no specific mention of children in this ritual, and no recommendation is made one way or another about their participation. While the family is also rent, separation essentially occurs between wife and husband. The recitation from Genesis includes words like “family” and “house” to allow the images of family with children to be introduced. Participants are encouraged to determine the extent to which they wish to involve and reference children in the ritual beyond the modest inclusion already offered.

The cloth should have a slight cut mid-point along the upper edge, to facilitate tearing.

The ritual, designed to be simple and short, begins with lighting a candle and should be concluded with a meal of comfort. As at a mourner’s home, such a repast can be composed of round foods (such as bagels, lentils, cheeses, etc.) to represent the continuity of life’s cycle, despite the breach of sorrow.

Welcoming and Setting the Tone

Gathered among family and friends, the woman lights a candle and says:

Adonai ori veyishi mimmi ira. Adonai ma'oz-hayyai mimmiefhad. Al-tittesheni ve'al-ta'azveni elohei yishi. Ahat sha'alti me'et adonaiotah avakkesh, shivti beveit-adonai kol-yemei hayyai.

God is my light and my help; whom shall I fear? God is the stronghold of my life; whom shall I dread? God will not forsake me, the Merciful One will not abandon me, God, my Deliverer. One thing I ask You God, only that do I seek; to live in the house of my God forever (after selections from Psalms 27:1,9,4).

Tearing and Building

A friend or family member gives the woman the cloth or sheet which has been prepared for the ceremony. The woman takes the cloth, holds it at mid-point along the upper edge and recites:

Al-na tehimerivah beini uveinekha...ki-anashim ahim anahnu [ish ve'isha hayinu] ...Hippared name'alai, im-hasemol ve'eiminah ve'im hayamin ve'asme'ilah.

Let there be no quarrel between us, for we were once family; let us separate gently; if one goes north, may the other go south; if one goes east, may the other go west. May your house be your house, and my house be my house, and may strife and contentions not rule our hearts (interpretive translation of Genesis 13:8-9).

The woman recites the following verse and then tears the garment:

Kirugdeikhem ve'al levavkhem'ki adonai hannun verahum erekh appayim verav-hesed.

Rend your garments and not your heart..., for God offers compassion and comfort (after Joel 2:13).

She tears the cloth and continues:

Hakhnisinitahat kenafekh/vahayi li em ve'ahot/yehi heikekh miklat roshi/kan tefillotaihaniddahot.

O God, gather me gently under Your wing,

Be my mother, my sister.

Let my head find shelter in Your embrace
the nesting place for my homeless prayers.

(translation of "Hakhnisini Tahat Kenafekh" by Chaim Nachman Bialik)

Communal Support and Blessing

Family members and friends form a circle with the separated woman and say: Wherever you go, we are there with you. Whatever your need, we are beside you.

The participants step forward each in turn speaking the name of the woman for whom they have gathered, declaring their presence and support, as follows:

Hineni _____ bat _____ ve _____, ki karat li, ve'ehyeh immakh od.

I am here, _____ daughter of _____ and _____, for you called me, and I will be with you throughout your journey.

Then all the participants bless the woman: May your way be illumined by the face of God, as it is said:

Be'or-penei-melekh hayyim.

For the radiance of God's face grants life (Proverbs 16:15).

And may you dwell in the house of God forever (after Psalms 27:4).

Other spontaneous blessings may be offered. A friend takes the cloth to be discarded or saved as a memento of this time.

Closing

The woman says: May the setting aside of this cloth help me to set aside a completed portion of my life, and to weave new and beautiful times and garments.

The group may recite a traditional Sheheheyenu (blessing for reaching a new or momentous occasion) in closing:

Barukhattah adonai eloheinu melekh ha'olam, sheheheyenu vekiyyemanu vehiggi'anu Izmanhazzeah.

Blessed are You, God, Ruler of the Universe, who has given us life and sustained us and enabled us to reach this time.