

Blessing for a Jewish Home

Rabbi Maury Grebenau

As the bride and groom stand under the Chuppah ready to embark on a journey through life together it is a memorable and magical time. There is a sense of purpose and a desire to discover some pearls of wisdom which will help the couple to navigate this new adventure. As the bride and groom stand under the Chuppah the bracha recited over the first cup is that over the Kiddushin, the first step¹ of the marriage ceremony. The text of this bracha is unusual and examining it gives us a wonderful pearl of wisdom which will help in starting a strong marriage and a Jewish home.

Blessed are You Hashem, our G-d who sanctified us with His Mitzvos and commanded us about forbidden relationships and allowed us those who are married to us through Chuppah and kiddushin. Blessed are you Hashem who makes Yisroel holy through Chuppah and kiddushin.	בא"י אמ"ה אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו על העריות, ואסר לנו את הארוסות, והתיר לנו את הנשואות על ידי חופה וקדושין בא"י מקדש ישראל על ידי חופה וקדושין.
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There are a few aspects of this Bracha which we can explore. Firstly, it seems to be a *birchas HaMitzva* (i.e. categorized as a bracha said before performing a mitzvah) from the inclusion of the words “who sanctified us with His mitzvot, and commanded us..” but it is far longer than most of the brachos in this category. We usually get right to the point and describe the mitzvah in two or three words: “On washing our hands” “to light Shabbat candles” “to sit in the sukka” etc. Also, the mention of anything aside from the specific mitzvah which we are performing is highly unusual in a *birchas haMitzva*. It would seem that we should simply be making a bracha on the act of kiddushin and not mentioning the forbidden relationships at all. Similarly, the repeated mention of chuppah (another name for the 2nd stage of marriage) is puzzling. Why do we mention the next phase at all; shouldn’t we focus on the one being performed right now? Finally, if we are going to mention both stages they should appear in the order which they are performed. Here, Chuppah is placed before Kiddushin when in reality we first perform kiddushin and only then Chuppah/Nesuin. How are we to make sense of this unusual blessing?

The Rishonim grapple with some of these issues and the reality is that there is a sharp divide in terms of how to classify this bracha. Because of the many differences between the bracha on Kiddushin and the usual formula for a *birchas haMitzva*, the Rosh (Kesubos 1:12) decides it must really be a bracha of *Shevach V’Hodoah* (i.e. a bracha stated in praise of Hashem). The Rambam (Hil. Ishut 3:23), on the other hand, does seem to understand that this bracha is classified as a *Birchas HaMitzva*. The Rosh’s approach is understandable given all the issues

¹ Although in our History the two steps of marriage *kiddushin* (first step) and *nesuin* (final step) were separated by a full year today both take place within minutes of each other during the wedding

mentioned above. How would the Rambam approach these problems? Let's examine an approach to the order of the stages first and return to this issue later.

The Aruch HaShulchan (Even HaEizer 34:4) has a fascinating approach to answer why Chuppah should precede kiddushin. He explains that certainly if we were referring to this couple and their marriage directly then the stages would be interposed but that is not what the bracha is referencing at all. According to the Aruch HaShulchan the bracha is recalling the events at Har Sinai where when we stood under the mountain² it was our Chuppah and when we received the luchos (tablets) it was our Kiddushin³ with Hashem. This is a brilliant explanation for why the order of the bracha makes a great deal of sense. But we are left with another question. Why is standing at Har Sinai mentioned at all as we prepare for our couple to be joined in marriage? Why is this an appropriate time to mention this seminal moment from our History?

Rav Pinchas Sheinberg zt"l (Shiurim on Kesubos 1:5) explains beautifully the message which the new couple should be mining from this reference to Har Sinai. He explains that the secret to Jewish marriage is that there is more here than simple monogamy (although this is of course essential). The holiness of the marriage is created through the responsibility each spouse has to the other. It is for this reason that we reference the moment where we became responsible to Hashem to perform the Mitzvos as a paradigm for a holy relationship.

Perhaps we can add that this may be part of the reason for the prevailing custom to read the Kesubah⁴ under the chuppah. There is no real obligation for the Kesubah to be read. Rather we need to make some sort of break between the two stages of the marriage and the custom developed to read the Kesubah in order to make such a separation. Perhaps we are also trying to underscore the responsibilities that each spouse has to the other, to let them know that this is the source of the kedusha we hope will emanate from their new home.

Rav Sheinberg suggests that this is also why the idea of the forbidden relationships is mentioned in the bracha; it is in fact an integral part of kiddushin. Since the concept of mitzvos, limitations and responsibility are part and parcel of the idea of kiddushin, then it is not extraneous to have the mitzvos surrounding the marriage included in the bracha. This is why the Rambam feels that the bracha is certainly a birchas haMitzva despite the inclusion of these details.

² See T.B. Shabbos 88a which explains that Hashem lifted the mountain over our heads and had us accept the Torah. This image of Hashem and the Jewish people under a mountain canopy is understood by many to represent the Chuppah between the Jewish people and Hashem

³ Just as kiddushin involved the groom giving the bride something of value to cement their relationship, so too the giving of the luchos is seen as this stage in our relationship with Hashem

⁴ The Kesubah is a document detailing the financial and other obligations of the bride and groom to one another (as well as their families)

As a new couple begins their journey together the idea of responsibility to one another as a foundation of the holiness of their relationship is essential. Indeed, it is a pearl of wisdom which must be given its due under the Chuppah.

We must also bear in mind the source of this lesson. Our relationship with Hashem is also defined by responsibility, stemming from the moment on Har Sinai when we first received the code of law. It is not just the first two dibbros which are monogamy with Hashem⁵ but it is also the rest of them and the rest of the commandments. In this world where so many Jews do not even identify as such, we can easily rest on our laurels but we must realize that the more we are able to cling to the Mitzvos the more we can inject holiness into our relationship with Hashem.

⁵ The first two utterances being that there is a G-d and that we should not serve any other power