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Betrothal

By Rabbi Dr. Hillel ben David (Greg Killian)

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In many Sephardic congregations, prior to the Torah reading on the [first](one.html) day of [Shavuot](shavuot.html), a Ketubah le-[Shavuot](shavuot.html) ([marriage](mashal.html) certificate for Hag [Shavuot](shavuot.html)) is read, as a symbolic [betrothal](betroth.html) of [HaShem](hashem.html) and His people [Israel](gen-jew.html). There are various versions of such piyyutim, nearly all similar in terminology to the traditional tenaim (premarital document specifying the conditions agreed upon between the [two](two.html) parties) or the Ketubah (certificate the bridegroom presents to the bride at the [wedding](wedding.html) ceremony). These are hymns based on the verses:

***Hoshea (Hosea) 2:14-20*** *“Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert* **(at** [**Sinai**](stages.html)**?)** *and* [*speak*](mashal.html) *tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up* [*out of Egypt*](thebirth.html)*. “In that day,” declares* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)*, “you will call me ‘my husband’; you will no longer call me ‘my master.’ I will remove the names of the Baals from her lips; no longer will their names be invoked. In that day I will make a* [*covenant*](covenant.html) *for them with the beasts of the* [*field*](field.html) *and the birds of the air and the creatures that move along the ground. Bow and sword and battle I will abolish from the land, so that all may lie down in safety. I will* [*betroth*](betroth.html) *you to me forever; I will* [*betroth*](betroth.html) *you in righteousness and justice, in love and* [*compassion*](jonah.html)*. I will* [*betroth*](betroth.html) *you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)*.*

And:

***Yiremeyahu (Jeremiah) 31:31-34*** *“The* [*time*](time.html) *is* [*coming*](coming.html)*,” declares* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)*, “when I will make a renewed* [*covenant*](covenant.html) *with the house of* [*Israel*](gen-jew.html) *and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the* [*covenant*](covenant.html) *I made with their forefathers when I took them by the* [*hand*](fourteen.html) *to lead them* [*out of Egypt*](thebirth.html)*, because they broke my* [*covenant*](covenant.html)*, though I was a husband (betrothed) to them,” declares* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)*. “This is the* [*covenant*](covenant.html) *I will make with the house of* [*Israel*](gen-jew.html) *after that* [*time*](time.html)*,” declares* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)*. “I will put my Torah in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man* [*teach*](teacher.html) *his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘*[*Know*](daat.html)[*HaShem*](hashem.html)*,’ because they will all* [*know*](daat.html) *me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)*. “For I will* [*forgive*](forgive.html) *their* [*wickedness*](wicked.html) *and will remember their* [*sins*](sin.html) *no more.’*



The most widely used text of a *Ketubah le-*[*Shavuot*](shavuot.html) is that of the prolific Safed mystic and poet [Israel](gen-jew.html) Majara (c.1550-c.1625). Many of his piyutim are founded in the liturgy of oriental [Jews](gen-jew.html). This hymn is included in the Sephardic [prayer](prayer.html) book for [Shavuot](shavuot.html):

*The* [*sixth*](six.html) *day of the week (Friday), the* [*sixth*](six.html) *of* [*Sivan*](feasts.html)*, the day* [*appointed*](settimes.html) *by the Lord for the revelation of the Torah to His beloved people. ... The Invisible* [*One*](one.html) *came forth from* [*Sinai*](stages.html)*, shone from Seir and appeared from Mount Paran unto all the kings of the earth, in the year 2448 since the* [*creation*](bara.html) *of the* [*world*](worlds.html)*, the era by which we are accustomed to reckon in this land whose foundations were upheld by God, as it is written: “For he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters.” (Tehillim (*[*Psalms*](psalms1.html)*) 24:2).*

*The bridegroom (God), Ruler of Rulers, Prince of princes, Distinguished among the select, Whose* [*mouth*](body.html) *is pleasing and all of Whom is delightful, said unto the pious, lovely and virtuous maiden (the House of* [*Israel*](gen-jew.html)*) who won His favor above all women, who is as beautiful as the* [*moon*](chodesh.html)*, radiant as the* [*sun*](hachama.html)*,* [*awesome*](awesome.html) *as bannered hosts: Many days wilt thou be Mine and I will be thy Redeemer. Behold, I have sent thee golden precepts through the lawgiver Jekuthiel (Moses). Be thou My mate according to the* [*law*](law.html) *of Moses and* [*Israel*](gen-jew.html)*, and I will honor, support, and maintain thee and be thy shelter and refuge in everlasting mercy. And I will set aside for thee, in lieu of thy virginal faithfulness, the life-giving Torah by which thou and thy children will live in health and tranquility. This bride (*[*Israel*](gen-jew.html)*) consented and became His spouse. Thus an eternal* [*covenant*](covenant.html)*, binding them forever, was established between them. The Bridegroom then agreed to add to the above all* [*future*](future.html) *expositions of Scripture, including Sifra, Sifre, Aggadah, and Tosefta. He established the primacy of the 248 positive* [*commandments*](cmds613.html) *which are incumbent upon all...and added to them the 365 negative* [*commandments*](cmds613.html)*. The dowry that this bride brought from the house of her father consists of an understanding* [*heart*](body.html) *that understands,* [*ears*](body.html) *that hearken, and* [*eyes*](body.html) *that see. Thus the sum total of the contract and the dowry, with the addition of the positive and negative* [*commandments*](cmds613.html)*, amounts to the following: Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: “Revere God and keep his* [*commandments*](cmds613.html)*, for this is the whole [duty] of man.” (Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) 12:13). The Bridegroom, desiring to confer privileges upon His people* [*Israel*](gen-jew.html) *and to transmit these valuable assets to them, took upon Himself the responsibility of this* [*marriage*](mashal.html) *contract, to be paid from the best portions of His property...*

*All these conditions are valid and established forever and ever. The Bridegroom has given His oath to carry them out in favor of His people and to enable those that love Him to* [*inherit*](inherit.html) *substance. Thus the Lord has given His oath. The Bridegroom has followed the legal formality of symbolic delivery of this document, which is bigger than the earth and broader than the seas. Everything, then, is firm, clear, and established...*

*I invoke* [*heaven*](heaven.html) *and earth as reliable witnesses.*

*May the Bridegroom rejoice with the bride whom He has taken as His lot and may the bride rejoice with the Husband of her youth while uttering words of praise.*

By [Israel](gen-jew.html) Najara; Translated by Solomon Feffer

The [Mishna](orallaw.html) comments that the [wedding](wedding.html) day of King Solomon (Shir HaShirim (Song of Songs) 3:11) refers to the day of the giving of the Torah:

**Ta’anith 26b** LIKEWISE IT SAYS, GO FORTH, O YE DAUGHTERS OF ZION, AND GAZE UPON KING SOLOMON, EVEN UPON THE CROWN WHEREWITH HIS MOTHER HATH CROWNED HIM IN THE DAY OF HIS [ESPOUSALS](betroth.html), AND IN THE DAY OF THE GLADNESS OF HIS [HEART](body.html). ‘ON THE DAY OF HIS [ESPOUSALS](betroth.html):’ THIS REFERS TO THE DAY OF THE GIVING OF THE [LAW](law.html). ‘AND IN THE DAY OF THE GLADNESS OF HIS [HEART](body.html):’ THIS REFERS TO THE BUILDING OF THE [TEMPLE](temple.html); MAY IT BE REBUILT SPEEDILY IN OUR DAYS.

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I have written more on this subject in a paper titled: [Wedding](wedding.html).

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