Commentary

MARCH 2012 JUDAISM

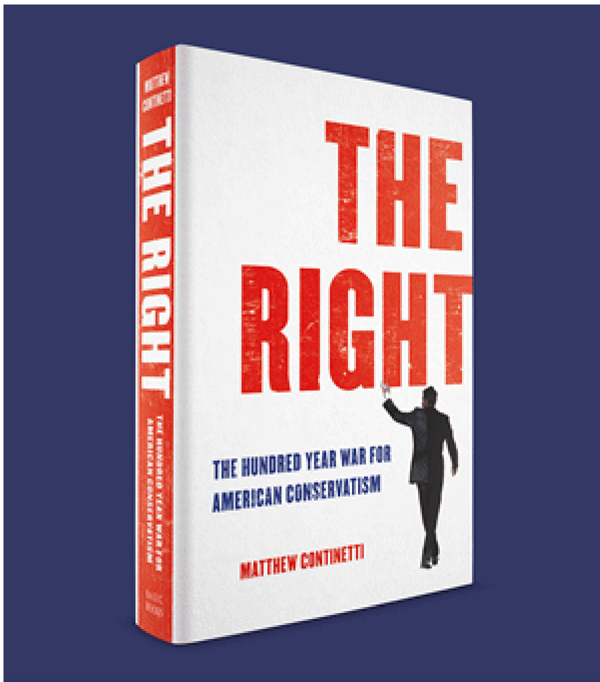
Blessed Unions

What the traditional Jewish wedding tells us about the American Founding.

by Meir Y. Soloveichik

On June 27, 1787, the American Founding Father Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a renowned physician, wrote an extraordinary letter to his wife about a Jewish wedding he had just attended in Philadelphia. Rush's is the only firsthand account of how this centerpiece of traditional Jewish life was celebrated in the fledgling United States. More important, it is a document that tells us much of enduring interest about the unique values and traditions of the Jews and how those values and traditions contributed to the self-understanding of the American Founders and to the no less unique civilization they shepherded into being.

Rush tells his wife he accepted the invitation to this wedding "with great pleasure, for you know I love to be in the way of adding to my stock of ideas upon all subjects." The bride, Rachel by name, was the daughter of Jonas Phillips, a prominent member of Philadelphia's Mikveh Israel congregation; her groom was "a young man of the name of Levy." Rush relates that the day's events began "with prayers in the Hebrew language…chanted by an old rabbi" of which he "did not understand a word except now and then an Amen or Hallelujah." He could not help noticing that—then as now—some of the worshippers "conversed with each other during the whole time of this part of their worship."



Rush, it would seem, was describing *minhah*, one of the three daily services in Judaism. Prayers having been concluded, the wedding rites proper got under way:

[A] small piece of parchment was produced, which contained a deed of settlement and which the groom subscribed in the presence of witnesses. This ceremony was followed by the erection of a beautiful canopy composed of white and red silk in the middle of the floor....As soon as this canopy was fixed, the bride, accompanied [by a] long train of female relations, came downstairs. Her face was covered with a veil which reached halfways down her body. She was handsome at all times, but the occasion and her dress rendered her in a peculiar manner a most lovely and affecting object. I gazed with delight upon her. Innocence, modesty, fear, respect, and devotion appeared all at once in her countenance.

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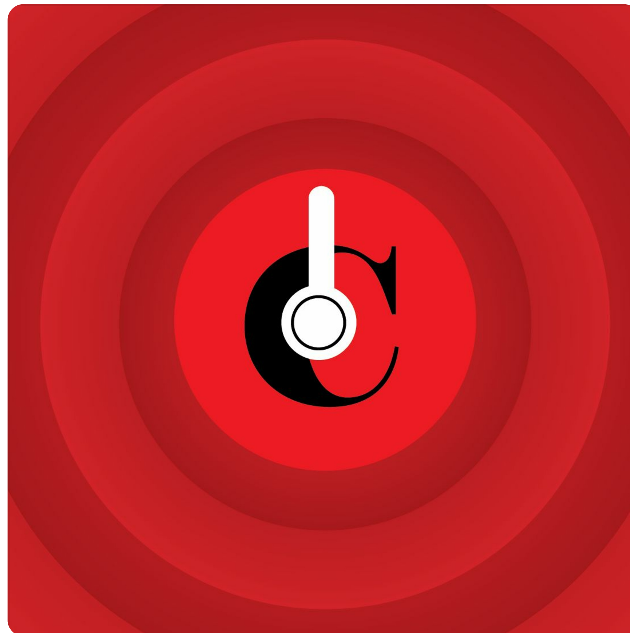

The Madness of the Moment

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From the signing of the “deed of settlement”—that is, the wedding contract, or *ketubah*—and the erection of the canopy, the *huppah*, Rush’s itemization proceeds in orderly fashion to the next stages: the giving of the ring, the blessings over wine, and then the dramatic conclusion as wine is handed a second time to the young couple:

> The groom after sipping the wine took the glass in his hand and threw it upon a large pewter dish which was suddenly placed at his feet. Upon its breaking into small pieces, there was a general shout of joy, the groom saluted his bride, and kisses and congratulations became general through the room.

Concerning this remarkable document, COMMENTARY editor John Podhoretz has rightly observed in a post on COMMENTARY’s blog Contentions that “it testifies to the wondrous imaginative sympathy that even these 18th-century Americans had toward the Jewish people, and offers a glimpse of the unparalleled freedom this nation would extend toward Jews.” Indeed so. But I would suggest that its significance goes beyond this, reaching into certain core ideas peculiar to both the Jewish and the American spirit, and perhaps infused into the latter by the former: ideas about the nature of families, societies, and nations, about how they are founded, and about the ends to which they are pledged. In light of those ideas, it was, one might say, no accident that in 1787 a Founding Father of the United States should have been present at, and so strongly moved by, a foundational ceremony of Jewish life.

In writing about modern conceptions of political society, Jonathan Sacks, the British chief rabbi, has helpfully distinguished between the social-contract model and the covenantal model. In the former conception, typically associated with thinkers such as Rousseau and Locke, individuals surrender aspects of their autonomy in order to gain something for themselves—primarily, protection—as members of a polity. In the latter conception, whose pristine form is adumbrated in the Hebrew Bible, individuals (in the words of H. Richard Niebuhr) "bind themselves together in a body politic by assuming unlimited responsibility to and for each other under God." As Sacks summarizes the distinction, a social contract is a secular transaction, entered into for mutual advantage; a covenant is a faith-based relationship, centered on moral commitment. In a contract, what matters is that both gain; in a covenant, what matters is that both give. In a contract, two individuals seek respective personal benefit; in a covenant, two *I*'s become a *we*.

Ideally, Sacks observes, covenants and contracts do not displace each other. A society that is all self-interest and no comradeship is not a society at all. But a society that is all comradeship and no self-interest is also not a society; it is a sect—or, on the largest scale, totalitarianism. “Throughout history, utopian thinkers have dreamed of a perfect world in which all individual striving is abolished, its place taken by harmony,” Sacks writes. “That dream has led to some of the worst bloodshed in history. Utopias have no room for difference, and difference is what makes us human.”

What, then, is a marriage? Surely, a covenantal relationship par excellence. But in fact a Jewish wedding has two distinct parts. It begins with what is called *kiddushin*, sanctification of the relationship through the giving of a ring and the signing of the *ketubah*—the acts duly witnessed by Benjamin Rush. It concludes with *nisuin*, marriage, a ceremony, also witnessed by Rush, in which a man and woman unite as husband and wife: two *I*’s becoming a *we* through the recitation of seven blessings under the *huppah*, representing the newlyweds’ home.

But there is more. Consider the *ketubah*, typically a handwritten document of some length that is read aloud to the gathered assembly during the first part of the ceremony. As a rabbi often honored with this task, I am always struck by the way guests, and indeed members of the wedding party themselves, treat the *ketubah* as if it were a quintessentially romantic if not a mystical symbol of marriage itself. Hence the beautiful and often lavish calligraphy with which the document is adorned, and the special place it often later occupies, suitably framed, in the couple's home.

Such manifestations of tender awe toward the *ketubah* may well owe something to the ancient Aramaic language in which its clauses are formulated and that sound so foreign to us today, almost like a spell out of the pages of a Harry Potter book: *Va'ana eizun vafarnes yesikhi likhi kehilkhos guvrein yehuda'in dezanin umokrin umefarnesisn lenesheihon bekushta*. So powerful is the lure of the *ketubah* that its popularity has spread beyond Jews, becoming incorporated into Christian and especially evangelical wedding ceremonies. To many couples, the *ketubah* appears broadly to represent holiness, or consecration. As one non-Jewish bride has been quoted in the *New York Times*, "We wanted a permanent reminder of the covenant we made with God."

A lovely sentiment. But a *ketubah* is not a covenant, and not a reminder of a covenant. Nor is it about consecration; God's name goes conspicuously unmentioned. It is written in ancient Aramaic for the simple reason that Aramaic, not Hebrew, was the Jewish vernacular in the period when the form of the *ketubah* was codified. Nothing could be more mundane than the document's subject matter: a public promise by the groom to support his wife and obligating his estate to insure her well-being in case the marriage dissolves. It embodies a balance of

interests: The groom wishes to be married, and the bride, in agreeing, seeks to protect her own interests. And like any other transactional document witnessed and declared binding under Jewish religious law, it concludes with the remarkably unromantic phrase, *v'hakol sharir v'kayam*: All is correct and confirmed.

The *ketubah* is a legal document, a *shtar*, to use the Hebrew term. And yet for all the secular nature of this document, Jews take great pains, as Rush saw, to insure its completion in a formal ceremony before the second part of the wedding begins. The reason? Because covenant must be joined with contract. Because without the respect provided by law, there is no love. Without a recognition of difference, and of disparate interests, there can be no relationship. At the heart of the *ketubah* and its public recitation is the assumption that despite the romantic setting, these are not just abstract beings but two unique individuals whose separate names, and even the names of the two witnesses, must be plainly spelled out and pronounced: Reuben son of Simon, marrying Leah daughter of Levi. Only afterward can the covenantal aspect be enacted through the reciting of the seven blessings under the *huppah*.

But then the wedding language does indeed turn romantic, glorious, and sweeping. Bride and groom are not just two contracting parties but two loving and beloved companions, joined in establishing a home that will be nothing less than a source of immortality. They are a link in a history that stretches back to Eden, where God (as the sixth of the seven blessings commemorates) gladdened the hearts of His creatures, and that will lead ultimately to the messianic redemption in which God will bring joy and gladness to the ingathered exiles. Thus is marriage seen as inspiring the ultimate covenantal emotion: hope, faith in the future. "Yet again in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem will there be heard the voice of joy, the voice of gladness, the voice of the groom, the voice of the bride!"

Contract and covenant: each different, both essential. For the non-covenantal but vital declaration of separate interests, the signatures of two witnesses alone are required; but the covenantal ceremony requires a minyan, the presence of 10, which according to Jewish law embodies the community as a whole, a living link to the Jewish people, past, present, and future. Elopement is not a possibility; the *huppah* must be a public event, affecting the entire nation of Israel.

What does all this have to do with America? Among modern polities, as Rabbi Sacks observes, only America combines contract and covenant. Its social contract is the Constitution of 1787, which sets out its form of government; its covenant is the Declaration of Independence of 1776. The Constitution is a secular *shtar* whose genius lies in the recognition that society is made up of a variety of factions, each with its own motivations and interests, and in the deliberate effort to create a balanced political structure that will preserve the rights of minorities and prevent a tyranny of the majority.

That is what makes the Constitution unique. However ardently the Founders may have desired democracy, they were uninterested in a parliament where a bare majority of representatives could pass sweeping measures of social and political change. Like the Jewish marriage contract, the Constitution recognizes and deliberately preserves the fact of diverse interests and, accordingly, the difference that "makes us human." Yet if, despite their differences, Americans are patently able to come together at the most important of times, it is because of their other great founding document, the Declaration of Independence.

The Declaration proclaims a great idea: that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. To perpetuate this idea, the signers bound themselves together in covenant under God: "And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor." The Founders also recognized that what they were choosing to do

affected not only themselves but also their posterity and indeed the world. To John Adams, the settlement of America was something to be regarded "with reverence as the opening of a grand design in providence for the illumination and emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth."

Even the gatherings that produced America's two documents were distinct in tone and character. During the debates over the Constitution, with the delegates deadlocked, Benjamin Franklin, aged 80, rose to suggest a resort to prayer: "How has it happened, sir, that we have not hitherto once thought of humbly appealing to the Father of lights to illuminate our understandings? God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?" The delegates largely ignored his request, and the document they produced was and remains wholly secular in nature.

A contrasting event occurred in 1774 at the Continental Congress in Philadelphia that ultimately produced the Declaration. A proposal that the delegates begin with prayer met with an objection from John Jay, later the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, who pointed to the deep religious divisions among those present. To us today, those divisions—among Episcopalians, Quakers, Anabaptists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists—may seem minuscule; but Europeans had been willing to kill over these differences, and Jay knew whereof he spoke.

Then Samuel Adams stood up and said that he would hear a prayer from any gentleman of piety and virtue who was also a friend to his country. One of those present was duly invited to read Psalm 35: "Plead my cause, O Lord, with them that strive with me; fight against them that fight against me. Say unto my soul, I am thy salvation." That evening, John Adams wrote to his wife Abigail:

> I never saw a greater effect on an Audience. Who can realize the emotions with which they turned imploringly to heaven for divine interposition and aid. It was enough to melt a heart of stone. It seems as if heaven had ordained that Psalm to be read that day….I must beg of you to read that Psalm.

Commenting on this story and others like it, the Catholic theologian Michael Novak notes that the sharp denominational divisions among colonial Americans were precisely what made the text of the Hebrew Bible into the central language of the American "metaphysic; the background to the American vision of history and the destiny of humanity." It was the biblically informed sense of a providential and covenantal mission that, over and over again, would enable Americans to overcome their differences and bind their individual selves to a common destiny.

Therein may lie the deeper meaning of what has become the central symbol of the Jewish wedding: the tent-like canopy whose origins are shrouded in mystery. Benjamin Rush writes that, following the Levy-Phillips wedding, "I asked the meaning of the canopy and of breaking the glass." The latter act, he was informed, "was designed to teach the bride and groom the brittleness and uncertainty of human life, and the certainty of death, and thereby to temper and moderate their present joys." Not bad for a first try. And the *huppah*? "I was told by one of the company that in Europe they generally marry in the open air, and that the canopy was introduced to defend the bride and groom from the action of the sun and from rain."

Well, not exactly. The *huppah* is not only a uniquely Jewish artifact; it is the ultimate embodiment of a covenant forging disparate parties into one. On handouts given to guests at Jewish weddings today, one reads that the *huppah*, which is open on all four sides, represents the tent of Abraham, the patriarch lauded in the book of Genesis for the welcome he extended to strangers. That is a fine explanation, but I happen to be especially fond of another, pointed out to me

by my father and found in the writings of Rabbi Samuel Eidels, an early-modern commentator on the Talmud. The *huppah*, in his reading, is actually reminiscent of the *mishkan*, the portable sanctuary or tabernacle constructed by the Israelites during their years of wandering in the desert. Eidels cites one of the seven blessings: “Blessed are You, Lord…Who sanctifies His people by [giving them] the commandment of *huppah* and *kiddushin*.” What this really means, says Eidels, is that God sanctified the Jewish people by marrying them, with the *mishkan/huppah* being the home that God and the Jewish people designed and built together.

The point is not only religious but social. The Torah devotes an immense amount of verbiage to describing, in exquisite detail, the building of the *mishkan*. Why? What turned the Israelites into a covenantal nation was not the miracles accompanying the Exodus, or even the events at Mount Sinai. For a nation to emerge, writes Rabbi Sacks, it is necessary for people to “build something together”—and that something is built out of the distinctive contributions of distinctive individuals. For the *mishkan*, “some brought [metals], others jewels, still others their skills and time.” A people, Rabbi Sacks explains, is made by making; a nation is built by building. What the Israelites built was a home for the divine presence.

To put the issue abstractly, the tabernacle represents what Sacks calls “integration without assimilation.” Because we are not the same, he writes, “each of us has something unique to contribute, something only we can give.” Society, for the Bible, is “the home we build together.” Similarly, I would suggest that in standing under the *huppah*, two people pledge to devote their respective talents to becoming one family, to building a home together for each other and for the divine presence. It was just such a home that Benjamin Rush saw a Jewish bride and groom beginning to build in Philadelphia in 1787.

Nor was it the only home this new family helped to build. Forty-five years later, Rachel Phillips Levy passed away. You can still see her burial place. It is at Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's estate in Virginia—the only grave near the house itself. The tombstone reads: "Rachel Phillips Levy, married 1787, died 7th of Iyyar, 5591 [April 20, 1831]."

How did this come about? The son produced by the marriage Rush witnessed was the American naval hero Uriah Levy, who bought Jefferson's estate to save it from ruin. He buried his mother there and, in his will, left the estate to the American people. Thus did the couple Rush had seen standing under their humble canopy end by bequeathing to America the home of the principal author of the Declaration, a man who had himself suggested that the seal of United States bear an image of the traveling Israelite tribes in the desert, surrounding the *mishkan*.

It was the Israelite concept of covenant, of integration without assimilation, the concept that enabled 12 tribes to become one, that so inspired the Founders as they pondered how a diverse group of states, from Maine to Carolina, could become one nation indivisible. "Covenantal thinking," writes the late political philosopher Daniel Elazar, "was the common mode of political conceptualization and expression during the American revolution." Here is Samuel Langdon (1723–1797), a New England pastor and president of Harvard:

> The God of heaven hath not visibly displayed his majesty and power before our eyes, as He came down in the sight of Israel on the mount…but the interpositions of divine providence fall little short of real miracles and an heavenly charter of liberty for these United States. We cannot but acknowledge that God hath graciously patronized our cause and taken us under his care, as He did His ancient covenant people.

Such, then, was the scene witnessed by Benjamin Rush as he gazed bemusedly at the *huppah*: a model, like the *mishkan*, of the process by means of which diverse persons become one, and a model of the nation that would inspire the Founding

Fathers so many centuries and millennia later.

After the ceremony, Rush entered the kitchen to say goodbye to the mother of the bride, herself an extraordinary woman. There, he “discovered the bride and groom supping a bowl of broth together,” as Rush reports to his wife. “Mrs. Phillips apologized for them by telling me they had eaten nothing since the night before, agreeably to the custom prescribed by their religion.”

“Upon my taking leave,” Rush continues, incidentally pointing to another venerable and “agreeable” Jewish custom, “Mrs. Phillips put a large piece of cake into my pocket for you, which she begged I would present to you with her best compliments.” Concluding his letter, Rush reflects: “During the whole of this new and curious scene my mind was not idle. I was carried back to the ancient world, and was led to contemplate the Passovers, the sacrifices, the jubilees” of Judaism.

There is, of course, only one chosen nation. But Abraham Lincoln would call America “an almost chosen nation” because he believed that America had a providential role to play in history, inspired by the example of God’s ancient covenant people. With an acute eye for detail, and a mind very far from idle, Benjamin Rush helps us put the pieces together.

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