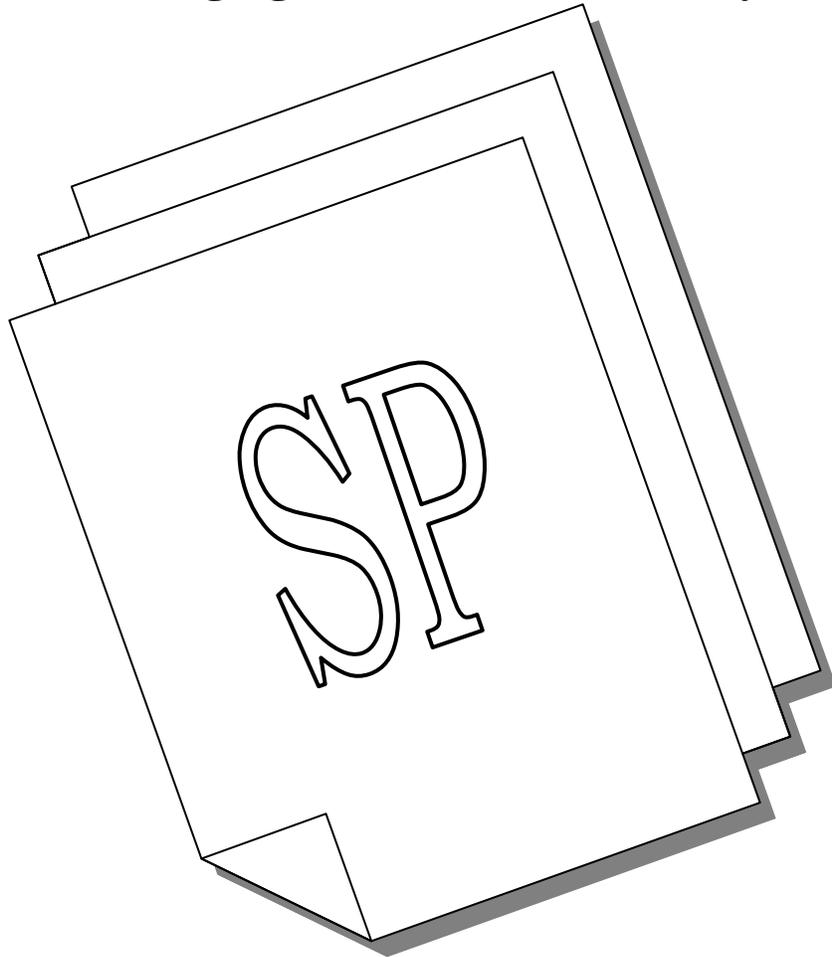


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Changing Women's Roles in Jewish Alternative Weddings in Modern Israel

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Abstract

Redressing gender balance is among the most important developments in the modern ritual field and liturgy. This article examines changing women's roles in Jewish alternative wedding rituals in modern Israel that challenge the patriarchal nature of the Orthodoxy in a number of ways. Women are no longer passive figures at their own and others' weddings, they may act as alternative wedding ritual experts; *kidushin* is performed in tandem when they betroth the grooms and recite a verse to express their love and commitment, and give a groom the ring. Women pronounce the blessings and also function as witnesses; financial premarital agreements and personalized forms of *ketubah* are equal documents. Other changes include linguistic altering of the name of God or blessings' wording to feminine gender and alteration in other customs deemed sexist and patriarchal, such as covering the bride with the veil or breaking of the glass by the groom. Apparently, in alternative weddings women's role and status have improved beyond recognition, granting them some symbolic equality with men in the ritual domain. Yet, this improvement may remain purely symbolic if it is not backed up by women's more equal legal and economic rights secured by means of prenuptial agreements.

Introduction

According to patriarchal assumptions widely accepted around the world, many rituals in both traditional and modern societies define women's deference and subordination to men. Wedding ritual and marriage generally are one of the central arenas of women's discrimination. The notion of the exchange of women and control over them by men is still enacted in many traditional and modern wedding ceremonies, including those performed in contemporary Israel. Furthermore, in Israel there is no separation between religion and the state and rabbinical courts have exclusive monopoly in matters of marriage and divorce of Jews. The only legally accepted marriage ritual is Orthodox one which does not treat men and women equally. In the frame of Jewish wedding, only the groom betroths the bride by recitation of the betrothal blessing, followed by his addressing to her "you are hereby consecrated unto me", and giving her a ring. The groom commits to the bride with *ketubah* – a contract specifying his obligations toward his wife, usually signed by him before the beginning of the ceremony. At the end of the

ceremony, the groom recites the verse from the Psalms (137:5-6): "If I forget You, O Jerusalem ..." and then he steps on the glass to break it.

According to religious law, women are seen as domestic beings and are excluded from public leadership roles that are mostly ascribed to men. Generally, Jewish Orthodox wedding, as well as many other Jewish formal ritual arenas, is dominated by men. To begin with, Orthodox rabbinical positions are available only to men, and during the wedding only men pronounce the blessings and function as witnesses of the marriage. The bride is invisible because of the veil hiding her face and is inaudible because there is no special ritual utterance intended for her or for other women throughout the wedding ceremony. One of the serious flaws of Orthodox marriage, and of personal law based on the *Halacha* in general, is obliteration of some basic human rights of the women by construing married women as property of their husbands (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2003)¹. These aspects of Orthodox marriage have been criticized by researchers coming from a variety of academic fields (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2003; Elior, 2001; Shifman, 2000; Cohen, 2000). One infamous predicament of Jewish religious marriage is the exclusive power of husbands to give divorce – “get” – or to withhold it from their wives, leading to the problem of *agunot*, i.e. chained women. They are stuck interminably in marriages which are already dead and forbidden to get married again because of husband’s refusal to give “get” or due to his disappearance. If *agunah* will have a child from another man, the child will be declared *mamzer* – bastard born of a married woman, a fruit of adultery. *Mamserim* and their offspring are forbidden to marry other “kosher” Jews for ten generations. By contrast, husbands in this situation are allowed to have children with other unmarried women and even to marry again in certain circumstances (Moller Okin, 2000).

As the only legally accepted option for Jews to marry, Orthodox marriage is prevalent even among the less-religious and secular Israelis, but the number of couples who choose to marry according to alternative rituals is persistently rising (Dobrin, 2006). Because the State officially recognizes only the Orthodox wedding, every ritual deviating from this form is denied recognition from the Rabbinate and Interior Ministry of Israel. These types of non-Orthodox rituals are presented in this study as “alternative” weddings that challenge and criticize the Orthodox pattern or alter some of its main components. Alternative wedding rituals in Israel is a complex phenomena, drawing on at least six interrelated social forces or movements: progressive Judaism, such as Reform and Conservative movements; “return to the Jewish book-shelf” movement among secular Israelis also known as Jewish Renewal Movement; a civic orientation expressed in performance of civil marriages by New Family association; New Age movements involved in performance of spiritual and mystical weddings; the kibbutz movement; and homo-lesbian (queer) movement. The article examines all these types of alternative weddings and outlines the principal changes in the place and functions of women at these weddings in comparison with the Orthodox ritual.

It is important to indicate that the distinction between Orthodox and alternative ceremonies is unique to Israeli context and goes beyond the customary dichotomy between the religious and the secular in ritual studies. Alternative ritual draws on a

¹ Although there is difference between acquiring a wife and other types of purchases, the origin of marriage still in acquisition law.

hybrid of religion and secularism, and the main reason for secular Israelis to choose it is not the rejection of Jewish religion and tradition as such, but their protest against the religious establishment (Tabory and Shalev Levztur, 2009). Beyond cultural alienation, recent public scandals connected to Chief Rabbis caused more non-observant Israelis to withdraw and seek alternatives - both inside the religious camp (e.g., by turning to *Tzohar* - the union of young Modern Orthodox rabbis) (Ferziger, 2008) and outside of it, i.e. alternative types of wedding.

Alternative wedding rituals challenge the patriarchal nature of the Orthodoxy in a number of ways. Women are no longer passive figures at their own and others' weddings, they may act as alternative wedding ritual experts; *kidushin* is performed in tandem when they betroth the grooms and recite a verse to express their love and commitment, and give a groom the ring. Women pronounce the blessings and also function as witnesses; financial premarital agreements and personalized forms of *ketubah* may be read not only by men but also by women. Other changes include linguistic altering of the name of God or blessings' wording to feminine gender and alteration in other customs deemed sexist and patriarchal, such as covering the bride with the veil or breaking of the glass by the groom. This article centers on the criticisms of Jewish Orthodox weddings voiced by Israeli women and their search for different alternative rituals. I will also compare secular and religious women's opinions on Orthodox weddings in order to identify some common ground in the feminist criticism of this dominant ritual practice.

Re-orientation of rituals and liturgy towards women

Redressing gender balance is among the most important developments in the modern ritual field and liturgy. The recognition that ritual tradition and worship in different religions are never gender neutral brought about rethinking of their fundamentals in the light of feminist theory in contemporary theology, psychology, and anthropology. Development of alternative forms of rituals and liturgy became a crucial site of women's activism within different religions, movements and social groups. A growing number of women are writing, planning, leading, and actively participating in public rituals (Roll et al, 2001; Spretnak, 1982; Orenstein, 1994). Feminist rituals focus on the dimensions of bonding among women, embodied modes of shared symbolic communication, and personal empowerment (Bell, 1997:238). In the frame of theology of different religions strengthen the recognition of the importance of women's ritual practices and women's ways of worship and spirituality (Roll & all, 2001). The subfield of feminist anthropology places women at the center of the study of tribal and modern societies; religions dominated by women, female initiation and puberty rituals attracted attention of feminist researchers (Lutkehaus and Roscoe, 1995; Sered, 1994). In the field of psychology too there is growing understanding of the lack of rituals for women in modern society, and some family therapists suggested creating new feminine rituals, such as celebration of first menstruation or motherhood (Laird, 1996). In the light of these developments, I examine women's role in alternative wedding rituals.

Methodology

This article is part of a larger research project - a comparative study of Orthodox and alternative wedding rituals in Israel (Prashizky, 2006). It is based on qualitative analysis of 43 semi-structured in-depth interviews with couples from different sectors of the

Israeli society who were married under different wedding rituals. Israelis who had an alternative wedding can be divided into two categories: secular couples who got married in a Reform wedding ritual (9 interviews), and those who chose to be wed in a variety of other ways: through the Institute of Jewish Secular Rites², New Family association³, Israeli writer Dorit Zilberman's group Priestess of Love⁴, the pop-culture celebrity Avri Gilad⁵, and friends of the couple (10 interviews altogether). In addition, I also observed and taped tens of traditional weddings over a period of four years (2001-2004). This article will concentrate on the women's voices and experiences – these of the bride.

Reasons for choosing an alternative wedding

Secular men and women interviewed for this study expressed five main reasons for choosing alternative wedding: 1) opposition to religious establishment of Chief Rabbinate and religious coercion by the State; 2) dislike of traditional Jewish wedding as discriminating against the woman; 3) antagonism to Jewish religion generally (rare); 4) the wish to have a modern Jewish wedding combining components from the tradition, today's reality, and personal identity of the couple; 5) membership in some alternative movement, e.g., Reform (rare). Most of the reasons appear simultaneously in the narratives of the interviewed couples. Several recent studies have indicated that the most common reason for choosing an alternative wedding not recognized by the government, rather than state-sanctioned Orthodox wedding, is loathing of Chief Rabbinate (Tabory, 2000; Haretz, 2004; Tabory and Shalev Levtzur, 2009). While recognizing this reason as important, I concentrate on another common explanation for choosing an alternative ritual most relevant for the women - discrimination of women in the frame of the Orthodox ritual from the bride's point of view. Sometimes the Orthodox wedding is described by brides from the secular sector as very strange and distant from their daily lives. Interviewees recounted multiple negative images of the weddings they had been present at (of their relatives and friends), as well as their own wedding that took place at their home or in Rabbinate. These images referred to "empty chattering", "swallowing of frogs", "anthropological experience", "disgust", and "pretending". Additionally, claims of misapprehension of the language of the wedding ritual were repeated by many brides.

Maly, who was married in a Reformist wedding, explained her choice: "*It was important for me to keep connection with Jewish tradition but Orthodox wedding seemed empty and unconnected to me at all*". Dina, who married in a "custom-made" alternative wedding at home and then had a civil marital registration in Italy, said: "*In most weddings that I visited, especially of my secular friends, I was irritated and disappointed. I kept thinking that they acted as conformists, people who don't think for themselves.*" Ella, who is a member of the Reform movement, described her feelings toward Orthodox wedding in this way:

My female friend who got married in a regular Orthodox way told me afterwards that during the Huppah they couldn't wait for it to end. As a guest, I also noted that I couldn't wait till the end of Rabbi's ritual and

² <http://www.tekes.co.il>

³ <http://www.newfamily.org.il>

⁴ <http://www.tkasim.org.il>

⁵ <http://www.tkasim.org.il>

would often leave the room because no one really understood what he was reciting and reading in there. Why does he have to rush? Why do we perform this show at all? Let's be truthful to ourselves and do things for a real reason and with meaning. They perform the ritual without really understanding it. This is empty of content and meaning for me.

Dana, who was married in a modest ritual in the Rabbinate followed by an alternative wedding in the wedding hall with hundreds of guests, described her feelings about her orthodox wedding:

I never understood the blessings until I studied their meaning with Ifrah Shilony, before my alternative wedding. Now that I do understand them, they look even more shocking... The blessings of the wedding are written in ancient and incomprehensible language and I did not want them in my wedding. Even if they are beautiful, they should be said in modern Hebrew, the ketubah also should be written in Hebrew... The traditional wedding was like an anthropological experience for me. I came there to experience a different reality and I didn't like it. I am happy that this wasn't my own real wedding...It is hard to believe that people still marry that way. It is like in the Middle Ages, "take the cows" – I am buying this woman. You bought the bride, now she is yours. All the property business – now take the piece of cloth and you bought your wife. ...Nobody of course looked at me or let me to participate. It seems that all the ritual was of my partner and I was there just accidentally. Of course only he gave me the ring and I couldn't do the same to him.

Zehava, married in a Reform wedding, explained her choice of this alternative marriage:

I always knew that I wasn't going to get married in the Rabbinate because all their rules are not suitable for me and my ways. Especially the equality issue: I cannot accept the idea that divorce is possible only after his agreement. For me, the marriage in which one partner is no longer interested - is over. The thing that I dislike most in the Orthodox wedding is that the bride is just standing there and doing nothing. As if she is taken from place to place, from her family to the groom's family. She is just an object, not an active participant. She is not giving the ring and not breaking the glass. I cannot accept woman's passivity during her own wedding.

All these quotes are taken from the interviews with the brides who were married in an alternative wedding in combination of an orthodox wedding at home or in Rabbinate in Israel, or civil marriage abroad. By Israeli law, these women will have to be divorced (need be) in the Rabbinical Court according to religious law, regardless of the type of their marriage. This means that these women have gained symbolic ritual equality during their alternative wedding but not real judicial equality and improvement of their status in the case of divorce. Some brides I interviewed were unaware of the fact that, despite their alternative wedding, their divorce will still be handled by the Rabbinate, and others knew it but hoped they will never divorce. Liora and Michael were an interesting couple who opted for common law marriage (along with a legal agreement spelling out the terms of their union) to avoid civil marriage abroad or religious one in Israel, all because of their

wish to bypass a divorced in the Rabbinate. In Liora's words, "*We chose common law option because of the juridical implications. There are more or less liberal Rabbis around and the ritual itself is the last of my worries... I am simply against the dictate of the state in my personal life. But this choice was also result of feminist thinking: the absence of equality in Orthodox marriage disturbs me.*"

The criticisms of the bridal passivity during the wedding and the patriarchal nature of the ritual can be found in almost all social groups of Israeli society, albeit not to the same extent. The brides from the secular sector, and even those from the Modern Orthodox sector, who chose to marry according to the standard Orthodox ritual, may assess positively most components of the ritual but often feel very uncomfortable about their own inequality and inactivity during the wedding (Koren, 2005; Prashizky, 2006).

Kidushin

According to Jewish religious law, if a man wants to marry a woman he should buy her in the presence of witnesses. From the three possible aspects of possession (*kinyan*): sexual relations, script and money, money is the most salient in the reality (Frimen, 1945). The act of obtaining a *kinyan* must have three components: saying, giving of a symbolic object, and testimony (Ibid.). Today the custom is to betroth a woman by a gold or silver ring that will stay with her as a symbolic memory (Adler, 1994). The betrothal formula that the groom pronounces to the bride is: "*You are consecrated to me through this ring, in accordance with the religion of Moses and Israel*". Then the groom places the ring on the bride's finger. In the Talmud, there are many additional formulas of betrothal, but this one became canonical and accepted in all Jewish wedding. According to the rule, every change of the betrothal wording casts doubt about its authenticity. One of the central characteristics of the ritual is its formality, i.e. adherence to the established form (Rappaport, 2000:33-37). In ritual events, such as inaugurations, coronations, dubbings and marriages, the invariant aspects of the event become dominant, for example, transforming a prince into a king. The recitations of traditional vows and placing of a ring on another's finger transforms the betrothed into wedded. Jewish betrothal words are "canonical messages", (Ibid.: 53), which "represent the general, enduring or even eternal aspects of universal orders".

The canonical formula of "with this I thee wed" is "performative utterance" (Austin, 1975). It does not describe or report anything, is not true or false. According to religious law, the woman which was betrothed turned into complete married women even if she had not enter her husband's house and had no intercourse with him (Adler, 1994). If the married couple will want to separate immediately after Huppa, even before her entrance to his house, they should be divorced. Additionally "performative utterance" is a form of authoritative speech (Butler, 1990). The woman "is consecrated through the ring, in accordance with the religion of Moses and Israel". The act of betrothal became valid and getting authority from the Written Law (Torah) - religion of Moses and oral law (Talmud) – Israel. Also, the betrothal words express and activate religious and social-gender world order, under which the world is divided into two parts, male and female, each of them with different functions. A man is "buying" and betrothing a woman and has an active role, while the woman has a passive position of being betrothed by a man. This ritual component expresses the patriarchal world view and reality of the ancient Jewish society where the control of women's fate is handed to men (Rubin, 2004, 2008).

The foundation of the *kidushin* is that only the man can create the judicial status of a married woman, while a woman is not able to determine men's status (Pikar, 2000).

As a result of greater equality between the sexes and the feminist ideas accepted today in modern societies including Israel, women and men of both secular and religious persuasion find it difficult to perform such a one-sided act of possession and are looking for different types of solutions. Some brides are willing to give wedding ring to the groom and read traditional words of *kidushin*, but Orthodox rabbis assert that this change in roles deprives the ritual of any meaning. Yet, it became a common custom that a bride gives the ring to the groom too - not only in the weddings of secular Israelis but also among the Modern Orthodox couples. Among the latter, the bride often gives the ring to the groom as a gift and not as the *kidushin* act, and not in the public ritual arena but in the "union room" which they enter alone after the Huppa, or after the end of the ceremony. This solution is also accepted in the weddings of many secular couples. Thus, the canonical act is performed by the men in the public ritual arena while women perform their act privately at the ritual's margin. An additional solution introduced by some rabbis (which is still doubtful by Jewish law) is permission to the bride to give a wedding ring to the groom in the end of the ceremony, after the seven blessings, before breaking of the glass by the groom, as a gift accompanied by a saying that differs from the canonical utterance, such as verses from the Song of Songs (Pikar, 2000). Sometimes the rabbi specifically explains that bride is giving a gift and that her act is not *kidushin*.

The situation is different in the scene of alternative weddings. Most alternative weddings examined in this study have different forms of equal *kidushin* when a woman betroths and gives the ring to the man in parallel to his giving and betrothal. Two additional modifications of *kidushin* found in the study include change of the authority source. The one is the Jewish religious source (in accordance with the religion of Moses and Israel) that is taken out from the utterance and is replaced by another; the other change is in the utterance character: a traditional performative utterance is replaced by a descriptive personal expression. Thus, the short canonical formula is transformed into a long personal narrative in a form of wedding vow. The following examples will underscore common changes in the "alternative *kidushin*". In the weddings performed by "Priest of Love" Dorit Zilberman, the bride and groom sometimes betroth each other with the words: "*You are consecrated to me through this ring*". This utterance is identical to traditional utterance without the authority source of "*in accordance with the religion of Moses and Israel*". There is a clear connection between the alternative wedding character and the type of *kidushin* wording used in it. The alternative wedding performed by Dorit deals with internal spiritual connection between the partners and concentrates on their love - without any particular references to the Jewish traditional sources. The central part of the ritual is accompanied by the poem of Lebanese artist and poet Khalil Gibran which is usually read by Dorit.

Another example is taken from the wedding performed by the friend of the couple, who are part of Jewish Renewal Movement. The couple chose to marry in an alternative wedding after studying in Alma College for Hebrew Culture, whose doctrine relates to the meeting point between Jewish, Israeli and world cultures. During the wedding the bride and the groom said to each other these words: "*I am consecrated to you through this ring in accordance with the spirit of Moses and Israel*". In this Jewish secular

wedding the institutionalized authority of the religion of Moses and Israel was replaced by a flexible and indefinite authority source that can be interpreted in multiple ways. Notably, each partner consecrates him/herself (by free choice) to the other instead of the consecration of a passive woman by an active man. Here the betrothing is based on the autonomy and personal wish of each partner. On the other hand, in many Reform weddings the bride and the groom pronounce the canonical utterance. In some Reform weddings, the brides recite the verse from Song of Songs and not the canonical formula, as they feel that saying the traditional men's *kidushin* by women might be interpreted as too radical. Another version which I observed in a Reform wedding (pronounced by each partner) was: "*You are consecrated to me through this ring, in accordance with the custom of bnei (man) and bnot (women) of Israel*". The wish to express equality between the sexes is apparent in this version.

In many alternative weddings within Jewish Renewal Movement performed by the Union of Secular Rites, *Havaya* center for Israeli lifecycle ceremonies, or accepted in Kibbutzim the words pronounced by the partners are: "*You are consecrated to me through this ring, to be my beloved and wife, to live together the life of creation and love*". In this case the traditional authority source is replaced by the character of life the partners are committing themselves to live. Another change in alternative *kidushin* is that it becomes a long personal narrative of commitment. This commitment does not belong to the field of religious law, but to the intimate field of couple's feelings. The typical example of this change is taken from the bride's speech in an alternative wedding performed by two friends of the couple and taking place in the desert during five days:

I love this man, who stands here beside me, so much ... that I don't have words to describe my love and my feelings.... I remember the formation of this love over a couple months after we meet. This love was so strong that the thought of losing it was unbearable. Sometimes I wonder... how is it that I received such a prize, a chance to meet my second half, the person who gives me power, balance and calm. Everyone who stayed here with us during these days knows about it. I think that we learned together what love is. When I say that I love you I feel sweet burning feeling... I commit myself to live with you all my life. I commit myself to an effort to be tolerant, forgiving, to behave to you respectfully and to be your friend. I love you very much."

The personal commitment of this bride is "self-referential message" (Rappaport, 2000:53) referring to the current physical, psychic or social states of individual participants and confined to here and now. The self-referential represents the immediate, the particular and vital aspects of the ritual, contrary to the canonical, which represents the general and eternal aspects of universal order. Self referential message are very central in different types and components of Israeli alternative weddings and became their "trademark." For example, the self-referential messages appear in the new seven blessings, then instead of or in addition to the traditional blessings the participants narrate personal stories about the bride and groom, describing their characters and the circumstances of their life (Prashizky, forthcoming). The descriptions of personal feelings and stories cause empathy and even tears among the audience, similar to those caused by the Orthodox ritual among religious participants. There, the fear of G-d and acceptance of collective values are the transcendent source of holiness, being outside the man; here, the

identification with the feelings of love and friendship emerge as expressions of the immanent source of holiness, i.e. inside the man. Ruth Kalderon (1999:41), one of the central figures of Jewish Renewal Movement, who is a head of the Alma College for Modern Hebrew culture, successfully expressed the difference between Jewish and alternative weddings: “As much as the alternative ritual is more personal, it is more holy”.

The tendency of replacement of the transcendent source of holiness with the immanent one is expressed in many alternative rituals, including *kidushin*. Romantic love of the partners stands in the centre of alternative weddings. In the frame of modern mass culture, the romantic love between man and woman became a new religion, which in many ways replaced the traditional religion (Illouz, 1997). It is possible to see the near-religious perceptions of romantic love in the last quote from a bride’s words. The romantic feeling is shown by her as religious feeling which uplifts the soul and leads to spiritual perfection. When she speaks about her love, she feels a “sweet burning sensation” making her life better and more meaningful.

Another interesting example of alternative *kidushin* becoming a descriptive statement is taken from the Reform wedding of Michael and Orit performed by Rabbi Mira Raz:

The Rabbi: Now we want to express physically something that happened privately in the heart. This is kidushin, which is an equal ceremony in our wedding. Orit already betrothed by her love to Michael from all the men, and Michael already choose Orit in his heart from all the women.

Orit: Michael, my beloved one, I am very excited to be here by your side during this very special moment which is only ours... You appeared in my life as white knight sent to me from the sky in perfect timing. I am grateful to you for teaching me the meaning of true love... I am grateful for an opportunity to tell in the presence of our most significant and dear people how special and amazing you are... I love you, I believe in you and because of it - You are consecrated to me through this ring, in accordance with the religion of Moses and Israel.

The idea expressed by Reform Rabbi, the bride and the groom is that *kidushin* is a personal event which takes place in the heart. According to this point of view, the man privately betroths the woman he chose, and this act is performed only between the two of them. During their wedding they only give public expression and description to the act which already took place. This underlines the process of *kidushin* turning from a performative act, which actually changes the status of the wedding couple, to a more descriptive and personal one, which only depicts rather than transforms.

Changes in marital contract (ketubah) and prenuptial agreements

Ketubah is integral part of a traditional Jewish marriage and is usually read publically during the *Huppa* by the Rabbi or one of the important guests. According to definition of Jewish religious law the *ketubah* is “Scroll which includes the financial and moral commitments of husband to his wife. Indeed there is no specification of all the commitments of the husband which he is obligated to take according to Sages, but commitments which are always customary. Anyway also the commitments which are not

written on *ketubah*, like to heal her or to redeem her from prison are as if written there by the power of Beit-Din conditions, and he is committed to perform them (Adler, 1994: 308-309).

Ketubah states that the husband commits to provide food, clothing and marital relations to his wife, and that he will pay a specified sum of money if he divorces her. A man can give his wife a "get" if he wants to divorce her. Today's *ketubah* is the document written in Aramaic, testifies the obligations of the husband to his wife taken by him with the signing of a marital agreement. The man is committed to his bride/wife in *ketubah* scroll signed by him in the presence of two witnesses and is delivered to her during the wedding ceremony. It is handed to the bride for safekeeping. The *ketubah* was changed over the centuries in different parts of the Jewish world according to local community customs. Although several versions of *ketubah* exist today, it has become a nearly standard document, and the groom only enters personal details like the names, the date, and the sum of money he committed to pay to his wife. The main parts of *ketubah* are: *ketubah* essence, *ketubah* addition, Dowry, and *ketubah* conditions. The *ketubah* essence is husband's commitment to pay 200 zuz to the virgin and 100 zuz to non-virgin. The women's privilege is to receive this money only after her husband's death or after divorce.

Different Rabbis debate the translation rates of these sums (zuz - an ancient Hebrew silver coin) to current money which measures the *ketubah's* value for today (Kelmar, 1990; Ben-Nun, 2001). Also defining the status of the virgin or non-virgin according to religious law is not so simple today. The *ketubah* was developed during periods of the *Tannaim* and *Amoraim* and, as the rest of the scrolls of this time, was written in Aramaic which was then spoken language. Although the reading of *ketubah* written in Aramaic is one of the most central and festive parts of the wedding ceremony, today only the minority of the audience present at weddings, such as Rabbis and scholars actually understand the *ketubah* content. (One Rabbi from *Zohar* said to me in interview that he was unpleasantly surprised that many grooms who are Modern Orthodox Yeshiva students do not fully understand the meaning and details of *ketubah*). This argument is even more relevant for the secular sector, where reading of the *ketubah* is sometimes seen as pointless or even obnoxious part of the ceremony. Usually, *ketuba* is quickly read in Aramaic sounding as casual muttering and the couple and the guests don't understand the commitments written there (Gilat, [1966] 2002: 58; Bar-Yosef, 1996:3).

The aspects of *ketubah* which gets a lot of criticism is its one-sidedness, when only the man commits to support his "dependent" wife, while in reality most men and women work outside of the home and contribute more or less equally to family's livelihood. According to *Halacha*, the man divorces only from his own free will and sometimes a man will completely refuse to grant a divorce. This leaves his wife with no possibility to remarry within Judaism. The financial agreement is designated to solve this problem and to improvement women's position in case of failed marriage. In many religious ceremonies the sacred words are recited in the language of the authorized sacred texts (Tambiah, 1985) and their function is more symbolic and ritual than informative. It is possible to claim that Jewish *ketubah* in Aramaic became a symbolic ritual component more than a judicial document. The disputes between rabbis as to the translation of *ketubah* to modern money (for example, Ben-Nun, 2001; Dihovsky, 2001), as well as the

custom of some grooms to write unreal sums of money to impress the bride, or to translate an important date, such as the date of the couple's first meeting to *ketubah* sum, all these point to economic insignificance of *ketubah* today.

Some researchers and even Rabbis claimed that *ketubah* is incompatible with modern times and some of them proposed to make changes to make it more appropriate (Gilat, [1966] 2002; Knohel, 2001; Ben-Zazon, 2005). Stormy discussions about the *ketubah*'s role and arguments for and against its change appeared over the last decade on the pages of such Rabbinical journals, as *Techumin* (Knohel, 2001; Dihovsky, 2001; Mishlov, 2001) and *Tzohar* (Dihovsky, 2004; Ben-Zazon, 2005; Rozen, 2006), as well as in conferences and meetings with participation of Rabbis, lawyers and women's rights activists. The changes of *ketubah* proposed by Rabby Knohel (2001) include its translation into Hebrew (read alone or together with the Aramaic version). This idea is accepted today among younger rabbis from *Tzohar* and rabbis from religious kibbutzim who try to make it more understandable for the secular audiences. The second change is stylistic and linguistic one – e.g., the avoidance of traditional concept of virgin and calling the woman “dear bride” (Knohel, 2001).

But the most important change is to sign the financial agreement (*heskem mammon*) or prenuptial agreement (*heskem kdam nisuin*), before the wedding, additionally to *ketuba* usually signed only by the man. There are many types and versions of such agreements introduced by different Rabbis, lawyers and organizations (Halperin-Kaddari, 2008). According to financial agreement - a legal document signed by both the bride and the groom - the woman is equal to her husband in case of divorce and property division. Another suggestion is to sign agreement for mutual dignity (*heskem lekavod hadadi*). The main purpose of these agreements is to prevent withholding of get from both sides, especially of possible refusal in giving the divorce by the husband. There is no agreement so far between rabbis of different camps about the acceptability of these changes.

I turn now to the changes in *ketubah* occurring in the alternative weddings arena, where borders of religious law are breached. In most alternative weddings, the traditional form of *ketubah* is abolished and it appears in a new form which differs greatly from the traditional one, mainly in two respects. The first change, or rather addition, takes different forms of financial and prenuptial agreements that the couple is encouraged to sign. The Reform movement, for example, requires the couple to have a civil marriage abroad before their Reform wedding ceremony and gives them information about financial agreements and their advantages (often with the help of a lawyer). In addition, the *ketubah* itself is reshaped into a personal document that is written by the couple as a declaration of their common intent.

Let us look at the *ketubah* changes in the Reform weddings. Like in other components of the Reform rituals, there is no single, standardized version of the *ketubah*; it changes from one wedding to the next according to the wishes of the couple and of the performing rabbi. Most rabbis suggest that the couple writes their *ketubah* together while supplying them with a few possible templates. Most couples will choose one of the Reform texts, which reflect an equal partnership and contains declaration of mutual affirmations and commitments. Often people use their own vows, a favorite poem, or simply modified version of the traditional texts. Unlike more traditional *ketubah* texts, these egalitarian texts serve more as a personal statement of vows than a legal document.

Most Reform *ketubot* start with the date, place and names of bride and groom, and then describe mutual commitments of the couple to each other. The example below is from Reform movement brochure of year 2000:

The groom said to the bride and the bride said to the groom:

Be my wife/husband according to religion of Moses and Israel and I will respect and love you as the way of Bnei/Bnot Israel in respecting and loving their wives and husbands faithfully and honestly. The bride and the groom committed on the authority of God and of congregation to build their home in Israel in which peace, love and friendship will be found always, to aspire to be aware of the needs of one another and to reach the mutual fulfillment of sentimental, intellectual, spiritual and physical needs of one another. To raise children to Torah, Huppa and good actions in the spirit of people of Israel's tradition and of its renewed view in our days. The responsibility for this ketubah was taken by the bride and the groom; all is valid and binding.

The second example is taken from an alternative wedding performed by Iftah Shilony of the Institute for Secular Rites:

Today we, the bride and the groom, are marrying according to our Jewish way of life and our Jewish culture in the presence of our families, friends and of the whole world. This is the oath which we take today: to build our home based on mutual connection, with love, commitment, joy, friendship and equality... We are establishing our home together, which will be place for both of us, where we will be able to be silent and to listen, to forgive each other's flaws and to fight them, always to continue to improve ourselves, to know how to ask for forgiveness... and to respect our differences; to nurture our relationship and to invest in our love... We declare to one another that we are looking only for good, we choose to base our relationship on big love and deep understanding - in our special and personal way... And all is valid and binding.

The only traditional components of this *ketubah* are the name itself and the last sentence which is taken from the Orthodox *ketubah*; all the rest is a personal and intimate statement of the couple. Therefore, the text of an alternative *ketubah* depends on the character of the movement, organization or person performing the wedding, its purposes and wishes of the couple. Couples seeking a stronger connection with Judaism will have more traditional *ketubah* contents (i.e., with more references to the original Orthodox *ketubah*), while more secular couples will design their *ketubah* in “free style”. Thus, in civil weddings arranged by New Family association the *ketubah* is a scroll certifying mutual commitment of the couple, while in a wedding performed by Priestess of Love Dorit Zilberman, the *ketubah* appears as a mystical script describing the spiritual connection of the couple and their deep, cosmic union which is impossible to break.

Changing of blessing's version to feminine language

The phenomenon of recognition and introduction of the feminine aspect of divinity is not so common in Israeli alternative weddings arena⁶. I found this kind of change mainly in lesbian weddings. Given common spread of this phenomenon in liturgical practice of different Liberal movements in the US, such as Reform movement (Wiener, 2001; Marx, this volume) and Jewish Renewal movement (Weissler, 2005), and also in the frame of liberal liturgy in Israel (Marx, this volume) this finding is surprising and demands an explanation. According to Sigal Dabach, who specializes in arrangement of different alternative rituals and especially weddings for homo-lesbian community, "references to the feminine God are more typical for alternative lesbian weddings in Israel because the issue of femininity is more prominent there". She explained that, while officiating at these wedding, she tends to suggest the change of the blessings' language to the feminine in the frame of a lesbian wedding, which is after all an all-woman ritual, making this change more natural. Changing of blessing's version to feminine gender that is more common in different types of alternative Israeli weddings is not in the name of God but rather in other components, for example, adding female characters - "daughters of Israel"- together with the standard "Bnei Israel" ("sons of Israel") in the alternative *kidushin* words.

My first example of feminine God language is from the blessing said by Sigal Dabah during a lesbian wedding at the end of the ceremony: "*Blessed be the pact of love that you signed today....You are blessed, o Yah (in feminine gender), who sanctifies our life with love.*" The second example is taken from an alternative seventh blessing in another lesbian wedding, performed by Gili Zidkiahu:

You are blessed, Yah, the source of life (in feminine gender), which creates the joy and gladness, love and kinship, peace and friendship. May there always be heard in the cities of Israel and in the streets of Jerusalem and in the entire world, the sounds of joy and happiness. You are blessed Yah (in feminine gender), who causes to rejoice women with their beloved (in feminine gender).

The origin of these changes is probably in "The Book of Blessings" written by an American Jewish poet Marcia Falk, which includes amongst others new prayers with reference to the feminine God language.

While changes of wedding blessings are very common in Israeli alternative rituals, the usage of feminine Gog language is very rare. My impression is that omission of God's name from the blessings or keeping the traditional formula is more common than its change to feminine language. In this sense, Jewish alternative weddings are paradoxically more conservative than other types of Jewish alternative liturgy, such as prayers for daily life and holidays in the frame of different liberal movements in Israel. One possible explanation is that most couples looking for an alternative wedding typically come from a secular public that is not engaged in theological discussions of God's nature. The brokers

⁶ Is possible to find examples of changing wedding blessings to the feminine God on portal of Jewish secular rites in the articles of one of its officiants Yair Rotkovitch : <http://www.tkasim.org.il/49949/2008> But I have no information about the actual frequency of this option (during my fieldwork I found this kind of change only in the frame of lesbian weddings).

of alternative ceremonies usually prefer using traditional blessings with the name of God or to exclude God's name altogether from the blessings targeting a secular audience. Other possible explanation is a conservatism and resistance to innovation among Israeli Jews used to the Orthodox monopoly, in comparison to American Jews living in the multi-confessional milieu. The fact that individuals who officiate in alternative weddings do not suggest the option of "feminizing God" may further reinforces this conservatism.

Changes in other customs deemed patriarchal

Beyond the already described patriarchal components of Orthodox weddings, there are other customs such as bridal veil, circling the groom by the bride, and the breaking of the glass by the groom deemed sexist and hence disliked by the more feminist brides. According to feminist critics, these three customs underscore the masculine dominance and centrality against the passivity of the woman and her marginality. The first two customs have been fully abandoned in most Israeli alternative weddings, in which the brides appear without veils (called by one bride by the Moslem name *pardah*) and are not performing the groom circling ceremony in the center of the ritual arena. The third custom of breaking the glass by the groom is still kept in most alternative weddings and has many variations in their different types (Prashizky, 2008). Thus, in Reform and Jewish Renewal weddings, sometimes the bride breaks a second glass, or even the one that the groom was supposed to break, or she recites the verse "If I forget You, O Jerusalem" along with or instead the groom.

New ritual stance – women activism

Performers' ritual posture is known in the anthropological literature as the "ritual stance". According to this approach, an action is ritualized when the actor takes up a "ritual commitment" – a particular stance with respect to his own action (Tambiah, 1985; Humphrey and Laidlaw, 1994). In adopting this commitment, the performer admits that s/he is not the author of her/his acts: the identity of a ritualized act does not depend, as is the case with normal action, on the agent's intention in acting. Rituals are not spontaneous expressions of feelings, but conventional, formal and stereotyped actions. The example of wedding ritual clarifies this character of ritual action (Tambiah, 1985:134-5). The immediate intentions of the officiating priest or the bride and groom do not explain the efficacy of the rite itself.

There are three central features in the ritual stance in Jewish weddings that were explored in my previous study (Prashizky, 2006). The first one is the acceptance of ritual rules and laws – performance of the ritual according to Jewish religious law, even without identification with all the symbols and components of a Jewish Orthodox wedding; in other words some measure of agent passivity. The second is focusing on the collective meaning of the wedding, viewed not as a private event but as of concern for the Jewish people as a whole. The third aspect is patriarchal character of the ritual. Women experienced double passivity in the Orthodox wedding – one as ritual agents and the second one as female participants in patriarchal ritual. Compared to the traditional ritual stance, alternative ritual performers take more active and independent stand regarding their wedding ritual. They abandon the traditional ritual stance that characterized the Orthodox ritual in favor of an active stance. The three components of this alternative stance are: agency (Giddens, 1979; Sewell, 1992; Hays, 1994), self-definition (Myerhoff,

1987), and equality between genders. Agency is the independent and reflexive capacity of the agent, his/her ability to control the action and to change it. Self-definition is defined as the presentation of personal identity and its visible deployment in the public ritual arena. Alternative ritual performers also strive for equality between men and women. The following examples will show women's activity during their alternative wedding. The agency component is expressed by Zehava who chose to marry in a Reform wedding:

The Reform rabbi insisted upon our participation in the wedding ritual, that we should direct it ... She moved aside to let us and our family to be in the focus of the scene. We had to write for each other the words that we later spoke and thanks to it the event was more emotional. Our excitement and emotions went through the audience. I think that it is very important that for most of the ritual we were active participants. I don't like it when there is absolute disconnection during the wedding when the rabbi is reading the seven blessings and everybody is just standing there like puppets, including the marrying couple, and he is conducting most of the wedding.... It feels like alienation because the participants are silent most of the time, standing there and doing nothing... Only now, when I was married in an alternative wedding, I understood the difference. Soon after my own wedding I was at an Orthodox wedding and was shocked to see the bride who was probably very excited but had no way to express her feelings. She was standing there like a statue. I felt sorry for her because I was in her place but had an opportunity to express myself. Now I understand the difference between being there covered by the veil and saying nothing during all the ritual and the situation where you can shape all parts of the ritual, to participate and to express.

Zahava describes herself as being an active agent before the wedding and during it. Choosing the marriage according to Reform movement rules, she herself wrote the text of the *ketubah*, the words of *kidushin* that she pronounced to her partner, as well as discussed with her relatives and friends the blessings to be voiced during the wedding. In her words, she was not a passive "puppet" like the brides in Orthodox weddings. Successful and exciting wedding for her is a participatory event, where all those involved, especially the women, can speak, express themselves and tell their true personal stories. In other words, it had to be authentic.

In contemporary societies, authenticity is central category for evaluation of successful action (Alexander, 2004). An authentic person is one who acts without artifice, without reference to script or text. Action will be viewed as real if it appears as a product of a self-generating actor who is not pulled like a puppet by the strings installed by society (Ibid: 55; Meyer and Jeperson, 2000). Thus, the change of the ritual stance in Israeli alternative weddings can be interpreted as a result of a wide trend in modern society. One of the central characteristics of modern rituals is the active relation to ritual by performers (Grimes, 2002). According to Myerhoff (1982:130-31): *"Instead of having rites performed on us, we do them to and for ourselves, and immediately we are involved in a form of self-creation that is potentially community-building, providing what Van-Gennep would call regeneration by revitalizing old symbols from the perspective of the present."*

Indeed, there is a striking difference between woman's active role in alternative weddings and her passive role in the Orthodox ritual. The following examples taken from

the interviews with religious brides, who married in an Orthodox ritual, emphasize this difference. This is how Bilha, coming from a liberal section of Modern Orthodox camp and a sociology student, criticized the Orthodox wedding:

The ritual is very patriarchal. I detest the emptiness of its performance – where the husband’ buys’ his wife and she becomes his property. It is a source of internal tension that I am unable to solve, as it is the only way to get married by Halacha. If I too will betroth him, it would be inappropriate by our religious law. There is no place for interpretation. I am solving this difficulty by paying attention to other components of the wedding ritual, concentrating on the positive aspects and not on the fact that I am about to become property of my husband. I cope by thinking about the beautiful aspects of the wedding. This is psychological work: I will draw on the positive aspects of the event to relief the tension... There is also signing of the ketubah - it is very analytical, masculine and patriarchal. I think if women were creating the wedding ritual, it would be more emotional, artistic, with much more imagination and less formality.

Bilha criticized the patriarchal nature of the wedding but she had to except its rules. “Positive thinking” was her response to disappointment and tension. Another quote is from the interview with Ora, a bride from religious kibbutz and a student of Ein-Hanaziv midrasha, which illustrates passivity of a bride’s ritual pose:

I bought the ring that I wanted to give to my groom during the Huppa. Then I studied religious law and found out that it I couldn’t perform kidushin and to betroth the groom. Only man can buy a woman. Woman can’t buy men according to Torah and religious law. This is hard for me to accept. This is a feminist issue. At the beginning it was very hard to me to understand that only men can do all those things and women can’t. I asked Rabbi if I can give the groom the ring in the end of the ceremony and he said this is against the religious law. So I gave him the ring privately after the ceremony.

Q: How do you feel about it?

I accept the religious law despite all my difficulties and dissent. There is nothing to do about it. You can’t decide to marry according to Halacha and bypass some parts of the ritual because I don’t like them. I have to accept all its rules from the start to the end. Even that it is very difficult for a modern and rational person. But there are always questions that remain unanswered - this is all part of Judaism in my opinion.

Although Ora criticized the patriarchal aspects of the wedding, she acted in the boundaries of religious law and accepted rabbi’s prescriptions. She adopted the ritual stance and complied with the fact that she will not be the author of her acts. In the frame of ritual action, the act itself appears as already formed, almost like an object, while the intentions and thoughts of the actor (e.g. about gender equality) have no effect on the act performed (Humphrey and Laidlaw, 1994).

It is interesting to compare the findings of this study with the research about feminist brides challenging the Orthodox wedding rituals (Koren, 2005). These women produced

alternative interpretations and practices in the Orthodox ritual to make it more egalitarian without running against Halachic prohibitions. Koren has found four main changes in the wedding ritual applied as egalitarian strategies. The first was the creation of a parallel ritual act, such as producing a double *tisch*, a double *bedeken* (veil) and a double *kidushin* which attempt to parallel traditional male rites. The second one was variations in the ritual act, such as reading of the *ketubah* by female or bringing down the veil before the entrance to the *Huppa*. The third was avoiding a particular ritual act, such as circling the groom by the bride and the fourth was employing legal resistance, such as signing prenuptial agreements. Apparently, feminist brides - both secular and religious - challenge patriarchal *Huppa* in similar ways. Despite the differences in tactics, an active ritual pose of these performers in Orthodox and alternative rituals is similar. The women from Koren's study married according to *Halacha*, and they had no choice but maneuver inside patriarchal rules and borders of the wedding ritual. They had no such freedom of action as the brides in alternative weddings which explicitly break *Halacha* rules. But the creativity and autonomy of these "compliant" brides still erodes patriarchal structure of Orthodox wedding and challenges traditional passivity of women.

Women's agency is expressed not only in the ritual pose of the brides themselves, but also in the stance of other ritual actors at alternative weddings. More and more women come to serve as officials in different types of alternative weddings. Reform and Conservative rabbis, officials from Israeli Jewish Renewal movement, lawyer Irit Rozenblum who heads New Family association, "Priestess of love" Dorit Zilberman - all of them are women who perform alternative weddings. According to traditional point of view, only men can perform authoritative functions because of the general connection between authority and masculinity (Connel, 1987: 109). Women who act as ritual authority challenge this traditional approach. However, some couples who chose female wedding officials encountered protests from their families and were forced to hire a male performer. In other cases, the couples themselves view the option of women officials as too provocative. Still, there are enough couples who engage female officials for their alternative weddings.

The stance of the alternative ritual officials also encourages the active position of the performers (so-called enabling authority). Different officials employ different measures in the process of free creation of modern Jewish weddings combining Jewish traditional and personal components. Thus, Reform rabbi Mira Raz explained the difference between her function and the function of the Orthodox rabbi during the wedding:

I feel that my role during the wedding is like stringing the beads of the necklace - to combine all the elements of the ritual to give it meaning. The cooperation of the couple is very important. If they want the audience to get excited at the wedding, teamwork is a must. I don't not see myself as performer of the ritual, as if I am mesader kidushin (the one who arranges the betrothal), as if I am the expert who knows how to perform the wedding ritual. Not at all. I am only the part of something that is happening there. My role is to interlace all the components of the ritual. An important thing is to bring the audience inside the ritual. This is very different from the traditional rabbi function. He is like orchestra conductor... only that there is no orchestra besides him. How can there be an orchestra? The groom says only

a few words and the bride is silent... I advise the couple that the kidushin is the highest part of the ritual... The bride and the groom don't have to feel shy. I say to the groom: if you want your bride just to stand there as a flowerpot and you will only pronounce "You are consecrated to me" - fine by me. I can do it. But don't ask afterwards why the Huppa was not so exiting... I am telling them to write something personal.

The Reform rabbi encourages the activism of both bride and groom and asks them to prepare and read personal vows or statements during their wedding and not just repeat mechanically the traditional formulas. Her position and authority is more reciprocal and very different from that of the Orthodox rabbi, who demands the performance of the ritual according to the rules, with resulting passivity of the key actors. Additionally, women pronounce the blessings and act as witnesses of *kidushin* during alternative weddings. Mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters and female friends of the couple pronounce traditional as well as new personal blessings on par with male relatives and friends of the married couple – achieving greater gender balance and contentment of all.

Conclusion

Change in gender roles in Jewish rituals is underway, and women's activism in the frame of alternative weddings is its one distinctive expression. Brides become visible, speak and sound their voices, read and sing, betroth, commit to the man, give him the ring, and break the glass during their own weddings. Their emerging active stance (which varies in expressions and extent in different kinds of alternative weddings) counters the age-old silencing, exclusion, marginality, invisibility, and subordination of women in the holy language, Jewish religion, its rituals and modern Israel society (Elior, 2001). Although patriarchal stereotypes are still dominant in Israel society, values of equality gradually penetrate the ritual arena of Jewish weddings, alternative and even Orthodox.

Apparently, in alternative weddings women's role and status have improved beyond recognition, granting them some symbolic equality with men in the ritual domain. Yet, this improvement may remain purely symbolic if it is not backed up by women's more equal legal and economic rights secured by means of prenuptial agreements. Since in today's Israel alternative weddings are not legally recognized, even the couples, who got married in an alternative ritual in order to avoid Chief Rabbinate in combination with civil marriage abroad, will still have to apply there in case of divorce. Therefore, these legal measures protective for a woman, along with symbolic and ritual innovation aiming at greater gender equality, may actually improve women's status both in weddings and in subsequent marital life. Organizations that lobby for women's rights and rabbis who support and encourage the dissemination of prenuptial agreements will hopefully make these legal arrangements the norm rather than an exception. Despite the importance of prenuptial agreements, major breakthroughs in women's equality in marriage and divorce can only occur via introduction of civic alternatives to religious marriage in Israel.

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