KETUBA (Part 1): What is the Ketuba and what does it say?

The word Ketuba means “document.” Despite what many people assume, the Ketuba is not a contract between husband and wife. It is the document that sets out the obligations of the husband toward his wife while they are married, and the provisions that protect her financially if the marriage is dissolved or if the husband dies. In that last sense the Ketuba is a marriage insurance policy, where the beneficiary is the wife and the benefactor is the husband. It is not strictly a contract, since the wife’s obligations toward her husband are not recorded in it. For that reason the Ketuba is signed by the husband and two witnesses, but not by the wife.

Now that we understand what it is, let us go through the text itself. The Ketuba is divided into three parts.

FIRST PART: THE DATE, THE PLACE, AND THE NAMES

The Ketuba records, first of all, the basic information any legal document would include: the date of the wedding, the city and state where it takes place, and the names of the bride and groom.

If we were writing a Ketuba today in Yerushalayim, it would read: “On the fourth day of the week (Wednesday), the thirtieth day of the month of Sivan, which is the first day of Rosh Hodesh Tamuz, in the year 5775 from the creation of the world, in the city of Yerushalayim…”

Next come the names of the couple. First the groom’s name followed by his father’s name – for example, YOSEF BEN YAAQOB – and the family name. It must also be noted whether he is a Kohen or a Levi. Then the bride’s name and her father’s name,

likewise noting Kohen or Levi.

In addition, and especially outside of Israel, the names of the couple and their parents must be written in English, Spanish, or whatever the local language is. If the groom's Hebrew name is YOSEF but everyone calls him "Joseph," the Ketuba will read YOSEF DEMITQARE JOSEPH, that is, "Yosef, also known as Joseph."

The names of the bride, the groom, and their parents have to be written with extreme care. The rabbi who writes the Ketuba must know not only how to spell the Hebrew names correctly, but also how to render non-Hebrew names in Hebrew letters, which is sometimes tricky, since not every consonant or diphthong has an exact Hebrew equivalent.

The first part of the Ketuba also states the bride's previous marital status. If she has not been married before, the Ketuba says *betulta*. Some communities simply write *kalata*, "the bride." If the bride is a widow or divorcee, the Ketuba must record it: *metarakhta* or *armelata* – divorcee or widow – in Aramaic, the language of the Ketuba.

SECOND PART: THE HUSBAND'S OBLIGATIONS

The second part sets out the husband's obligations toward his wife. The groom declares that he is legally taking her as his wife "according to the law of Moshe and Israel," which means he accepts all the responsibilities of a Jewish husband.

The Torah established the three principal duties of a husband toward his wife (Shemot 21:10):

1. *she-erah*: providing his wife with food.
2. *kesutah*: providing her with clothing and shelter.
3. *onatah*: living with her.

These three obligations are explained in detail, with Maimonides' illustrations, in MISHPATIM: The Rights Of A

Jewish Wife.

THIRD PART: THE FINANCIAL OBLIGATIONS

The third part, which is the longest section of the document, sets out the monetary compensation the wife receives if the marriage is dissolved, and the clauses that make the Ketuba a collectible debt. It is explained in KETUBA (Part 2): The financial obligations and the signing.

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