This essay traces the history—and attests to the curious staying power—of a variant reading that appears in the seventh and last of the traditional marriage blessings recited at Jewish weddings. This reading has evoked rabbinic polemics, inspired grammatical exegesis, and has even suffered alteration at the hands of scribes and printers who were either unaware of its existence or convinced of its erroneousness.

Most Jewish communities render the last blessing: “Lord our God, let there soon be heard in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride.” At first glance, this version would appear to be sufficiently well-grounded, for it derives from a Talmudic text (B. Ket. 7b–8a) that is itself based upon an explicit verse in Jeremiah (33:10–11):

Thus saith the Lord: Yet again there shall be heard in this place whereof ye say: It is waste, without man and without beast, even in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem, that are desolate, without man and without inhabitant and without beast, the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voice of them that say: “Give thanks to the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for His mercy endureth forever.”

1 I wish to express my thanks to Dr. S.Z. Pick and to Professor J. Faur for their involvement in this article.

2 We have referred to this blessing as both seventh and last on account of Maimonides’ phrasing in Hilkhot Ishut 10:3. There he writes, “The benediction of the bridegrooms must be recited in the house of the groom before the marriage, and they are six blessings.” In 10:4 Maimonides adds, “If there is wine on hand, he brings a cup of wine and blesses first over the wine and recites all of [the remaining blessings] over the cup, and in so doing he blesses seven blessings. In some places they have a custom to bring myrtle with wine, and bless over the myrtle after the wine, and then bless the six.” The expression “Berakha Acharita” is a study in itself, but this would take us beyond the scope of this study.

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This arrangement stands to reason: Israel’s future consolation described by the sound of joyful wedding celebrations manifests the return of happiness to Judah and Jerusalem and exemplifies the central motif of our blessing. Yet, a number of sources reveal a variant reading that is also supported by a biblical source (Jer. 7:34): “from the cities of Judah and from the streets of Jerusalem.” Albeit any genuine attempt to clarify this matter must commence with a thorough examination of Talmud manuscripts and textual testimony for this liturgical tradition, this preliminary stage will be postponed in order to cite a source that immediately grants substantiated legitimacy to the variant from reading.

“That Verse Appears in the Curse”

The thirteenth century Spanish Rabbi, Yom Tov of Seville, wrote in his commentary:

“Let there be heard in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem,” and this is indeed the accepted reading. However, Maimonides renders it, “Let there be heard from the cities of Judah and from the streets of Jerusalem,” and the grammarians explain that this phrasing is the more correct reading, for when one says, “Let there be heard in the cities of Judah,” perhaps it means the voice will be heard there from without. However, when one says, “Let there be heard from the cities of Judah,” the voice of joy must inevitably come from within.3

The reading attributed to Maimonides, “from the cities of Judah and from the streets of Jerusalem,” differs from the accepted version. Accordingly, some grammarians suggested an argument elucidating its superiority. The Hebrew prefix bet (which means in) implies that though Judah and Jerusalem can hear the distant matrimonial bliss, they themselves are bereft of such happiness. In contrast, the prefix mem (meaning from) suggests a joy that erupts from the very midst of Judea and Jerusalem and can be heard from afar.4

1 Ritba, Ketubot, ed. M. Goldstein (Jerusalem, 1982), p. 59. See also Shita Mekubetzet on Ketubot, ad loc.
2 Some note Nachmanides’ comment on Gen. 35:16, s.v. kivrat haaretz: “The verse which states, ‘A voice is heard in Ramah’ (Jer. 31:15) is a metaphor meant to convey that Rachel cried out in a great voice and a bitter lamentation, to the point where the voice could be heard from afar in Rama, which is on the top of the hill, to her son Benjamin.”