



Your wedding is one of the most exciting days in your life, and it should be as close to your (and your parents') dreams as possible. Choosing among the traditions will give you an opportunity to reflect the respective beliefs and backgrounds of the bride and groom and your families. As you read this section, consider your emotions on the days following your wedding day: Will you relive the day, and view the video, and be proud of your wedding and the customs you chose to include? Will you have considered the wishes of your dear ones and also fashioned a simcha that fits you? Let's hope your answers are yes!

SIGNIFICANCE OF MARRIAGE

The Matchmaker

As your wedding day approaches, you feel very excited ... and you should! **According to Jewish law, marriage is not only a privilege: it is also a responsibility. God said to Adam, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a companion:" (Genesis 2:18) He then created Eve from Adam's rib and gave her to him as a partner. God wanted this union to be natural and wanted Adam always to feel that his wife, Eve, was a part of him. The Talmud also stresses the importance of marriage: "One who does not have a wife lives without joy, without bliss, without happiness" (Yevamot 62b). The Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law) states that it is our duty to get married in order to "Be fruitful and multiply," "Peru ure'vu" (Genesis 1:28). The strong loving family unit is of paramount importance in Jewish tradition.**

Tradition says that forty days before your birth God decides whom you will marry. In ancient times, there was a matchmaker, a *shadchan*, to arrange marriages. The *shadchan* would travel between cities and propose the matches because the Jews had limited mobility and would otherwise have been restricted to marrying within their own community. Although travel is easy today for most people, the *shadchan*

still exists in the form of matchmaking services and marriage bureaus, which are thriving nationwide. But you are past that stage by now!

Because each person deserves individual attention and celebration at this time in her or his life, there is a prohibition against having two siblings marry on the same day. Each *simcha* deserves its own recognition and rejoicing, so as not to lessen the importance of one for the other. In Genesis 29:27, Jacob was instructed to celebrate the entire week after he was tricked into marrying Leah "Fulfill the week of this one"- before he could also marry her sister Rachel, whom he loved. (Their father would not disgrace Leah by marrying off his younger daughter first, in keeping with the tradition of the times.) Here again the importance of each marriage is stressed, as is the deep respect Jews have for their *simchas* ("Yiddish plural of *simcha*, more commonly used than Hebrew plural *semachot*).

(Note: A double wedding of siblings may be scheduled in the evening so that one is married before sundown and one after -two different Hebrew dates- as my mom and her sister did. Halachically [according to Jewish law], the reception for the first sibling should also be completed before the second ceremony proceeds; in actual practice, usually only the ceremonies are separated by sundown.)

THE WEDDING DAY

Fasting: In preparation for this most important day, the bride and groom traditionally fast and repent as they do on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. If the ceremony is in the evening, the bride and groom may eat a light snack beforehand when the stars come out, as that is the beginning of the next Hebrew day. Fasting is prohibited on these festive days: **Rosh Chodesh** (first day of a new Hebrew month), the day after *Shavuot* (pentecost), the fifteenth day of the month of *Av*, the fifteenth of *Shevat*, *Chanukah*, *Purim*, *Shushan Purim*, and the fourteenth and fifteenth of days Adar I in a leap year. (Note: Purim occurs on the fourteenth of Adar, Shushan Purim on the fifteenth. Seven times each nineteen years, a second month of Adar is added to the calendar. Even though Purim is celebrated in Adar II during leap years, the fourteenth and fifteenth days of

Adar I are still considered to have a festive aspect; therefore, fasting is prohibited.)

The bride and groom are then ready to enter this new stage of life together after serious reflection and purification. The idea of purity is the basis for the bride's white gown, as well as for the *kittel*, the white robe the groom may wear during the wedding ceremony. It reflects the solemnity of the wedding day, as well as other solemn occasions throughout his lifetime, such as *Yom Kippur* and the *Pesach Seder*. (Both men and women are also buried in white garments.)

BEFORE THE CEREMONY

Because the bride and groom are not supposed to see each other Groom's until the ceremonial veiling of the bride, separate receptions are held for them as the guests are arriving at the ceremony site. The *Kabbalat Panim* (literally, "Greeting Faces") is the groom's reception for male guests, although females are welcomed, too. (In Yiddish this is called *Chossen's Tish*, "Groom's Table.") The guests listen to a *d'var Torah*, a short Torah lesson, by the groom or a designated relative or friend.

In some circles, it is customary to read and sign the *tena'im* (literally "conditions") at the groom's reception. This formal contract announces the wedding date and sets forth various prenuptial agreements, including a fee to be paid by the groom to the bride's father. In ancient times, the *Tena'im* were often arranged when children were very young, to ensure the continuity of the family. However, because it is a witnessed agreement and a broken engagement may cause legal problems, today the *Tena'im* ceremony is performed immediately before the wedding ceremony. The rabbi will provide the paper if you choose to include this ceremony.

At the conclusion of the *Tena'im* ceremony, the mothers, having joined the guests at the groom's reception, wrap a piece of fine pottery or china in a cloth and break it on the corner of a chair. The mothers retain a piece for themselves as good luck and distribute the broken pieces to unmarried women as a wish that they may also have a joyous wedding. A similar American custom is throwing the bouquet and garter.

The Veiling of the Bride

Next, the *ketubbah*, having previously been reviewed by the rabbi, is displayed. The *ketubbah* is the Jewish legal contract that states the obligations of the groom to his bride in marriage, death, and divorce. The original Aramaic text was developed in the second century B.CE., although the oldest *ketubbah* found dates back to the fifth century B.CE. Standards were created by the *Sephardim* in the eleventh century and by the *Ashkenazim* in the twelfth century. Although printed *ketubbot* (plural) are available with Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Egalitarian texts, many couples decide to invest in a genuine piece of artwork and commission an experienced scribe, a *sofer*. This Hebrew artist-calligrapher will design an individual *ketubbah* after an interview with the couple and will hand-letter the text in Aramaic on request.

Then the groom designates two witnesses, *edim* (singular: *ed*), who must be Jewish males over Bar Mitzvah age (thirteen) and Shomer Shabbat, "Sabbath observer; and unrelated both to the bride and groom and to each other. Next, the groom accepts a handkerchief from the rabbi to symbolize his formal acceptance of the responsibilities set forth in the *ketubbah*; this ceremony is called the *Kinyan*. At this point, the last word of the *ketubbah* (*ve'kanina*, "I have made a *kinyan*") is written, and formal acceptance of the *ketubbah* and its contents is completed. (Note: If the *sofer* who created your *ketubbah* is not present at the *Kabbalat Panim*, he or she will have left only the last stroke of the Hebrew letter *Kufin* the word *ve'kanina* to be completed, or one letter outlined to be filled in.)

The two witnesses sign the *ketubbah* in which the groom, the *chatan* (or *chossen* in Yiddish), promises to provide food, shelter, and conjugal relations to his bride, the *kallah*. The groom presents the ketubbah to the bride at the ceremony. According to *Halacha*, the couple can live together only if the bride has the *ketubbah* in her possession and knows its whereabouts at all times. Many couples put a photograph of the *ketubbah* in their safe deposit box and display the original in their living room or bedroom.

During the *Kabbalat Panim*, the women have been pampering and entertaining the bride, *Hachnasat*

Kallah. Attending the bride is an honor and called a *mitzvah*, "good deed." This is the time for the women to compliment the bride on her beauty and her special glow - '*Kallah na'ah va'chasudah*' - and to wish her well as she sits in her *kisei kallah*, "bridal throne," awaiting her groom and the *Badeken die Kallah*, "Veiling of the Bride." **The *Badeken* has its origin in the story of Rebecca in the Book of Genesis. Isaac sent his servant Eliezer to find him a bride, and he chose Rebecca. As they journeyed home, they saw Isaac coming to meet them. Rebecca asked, "What man is this that walks in the field to meet us?" And the servant replied, "It is my master [Isaac]" (Genesis 24:64-65), whereupon Rebecca took her veil and covered her face in the ancient Eastern tradition of modesty. The *Badeken* ceremony occurs only for a bride's first marriage.**

The groom is escorted by the male guests from the *Kabbalat Panim* to the bride for the *Badeken*. As he covers her face with the veil, the rabbi says, "Our sister! Be thou the mother of thousands of ten thousands" (Genesis 24:60). The parents then bless the bride and groom, and the guests are requested to seat themselves in preparation for the ceremony. (Note: the American tradition has the ushers seat the guests.)

THE PROCESSIONAL AND THE CHUPPAH

The bride and groom are like queen and king on their wedding day, so they are escorted down the aisle by an entourage of attendants, *shoshvinim*. (Ancient northern European history tells a different tale of the attendants. The custom was for the groom to raid the village in which the bride lived and carry her away. The best man and the groomsmen held back the relatives, and the bridesmaids tried to protect the bride from capture. If the raid was successful, the groomsmen received gifts for their services. The bridesmaids had already been bribed to allow the groom to capture his bride!)

The Jewish processional is slightly different from the traditional American processional, although it is common practice for each member of any processional to start down the aisle on the right foot! The rabbi and cantor enter first, followed by the bride's grandparents, then the groom's grandparents.

The ushers, best man and ring bearer(s) follow, in that order, to introduce the groom and his parents. (The mothers are on the right side when walking down the aisle.) In very Orthodox or Sephardic weddings, the groom is escorted by the two fathers-and the bride by the two mothers-in keeping with *tzniut*, "modesty!" and the laws of separation of males and females in public. Otherwise, as in the Ashkenazic custom, both parents escort their child down the aisle to share in the pride and honor of "giving their child away." The bridesmaids, maid or matron of honor, and flower girl(s) enter before the bride and her parents.

The procession toward the wedding canopy may be illuminated Candles by candles. There are several explanations for this tradition. The light emitted from the candles represents the lightning that appeared when Israel (the bride) accepted God (the groom), light being a symbol of God's presence. Another interpretation explains the similarity of the wedding lights to those of the candles kindled on the Shabbat and on the *yomim tovim*, "holidays." The Book of Esther (8:16) says, "The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor:" "*Orah ve'simchah ve'sasson ve'yikar*." Last, the sum of the letters of the Hebrew word for "candle," *ner*, multiplied by 2, the number of witnesses required for the wedding (or the bride and the groom equal 2) results in the numerical value of the sum of the letters of the beautiful phrase "*Peru Ure'vu*," "Be fruitful and multiply."

The groom walks to the *chuppah*, the wedding canopy, first so he can receive his bride, as God received Israel. Another reason he arrives first is that the *Chuppah* represents the room in the groom's home where the marriage will be consummated; thus he is bringing his bride into the wedding chamber. Sometimes the couple will choose to hold the *Chuppah* (used here synonymously with "wedding ceremony") outside, a practice based on the verse "Thus [like the stars] shall your children be" (Exodus 15:5).

The chuppah is usually made from fine cloth, such as velvet or silk, and is beautifully decorated with embroidery and/or flowers. A tallit, or prayer shawl, can also be used as the chuppah, This tradition originated in the seventeenth century in Germany and

France where the tallit was spread around the bride and groom.

The handmade chuppah or tallit is spread over four poles -one at each corner- but does not extend over the edges. These poles may be held by honored friends or family. Most synagogues own a *chuppan* whose poles are temporarily secured on the floor for the ceremony.

Usually all members of the procession stand under the *chuppah*, although grandparents and young children often prefer to sit in the first row.

The Chasidic bride and groom usually face their guests; therefore, this arrangement would be reversed: the groom, with the bride on his right, exchanging places with the rabbi and cantor. (Guests may sit on the same side as the bride or groom, depending on whose guest they are.)

THE CEREMONY

Before the bride takes her position next to the groom, she may circle him either three or seven times: "The prophet says that a woman encompasses and protects a man" (Jeremiah 31:21). Again, the interpretations are numerous. The most accepted reason for the number 3 is that God (the groom) said to Israel (the bride), "And I will betroth you unto Me forever; and I will betroth you unto Me in righteousness, and in justice and in lovingkindness, and in compassion; and I will betroth you unto Me in faithfulness, and you shall know the Lord" (Hosea 2:21-22). The words "and I will betroth you," "*veerastich*," are used here three times. Also, three obligations of the man to his wife are stated in the *ketubbah*: food, clothing, and conjugal rights. The *tefillin*, "phylactery," straps are wrapped around the middle finger three times every morning during prayer. There are three *aliyot*, "Torah honors," during the weekday Torah readings. And there are three Halachic requirements of marriage

The number 7 also occurs frequently in Jewish history: seven days in the week; the seventh day is the Sabbath, seven aliyot are given out on the Sabbath; seven hakafot, "processionals;" on Hoshanah Rabbah, seventh day of Sukkot; seven repetitions in the Bible of the phrase "and when a man takes a wife;" and seven blessings, the Sheva Berachot, during the wedding ceremony.

When the bride, followed by the mothers, has completed her circles, she takes her place to the right of the groom: 'At thy right hand doth stand the Queen ... ' (Psalms 45:10). This is also the rationale for the mothers' walking down the aisle on the right.

Next, the cantor sings a short hymn, which serves as the start of the *Erusin*, "Engagement," ceremony. The rabbi recites the blessing over the wine and then the betrothal blessing, *Birkat Erusin*. The groom drinks some of the wine and then hands the cup to the bride, whose veil has been lifted by her mother or an honor attendant. **Drinking from the same glass indicates that the bride and groom are ready to begin a life of sharing.**

The engagement ceremony is also often referred to as *Kiddushin*. **The Kiddushin proceeds with the first of the three Halachic requirements for a marriage which are: *tabba'at* (ring) / *kesef* (money), *shetar* (deed or bride's acceptance), and *yichud* (seclusion) / *bi'ah* (consummation).** First, the groom must give the bride something of value, usually the ring. **The ring, *tabba'at*, represents the gold or silver, *kesef*, which was given to the bride in ancient times** (beginning around the seventh century). The ring must be plain metal, preferably gold, without any stones, because the value of the ring must be easily determinable. Otherwise, the bride may over- or underestimate its worth, which would invalidate her acceptance of it and would thereby make the marriage null and void. **The ring must be whole, *shlemut*, similar to the result of a union of two people, and its value must equal at least one *perutah*, the smallest coin in ancient times.**

Before putting the ring on the bride's finger, the groom recites the *Harei At*, the public proclamation of this union:

Harei at me'kudeshet ii b'tabba'at zu ke'dat Moshe ve'Yisraei. Behold, you are consecrated unto me with this ring, in accordance with the law of Moses and Israel.

The *Harei At* is taken from the Talmud (Kiddushin 8a) and is very appropriate to this part of the

wedding. There are thirty-two letters in the sentence. The Hebrew letters that make up the number 32 are Lamed (30) and Bet/Vet (2), and these two letters together spell *lev*, the Hebrew word for "heart." As he gives the bride the ring, the groom simultaneously gives her his heart. He places the ring on the forefinger of the bride's right hand (not over a gloved finger) so that it may be seen easily by the two appointed witnesses and by the guests. The ring may then be transferred to the ring finger of the left hand; this custom is based on the Greek belief that there is a vein in this finger that runs directly to the heart.

The second requirement is *shetar*, the deed, or bride's public acceptance of the ring (allowing the groom to put the ring on her finger) because, Halachically, the groom "takes a wife." If the bride chooses to give the groom a ring also, she may do so and recite the beautiful phrase: *Ani le'dodi ve'dodi li*. I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine. (Song of Songs 6:3) This phrase is simply a statement of her affection and is not intended to be an "exchange." In fact, she could give him the ring during the *yichud* (discussed later). Some brides, during a Conservative or Reform ceremony, give the groom a ring and say, "*Harei ata me'kudash li*" (the masculine form of *Harei At* used when addressing the bride). This phrase implies that she is "taking" him as her husband; for this reason, it is not included in an Orthodox ceremony. In fact, some Orthodox rabbis will not perform a double-ring ceremony at all because it may be misconstrued.

The double-ring ceremony developed in America around World War II. Women began giving their husbands rings to announce to the women overseas that these men were "taken." This is a reverse of the medieval practice of departing knights locking their wives into chastity belts!

The bride's acceptance of her ring marks the end of the betrothal ceremony, *Erusin*.

At this natural break between *Kiddushin* and *Nissuin*, "the wedding ceremony:" the *ketubah* is read aloud in Aramaic (or Hebrew) and English and then given to the bride to keep. The rabbi usually makes some personal comments at this time, often incorporating a modern English translation of the *Sheva Berachot*, the seven marriage blessings.

The *Nissuin* begins with the *Sheva Berachot*, also called the *Birkat Chatanim*, "Blessing for Grooms," which were extracted from the Talmud (*Ketubah 8a*). Although only two witnesses are necessary for the *Erusin*, a minyan-ten men over Bar Mitzvah age-must be present for the *Nissuin*. The cantor usually recites all seven *berachot*, especially the last blessing because beautiful melodies have been composed for it. A wonderful tradition is to honor fathers, grandfathers, uncles, and others by having them each recite one *beracha* (singular). Often, at Chasidic weddings, all seven *berachot* are recited by rabbis. Each *beracha* has its own significance: the first is for the wine; the second is in honor of the wedding guests; the third celebrates the creation of Adam; the fourth, fifth, and sixth bless the couple's marriage; and the seventh is in honor of Israel and the wedding couple.

The bride and groom share wine again - either from a second cup - or from the refilled first cup. Two cups are used as a reminder of the two separate ceremonies (betrothal and marriage) occurring at this one time, but one cup is sufficient if it has been refilled before the *Nissuin* ceremony.

An option that many couples choose to include are these few words added by the rabbi: "By the power vested in me by the state of (your state) and according to the traditions of Moses and Israel, I now pronounce you husband and wife."

Before the groom kisses his bride, he breaks with his right foot a small glass that has been wrapped in a napkin or a special velvet pouch. This breakage suggests that a broken marriage cannot be easily repaired. It also serves as a reminder of the Destruction of the Temple: the bride and groom must always remember the sorrows of the Jewish people, even during *simchas*. The Talmud (*Berachot 31a*) tells us the story of a wedding celebration at which the guests included many rabbis. At one point during the *se'udah*, "festive meal:" one rabbi smashed an expensive vase in order to warn the celebrants against limitless joy. (Note: A similar American custom is observed at bachelor parties: after the best man has toasted the bride and groom, he and all the men smash their glasses, so that they may never be

used for a "less noble purpose:') **At the sound of the broken glass, family and guests call out words of congratulations and *Mazel tov* ("good luck").** (Note: *Mazel*, the Yiddish pronunciation of "luck," is more commonly used than the Hebrew pronunciation, *mazal*.) In Eastern Europe and Sephardic communities, at this point the couple try to step on each other's foot first to determine who will be the dominant one in the marriage!

AFTER THE CEREMONY

The third and final halachic requirement for the bride and groom is *Yichud*, "seclusion," or *Bi'ah*, "consummation:' First the couple leads the recessional, followed by (in this order) the bride's parents, the groom's parents, the maid or matron of honor and the best man, the ushers and the bridesmaids, the flower girl(s) and ring bearer(s), and the rabbi and cantor. (Here, too, the men and women walk separately, except for the bride and groom, if following strict Orthodox tradition.) This "entourage" escorts the queen and king (bride and groom) to a special room (the bride's room or the rabbi's study) so the couple can share a few private moments and break their fast together. *Yichud/Bi'ah* represents the time when, historically, the groom took his bride home to consummate the marriage. As this is an important ritual, two witnesses stand outside the door to keep well-wishers out for about ten minutes.

Meanwhile, the guests are directed to the area where cocktails are being served. The family members and attendants mingle with the guests when they are not involved in the family photography session taking place concurrently in another room. Since the bride and groom have not seen each other prior to the ceremony, this period during the cocktail hour offers the ideal time for the formal family photographs with the couple. Try to be as brief and efficient as possible - your guests are eager to congratulate you!

THE RECEPTION

At the conclusion of the photo session, the bride and groom join the *se'udah* (festive meal, celebration). Upon their entrance into the reception hall, they are usually introduced as "the new Mr. and Mrs. ____ (the groom's name):' (If the bride prefers a different form, such as "the new married couple, Ms. Sarah Goldstein and Mr. Eric

Green," be sure to notify your bandleader!); before they have time to breathe, the bride and groom are whisked into the middle of the room for energetic and enthusiastic circle dancing. (The men and women will dance in separate circles at Orthodox receptions.) At one point, the bride and groom are simultaneously lifted up into the air in individual chairs. Each grabs onto the side of his or her chair while attempting simultaneously to hold a corner of the same handkerchief! The handkerchief symbolizes their union but does not disobey the rules of *tzniut* (modesty) because their hands do not touch.

The dancers finally bring the chairs down to the floor and when everyone is totally exhausted, the circles break up, and the bride and groom proceed to the front of the room for the *motzi*, blessing over the *challah*. (Observant Jews will wash their hands and recite the appropriate blessing before saying the *motzi*.) Finally, the couple sits down for a few moments to enjoy the meal. In between courses and dancing, the bride and groom should try to visit each table to greet the guests and pose for the table photographs.

At a natural break in the excitement, some American customs may be included. First, the best man and/or the father(s) will toast the happy couple. There is no limit to the number of toasts, nor is there any restriction as to who may toast the couple. These toasts may signal the beginning of frequent calls for kisses: tapping spoons on the water glasses is a hint for the bride and groom to kiss. The more your guests tap, the more kisses you will get to share with your new spouse! Finally, the best man reads aloud any telegrams received for the bride and groom. (Having the reception videotaped is one way to remember the sentiments of these moments.)

If either the bride or groom is the last child in the family to be wed, the *Mezinke Tanz*, one of the most exciting and touching traditions, is now danced to honor the occasion. The couple places a wreath of flowers on the mother's head and then dances around both parents, who are seated in chairs. The Yiddish song, "*Die Mezinke Oysgegeben*," "The Youngest Has Been Given Away:' is a beautiful melody for this dance. (Note: Originally, the dance was done only if the last child married was a girl, and only the mother was honored. Since parenting today is more of a joint responsibility, the

tradition was altered to honor both parents when the last child, female or male, gets married.)

At the conclusion of the meal, the bride and groom approach the front of the room to cut the wedding cake. Photographs are taken, the first bite of cake is shared, and dessert and more dancing follow. Finally, the *Birkat Hamazon*, "Grace After the Meal," is chanted, followed by another recitation of the *Sheva Berachot*. It is customary to ask individual men who have not yet had the honor of participating in your *simcha* to now recite one of these blessings. Remember to assign the seventh blessing to one who is familiar with the melodies. After the *Sheva Berachot* are completed, the **Ceremony of the Cups** proceeds. One cup of wine represents the *Benchen* (Yiddish for "Grace"), and the other represents the *Sheva Berachot*. These two cups are poured into a third cup to combine the blessings. The wine is then poured back into the first two cups, and the bride and groom each drink from one of those two cups.

At this time, if the American custom of throwing the bouquet is to be included, the band leader will call upon all the single women to join the bride at the front of the room. The bride then tosses the bouquet over her head to one lucky woman who receives the bride's good luck wishes and who, according to tradition, will be the next to wed. (Many brides order a special toss-away bouquet for this purpose so that they may keep their own bridal flowers.)

The band leader may then call all the single men forward so the groom can toss the garter. The lucky man who catches the garter Tossing the Garter then places it on the leg of the woman who caught the bouquet, in hopes that they both will have the luck and good fortune to be the next ones married. Most Orthodox couples do not include these traditions, or have only the throwing of the bouquet, because of the rules of *tzniut*. In keeping with the American tradition, the couple leaves the reception in a shower of rice (to symbolize fertility), or rose petals, or confetti, or even a shimmering array of colored sequins.

AFTER THE WEDDING

Some couples choose to postpone their honeymoon until one week after their wedding in order to celebrate their first week with family and friends. This seven-day celebration is based on the biblical recounting of Jacob's week of celebrating after his marriage to Leah. Another explanation points out the significance of the comparison of one's wedding with one's death. Both of these two very emotional events require an adjustment period. As when one is "sitting *Shiva*," or mourning, the joy or sorrow is shared among family and friends for seven days to ease the individual burden. Also, the *Shulchan Aruch* states that when a man marries, he should rejoice with his bride for seven days; no work or business transactions should occur during this time, so that he may devote himself to her. Each day following the wedding, a minyan gathers in the morning and the evening (or just once a day) to say the *Sheva Berachot* again in honor of the bride and groom. (You are bride and groom for one year's worth of celebrations and holidays, and then you are called husband and wife.) There should be a *panim chadashot*, a "new face," among the guests each day, to renew the rejoicing, except on the Shabbat because the Sabbath is "new" each week.

(Note: If the bride or groom was widowed or divorced, the *Sheva Berachot* are said only on the first day and the celebration lasts only three days.)