

A BRIEF GUIDE TO THE JEWISH WEDDING CEREMONY

The customs of the traditional Jewish wedding date back thousands of years and combine religious law and symbolism. The union of the bride and groom under the chupah (canopy) has parallels with the union of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and the union of G-d (the groom) with the Jewish people (the bride). Here follows a brief guide to the main constituents of the wedding ceremony.

THE CHUPAH (*Wedding Canopy*)

This symbolises the new home which is the basis of the Jewish family. It is open on all sides and bare of all furniture, to indicate that it is not physical or material things that make for a happy and fulfilled relationship, but the love and sacrifice of each partner and the spiritual richness with which they invest their home.

SIGNING THE *KETUBAH*

Before the ceremony commences the bridegroom is asked to read and accept upon himself all the terms of the *Ketubah*, the Jewish marriage contract, detailing (in Aramaic) all the duties and responsibilities of a Jewish husband, notably to provide food, clothing and conjugal rights. When first introduced, over 2,000 years ago, it represented a domestic and social revolution in the form of a charter on women's rights. By raising a kerchief, together with the officiant, the groom signals his acceptance and empowers the officiant to read it aloud to the bride later in the proceedings. The *Ketubah* is then witnessed by religiously competent witnesses, usually the officiating ministers.

BEDEKEN (Veiling of the Bride)

The groom is then escorted to the Bride's Room, where he satisfies himself that it is the right bride, before performing the *bedeken*. The Rabbi then blesses the bride with the blessing originally given to Rebecca, "Our sister, may you become a prolific mother in Israel" (Genesis 24:60).

THREE OR SEVEN CIRCUITS

It is a popular practice for the bride to walk around her groom either *three* or *seven* times. Both are significant numbers in Jewish tradition. The Bible has three main divisions; there are three founding fathers of our nation; three main national groupings of priests, levites and Israelites. Finally, and most pertinently in the present context, there are three partners to a loving marriage: bride, groom, and the Almighty whose blessings will guarantee its permanence and spiritual quality.

The *seven* circuits correspond to the seven days which G-d took to create the world, to remind us that, on one level, marriage is a re-enactment of the creative process, and an opportunity for the bride and groom to help create a brave new world.

THE BETROTHAL (*EIRUSIN*) CEREMONY

A Jewish wedding consists of two ceremonies, the betrothal and the marriage, each of which is sanctified with its own cup of wine, from which the bride and groom sip. The Rabbi recites the two betrothal blessings, the second of which refers to the special sanctity of the Jewish marriage and the various categories of prohibited relationships. The groom then recites in Hebrew “Behold you are consecrated to me with this ring according to the law of Moses and Israel.” He then places the ring on the index finger of the bride’s right hand. This ends the betrothal ceremony and the couple are now considered sanctified to one another under Jewish Law. The *Ketubah* is then read aloud in Aramaic, with an English abstract.

MARRIAGE (*NISSUIN*) CEREMONY

The *Nissuin* follows the reading of the *Ketubah* and seals the union by permitting the couple to live together as husband and wife. The seven blessings, recited over a second cup of wine, deal with various themes, including tributes to God as Creator, the wondrous nature of the marital state, Jerusalem as co-partner in the joy of bride and groom, hopes that the young couple will be as happy as Adam and Eve in the cacoon of their Garden of Eden, and that God will bless their relationship with perfect bliss.

THE BREAKING OF THE GLASS

This marks the end of the ceremony and recalls the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, by the Romans, in the year 70 CE. This set in motion an exile of some 1900 years of unremitting oppression of the Jewish People. It reminds us, therefore, even on our most joyous occasion, that our people are still not totally carefree, but looks forward to the time when the joy of our bride and groom will characterise the feelings of our entire nation. After the glass is broken, all present shout aloud the greeting *Mazal Tov* "good fortune", after which the Rabbi confers upon the couple the biblical 'Priestly Blessing'.

SIGNING THE CIVIL REGISTRIES

In most situations, the Synagogue marriage also serves to satisfy the State requirements for marriage. At this point, therefore, the couple sign the official Civil registers and are given (in addition to the *Ketubah*) their state marriage certificate. Two of their friends or relatives are asked to sign as witnesses to the marriage ceremony.

YICHUD (Seclusion)

The couple then return to the bride's room where they enjoy their first moment of privacy (*yichud*) together. This seclusion symbolises the consummation of the marriage. After they re-emerge for the wedding celebrations, every guest is religiously obligated to do his or her utmost to make the bride and groom happy. So please sing, dance and have a great time!

We hope that these notes will enhance your understanding and enjoyment of the wedding. Please keep this as a memento of our special day.