



A GUIDE TO THE JEWISH WEDDING

A traditional Jewish wedding is full of meaningful rituals, symbolizing the beauty of the relationship of husband and wife, as well as their obligations to each other and to the Jewish people.

The following guide explains the beauty and joy of these Jewish wedding traditions.

THE WEDDING DAY

The dawning wedding day heralds the happiest and holiest day of one's life. This day is considered a personal Yom Kippur for the *chatan* (Hebrew for groom) and *kallah* (bride), for on this day all their past mistakes are forgiven as they merge into a new, complete soul.

As on Yom Kippur, both the *chatan* and *kallah* fast (in this case, from dawn until after the completion of the marriage ceremony). And at the ceremony, the *chatan* wears a *kittel*, the traditional white robe worn on Yom Kippur.

[Sefardim do not have the custom to fast and wear a *kittel*.]

KABBALAT PANIM

It is customary for the *chatan* and *kallah* not to see each other for one week preceding the wedding. This increases the anticipation and excitement of the event. Therefore, prior to the wedding ceremony, the *chatan* and *kallah* greet guests separately. This is called "Kabbalat Panim."

Jewish tradition likens the couple to a queen and king. The *kallah* is seated on a "throne" to receive her guests, while the *chatan* is surrounded by guests who sing and toast him.

At this time there is an Ashkenazi tradition for the mother of the bride and the mother of the groom to stand together and break a plate. The reason is to show the seriousness of the commitment – just as a plate can never be fully repaired, so too a broken relationship can never be fully repaired.

BADEKEN

Next comes the *badeken*, the veiling of the *kallah* by the *chatan*. The veil symbolizes the idea of modesty and conveys the lesson that however attractive physical appearances may be, the soul and character are paramount.

The Ashkenazi custom is that the *chatan*, accompanied by family and friends, proceeds to where the *kallah* is seated and places the veil over her face. This signals the groom's commitment to clothe and protect his wife. It is reminiscent of Rebecca covering her face before marrying Isaac (Genesis ch. 29).

CHUPPAH

The wedding ceremony takes place under the *chuppah* (marriage canopy), a symbol of the home to be built and shared by the couple. It is open on all sides, just as Abraham and Sarah had their tent open all sides to welcome people in unconditional hospitality.

The Ashkenazi custom is to have the *chuppah* ceremony outside under the stars, as a sign of the blessing given by God to the patriarch Abraham, that his children shall be “as the stars of the heavens” (Genesis 15:5). Sefardim generally have the *chuppah* indoors.



The Ashkenazi custom is that the *chatan* and *kallah* wear no jewelry under the *chuppah*. Their mutual commitment is based on who they are as people, not on any material possessions.

The *chatan*, followed by the *kallah*, are usually escorted to the *chuppah* by their respective sets of parents.

Under the *chuppah*, the Ashkenazi custom is that the *kallah* circles the *chatan* seven times. Just as the world was built in seven days, the *kallah* is figuratively building the walls of the couple’s new world together. The number seven also symbolizes the wholeness and completeness that they cannot attain separately.

The *kallah* then settles at the *chatan’s* right-hand side.

[At this point, the Sefardic custom is that the *chatan* says the blessing *She’hecheyanu* over a new *tallit*, and has in mind that the blessing also goes on the marriage for him and the *kallah*. The *tallit* is then held by four young men over the head of the *chatan* and *kallah*.]

BLESSINGS OF BETROTHAL (KIDDUSHIN)

Two cups of wine are used in the wedding ceremony. The first cup accompanies the betrothal blessings recited by the rabbi. After these are recited, the couple drinks from the cup.

Wine, a symbol of joy in Jewish tradition, is associated with the *Kiddush*, the sanctification prayer recited on Shabbat and festivals. Marriage, which is called *Kiddushin*, is the sanctification of a man and woman to each other.

GIVING OF THE RING

In Jewish law, a marriage becomes official when the *chatan* gives an object of value to the *kallah*. This is traditionally done with a ring. The ring should be made of plain gold, without blemishes or ornamentation (e.g. stones) – just as it is hoped that the marriage will be one of simple beauty.

The *chatan* now takes the wedding ring in his hand, and in clear view of two witnesses, declares to the *kallah*, “Behold, you are betrothed unto me with this ring, according to the law of Moses and Israel.” He then places the ring on the forefinger of his bride’s right hand. According to Jewish law, this is the central moment of the wedding ceremony, and the couple is now fully married at this point.



If the *kallah* also wants to give a ring to the *chatan*, this should be done afterwards, not under the *chuppah*. This is to prevent confusion as to what constitutes the actual marriage, as prescribed by the Torah.

KETUBAH (MARRIAGE CONTRACT)

Now comes the reading of the *ketubah* (marriage contract) in the original Aramaic text. The *ketubah* outlines the *chatan's* various responsibilities – to provide his wife with food, shelter and clothing, and to be attentive to her emotional needs. Protecting the rights of a Jewish wife is so important that the marriage may not be solemnized until the contract has been completed.

The document is signed by two witnesses, and has the standing of a legally binding agreement. The *ketubah* is the property of the *kallah* and she must have access to it throughout their marriage. It is often written amidst beautiful artwork, to be framed and displayed in the home.

The reading of the *ketubah* acts as a break between the first part of the ceremony – *Kiddushin* (“betrothal”), and the latter part – *Nissuin* (“marriage”).



THE SEVEN BLESSINGS

The Seven Blessings (*Sheva Brachot*) are now recited over the second cup of wine. The theme of these blessings links the *chatan* and *kallah* to our faith in God as Creator of the world, Bestower of joy and love, and the ultimate Redeemer of our people.

These blessings are recited by the rabbi or other people that the families wish to honor.

At the conclusion of the seven blessings, the *chatan* and *kallah* again drink some of the wine.

Go to www.tinyurl.com/7blessings for audio versions of the Sheva Brachot, as well as a printable PDF of the text in Hebrew, English, and transliteration.

BREAKING THE GLASS

A glass is now placed on the floor, and the *chatan* shatters it with his foot. This serves as an expression of sadness at the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and identifies the couple with the spiritual and national destiny of the Jewish people. A Jew, even at the moment of greatest rejoicing, is mindful of the Psalmist's injunction to “set Jerusalem above my highest joy.”

In jest, some explain that this is the last time the groom gets to “put his foot down.”

(In Israel, the Ashkenazi custom is that the glass is broken earlier, prior to the reading of the *ketubah*. Sefardim always break the glass at the end of the ceremony, even in Israel.)



This marks the conclusion of the ceremony. With shouts of “*Mazel Tov*,” the *chatan* and *kallah* are then given an enthusiastic reception from the guests as they leave the *chuppah* together.

YICHUD

The couple is then escorted to a private *yichud* room and left alone for a few minutes. These moments of seclusion signify their new status of living together as husband and wife.

Since the couple has been fasting since the morning, at this point they break their fast.

[Sefardim do not have the custom of the *yichud* room; the *chatan* and *kallah* immediately proceed to the wedding hall after the *chuppah* ceremony.]

THE FESTIVE MEAL (SEUDAH)

It is a mitzvah for guests to bring *simchah* (joy) to the *chatan* and the *kallah* on their wedding day. There is much music and dancing as the guests celebrate with the new couple. To further bring joy to the occasion, some guests perform feats of juggling and acrobatics.

After the meal, *Birkat Hamazon* (Grace After Meals) is recited, and the *Sheva Brachot* are repeated.

During the week following the wedding, it is customary for friends and relatives to host festive meals in honor of the *chatan* and *kallah*. This is called the week of *Sheva Brachot*, because of the blessings said at the conclusion of each of these festive meals.



Mazel tov!