Jewish Wedding Guide
for Interfaith Couples

interfaithfamily

Supporting Interfaith Families Exploring Jewish Life

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Section 1: Finding Your Officiant(s) and Choosing a Date

Timing and Location of a Jewish/Interfaith Wedding

If you're thinking of having a rabbi or cantor officiate your wedding, keep in mind that most Jewish clergy observe a number of limitations and restrictions on both the location and timing of weddings they perform. The rules vary a bit from one movement of Judaism (denomination) to another, but here are some of the most common limitations.

The Sabbath

Traditionally speaking, in Judaism weddings do not take place on the Jewish Sabbath (Shabbat). Shabbat begins at sundown every Friday and continues until a bit past sundown on Saturday (Judaism regards sundown, rather than sunrise, as the beginning of the day). Even rabbis of the more liberal Jewish movements tend to decline requests to officiate during Shabbat, though a growing number of rabbis are willing to consider it.

If your ceremony is co-officiated, make sure you clear your wedding site with *both* officiants prior to contracting for a venue.

Location, location, location!

In traditional Judaism there are hardly any restrictions on where a couple can get married. A synagogue, someone's home, a park, a non-denominational chapel or a banquet hall are all in play, as well as just about anywhere else. Some rabbis aren't comfortable officiating in churches or sanctuaries of other religions; others are more flexible. If your ceremony is co-officiated, make sure you clear your wedding site with *both* officiants prior to contracting for a venue. Different religious communities have different requirements.

We'll email you, free of charge, a curated list of rabbis and cantors in your area who are likely to be a good fit.

In part because of these Shabbat restrictions, Saturday nights are a popular choice for Jewish weddings. Sundays are also popular, as are other weekdays.

There are a lot of Jewish holidays, major and minor, that have traditionally been off limits for celebrating weddings. The question of which holidays are available and which ones aren't is complicated, and rabbis from different movements differ in their practice. Most important: If a Jewish clergy member says they can't officiate your wedding because of a Jewish holiday, they're not fibbing in order to avoid saying no for some other reason. If you're set on your date, ask if the rabbi can refer you to a colleague who may be willing to officiate on that day.

Finding a Rabbi or Cantor to Officiate at an Interfaith Wedding: Using InterfaithFamily's Clergy Referral System

There are many ways to search for a rabbi or cantor, including word-of-mouth or even Google. Although the percentage of Jewish clergy who officiate at interfaith weddings is growing, some couples would prefer not to start their search by asking rabbis whether or not they officiate at interfaith weddings.

InterfaithFamily's Jewish clergy referral service is a resource that can help. Just visit www.interfaithfamily.com/findarabbi and fill out the officiation request form, and we'll email you, free of charge, a curated list of rabbis and cantors in your area who are likely to be a good fit for the type of wedding you are planning. We also refer Jewish clergy that may be willing to travel.

Advice for Couples Working with Two Officiants in a Co-Officiated Wedding

Most rabbis and cantors who officiate at interfaith weddings are not willing to co-officiate with clergy of another faith, though the number who will do so is growing. If

The most important thing is for you and your partner to decide whether or not you feel comfortable, supported and respected

you're using InterfaithFamily's clergy referral service and you're looking for a rabbi to co-officiate, please check the appropriate box on the online form.

Good clear communication is essential when working with two officiants. Many clergy (of any faith) who are willing to co-officiate may have conditions for doing so, and some will want to make case-specific decisions about what they are comfortable doing. Good communication between the officiants, and between you and both officiants, is crucial so that no one feels blindsided or misunderstood. Some rabbis who co-officiate will recommend specific local clergy of other faiths with whom they enjoy working.

"Interviewing" Prospective Officiants

Your first conversation with a prospective officiant is your "interview," and it's your main opportunity to discern whether or not s/he is a good fit. Here are some questions you may want to ask:

1. Are you willing to work with us to craft the content of the ceremony, and do you have limitations on how flexible you're willing to be about the ceremony? (For example, if you're a couple that prefers little to no God language, this is the time to ask.)

2. What do you charge for a fee, and when do you need to be paid? Do you use a letter of agreement?

3. How much time are you willing to spend with us and/or members of our family if there are important issues or family dynamics that require sensitivity?

4. How far are you willing to travel to a wedding venue, and what travel reimbursement might you need?

5. How would you describe your approach to working with interfaith couples?

6. Do you have ritual limitations or restrictions that we might not be aware of?

7. How much Hebrew and English can we expect in the service, and how do you work to help guests who aren't Jewish feel included?

8. Do you do dress rehearsals?

9. Do you have references we can contact (i.e. other couples)?

After your initial conversation, the most important thing is for you and your partner to decide whether or not you feel comfortable, supported and respected.

Another Option: Wedding Ceremonies without Jewish Clergy Officiating

You can choose to get married without having a rabbi or cantor, or any other clergy for that matter. Hiring a justice of the peace, judge or non-denominational officiant are all options. You can also arrange to have a friend deputized by the state to act as your officiant. Good communication is key when working with officiants who may be unfamiliar with the family dynamics or other issues sometimes in play in interfaith weddings.

If you decide to go this route, there are many resources you can consult to incorporate Jewish ritual and cultural elements into your ceremony. See section 10, *Sample Ceremonies and Definitions for Wedding Programs*, for some good ideas.

Costs: Clergy Fees

Jewish clergy fees vary greatly, though generally they fall somewhere between $500–$1,500, depending on many variables. Fees may include travel costs, or reflect the amount of necessary pre-marital work. They also vary by region. Many rabbis and cantors offer a sliding scale if finances are an obstacle—don't be afraid to ask for a fee reduction if this is a factor.

Here's what's going into the fee: Rabbis bring years of seminary training into their work with couples, and often spend considerable time preparing the wedding ceremony according to the specific needs of each couple. In interfaith weddings, rabbis work with each unique couple to craft a sensitive, respectful and meaningful ceremony that strives to balance the aesthetics of Jewish ritual with the need for some cultural translation for family members and guests of other faiths.

When they hire a rabbi or cantor, couples are choosing to pay for a professional to create a sacred moment that they will remember forever. It's useful to think about the clergy fee alongside the other costs associated with weddings today. The expertise and care couples look for in a wedding cake, a DJ or a photographer all come with fees, and clergy also need to make a living.

Finally, for co-officiated weddings, remember to include clergy fees for both officiants in your budget.

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Section 2: Elements of a Jewish Wedding Ceremony

Prior to the chuppah ceremony, Jewish tradition offers rituals that help mark the days leading up to a couple's wedding. If you would like to learn more, here's a short video about traditions before the wedding.

Ketubah Signing

A *ketubah* is a "wedding contract." In ancient times, a *ketubah* was a legally binding document, signed by witnesses, describing a groom's "acquiring" of a bride, and stating the amount that the groom would have to pay the bride in case of divorce. In liberal Judaism today, there aren't many couples who would want to sign a wedding contract in which one partner "acquires" another. But 2,000 years ago norms were quite different.

Modern liberal *ketubot* (plural) are typically spiritual, not legal, covenants between both partners, and ketubot honoring same-sex and interfaith couples abound. Several websites, like ketubah.com, Modernketubah.com and ketubah-gallery.com, offer interfaith couples a variety of texts and artistic styles. Many couples frame their *ketubah* for display.

Some rabbis ask couples to have a ceremonial *ketubah* signing 20 to 30 minutes before the beginning of the wedding ceremony, though the timing can vary. A *ketubah* signing is a great event at which to have state marriage license documents signed as well.

Read more about the ketubah here.

wedding party processes down the aisle, with the rabbi going first or simply starting the ceremony waiting at the *chuppah* (wedding canopy).

In heterosexual weddings, the processional typically continues with the groomsmen walking single file, followed by the best man, and then the groom with parent(s) on either side of him. Then the bridesmaids walk single file, followed by the maid of honor, and then any other members of the wedding party (flower girls, ring bearer, etc.). Finally, the bride processes with parent(s) on either side. The bride traditionally stands on the groom's right, which is the reverse of traditional Christian weddings.

In same-sex weddings, couples use various processional configurations. There are no set Jewish rules regarding the processional, just customs, so the processional offers interfaith couples a great opportunity to weave in traditions from other faiths or include other cultural elements. Most couples have music during the processional.

Prior to the chuppah ceremony, Jewish tradition offers rituals that help mark the days leading up to a couple's wedding.

Bedecken (Veiling the Bride)

Bedecken, which means "checking to be certain," is a Jewish custom that, in weddings between a bride and a groom, involves the groom putting a wedding veil on the bride shortly before the ceremony. The groom gets to "verify" that the bride is in fact the person he means to marry. It's a fun ritual laced with humor that you can read about here. There's also a lovely version of this ritual for lesbian weddings here.

The Wedding Ceremony

Processional

In traditional Jewish weddings the entire

It's a good idea to let rabbis or clergy of other faiths know beforehand what music you plan to use.

Read more about the processional here.

Circling

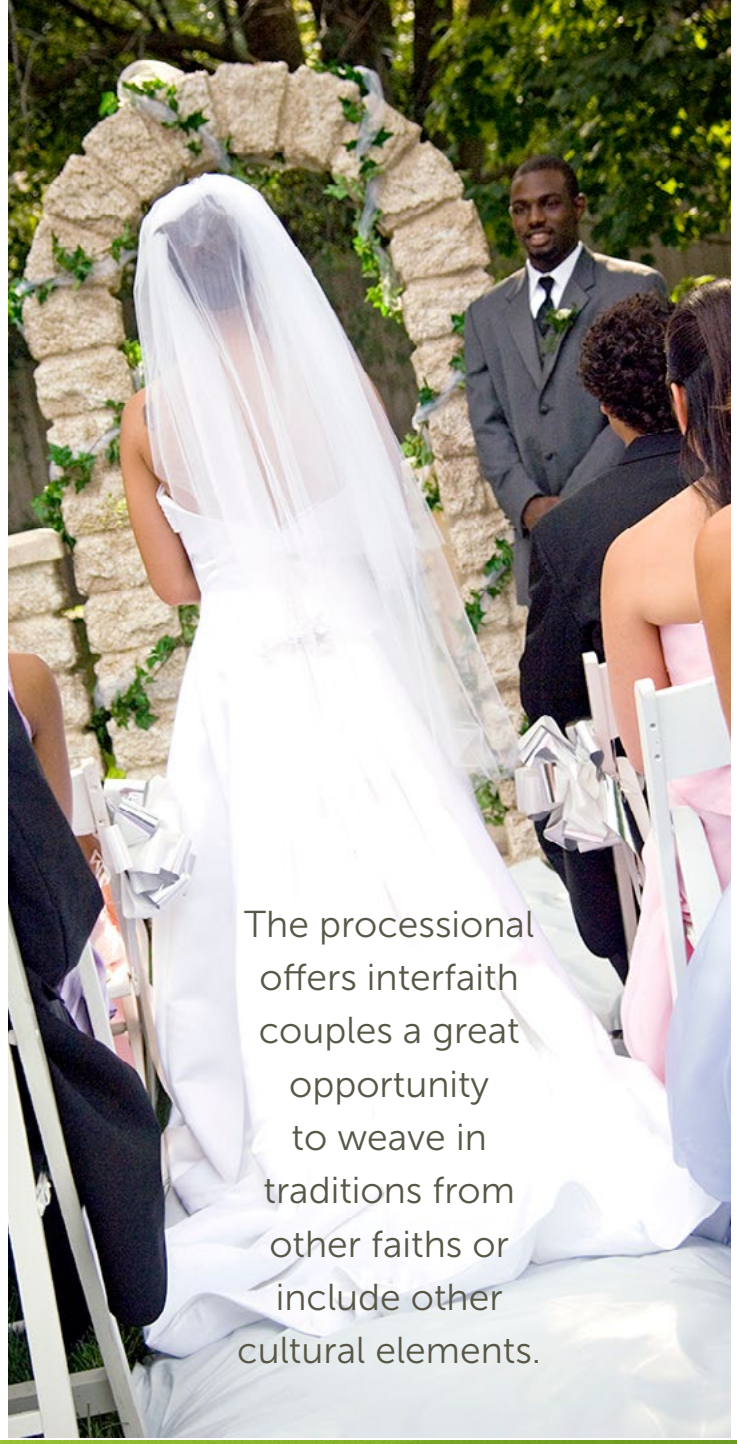
In traditional Jewish heterosexual weddings, at the end of the processional, when the couple has arrived at the chuppah, the bride walks slowly around the groom, circling him seven times. A popular variation on traditional circling is for each partner to circle the other three times, followed by a final, seventh circle that the couple does together. Circling symbolizes the creation of a new home and the intertwining of the lives of both partners.

Read more about circling here.

First Blessings: the First Cup of Wine and a Blessing of Thanks for this Unique Moment

The ceremony typically begins with a blessing of the first of two cups of wine (or grape juice). Wine represents joy in Judaism, and after reciting the blessing the rabbi invites the couple to sip from the cup. Then comes a second short blessing, called the *shehecheyanu* in Hebrew. This blessing gives thanks for the delight of reaching this wonderful moment.

See sample programs here.



The processional offers interfaith couples a great opportunity to weave in traditions from other faiths or include other cultural elements.

The Ring Ceremony

In liberal Jewish communities, both partners give each other a wedding ring to symbolize their love and commitment. The rabbi guides each of them through a short Hebrew formula that translates to: "Behold, with this ring, you are made holy to me, according to the laws of Moses and Israel." In interfaith weddings, some rabbis use an alternative version of this formula that replaces the words "according to the laws of Moses and Israel" with different wording (for example, "in the eyes of God and humankind").

The ring ceremony is a good time for couples to exchange vows with each other—something that isn't part of a traditional Jewish ceremony, but which many couples like to include.

See sample ring ceremonies here.

Rabbis or cantors traditionally sing seven blessings that give thanks for the joys of love, intimacy and marriage, for the creation of humanity and for the community's happiness.

The Seven Blessings (*Sheva B'rachot*) and the Second Cup of Wine: an Explanation

The ring ceremony concludes the first of two distinct parts of the Jewish wedding ceremony. The second part of the ceremony showers blessings upon the couple. Rabbis or cantors traditionally sing seven blessings that give thanks for the joys of love, intimacy and marriage, for the creation of humanity and for the community's happiness. Most Jewish officiants sing the blessings in the original Hebrew and translate each blessing into English. These blessings are ancient, and a lot of contemporary couples prefer to use modern creative translations. Also, the original wording of the blessings refers only to heterosexual weddings. Creative Jewish liturgists have written modified versions of these blessings, in Hebrew and in English, which honor same-sex weddings.

At the end of the seven blessings, the rabbi blesses a second cup of wine and invites the couple to take a sip.

After the seven blessings, some rabbis will recite another set of traditional blessings over the couple. These words, known as the "priestly blessings," ask God to bless and protect, enlighten and give peace to the couple.

Read more about the seven blessings and sample programs here.

Breaking the Glass: An Explanation

Jewish weddings don't traditionally end with a kiss. They end with the smashing of a glass. In heterosexual weddings, it's usually the groom who stomps his foot down on a thin glass (wrapped in a cloth for safety), though some couples will do it together. Many couples also want to have a kiss at the conclusion of their ceremony, which can fit nicely right before or after the smashing of the glass.

There's a Jewish tradition called *yichud*, which means "alone time for the couple."

There are several interpretations of the meaning of smashing a glass, as well as contemporary alternative interpretations. You can also see a fun short video taken from a same-sex wedding in which we see both grooms smashing a glass.

Read more about breaking the glass here.

Recessional and Alone Time (*Yichud*)

Right after the glass smash, guests usually shout *"Mazel Tov!"* ("May you have good fortune!") and other congratulations. Some couples like to have music resume at this point, followed immediately by a recessional. The recessional can be deliberately "messy," with the couple heading off down the aisle and then everyone else simply mixing and mingling with the guests, or it can be structured and more formal.

There's a Jewish tradition called *yichud*, which means "alone time for the couple." Couples who include *yichud* in their wedding take a little time to be alone together in a private space immediately following the ceremony. The rabbi usually mentions, just before the glass smash, that the couple is going to do this, and may offer any other short practical instructions to guests at this point as well. Taking a little time to be alone together before returning to your celebrating guests can be rewarding and grounding.

Section 3: Ritual Objects and Clothing

Ketubah

(For more on what a *ketubah* is and how it fits into a wedding, see Elements of a Jewish Wedding Ceremony.)

Modern *ketubot* (the plural of *ketubah*) are personalized works of art, including both text and artwork. Today *ketubot* are typically spiritual, not legal, covenants between both partners. In the liberal Jewish world, couples can consider a wide range of *ketubah* texts, including interfaith *ketubot*, LGBT *ketubot*, secular humanist *ketubot* and more.

Ideas for *ketubah* texts can be found here, or at sites like www.ketubah.com, www.modernketubah.com and www.ketubah-gallery.com, as well as in books like *The New Jewish Wedding, Revised*, by Anita Diamant. In most modern Jewish/interfaith weddings, the couple signs the *ketubah* about 30 minutes before the ceremony in the presence of witnesses, family and the wedding party.

After the wedding, couples usually frame their *ketubot* and hang them proudly in their home. Costs for ordering a *ketubah* vary widely, but typically fall somewhere within the $250–$500 range, depending on the degree of customization the couple wants, the materials used and the shipping time. Framing is a separate cost. Some couples write and design their own *ketubot*.

Chuppah (Jewish Wedding Canopy)

A *chuppah* (sometimes spelled "huppah") is a Jewish wedding canopy with four open sides. Jewish wedding ceremonies typically occur under a *chuppah*, and this tradition offers great opportunities for interfaith couples to integrate elements from multiple traditions.

A basic *chuppah* looks like a square piece of fabric supported by four poles. The poles stand on the ground and are often held

upright by friends of the couple. The poles can also be free-standing and decorated with flowers. Couples can make their own *chuppah*, use a synagogue's or rent one. There should be enough space inside a *chuppah* for the couple, clergy and a small table for ritual items like wine glasses.

The *chuppah* symbolizes the couple's home. The ancient rabbis compared it to the tent of the biblical Abraham, who was famed for his hospitality; his tent had entrances on all four sides to signal a message of welcome to travelers coming from any direction.

Making or decorating a *chuppah* offers opportunities to include various traditions in the wedding. Partners who are not Jewish can include materials and patterns representing their heritage in the chuppah cloth cover. Some couples use a family heirloom, such as a grandfather's *tallit* (prayer shawl) or a prized family tablecloth (from Irish culture), as the *chuppah* covering.

The costs of making your own *chuppah* can be modest, especially if you keep things simple. You can get everything you need in one trip to a building supplies store for $100 or less (www.apracticalwedding.com has a great DIY page called "How to build a chuppah"). Prefab kits available online run from about $130 to $250. Rental costs vary but are often under $100.

A Glass to Smash

Most Jewish and interfaith weddings end with one (or sometimes both) partners smashing a glass (for an explanation of the meanings, see Elements of a Jewish Wedding Ceremony). You can use any glass for this purpose. Just make sure it's thin and will break easily. Wrap the glass in a cloth or put it in a cloth drawstring bag to avoid injury from the broken shards. Some couples use shops like Mazel Tov Glass or Traditions Jewish Gifts that provide kits which allow you to send them the broken glass shards, which they then make into artistic keepsakes.

Two Cups of Wine/Grape Juice

A typical Jewish wedding ceremony includes two cups of wine (or grape juice). Wine is a Jewish symbol of joy. (Click here for a description of how these two cups fit into the wedding ceremony.) You can use any cups or glasses for this purpose; however, these cups offer an opportunity to include elements from both families' histories or traditions. Also, try using white wine or juice just in case of spills during the ceremony.

Some couples use only kosher certified wine or grape juice. Most rabbis who officiate

at interfaith weddings don't require kosher wine. The rationale behind what makes wine kosher goes back to very ancient times when Jews were concerned that wine they might buy in the marketplace could have been ritually dedicated to the polytheistic gods of their neighbors. Today, most liberal Jews don't check whether wine is kosher, but some choose to buy kosher wine for weddings in order to support the industry, or in case they have guests who only drink kosher wine.

What to Wear at a Jewish/Interfaith wedding

There really aren't any rules here. You can get married on a beach with everyone in swimwear, or you can tie the knot in the finest formalwear. There are some traditional ritual garments that one or both partners may want to wear, and we recommend discussing your options with a rabbi or cantor. Some of these items include:

Kippah (Jewish head covering, a.k.a. "*yarmulke*"). Traditionally worn by Jewish men, but sometimes by women too, either or both partners can don a *kippah* for the wedding. You can also request that your guests wear *kippot* (plural of *kippah*), though if you do you'll want to provide them with some. You can order from wholesalers like www.kippot.com and spend anywhere from $50 to a few hundred dollars (for personalized embossed *kippot*). You can also support fair trade by ordering *kippot* through Jewish United for Justice.

There are some traditional ritual garments that one or both partners may want to wear, and we recommend discussing your options with a rabbi or cantor.

Jewish partners, particularly men, sometimes like to wear a *tallit* (ritual fringed prayer shawl) during their wedding. In traditional

Judaism, the *tallit* symbolizes the commandments of the Torah and the enveloping and protective presence of the Divine, though not all Jews who wear a tallit practice traditional Jewish lives. Wearing a *tallit* that belonged to a deceased relative, for instance, can add meaning. Some people take the opportunity of getting married to buy themselves a new tallit that they plan to use in the future, perhaps in the hope of passing it down to future generations.

A *kittel* is a ritual garment that is typically worn by more traditional grooms. A *kittel* is a belted white robe, usually made of linen, symbolizing purity.

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Finally, some brides wear a bridal veil (and at same-sex weddings, sometimes both partners do). For info about a fun Jewish wedding veiling tradition, click here.

Section 4: Invitations, Programs and Food

Invitations

Invitations offer a great opportunity to communicate some of what you both appreciate about each other's backgrounds and traditions. Whether you're using an online vendor or crafting your own from scratch, you can use this first "official" expression about your wedding to share a taste of the interfaith aspects of your wedding. How you do that really depends on what best suits the two of you specifically. Phrasing like "as we honor our two faiths" or "we welcome friends and family of different traditions" can set a tone of inclusion and welcome.

Programs

If you're having printed programs at your wedding, they offer an opportunity to help guests understand aspects of your service that may be new to them. If you are including some of the classic Jewish rituals and blessings in your ceremony, you can use your program to provide short definitions of those parts of the service.

Similarly, you can offer brief definitions of other religious or cultural rituals, and doing so can help many Jewish guests understand those elements better. For example, popular Christian wedding rituals like reciting vows ("I dos"), lighting a unity candle and reading from scripture aren't necessarily familiar to some Jewish guests. Simple definitions of any religiously specific elements of your ceremony, offered in a warm, inclusive tone, can help everyone feel welcome.

You can search online for wedding program definitions and find many examples. Some of these sites are from vendors who hope you'll use them for your programs. Pinterest and Tumblr, and similar online interest blogs also offer examples of what others have done.

You can also use your program to share other kinds of important information. Some couples include things like: special thanks to specific people; dedications in memory of loved ones; acknowledgments of ritual items that are family heirlooms; poems; or even practical things like directions to the reception. You can also get creative with your program's format and packaging, or use it to give guests a chance to do something active to participate in your ceremony (like write down personal wishes on a provided blank page or use an attached bottle of "blowing bubbles" to create a flurry of bubbles during the recessional). Websites like www.bridalguide.com have some fun ideas.

Finally, for guests who are hearing impaired, your program can offer information that helps everyone stay connected to what's happening during your ceremony. Your program can also help communicate

Including simple definitions in your program of any religiously specific elements of your ceremony can help everyone feel welcome.

useful information for guests who are alter-abled, such as a simple map highlighting wheelchair accessible pathways to the reception, etc.

Food and Drink

Food choices at your wedding are another opportunity to express values of inclusivity and to educate guests who may not be familiar with specific religious food practices. Some couples have decisions to make regarding whether to have certified kosher food or food that is limited to other religious traditions' practices. Some couples opt to limit the food and drink at their wedding to a "common-denominator" set of foods, offering items that are acceptable to the widest possible range of anticipated guests. Others decide to serve what they want while making sure appropriate alternative food options are available for guests who follow religious or health dietary practices (like food allergies).

It's important to think through your food and drink plans, not just in terms of honoring sensitivities to guests with different religious practices, but also in terms of other issues. Some couples, for instance, don't offer alcoholic beverages if that is helpful in supporting guests who are dealing with alcoholism. Many wedding caterers will offer to label food items according to different guests' needs.

If you want to have kosher food available at your wedding, plan ahead for what can sometimes be a much higher cost. This is especially true for kosher catered meals involving any kind of meat or poultry. Going vegetarian, or just steering around meat and poultry, can help reduce costs. If your desire to have kosher food is based on the needs of specific guests, talking with them in advance can be helpful in determining the specifics of what they can and can't eat, and what alternatives to kosher catering might work for them. At the end of the day,

Food choices at your wedding are another opportunity to express values of inclusivity and to educate guests who may not be familiar with specific religious food practices.

the decisions are yours, and it may not be possible to fully meet every guest's optimal food practice criteria, but as with most issues, honest and thoughtful communication usually helps. Your wedding invitation may be a good place to say what the food and drink will be like – "all food will be vegan" or "contact us if you have special dietary needs" lets guests know that you care about their food concerns.

Finally, a word about kosher wine. Outside of the Orthodox Jewish community, few Jews follow traditional practices regarding kosher wine. Nevertheless, some interfaith couples like to include kosher wine, or even limit their wedding to only kosher wines, in order to honor Jewish traditions or accommodate specific guests.

It's important to think through your food and drink plans, not just in terms of honoring sensitivities to guests with different religious practices, but also in terms of other issues.

Section 5: Issues Specific to Jewish-Christian Weddings

Some Common Elements of Christian Weddings that are Different than Jewish Weddings

The Procession

In many Christian heterosexual weddings, the groom does not walk down the aisle, but waits with the clergy and the groomsmen at the altar. After the bridesmaids enter, the bride's father walks her down the aisle to her new husband, and sometimes ministers use the language of the father "giving away" the bride. Mothers are usually accompanied down the aisle just before the formal procession begins. Same-sex Christian weddings adapt these traditions in various ways.

Jewish heterosexual weddings usually start with the chuppah-bearers processing, followed by the rabbi, the groomsmen, the groom and his parents, the bridesmaids, and finally the bride and both of her parents. Same-sex Jewish wedding processions also generally begin with the chuppah-bearers, and continue with each partner being walked down the aisle by his/her parents.

Vows

In many Christian ceremonies, both parties recite vows ("I do's"). This isn't part

of a traditional Jewish ceremony, though similar promises often are part of the couple's *ketubah*.

The Kiss and the Pronouncement

Lots of Christian weddings end with a kiss and the officiant publicly declaring the new couple to be officially wed. While there isn't a kiss in the traditional Jewish wedding "script," today most Jewish weddings include one.

Scripture Readings

Some Christian communities include one or more readings from the Old or New Testaments of the Christian Bible. Jewish wedding ceremonies don't include any scriptural readings.

Common Ritual Ground for Jewish-Christian Weddings

Jewish-Christian weddings offer many opportunities for couples to honor both traditions and make their guests feel welcome. One way to do this is to have your officiant(s) open the ceremony with a reading acknowledging both faiths. InterfaithFamily has several examples that you can share with your officiant(s) for discussion.

Jewish-Christian weddings offer many opportunities for couples to honor both traditions and make their guests feel welcome.

There are several Christian and Jewish wedding rituals that emphasize the specific theology or beliefs of each faith, and some Jewish-Christian couples have reasons for wanting to include them. Often, however, Jewish-Christian couples seek out traditions from their respective faiths that are theologically "neutral" or universal. Here are several examples of Christian and Jewish wedding traditions that are well suited to creating a sense of universal welcome and respect.

From various Christian traditions:

Lighting of a Unity Candle. This tradition involves three candles. Usually, the mothers of the couple each light one of the taper candles. During the ceremony, the couple each take one of the taper candles and light the pillar candle together. InterfaithFamily has sample unity candle ceremonies.

The kiss and the pronouncement. The announcement that the two partners are now legally wed. And the kiss–everybody loves a joyful wedding kiss!

The assent of the congregation. This Christian tradition of asking the guests whether they support the couple.

Vows. Spoken vows, whether in a classic "I do" format or personally written and spoken by each partner to the other.

From Jewish tradition:

Breaking the glass. The groom (or sometimes either or both partners) concludes the ceremony by stomping on a glass.

There are several Christian and Jewish wedding rituals that emphasize the specific theology or beliefs of each faith.

Chuppah. The wedding canopy creates a cozy and often beautiful visual framing for the wedding.

Ketubah. Many interfaith couples now incorporate *ketubahs* into their wedding ceremony and have it read aloud. Contemporary interfaith *ketubahs* sometimes acknowledge both partners' faiths and their aspirations for how they seek to honor their traditions.

Circling. The circling of one member of the couple around the other, or each circling around the other, is a beautiful ritual that can be done with music playing, singing or in silence.

Potential Sensitive Issues in Planning a Jewish-Christian Wedding

Some potential sensitive issues are:

Use of names of God that are very specific to either Judaism or Christianity (like "Adonai" or "Jesus"). Some guests may feel uncomfortable due to their personal religious beliefs, a sense of historical persecution, ideas about closed community or a sense of exclusion. Referring to God as "God," "the Creator," "Source of Life," etc. can help bridge the different theologies. Clergy with interfaith wedding experience can help you plan the God-language of your ceremony.

Christian clergy sometimes tell guests "let us pray," ask them to bow their heads, or ask them to kneel. These are ritual moments that aren't familiar to many Jewish guests, and they may feel uncomfortable

Scriptural readings from the Hebrew Bible (a.k.a. the Old Testament) and the New Testament. Having a reading from both sources follows the pattern many Christian denominations use in Sunday services and at weddings. The main sensitivity arises for some Jewish guests who feel uncomfortable with New Testament texts that refer to Jesus or use other Christological language. And of course, there may be Christian guests who feel uncomfortable if there's no mention of Jesus at all. Each couple needs to decide what's right for them, and experienced clergy who are caring and sensitive to interfaith couples can help think these issues through with you.

Each couple needs to decide what's right for them, and experienced clergy who are caring and sensitive to interfaith couples can help think these issues through with you.

being asked to do these things. Talk through the elements of your ceremony with each other and your officiant(s) and consider giving your guests a little advanced notice of ceremonial elements that might be outside their comfort zones. You can do so by offering a brief explanation in your program or having your officiant(s) say something. Giving guests permission to participate or not in these kinds of ritual moments can also be helpful.

Jewish weddings often include a fair amount of Hebrew. Using Hebrew without any translation or explanation makes some guests feel left out or lost during the ceremony. Translations and little explanatory blurbs in your program can be very helpful. If you're working with a rabbi or cantor, ask them for a sense of how they work with Hebrew and how they help foster a feeling of inclusion for Christian guests and family members.

Jewish weddings often include the sharing of wine. Some Christian traditions don't allow the consumption of alcohol. Grape juice is a great substitute!

Section 6: Issues Specific to Jewish-Muslim, Jewish-Hindu and Jewish-Buddhist Weddings

Although the majority of interfaith weddings involving a Jew are Jewish-Christian weddings, the number of Jews marrying people of many different religions is growing. While we can't offer advice about all the possible combinations in this guide, here are a few resources for some of the more frequently occurring pairings.

Muslim-Jewish Weddings

As a religion of over a billion people, Islam incorporates a tremendous variety of cultural and religious practices. The best way to learn about the specific traditions, rituals and beliefs that are relevant to your wedding is for both partners to talk and learn together, and, whenever possible, to include family members in those conversations.

That said, there are some basic elements to most Muslim weddings. Just as there is a *ketubah* signing in traditional Jewish weddings, the signing of a wedding contract is a key element of Muslim weddings. There's a ceremony known as *nikah* in which a groom proposes to the bride in front of two witnesses and the bride publicly assents to be married three times.

The assumption in most online resources about Muslim weddings is that the couple is heterosexual. For same-sex weddings between Jewish-Muslim couples, finding supportive clergy and/or friends in both religious communities may be essential to planning your ceremony. One potentially helpful resource is the LGBTQI resource section of Muslims for Progressive Values' website.

Because of the ritual simplicity of most Muslim wedding ceremonies, there's lots of room for creative blending of Jewish and Islamic traditions. Some Muslim weddings include the recitation of the first chapter (*sura*) of the Qur'an, which is a brief set of verses asking God for guidance and offering devotion and commitment to God. One popular custom before the wedding, is for the bride to have a party in which her hands and feet are painted in henna: a custom also popular among Jews of Middle Eastern origin. Finally, InterfaithFamily has an archive of articles by and for Jewish-Muslim couples.

Hindu-Jewish Weddings

Classically Hindu weddings are officiated by a priest and can average three days, with different ceremonial elements taking place on successive days. In North America these weddings can be much shorter, though they are likely to last at least a few hours. As with Muslim weddings, many brides are painted in henna before the main wedding ceremonies. There are many customs and rituals involved in Hindu weddings, and the specifics of how both partners relate to their respective families may be a big factor in your wedding planning.

There are some Hindu wedding rituals that resemble Jewish ones, such as a wedding canopy and a ritual involving the couple circling around a fire seven times. Colorful traditional clothing and the symbolic offering of gifts to some of the Hindu gods are also aspects of the Hindu rites. Because Judaism is a monotheistic religion that traditionally frowns on "graven images" and making offerings to multiple deities, Jewish-Hindu couples might need to do some theological negotiating to plan a ceremony that works for them, and potentially for their respective families. Also, many rabbis, including those who co-officiate with clergy of other faiths, may have issues with polytheistic ceremonial elements of a wedding that blends Jewish and Hindu traditions. InterfaithFamily has archived several articles about Hindu-Jewish relationships.

Many rabbis, including those who co-officiate with clergy of other faiths, may have issues with polytheistic ceremonial elements of a wedding that blends Jewish and Hindu traditions.

As we become aware of good online resources for same-sex Jewish-Hindu couples, we'll be happy to add links here.

Buddhist-Jewish Weddings

Buddhism is practiced in dozens of countries by half a billion people. Buddhist wedding ceremonies contain little in terms of required rituals, but the specific culture of a Buddhist family can have many beautiful traditions and customs. A Buddhist wedding doesn't require a monk, nun or other clergy, though couples may visit with a monk or nun prior to their wedding for guidance.

Because simplicity characterizes the Buddhist religious elements of a wedding, there's lots of room for Jewish wedding customs and rituals to weave into a shared ceremony. If you're hoping to involve a rabbi, be aware that some rabbis are uncomfortable with the presence of statues representing the Buddha in ceremonies they are helping to officiate, because of traditional Judaism's prohibition on representing the Divine with images. InterfaithFamily has archived several articles about Buddhist-Jewish relationships.

As we become aware of good online resources for same-sex Jewish-Buddhist couples, we'll be happy to add links here.

Other Combinations!

The internet offers a wealth of resources describing the traditions and customs of weddings in every part of the world. Sometimes culture is an even bigger factor than religion. For example, Mexican or Japanese cultural wedding practices cover everything from clothing to music to food. While there can be complexity involved in planning your wedding, the opportunity for learning, curiosity, joy and excitement is remarkable. A number of websites offer general information about wedding traditions, including advice on etiquette for wedding guests.

A Final Thought: Should We Have *Two* Ceremonies?

Some couples decide to have separate wedding ceremonies in order to allow both of their traditions to be fully expressed. Sometimes couples do this if the family of one partner lives overseas and can't travel. Other couples do it if they find they aren't able to blend traditions into a single ceremony that satisfies them and/or other important people in their lives. This is a personal decision that comes with its own challenges and expenses.

Section 7: Managing Family Dynamics and Planning Your Wedding

Most families are complicated, and when two people decide to marry, they face important questions involving their relatives. A wedding brings two of these complex and sometimes messy family systems into relationship with each other.

Because families have histories, traditions and sometimes also misunderstandings or feuds, navigating your wedding planning with key family members in mind can require a lot of thought and energy. Planning a wedding is one of the first major joint projects a lot of couples take on together, and by communicating honestly and compassionately with each other, they can build strength and confidence.

When people of different faiths marry, sometimes the interfaith aspect of the

wedding adds more layers of complexity, and sometimes disagreements with family members about faith issues mask or distort other underlying family issues.

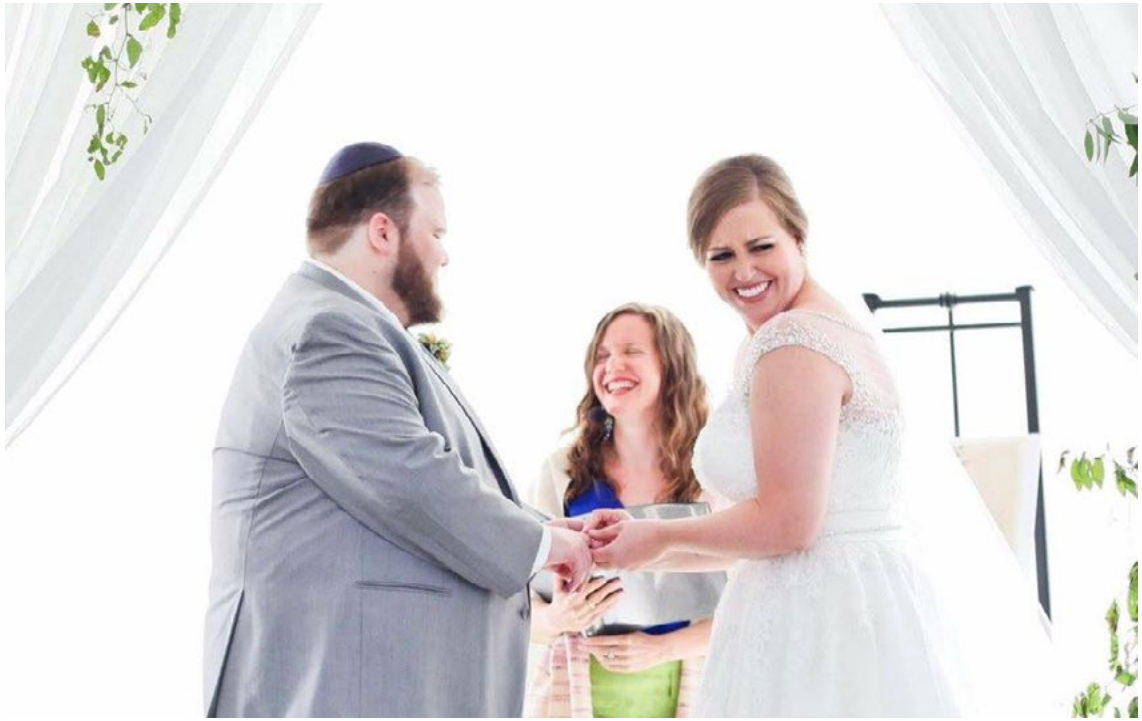
So what can you do to approach the family dynamics that are in play as you plan your wedding? Here are several strategies that may be helpful:

Make a "Family Issues and Strengths" Inventory Together

Chart out your extended families together and identify where the challenges are. If the challenges include issues related to your being an interfaith couple, make a note of that. Remember to also identify strengths within your families. Who are the relatives who could potentially help you navigate a tricky family situation? Who could you ask to be in your corner for advice?

Invite People to Get Involved Creatively

Gabrielle Kaplan-Mayer, the author of *The Creative Jewish Wedding Book*, encourages couples to think of the talents and creative skills their relatives have to offer, and, based on those skills, come up with projects that are part of the wedding itself. Baking, singing, jewelry making, embroidery, quilting and even puppetry can all be woven into a creative wedding ceremony or a festive meal following a wedding. If you know you have relatives with complex or conflicted feelings about your interfaith wedding, sometimes inviting them to contribute something to your wedding based on a talent of theirs can help create an emotional opening for them.



If you are "blending" families and bringing children from previous relationships into your marriage, it's important to offer meaningful opportunities for them to participate in the planning of your wedding and the ceremony itself. Pinterest has a great collection of ideas for including kids from previous relationships in weddings.

"Surrender" Parts of Your Wedding to Relatives

Some family members can't help but want to take control of your wedding. One strategy that sometimes creates a "win-win" in these situations is to offer to let this family member be in charge of a part of your wedding that isn't centrally important to you.

Patiently "Love Bomb" a Difficult Relative

InterfaithFamily has a great personal story describing a couple faced with a Jewish grandmother who was not initially accepting of their interfaith wedding, and who planned to skip it. Having her be present was deeply important to the couple. Accepting that they couldn't make her feelings change, they sought out repeated opportunities to spend time with her, and the partner who wasn't Jewish went on a charm offensive that ultimately worked. Sometimes being wanted and being loved patiently shifts the heart. Sometimes not. But sometimes it's worth a try. And remember, even a relative who doesn't attend a wedding can have a shift in feelings later.

Ch-ch-ch-changes...

Rabbi Julie Greenberg writes, "Families are constantly re-configuring." Cultivating acceptance, openness and compassionate understanding for the different ways family members initially respond to big changes in their families is good life prep for the greater reality that family life will bring many emotionally layered changes throughout your lives. Of course, even though patience and acceptance often help soothe family conflicts, sometimes it's important for couples to set boundaries with difficult family members.

Humility, not Humiliation

Humility is a good human quality, but humility is not the same as humiliation. If you face relatives who treat either of you with deliberate malice, or who seek to embarrass or shame either of you, sometimes the healthy thing to do is decide not to continue being treated that way. That might involve both of you respectfully telling the person how you feel or it might involve distancing yourselves. These are painful decisions. One of the most important things interfaith (or any) couples can do for each other is make their dignity and emotional security their top priority.

"Flexigidity"

Flexigidity is a term coined by Gidi Grinstein, and it basically means what it sounds like: the quality of being flexible about some things and rigid about other things at the same time. Couples who can work as a team to determine what they're willing to be flexible about and what they need to be firm about will find that that skill set is important for family life in general, and especially helpful in planning a wedding!

If you know you have relatives with complex or conflicted feelings about your interfaith wedding, sometimes inviting them to contribute something to your wedding based on a talent of theirs can help create an emotional opening for them.

Section 8: Pre-marital Counseling

Seeking out some wisdom and advice about healthy and successful marriages is good common sense, regardless of whether a couple is interfaith or not. Even if a couple rarely has disagreements or fights, marriage is such a big life decision that everyone planning a wedding can benefit from some pre-marital counseling, whether with a clergy person or a therapist.

Clergy tend to draw on their experiences working with couples and families at every stage of life, and they look to the core values of their traditions when they advise couples. Therapists tend to approach pre-marital counseling based on their training in psychology and family dynamics, as well as their experiences working with couples and families navigating different challenging situations.

Some of the questions couples typically explore in pre-marital counseling include:

How do you communicate, especially about sensitive or difficult topics? If either of you felt your marriage was in crisis, what would you do? Would you agree to go to couples' counseling in the future if either of you thought that was important?

How do you feel about having and raising children? What values do you want to teach them, and what religious choices do you want to make in raising them? If you face infertility, how do you feel about adoption? Are you aware of the importance of genetic testing for interfaith couples? (An easy way to get tested is with JScreen.) If either of you already have kids, how are you planning to co-parent them?

How do you both work through issues relating to finances, sex and tidiness in the home? These are areas that many couples find challenging at times.

Illness and death aren't fun to talk about, but they're important parts of family life. Are you going to set up a will and an advanced directive/living will?

What are your life goals? Where do they overlap and where might they be in tension?

How do each of you relate to your respective families, and what do you need to prepare for in that regard?

For further reading, Meg Keene has a great article on how she and her husband benefited from pre-marital counseling with her rabbi.

An Opportunity to Learn More about Each Other

For interfaith couples, pre-marital counseling is an opportunity to take the time to talk in depth about how you both feel about religion, spirituality, family and rituals. Discovering what you each think about these issues is important, but so is learning how you process these issues together. It takes practice to learn the communication and negotiation skills that are important for any successful marriage.

> "If we spent half as much time planning our marriages as we do planning our weddings, there'd be a lot less divorce."

If you're having a rabbi or other clergy person officiate your wedding, hopefully they will seek to involve you in some meaningful pre-marital counseling. If that's not a part of what they do in preparing for a wedding, finding another option for this important work is a good idea.

Finding Pre-Marital Counseling Resources Near You

InterfaithFamily offers some wonderful local resources in several of our Your Community cities. If you live in one of these metro areas, check out the web page associated with your city for information about courses, meet-ups, social gatherings and opportunities to be connected with other interfaith couples, including "mentors." Several of our regions offer Love and Religion classes for engaged or seriously dating couples. If you don't live in one of these cities, feel free to contact InterfaithFamily's national office at network@interfaithfamily.com if you have questions or are looking for local resources for pre-marital counseling. Many local Jewish Federations and Jewish Community Centers also offer excellent pre-marital workshops and resources for interfaith couples.

A final thought: One graduate of a recent Love and Religion class told an interviewer, "My grandfather used to have a saying: 'If we spent half as much time planning our marriages as we do planning our weddings, there'd be a lot less divorce.'" We agree, and wish you good fortune, wisdom and insight as you plan for your marriage as well as your wedding!

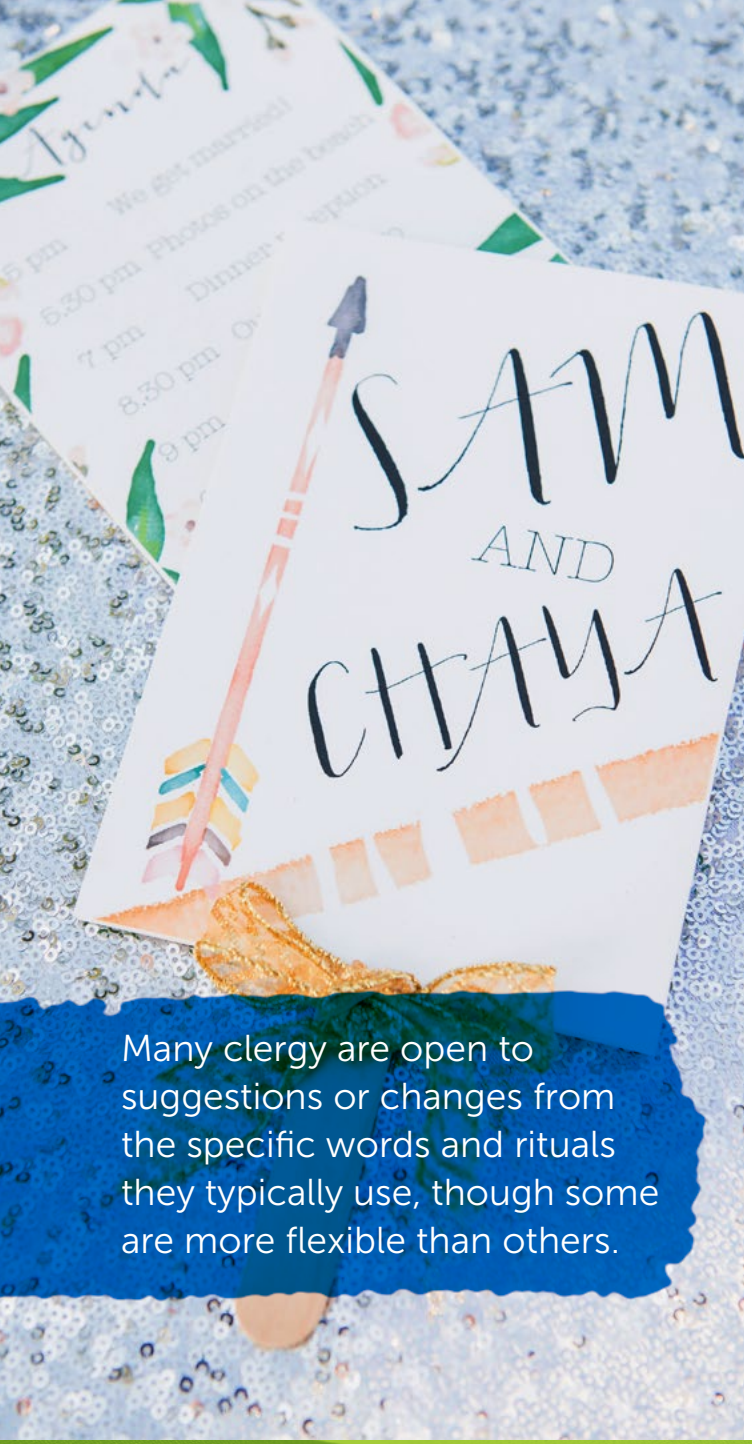
Section 9: Before the Wedding: Connecting with Other Couples

Connecting with other interfaith couples and families is a great way to share experiences, wisdom, questions and mutual support. Whether it's through a religious organization or through friends, finding people who understand some of the dynamics interfaith couples often navigate can help in many ways. Workshops and classes offered by synagogues, community centers and other religious communities can sometimes be terrific—the key is to make sure that whomever is offering these sessions is genuinely supportive and affirming of interfaith couples, and not pursuing a conversion agenda.

InterfaithFamily offers some wonderful local resources in several cities. If you live in one of the metro areas our offices serve, check out the web page associated with your city for information about courses, meet-ups, social gatherings and opportunities to be connected with other interfaith couples including "mentors." InterfaithFamily also offers practical and invaluable Love and Religion classes for seriously dating or engaged couples. We currently have offices in Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, San Francisco Bay Area and Washington, DC. If you don't live in one of these cities, feel free to contact InterfaithFamily's national office at network@interfaithfamily.com if you have questions or are looking for local resources for connecting with others.

Many local Jewish Federations and Jewish Community Centers also offer workshops, social events and classes for interfaith couples. More and more synagogues have social and support groups for interfaith couples too.

You can also connect online through InterfaithFamily. Visit our Facebook page or subscribe to our bi-weekly email newsletter. Finally, our outstanding Wedding Blog offers stories and experiences from other couples, and can help you discover ways to connect digitally.



Many clergy are open to suggestions or changes from the specific words and rituals they typically use, though some are more flexible than others.

Section 10: Sample Ceremonies and Definitions for Wedding Programs

We live in a time when couples have a huge range of choices about the words and rituals they can choose from in planning their wedding ceremony. If you're working with a rabbi, cantor or officiant of another faith, s/he will probably provide you with some specific ceremony texts and outlines to consider, as well as ideas for incorporating specific elements you may want. Many clergy are open to suggestions or changes from the specific words and rituals they typically use, though some are more flexible than others, so it's a good idea to find out early on if the person you're working with is a good match for your needs.

We have many samples of different parts of Jewish and interfaith wedding ceremonies that you may want to browse, including alternative English translations to some of the traditional Hebrew blessings.

We offer examples of different options for several components of the wedding ceremony, including:

- Blessings over the Wine
- Exchange of Rings
- The Seven Blessings: Alternative Wordings and Explanations
- Breaking the Glass

We also have examples of ceremony elements that come from outside Jewish tradition, but which are popular among many interfaith couples, such as:

- Lighting a Unity Candle
- Exchanging Vows

If you're looking for examples of full wedding ceremonies to explore, consider:

- A Jewish-Catholic Ceremony from Rabbi Devon Lerner
- The Knot's "Sample Wedding Ceremony Scripts"

There are also books with sample ceremonies, including:

Diamant, Anita. *The New Jewish Wedding, Revised.* (Scribner, 2001)

Foley, Michael P. *Wedding Rites: The Complete Guide to Traditional Vows, Music, Ceremonies, Blessings, and Interfaith Services.* (Eerdmans, 2008)

Kaplan-Meyer, Gabriele. *The Creative Jewish Wedding: A Hands-on Guide to New & Old Traditions, Ceremonies & Celebrations.* (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2004)

Lerner, Devon. *Celebrating Interfaith Marriages: Creating Your Jewish/Christian Ceremony.* (Owl Books, 1999)

Matlins, Stuart M., ed. *The Perfect Stranger's Guide to Wedding Ceremonies.* (Skylight Paths Publishing, 2000)

Seid, Judith. *God-Optional Judaism: Alternatives for Cultural Jews Who Love Their History, Heritage and Community* (Citadel Press, 2001) (Specifically the chapter on weddings, p. 165–179)

Finally, we also have a PDF you can download that includes many poems and readings from different traditions; suggested orders of service; and examples of short definitions of Jewish ceremonial elements designed for use in wedding programs.

You can also always ask an officiant you're considering working with if they would be willing to show you examples of ceremonies or rituals that they have used in the past.