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Weddings

for the interfaith couple

18 DOORS
Unlocking Jewish

weddings



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Law & Traditions

The rabbis of long ago, who codified Jewish law, made it very easy for Jewish couples to be joined in marriage. Only four things are necessary: the exchange of an item worth more than a few cents (the ring), the recitation of a ritual formula of consecration, two witnesses and the physical consummation of the partnership.

All the rest are traditions! The wedding canopy (*chuppah*), seven wedding blessings, breaking of the glass, wine, music, shouting “mazel tov!” and the rabbi or cantor leading the blessings are all optional.

The entire legal wedding service would fill only a page or two. The optional traditions are what give the ceremony color and flavor. In many communities, the customs or traditions have become so emotionally meaningful that many assume they are essential.

Before The Ceremony

Ketubah ♥

The *ketubah* is a legal contract, pure and simple. In its original form, it does not mention love, the establishment of a Jewish home or even God.

It was a contract whereby the groom promised, in front of two witnesses, to support the bride. The *ketubah* was then given to the bride as a guarantee of that promise.

Some consider it to be an early feminist document, since giving rights to women was not common in other first century cultures. It may also have contributed to the strength of the Jewish family, because it made abandonment of a wife a costly decision.

Modern *ketubot* (plural of *ketubah*) often include two parallel declarations, in both Hebrew and English, of the couple’s commitment to each other and a joint declaration of the couple’s connection to God, Torah and the Jewish people. LGBT *ketubot* use gender appropriate language instead of “bride and groom,” and interfaith *ketubot* may honor the traditions and values of both families’ backgrounds.

Because Judaism also has a tradition of making every commandment as beautiful as possible, modern *ketubot* are illuminated and decorated in any number of ways, including watercolors, papercutting, silk screening or lithography.

The signing of the *ketubah* may take place in a private corner just before the ceremony, or be integrated into the wedding ceremony.

The Ceremony

Symbolism ♥

On one level, every partnership in Judaism is modeled on the covenant between God and the Jewish people. Each celebrates the choice to set someone or something apart as special, to make it consecrated or holy - *kadosh* in Hebrew.

The Hebrew word for marriage is *kiddushin*, meaning “sanctification,” from the same root word as “holy.” The person who reads the wedding blessings is known as the *mesader kiddushin*, the one who “orders” (from the same Hebrew word for “*seder*,” the “order” followed on Passover) the ceremony of sanctification. The idea of sanctification, of setting someone apart, declaring them special for you, invested with value and meaning, is the foundation of a Jewish wedding ceremony.

Bedeken ♥

Bedeken means “covering” in Yiddish. This custom recalls the biblical story of Jacob, who found that his bride was not Rachel but her sister, Leah. From that story, the custom emerged of having the groom place the veil on his bride, so that he could see her face and ensure he was marrying the right person. Nowadays, only after signing the ketubah does the groom cover his bride’s face with a veil symbolizing that he chooses her for more than her beauty. Some couples choose to “cover” the groom as well, to create a more egalitarian moment of seeing, confirming and choosing. The bride might help her groom put on a *tallit* (prayer shawl) or *kittel* (Yiddish for “robe,” a white robe that is worn by Jews of Eastern European descent by married men on certain holidays such as Yom Kippur and then serves as a burial shroud). Same-gender couples may choose to cover each other with the same garment (two veils, two kittels) or a combination thereof.

Raising the Chuppah ♥

Like the biblical tent of Abraham and Sarah, the open sides of the chuppah symbolize the openness of the couple’s home and recognize that every Jewish home is part of a community.

A chuppah consists of fabric supported by four poles. Some couples choose to use a tallit or quilt; others choose fabric that compliments the wedding’s decoration scheme. The chuppah may be stationary or held by friends or family members. Holding the chuppah is a way for others to show their support of the marriage by keeping the chuppah over the heads of the wedding party.

At the start of the wedding ceremony, parents lead their son or daughter to the chuppah. The parents may stand beneath it or to the side, demonstrating that weddings are the union of families as well as the couple; their message of support is not diminished if they choose to sit down! For most of the ceremony, the couple stands beneath the chuppah, creating an island of sanctified space. Some couples go under the chuppah only after circling (see below), while others spend the whole ceremony under the chuppah.

Circling ♥

There is a custom of the bride circling her groom. It was believed that, prior to the wedding, the bride’s allegiance was to her parents; after the wedding, it shifts to her partner. The circling of the groom symbolized that shifting priority, from family to husband. In recent times, the custom was discarded

by some who thought it was a display of the bride’s subservience to her husband. Some now view the custom as the creation of an invisible wall or a symbolic circle of intimacy. Some couples choose to circle each other to equalize the custom, with both partners circling the other seven times or each partner circling the other three times with a mutual turn, such as a do-si-do, for the seventh circle.

The Wedding Ceremony ♥

The traditional Jewish wedding ceremony includes two sections that express the holiness of the couple’s decision to marry. The betrothal blessing (*birkat erusin* in Hebrew) is preceded by a blessing over the wine.

In a traditional Jewish wedding, solid gold or silver rings representing the wholeness and harmony of the relationship are exchanged with the words,

..... ♥ ***You are consecrated to me,
with this ring,*** ♥
in accordance with the laws of Moses and [the people of] Israel.

This statement also confers the seal of Jewish authenticity by affirming that the wedding is within the Jewish legal code. Interfaith couples often use different formulas such as,

..... ♥ ***With this ring, you are consecrated to me
as my husband/wife/spouse/partner*** ♥
in accordance with the law of God

or,

..... ♥ ***You are consecrated to me
in love and truth.*** ♥

Others may choose Song of Songs (6:3) and say,

..... ♥ ***I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine.*** ♥

The recitation of seven wedding blessings recapitulates the history of God’s relationship to the world. The first four blessings celebrate God the creator by blessing wine, the creation of all things, the creation of people and people having been created in God’s image. The couple shares a cup of wine for the first time as they rejoice in their love. The last three blessings speak of celebrating community; granting joy to the new couple; and the creation of joy and gladness, groom and bride, merriment and song, dance and delight, love and harmony, peace and friendship. It is customary for the happy section of the seventh blessing to be sung out by everyone in attendance.

The Jewish marriage is an act of mutual free will, so there is no “giving away” of the bride. There is no place for “I do,” nor are there any promises “to have and to hold, to honor and obey.”

Breaking the Glass

The ceremony concludes with the breaking of a glass. Some see it as reminder of the destruction of the ancient Temple of Jerusalem, or of the need to recall that marriage is as fragile as glass. Others claim it is a vestige of a medieval custom that scared off evil spirits. Yet another reason is based in the Talmud, that joy must always be tempered. Whatever the interpretation, the shattering of the glass is always accompanied by shouts of “*mazel tov*” or “congratulations!” The commitment may also be sealed with a kiss at this point, marking the end of the marriage ceremony.

After The Ceremony

Yichud

A Hebrew word, *yichud* means both “togetherness” and “seclusion.” After the ceremony, but before the reception, Jews of Eastern European descent have a custom of the couple taking time apart from their guests. Traditionally, the reason for this period of privacy, held in a room away from others, was to allow the couple to fulfill the fourth requirement for a wedding – consummation. Today, this no longer takes place in the yichud room, but couples still appreciate the opportunity to spend time alone, to catch their breath and reflect on the ceremony before moving into the reception.

The Reception

The purpose of the party is to increase the joy of the couple since there is a commandment to make the couple smile on their wedding day. This commandment is often fulfilled through the custom of *shnick*, a Yiddish word meaning “piece” (as in, “performing a piece”). In the middle of the celebratory dancing, guests will bring chairs to the dance floor, sit the couple down and entertain them with acts of juggling, mime, dancing and silly tricks of all kinds. Circle dancing and line dancing bring everyone onto the floor in simple steps with the goal of dancing with the bride and the groom. The best known custom is when the couple (and their parents) are lifted up on chairs in the midst of the circles of dancers.

Questions To Consider Before Meeting With An Officiant

Now that you know that a Jewish wedding does not need a rabbi or cantor, ask yourself what personal religious or spiritual experiences or family history leads you to want there to be clergy participation at your wedding celebration.

- ♥ What do you want to accomplish by having a Jewish wedding?
 - ♥ What will be lost if there is no clergy?
 - ♥ How comfortable are you with ritual, prayer and language about God?
 - ♥ How comfortable are you with Hebrew and the traditional Jewish wedding blessings?
 - ♥ What are some of the challenges you anticipate in preparing your ceremony with the inclusion of clergy?
 - ♥ What role are you planning for religion and this clergy in your family’s future?

Recommendations For A Successful Marriage

Remember, the wedding will fly by in a matter of hours while your marriage is meant to last a lifetime.

Start with introspection.

Each one of you needs to think about

your own religious and ethnic identity, your values and your heritage.

Consider the meaning that your own traditions and community gave to your life.

Which do you want to continue?

What do you want to pass on?

1 Imagine the future and how you picture yourselves as a couple and as a family. What rituals will celebrate the birth of your children? What ceremonies and traditions will support you when you grieve? How will you relate to extended family at holiday time?

2 Learn about each other’s background. Encourage your partner to share their history. Attend religious events and family celebrations together to experience each other’s tradition firsthand. You will need to make religious decisions for your new family; these experiences and discussions should help inform your decisions.

3 Take a workshop. Interfaith groups provide support and broaden your perspective. Sometimes just hearing others (besides one’s partner) express themselves can be enlightening. You will meet other couples who share your experience and may have suggestions that are useful.

4 Keep the lines of communication open with your parents. Let them know how much thought you are giving to your decisions. Reassure them that their values will be passed on, regardless of the decisions made, and that they will be an important part of your future.

5 Expect changes in yourself and your partner over time. People may agree to things at one stage of their life that don’t feel comfortable later on. Births and deaths may bring up feelings that weren’t predictable. Even though it can be difficult, talking openly and honestly now, and in years to come, will be important. Better to have the hard discussions now than later.

We offer some suggestions for you to consider as you envision your life together...
check out our [Wedding Resources Page](#) for other useful info!

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18Doors mission is to empower people in interfaith relationships— individuals, couples, families and their children— to make Jewish choices, and to encourage Jewish communities to welcome them.

18Doors offers consultation and resources for synagogues, agencies and schools of all affiliations to assist them in their welcome and engagement of interfaith families and all those who are interested in exploring Judaism.

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