

Judaism

History, Belief and Practice

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CHAPTER 84

Marriage

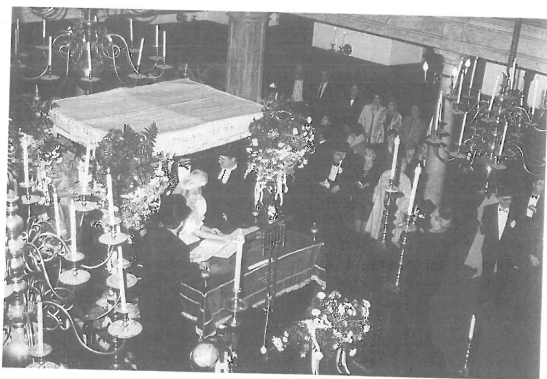


Figure 84 Bride and groom under the huppah (marriage canopy) at Bevis Marks, London. Copyright, David Rose, London.

According to tradition, marriage is God's plan for humanity, as illustrated by the story of Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis. In the Jewish faith it is viewed as a sacred bond as well as a means to personal fulfillment. It is more than a legal contract, rather an institution with cosmic significance, legitimized through divine authority. The purpose of marriage is to build a home, create a family and thereby perpetuate society. Initially Jews were allowed to have more than one wife, but this was banned in Ashkenazi countries with the decree of Rabbenu Gershom in 1000. In

modern society, all Jewish communities – Sephardic and Ashkenazic – followed this ruling.

In the Bible marriages were arranged by fathers: Abraham, for example, sent his servant to find a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24:10–53), and Judah arranged the marriage of his first-born son (Gen. 38:6). When the proposal of marriage was accepted by the girl's father (or elder brother in his absence), the nature and amount of the *mo'har* (payment by the groom) was agreed. By Second Temple times, there was a degree of choice in the selection of a bride – on 15th of *Av*

and the Day of Atonement, young men could select their brides from among the girls dancing in the vineyards.

According to tradition, a period of engagement preceded marriage itself. The ceremony was a seven-day occasion for celebration during which love songs were sung in praise of the bride. In the talmudic period a major development occurred concerning the *mohar* – since it could be used by the father of the bride, a wife could become penniless if her husband divorced or predeceased her. As a result the *mohar* evolved into the formulation of a marriage document (*ketubah*) which gave protection to the bride. In addition, the act of marriage changed from being a personal civil procedure to a public religious ceremony which required the presence of a *minyan* (quorum) and the recitation of prayers.

In Biblical and talmudic times marriage occurred in two stages: betrothal and *Nissuin*.

1. Betrothal: The concept of betrothal has two stages: (a) the commitment of a couple to marry as well as the terms of financial obligations (*shiddukhin*), and (b) a ceremony establishing a nuptial relationship independent of the wedding ceremony (*kiddushin* or *erusin*). An early instance of *shiddukhin* is found in Genesis 34 where the term '*mohar*' is used for a sum of money the father of the groom is to pay the father of the bride. During the *talmudic* period, this term was not used; instead the *Talmud* stipulates that negotiations should take place between the respective parents concerning financial obligations. The term for such negotiations is *shiddukhin* (an Aramaic word meaning 'tranquillity'). The terms agreed upon were written in a document called a *shetar pesika*; the amount given to the son was called *nedunyah*. From the medieval period to the present the prenuptial agreement was itself divided into two stages: a verbal understanding (*vort*) was made, followed by a ceremony (*kinyan*) symbolizing the acceptance of the obligation to marry. This normally occurred at a meal; the act of accepting was accomplished by taking an object (usually the corner of a handkerchief). The second stage involved the writing in a document (*tenaim*) of the terms undertaken. In addition, the *tenaim* designated the date and place of the nuptial ceremony. The ceremony of the *tenaim* concludes with the mothers of the bride and

groom breaking a pottery dish. This ceremony is frequently celebrated with a dinner, and during the following period the bride and groom exchange gifts.

In the Bible the betrothal or nuptial ceremony which takes place prior to the wedding is referred to as '*erusin*': in the rabbinic period the sages who outlined this procedure called it *kiddushin* to indicate that the bride is forbidden to all men except her husband. According to the *Mishnah*, the bride could be acquired in marriage in three ways: by money, deed or intercourse. Traditionally the method involved placing a ring on the bride's finger. At this stage the groom declared: 'Behold, you are consecrated unto me with this ring according to the law of Moses and of Israel.' Then the blessing over wine was recited:

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has hallowed us by your commandments, and has commanded us concerning forbidden marriages; who has forbidden unto us those who are betrothed, but has sanctioned unto us such as are wedded unto us by the rite of the nuptial canopy and the sacred covenant of wedlock.

After this ceremony the bride continued to remain in her father's house until the stage of *nissuin*.

2. *Nissuin*: During the second stage of the procedure for marriage the seven blessings (*sheva berakhoi*) are recited:

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.
 . . . Who has created all things to your glory.
 . . . Creator of man.
 Who has made man in your image, after your likeness . . .
 . . . made the who was barren (Zion) be glad and exult when her children are gathered within her in joy. Blessed are you, O Lord, who makes Zion joyful through her children.
 O make these loved companions greatly to rejoice, even as of old you did gladden your creatures in the Garden of Eden. Blessed are you, O Lord, who makes bridegroom and bride to rejoice.

... Who has created joy and gladness, bridegroom and bride, mirth and exultation, pleasure and delight, love, brotherhood, peace and fellowship. Soon may there be heard in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, the voice of joy and gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the happy sound of bridegrooms from their canopies, and of youths from their feasts of song. Blessed are you, O Lord, who makes the bridegroom to rejoice with the bride.

From the Middle Ages, it became customary for Ashkenazi Jewish communities to postpone the betrothal ceremony until immediately prior to the *nissuin* wedding ceremony – this also became customary among Sephardi Jews. In Hasidic communities, however, the traditional *tenaim* ceremony is still usually observed.

According to Jewish law, a marriage cannot be contracted in certain instances. Prohibited marriages are divided into two classes: permanent and temporary.

1. Permanent prohibitions: Leviticus Chapters 18 and 20 outline types of relationships between relatives which are not permitted for marriage, including a man's parents, stepmother, sister, granddaughter, aunt, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, stepdaughter, step-granddaughter, and wife's sister (during his wife's lifetime). Other prohibited liaisons include the following cases: (a) if a husband has divorced his wife and she remarried and was subsequently divorced or became a widow, he may not remarry her; (b) a wife who had willingly committed adultery is prohibited to her husband as well as the adulterer. If she was raped she is prohibited to her husband if he is a priest (*Cohen*); (c) a woman is not allowed to marry anyone who represented her in her divorce case or witnessed her husband's death; (d) a priest is not allowed to marry a divorcee, a widow, or a harlot; (e) a *mamzer* (child of an illegitimate or incestuous relationship) may not marry a Jewish man or woman but only a fellow *mamzer* or a convert; (f) mixed marriage is forbidden.

2. Temporary prohibitions: Some marriages are prohibited only for limited periods such as: (a) a widow or divorcee may not remarry within ninety days of her

husband's death or after receiving a bill of divorce (*get*); (b) a person may not marry within the thirty-day period of mourning; a widower must wait until three festivals have occurred (unless he has no children or he has young children who need the care of a mother); one is not allowed to marry a pregnant woman, or a nursing woman until the child is twenty-four months; (c) a woman may not marry for a third time if her two successive husbands died due to accidents; (d) a married woman is not allowed to marry a second husband; she may only do so if she receives a bill of divorce.

Prior to the wedding itself, the bride is to immerse herself in a ritual bath (*mikveh*) usually on the evening before the ceremony. To facilitate this the wedding date is determined so that it does not occur during her time of menstruation, or the following week. In some Sephardi and Eastern communities this event is a public celebration. In most Sephardi communities a special celebration for the bride also takes place on the evening of the wedding. Referred to as the *hinnah*, women friends and family come to the house of the bride, whose hands are painted with red henna. Yemeni women dress the bride in splendid clothes and jewellery to the accompaniment of singing, and then apply the henna. The aim of this ceremony is to ward off the evil eye.

On the Sabbath before the wedding in Ashkenazi communities, the groom is called to the reading of the Law and is showered with candies during the reading of the Torah blessings. In Sephardi and Eastern communities, the groom's Sabbath takes place on the Sabbath after the wedding. During the ceremony itself it is customary to shower the couple with rice and confetti. In some Ashkenazi circles, the bride when reaching the marriage canopy (*huppah*) is led around the groom seven times. The ceremony itself can be held anywhere, but from the Middle Ages the synagogue or synagogue courtyard was commonly used. It also became customary to hold it in the open air to symbolize God's promise to Abraham to make his descendants as numerous as the stars. Eventually, however, it has become customary to hold the ceremony in a hall.

In modern times the Orthodox wedding ceremony normally follows a uniform pattern based on traditional law. Normally the groom signs the *ketubah*. If this takes place before evening, the afternoon service

takes place and the groom who is fasting recites the *Yom Kippur* confession. He is then led to the bride and covers her face with her veil; the couple are led next to the marriage canopy (*huppah*) with their parents accompanying the groom and the bride (or the fathers according to custom those leading the couple carry lighted candles. When the participants are under the canopy the rabbi recites the blessing over wine and the *erusin* blessing. Then the bride and groom drink from the cup. The groom then recites the traditional formula: 'Behold you are consecrated unto me with this ring according to the law of Moses and of Israel'. He then puts the ring on the bride's right index finger.

To demonstrate that the act of marriage consists of two ceremonies, the *ketubah* is read prior to the *nissuin* ceremony. The seven blessings are then recited over a second cup of wine. The ceremony concludes with the groom stepping on a glass and breaking it. After the ceremony the bride and groom are led into a private room for *yibud* (seclusion). At the end of the wedding meal, the Grace after Meals is recited,

and is followed by another reading of the Seven Blessings.

Within Conservative and Reform Judaism the wedding service follows this traditional pattern with varying alterations. In most cases the custom of the groom covering the bride's face before the ceremony, the procession to the *huppah* with candles, and the *yibud* observance are omitted. In addition both movements have introduced a double ring ceremony in which the bride also puts a ring on the groom's finger (either with or without reciting the relevant blessing). The Reform ceremony is frequently accompanied by additional readings.

In the Orthodox community, the laws of ritual purity (*niddah*) are observed. Sexual intercourse even between married couples may only take place when the woman is ritually clean. During her menstrual period and for seven full days afterwards, a woman is forbidden to her husband. At the end of that time she must visit the ritual bath (*mikveh*) and immerse herself completely. Then they can resume marital relations. These laws are generally ignored by the non-Orthodox.

SOURCES

Wedding Ceremony

After the rabbi takes his place under the *huppah*, the bridegroom is led by his father and mother to the *huppah*. The rabbi then says:

May he who cometh be blessed.
He who is supremely mighty;
He who is supremely praised;
He who is supremely great;
May He bless this bridegroom and bride.

After the bride is led by her parents to the *huppah*, the rabbi says:

May she who cometh be blessed.
Mighty is our God.
Auspicious signs, and good fortune,
Praiseworthy is the bridegroom.
Praiseworthy and handsome is the bride.

The rabbi then fills a goblet of wine, and recites two benedictions:

Praised be Thou, O Lord our God, king of the universe, who hast created the fruit of the vine.

Praised be Thou, O Lord our God, king of the universe, who hast sanctified us with thy commandments, and hast commanded us concerning forbidden connections, and hast forbidden us those who are merely betrothed, but hast allowed to us those lawfully married to us through *huppah* and betrothal. Praised be Thou, O Lord our God, who sanctifiest Thy people Israel through *huppah* and betrothal.

The bride and bridegroom drink from the winecup. The rabbi then says to the groom:

... (*name of groom*): Do you of your own free will and consent, take ... (*name of bride*) to be your wife; and do you promise to love, honour and cherish her throughout life. If so, answer yes.

The rabbi then says to the bride:

... (*name of bride*): Do you of your own free will and consent, take ... (*name of groom*) to be your husband, and do you promise to love, honour and cherish him throughout life? If so, answer yes.

The rabbi then appoints two witnesses, who must not be related to either the groom or the bride, to witness the betrothal.

Rabbi to groom:

You will now betroth the bride, in the presence of these two witnesses, by placing this ring upon the forefinger of her right hand, and say to her in Hebrew:

Hare at Mekudeshet Li Betabaat Zu, Kedat Moseh Veyisrael

Behold, thou art betrothed to me with this ring, in accordance with the Law of Moses and Israel.

(In H, pp. 15-17)

Ketubah

According to tradition, the *ketubah* is read during the wedding ceremony:

On the (first) day of the week, the ... day of the month ... in the year five thousand, six hundred and ... since the creation of the world, the era according to which we are accustomed to reckon here in the city of (*name of city, state and country*), how (*name of bridegroom*), son of (*name of father*), surnamed (*family name*), said to this virgin (*name of bride*), daughter of (*name of father*), surnamed (*family name*): 'Be thou my wife according to the law of Moses and Israel, and I will cherish, honour, support and maintain thee in accordance with the custom of Jewish husbands who cherish, honour, support and maintain their wives in truth. And I herewith make for thee the settlement of virgins, two hundred silver *zuzim*, which belongs to thee, according to the law of Moses and Israel; and I will also give thee) thy food, clothing and necessities, and live with thee as husband and wife according to universal custom.' And Miss (*name of bride*), this virgin, consented and became his wife. The wedding outfit that she brought unto him from her father's house, in silver, gold, valuables, wearing apparel, house furniture, and bedclothes, all this (*name of bridegroom*), the said bridegroom accepted in the sum of one hundred silver pieces, and (*name of bridegroom*), the bridegroom, consented to increase this amount from his own property with the sum of one hundred silver pieces, making in all two hundred silver pieces. And thus said (*name of bridegroom*), the bridegroom: 'The responsibility of this marriage

contract, of this wedding outfit, and of this additional sum, I take upon myself and my heirs after me, so that they shall be paid from the best part of my property and possession that I have beneath the whole heaven, that which I now possess or may hereafter acquire. All my property, real and personal, even the mantle on my shoulders, shall be mortgaged to secure the payment of this marriage contract, of the wedding outfit, and of the addition made thereto, during my lifetime and after my death, from the present day and forever.' (*Name of bridegroom*), the bridegroom, has taken upon himself the responsibility of this marriage contract, of this wedding outfit and the addition made thereto,

according to the restrictive usages of all marriage contracts and the additions thereto made for the daughters of Israel, in accordance with the institution of our sages of blessed memory. It is not to be regarded as a mere forfeiture without consideration or as a mere formula of a document. We have followed the legal formality of symbolic delivery between (*name of bridegroom*), the son of . . . , the bridegroom, and (*name of bride*), the daughter of . . . , this virgin, and we have used a garment legally fit for the purpose, to strengthen all that is stated above.

(In H, pp. 17–20)

DISCUSSION

1. In what ways is Jewish marriage perceived as vital to Jewish survival?
2. Has intermarriage threatened the future of Judaism?

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