

Title: Jewish Weddings

Learning Objective: To explore how Jewish people celebrate marriage **and why**



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 (day of atonement) 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.



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. Jewish tradition likens the couple to a queen and king. The kallah will be 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. It is reminiscent of Rebecca covering her face before marrying Isaac (Genesis ch. 29).

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.



Chuppah

The wedding ceremony takes place under the chuppah (canopy), symbol of the home that the new couple will build together. 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.



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 the bride's right hand. According to Jewish law, this is the central moment of the wedding ceremony, and at this point the couple is fully married.



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.



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."

