

The Spiritual Journey of *Kiddushin*

# A Jewish Wedding

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**A Jewish wedding is not just a ceremony.  
It is a journey.  
Nor is the rabbi an "officiant".  
Rather, the rabbi you choose to accompany you on this journey  
is a facilitator and guide.**

The experience of a Jewish wedding is one of transformation. Two people enter the *Huppah*, the wedding canopy, as friends and lovers. In the course of their experience under the *Huppah*, their souls bond to each other in a way that cannot be described until it is experienced. They emerge as transformed beings: sacred to one another as *Hatan* and *Kallah*, bridegroom and bride.

The medium of this transformation is the magic of the ceremony. Like all powerful rituals, the wedding ceremony is a holistic event. One can think of the ceremony as a symphony of successive movements: the intensity builds, peaks and, only when we are ready, subsides gently allowing us to return to the world. We re-enter the world filled with the high of the peak experience and glowing with the charge it created in us.

In a wedding, there is no audience: all are participants and everyone is touched and changed.

For the *Hatan* and *Kallah*, the changes are deep and profound.

No "description of the ceremony" can adequately convey the power of this journey.

What follows is a roadmap.

# The Wedding Begins Before the Ceremony Starts

## **Pre-marital documents: *Tenaim***

*Tenaim* are literally betrothal documents. Traditionally they functioned in the way legal "pre-nups" would today, addressing a host of financial issues that had to be clarified so that both partners to the new relationship, and their families, would know where they stood. Today, all couples who come into a marriage with assets, financial obligations or debts should consult a legal specialist to learn what can happen when their marriage and their finances meet. Conversations about money may seem like an unnecessary detour when you are in love and planning a wedding, but embarking on a frank, honest conversation and making clear decisions is a great experience of trust and caring.

These days, lawyers handle the financial "pre-nups" and *tenaim* are often more about the emotional contract of your marriage - the needs and expectations you bring, the intentions you have, and the assumptions they are based on. Exploring these with your partner, and writing them down as an emotional and spiritual "pre-marital" agreement can be an exciting and challenging project. As your rabbi, I can be a helpful guide so that this pre-wedding process helps you nourish and deepen your relationship.

Note: There are also important contemporary *tenaim* documents that use the traditional language of Jewish legal process (halacha) to render the rights of men and women more equal under Jewish law. These can be valuable for many reasons beyond the scope of this booklet, but I will be happy to work on this with you.

## **A few days before the *Huppah*: *Mikvah***

*Mikvah* is our people's ancient ritual of re-birthing and renewal, and is a profound experience. Those doing *mikvah* submerge fully in a pool of "living waters." These welcoming waters invite you to acknowledge, thank and let go of the past, to float free and be lovingly held in the maternal waters of Creation, the "womb waters" of God. *Mikvah* is often included by bridegroom and bride in their personal preparations for their wedding. Preparing one's self for the experience of *mikvah* is a special experience and sensitive guidance can be very helpful,

## **Before the *Huppah*: Signing the *Ketubah***

The signing of a *ketubah*, (Jewish wedding contract) is an ancient practice designed to protect certain rights of a woman in marriage. Ancient Middle-Eastern marriage and divorce law is not egalitarian. There are conditions that favor the woman, but many favor the man. The *ketubah* is an early rabbinic formula for defining the rights and responsibilities of both partners, and strengthening the woman's status financially. The traditional document is in Aramaic, a sister language to Hebrew, which was the vernacular of the time. The full traditional *ketubah* is required as legally valid documentation of a marriage (although a publically established marriage is not invalidated by the absence of a *ketubah*).

In addition to *ketubot* (plural of *ketubah*) with the traditional Aramaic text, you will see *ketubot* with modernized Hebrew texts. Some are close to the original in content, others depart dramatically, especially in favor of meeting contemporary desire for fully egalitarian language. Both traditional and modern *ketubot* will sometimes have English add-on sections, which may freely translate parts of the original and also may add further sentiments.

The decision whether to choose the traditional or a modernized text requires thought and discussion.

Once you have decided on the text, choosing the *ketubah* that will be personalized for you comes next. The creation of exquisite illuminated manuscript *ketubot* has been an art-form for centuries. Contemporary *ketubah* artists make *ketubot* in all price ranges. You can choose a simple lithograph or commission a majestic work of art.

**Filling in the *ketubah*:** A *ketubah* is a customized document. The Hebrew names of the bride (the *Kallah*) and groom (the *Hatan*), the Hebrew date of the marriage, and other specific information is written into the body of the text. One of my jobs as rabbi is to see that all the necessary information is obtained and filled in correctly. This should all be done weeks before the wedding, so that the *ketubah* is complete and ready for signing before the ceremony.

**The Signing of the *Ketubah*:** The *ketubah* is customarily signed in the hours before the ceremony. I like to invite the *Hatan* and the *Kallah* to be present, along with friends and family who would like to witness this important event. Signing the *ketubah* requires that two (traditionally male) witnesses be chosen. The witnesses must know and be able to write their FULL Hebrew name (I can provide assistance with spelling and writing), and neither may be related to either the *Hatan* or the *Kallah*.

Before the *ketubah* is signed, I explain what it is to the guests, and then ask the *Hatan* if he is willing to assume the obligations stated in it. The *Hatan* accepts his obligation to the *ketubah* by taking a handkerchief or a *kipah* from my hand in the full view of the witnesses. This act of "taking hold" is called *kinyan*, and is the traditional method of making an agreement binding. The witnesses then sign the *ketubah* in the space provided,

### ***Kabbalat Panim: A time for meeting and receiving.***

After the *ketubah* is signed, I ask all but the *Hatan*, *Kallah*, and their parents to leave and rejoin the other guests. I invite the couple and their parents to be seated, and explain that I have chosen to create a brief moment of tranquility for them so that something important can happen. For parents, the marriage of their children is as important an event as the wedding is for the couple: but it is a different event. It is essential to acknowledge this and to give the parents the precious (and sadly often overlooked) opportunity to send their children to the *Huppah* with their personal blessings. This is an time for sharing, and sometimes for a measure of reconciliation if the road has been rocky. I use my skills as a trained family therapist to make this a positive and emotionally successful experience. Adult children and other relatives can also be included in this gathering.

### ***Bedeken***

The *bedeken* is the traditional ceremony of "veiling the bride." There are many elaborate traditional customs surrounding the *bedeken*. One way that I like to use this ceremony is as an opportunity for the *Hatan* and *Kallah* to look deeply at each other before they separate to join their respective processions. The *bedeken* originated because *Hatan* and *Kallah* need to truly see each other before walking to the *Huppah*. This is true whether the *Hatan* and *Kallah* have been lovers for years, or whether they are seeing each other for the first time. The depth of the "seeing" that occurs in the moments before *Huppah* is unparalleled. With good guidance, this act of seeing can be a profound experience.

## **Bride's and Groom's "Tish"**

In some more traditional communities and families it is common for the *Hatan* and *Kallah* to host a men's festive gathering around the groom, and a women's gathering around the bride, at which there is pre-huppah feasting, singing and sharing. This is entirely optional, but should you wish, we can discuss how to create and plan this kind of extended pre-huppah party.

## **The Processional and the *Huppah***

### **Raising the *Huppah***

Before the *Hatan* (and his escorts) begin their walk to the *Huppah*, the *Huppah* itself must be raised, if it is not a free-standing structure. (There are many ways to make a *Huppah*. The most traditional is a large *tallis* attached at its four corners to long poles, each of which is hand held. However, any fabric of your choice can serve as the *Huppah*, and designing a *Huppah* cloth can be an exciting project for the couple or friends.)

The *Huppah* and poles can be walked forward as the first event of the processional, or it can be up front and raised by the pole-holders who come forward to do so. In either case, if the *Huppah* is not free-standing, the four pole holders and I must practice setting the *Huppah* up before the ceremony begins. I usually arrive an hour before the ceremony to meet the *Huppah* holders first so that there will be no fumbling later.

When the *Huppah* is raised, I begin the ceremony with a few words of welcome and introduction. I share some of the traditional teachings about *Huppah* (and *tallis*, if one is used). My style of teaching and sharing is an inviting and participatory one. I begin by setting a tone of warmth and involvement, so that guests are at ease and feel included. Then I signal for the processional to begin.

### **Processional**

The custom of escorting the *Hatan* and *Kallah* to the *Huppah* is an ancient one. Here there are an array of customs, and no hard rules save one: the *Kallah* arrives at the *Huppah* last. The processional can be as simple or as festive as desired. Exquisite Hebrew and Ladino love songs have been composed to accompany both *Hatan* and *Kallah* as they approach the *Huppah*. I can help you find music that works for you.

### ***Mi Adir***

When the couple arrives at the *Huppah* I greet them with the medieval chant of *Mi Adir*, sung in Hebrew and English.

*May The Source of Greatness,  
and the Source of Blessing,  
and the Source of Powe,r  
Bless this Bridegroom and this Bride!*

Hebrew liturgy is designed to be sung, not spoken. Thus it is my custom is to sing ALL Hebrew texts of the ceremony in English as well, using the identical evocative melodies.

### ***Erusin: The Blessings of Betrothal***

The *bracha* (blessing) over the first cup of wine is sung, followed by the *bracha* of betrothal. This *bracha* is a reminder that we must choose our marital relationship with care, and honor it by making it *kadosh*, sacred. *Hatan* and *Kallah* then drink the first cup.

### **Circling**

I have decided to weave the ancient custom of circling into the ring ceremony, so that the symbolism of the circles and the ring interact. This is a small but effective innovation.

I ask the *Hatan* and *Kallah* to bring out their rings and, by lifting them up, to show them to the guests who serve as witnesses that the rings are good and proper. I then explain the custom by which *Hatan* and *Kallah* circle each other seven times. It is an encircling that weaves the couple deeper and then yet deeper into each other's soul. To accomplish this, the couple needs the help of the guests. I teach a chant which all will sing to assist the *Hatan* and *Kallah* in their journey towards each other. Many couples report that this experience was the most powerful in the entire ceremony.

### **Exchange of Rings**

Circling finds its culmination in the exchange of circles: the rings. This is the peak moment of the ceremony. The *Hatan* places his ring on the forefinger of the *Kallah*, who holds it up as he recites the binding words of marriage:

*Behold, you are sacred to me as my wife with this ring  
according to the tradition of Moses and Israel*

*Ha-rey aht m'kudeshet lee, b'ta-ba-at zo, k'dat Moshe v'Yisrael*

This statement is the essence of the entire ceremony. Recited before witnesses, it legalizes the marriage. All the other parts of the ceremony build up to and support this moment. The words of this vow must be taken with utmost seriousness. When recited before two witnesses and accompanied by the offer of any token of value, even if in jest, a marriage has legally taken place.

In a double-ring ceremony, the *Kallah* then places her ring on the *Hatan's* forefinger. As he holds it up to public view, she recites her vow. Because a double-ring ceremony is a fairly recent innovation in a Jewish wedding, there are diverse emerging customs concerning what the bride might choose to say when she gives a ring. We can talk about this together and decide.

## **Reading the *Ketubah***

The *Ketubah* is brought forward and read, either significant excerpts or in full. It is then handed to the *Hatan* who presents it to the *Kallah*. Once she accepts it, the document belongs to her, and she is charged with taking care of it, which can include having it framed and hung in a place of honor in your home. During the ceremony, one way to include a special relative or friend who can read Hebrew is with the honor of reading all or some of the Hebrew of the *Ketubah*

## **Opportunity for *Hatan* and *Kallah* to speak**

Some couples wish to prepare personal vows or other words to share in addition to those of the ring ceremony and the *ketubah*. This is the ideal time for the *Hatan* and *Kallah* to offer those prepared words, sometimes including poems, or any spontaneous expressions of love and caring you wish. Taking time in the weeks before the ceremony to write something thoughtful and personal to say to your beloved is a precious experience, and becomes especially moving under the *Huppah*.

## ***Birkat Cohanim***

Time permitting, we can further augment the drama of the ceremony by draping a large *tallis* over the *Hatan* and *Kallah*, and chanting the ancient priestly blessing - *Birkat Cohanim*. This blessing opens a channel of divine radiance and peace for the couple and all present.

## **The *Sheva Brachot*: Seven Blessings**

Paralleling the seven circlings, the ceremony closes with seven blessings. Again, I customarily sing these blessings both in Hebrew and in English. It is my custom to sing them using the sensual traditional chant of Song Of Songs, the epic Hebrew love poem which is one of the most sacred of Jewish texts. Sometimes friends or relatives of the couple wish to participate in the ceremony by singing one or several of these blessings and I am happy to facilitate such a request. Some couples also choose to honor friends or relatives by inviting them to share personal words, poetry, or music. This can also be a good time for these offerings.

### *An Interpretive Translation of the Sheva Brachot*

*Praised are You, Source of Creation,  
Creator of Wine, Drink of Joy*

*Praised are You, Source of Creation,  
all of Creation reflects your Glory!*

*Praised are You, Source of Creation,  
Giving Life to each Human Being*

*Praised are You, Source of Creation,  
You Make Us in Your Image ,  
To Live, Love and Perpetuate Life*

*Praised are You, Source of all Blessings,  
You Give Life to Every Being*

*We hope there will come a day,  
when you will walk together in the land of Israel,  
and that she will be a land of peace,  
not a barren land,  
who will open her arms to receive you.  
Holy One of Blessing, You make Zion rejoice with her children!*

*May these cherished friends rejoice with each other,  
as did the first Man and the first Woman  
in the Garden of Eden  
Holy One of Blessing, You Radiate Joy for Hatan and Kallah*

*Praised are You, Creator of Joy and Gladness,  
Bride and Groom, Mirth and Song, Delight and Rejoicing.  
May there always be heard in our streets and our cities,  
voices of joy and gladness, voices of bride and groom;  
the jubilant voices of those joined in marriage,  
under the Huppah,  
the voices of young people feasting and singing!  
Praised are You Adonay,  
You let the Hatan rejoice with the Kallah*

The *Sheva Brachot* conclude with *Hatan* and *Kallah* sharing a second cup of wine.

## **Breaking the Glass**

It is customary for the ceremony to end with the *Hatan's* dramatic breaking of a cloth-wrapped glass placed by his foot. This act calls us to remember at our moments of greatest joy, the imperfection of the world. Our lives and our history contain pain and loss yet we can dedicate ourselves to the path of healing and repair.

It is customary for the musicians to strike up one of the hot, up-beat *mazal-tov freilachs* just at the moment the glass pops. These joyous, up-tempo pieces were written especially for weddings, and everyone rejoices.

I can help you plan the music for your processional and also for this moment at the end of the ceremony.

## ***Yichud***

After the ceremony all rise as the *Hatan* and the *Kallah* depart from the *Huppah* with applause and joyous music. It is required that there be a room to which they can retire to be alone before re-joining guests. The emotional importance of this alone time cannot be underestimated. The *yichud* is the couple's first solitude as husband and wife. It is even customary to appoint two friends to guard the door and prevent anyone from disturbing the couple. Make sure there are some light foods and drinks there.

## ***Seudat Mitzvah: The Wedding Feast***

Rejoicing with the *Hatan* and *Kallah* continues at the wedding feast. Here again I can be helpful with decisions about music and food. Jewish tradition has some deep ecological and sacred wisdom to share about food, and some wonderful traditions in music. There are also practical considerations you may wish to discuss with me.

The formal meal should begin with *Motzi*, the *bracha* over the bread. It is wonderful for *Hatan* and *Kallah* to come up together and commence the feast with this blessing. At the close of the meal there is customarily another opportunity for the guests to celebrate the *Hatan* and *Kallah* by singing the *Sheva Brachot* again.

*Mazal Tov!*

## THING TO MAKE SURE YOU HAVE UNDER THE HUPPAH

- a small but high table on which there is a:
  - tablecloth
  - bottle of kosher wine/grape juice, pre-opened
  - *kiddush* cup or cups
  - *tallis* (does groom have a large *tallis*? If not this is a nice present for the bride to purchase for him)
  - photographs of parents/grandparents/other relatives whose presence is missed!
  - rings (unless held by someone)
  - flowers
  - glass that is to be broken wrapped or sewn into a white heavy napkin
  
- display-easel with *ketubah*
  - *ketubah* must be mounted flat (best way: held by tape at the four corners to a sheet of foam-core) under clear acetate for safety during signing and display.
  
- sound system

There is nothing more uncomfortable than attending a wedding at which you cannot hear the ceremony. All ceremonies, and especially outdoor ceremonies need an adequate sound system with at least one quality vocal microphone. This can typically be obtained from the facility at which the wedding is held, or from the music provider. I can also provide a small portable sound system by special arrangement.

### Who must come early:

Ketubah signing takes place about 45 minutes before the wedding ceremony begins. Witnesses and guests who are to be part of this must be informed.

### Who else must come early:

- pole holders to rehearse setting up the *Huppah* if it is not free-standing
- sound-check/sound system provider