



CONGREGATION
BETH AHABAH

A JEWISH GUIDE TO MARRIAGE AND WEDDING CUSTOMS

JEWISH REFLECTIONS ON LOVE AND MARRIAGE

I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.

Song of Songs 6:3

Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife so that they may become one flesh.

Genesis 2:24

According to the Zohar, the central book in the Jewish mystical tradition, each soul, prior to its entry into the world, consists of male and female united into one being. When the soul descends on earth at birth the two parts separate and animate two different bodies. These individual souls spend their earthly life looking for their original mate: the other half that was separated from them prior to birth. When the time for marriage arrives, the Holy Blessed One, who knows all souls, unites them again as they were before. Thus, they once again constitute one body and one soul, forming the right and left side of one individual.

adapted from Zohar I, 91b

The one who loves one's spouse as oneself and honors that spouse more than oneself – to that person the Scriptural promise is made: "You shall know that your home is at peace."

Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 62b

A spouse is the joy of one's heart.

Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 152a

When one spouse is blessed, the other is also blessed as a result.

Zohar I, 233a

A spouse is like a candle kindled from another. As two candles give forth the same light, so is the light of the husband and wife the same.

Zohar II 167a

From every human being there rises a light that reaches straight to heaven. And when two souls that are destined to be together find each other, a single brighter light goes from their united being.
Baal Shem Tov

When husband and wife are worthy, God's Presence abides with them.
Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 17a

A man who does not have a wife lives without joy, without blessing, and without goodness.
Babylonian Talmud, tractate Yevamot, 62b

Where there is no union of male and female, men are not worthy of beholding the Shekhinah [Divine Presence of God].
Zohar, volume 3, portion Aharei Mot, page 59a

I will betroth you with righteousness, with justice, with love and compassion. I will betroth you with faithfulness and you will know God.
Hosea, 2:19 – 20

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm,
for love is as strong as death....
Many waters cannot quench love, nor can floods drown it.
Song of Songs 8:6 – 7

My soul takes pleasure in three things, for they are beautiful to God and to all: harmony among people, friendship among neighbors, and a husband and wife suited to each other.
Ben Sira 25:1

God creates new worlds constantly by causing marriages to take place.
Zohar 1:89a

INTRODUCTION

In Jewish life, marriage is considered the ideal state between two people. It is the expression of the profound love which two people have for one another and the basis of family life. This relationship is so unique that Judaism calls it *Kiddushin*, “holiness.” It is one of the ways which people bring sanctity into their lives and transform their relationship into a sacred bond which links it to God.

The ancient Jews believed that the Temple in Jerusalem, the *mikdash*, was God’s dwelling place on earth. After the Temple was destroyed and to reflect the sanctity and importance of marriage, Jewish tradition referred to the home of a loving couple and their family as a *Mikdash M’at*, a “small sanctuary,” a place where God dwells.

Marriage is also a mitzvah, a commandment. In that sense, marriage is a Jewish act, a commitment to the continuity and vitality of the Jewish community.

This booklet is designed to explain the traditional and contemporary meanings of many customs and rituals that surround marriage and the wedding ceremony. It also covers many of the details in planning a wedding at Beth Ahabah.

PLANNING YOUR WEDDING

SETTING A DATE AND TIME

Before finalizing a wedding date and time for the ceremony, the couple should check with the Rabbi to ensure his availability.

Any day of the week except Shabbat and Jewish Holy Days is suitable for a Jewish wedding. In traditional Judaism, there are certain additional days during the year on which weddings do not take place, but at Beth Ahabah weddings may take place on those days.

The time of the ceremony can be affected by many factors. On Saturday nights and after Holy Days, weddings must be scheduled after dinner time.

LOCATION

The couple should choose a location that is respectful to hold a religious service. To arrange a wedding in the synagogue, please contact the Rabbi.

Many details and logistics for weddings are handled by the Temple's Executive Director, who will gladly help with the numerous questions which arise when planning a wedding.

The Temple is also available for wedding receptions. Please contact our Executive Director for information about fees and rules for the use of the facilities.

Weddings are also held in other settings, like gardens, hotels and restaurants. Before finalizing a location outside of the synagogue, the couple should check with the Rabbi to be sure he is able to travel to the location.

OFFICIANTS

It is customary for the Rabbi of the congregation where the wedding is held to officiate at the wedding ceremony. At Beth Ahabah, this custom is a matter of policy. If the bride and groom would like a Rabbi or Cantor who is not affiliated with the congregation to co-officiate, the host Rabbi will help make those arrangements.

PREMARITAL MEETINGS AND COUNSELING

Prospective brides and grooms meet with the Rabbi several times before the wedding to discuss not only the ceremony but also aspects of their relationship with and expectations for one another. These sessions enable the couple and Rabbi to get to know each other better and make the wedding more personal and intimate.

Couples are encouraged to meet with the Executive Director to go over logistical details surrounding the wedding, the rules concerning use of the Temple's facilities, and the guidelines for vendors involved with the wedding.

WEDDING REHEARSALS

The couple and Rabbi discuss privately many of the details surrounding the ceremony itself. In addition, most families arrange a rehearsal to practice the processional, recessional and the placement of people on the *Bimah*. The rehearsal is usually conducted by a wedding consultant, photographer or florist. The Rabbi does not attend the rehearsal. Rehearsals must be scheduled with the Executive Director. If held on a Friday, rehearsals must be finished by 6:00 p.m.

MUSIC FOR THE CEREMONY

Since the wedding is a religious ceremony, the music should reflect the dignity and sanctity of the occasion. In selecting music the couple should consult with the Music Director who can offer them many suggestions and much guidance.

Most couples engage the Temple's Music Director to play at the ceremony, but some use a variety of other musicians. Especially in the latter case, it is important to discuss the music with the Music Director because most musicians are unfamiliar with music used at Jewish weddings.

PHOTOGRAPHY AND VIDEOGRAPHY

Most couples desire a tangible memory of the ceremony in the form of photographs or video. Desiring to balance this wish with the dignity of the religious nature of the ceremony, we expect couples and vendors to follow our policies and procedures.

Photography may be taken on the floor of the sanctuary up to 45 minutes before the start of the ceremony or after its conclusion, with one exception. The photographer may stand in the aisle of the sanctuary at the back row to photograph the processional and recessional.

The Rabbi will be available for pictures 45 minutes before the beginning of the ceremony.

During the ceremony, photography is permitted from the back balcony but only with available light. No still photography is permitted from the floor of the sanctuary during the ceremony (except as described above). At weddings outside the sanctuary, we ask the photographer to remain stationary and behind the congregation during the ceremony.

The ceremony may be video recorded from the balcony or rear of the sanctuary using one or more stationary cameras on tripods. No auxiliary lighting is permitted during the ceremony and cameras may not be placed on the *Bimah* or in the sanctuary aisles.

Please discuss these rules with the photographer and videographer.

WEDDING RECEPTIONS

The Temple is an attractive and convenient location for wedding receptions following the ceremony. Please contact our Executive Director for more information.

HONORARIA

The services of the Rabbi are free to congregational members for all lifecycle events, including weddings. Contributions to a Temple fund in appreciation for their officiation are appropriate but are completely at the discretion of the family.

Non-members are welcome to contact the Associate Rabbi, and based upon his availability, he may officiate.

THE KETUBAH

The *ketubah*, or Jewish wedding certificate, is signed before the wedding. Many couples supply a *ketubah* they have purchased or has been given to them as a gift. Most companies that sell *ketubot* also insert all of the necessary information. While there is usually a charge for this, we encourage couples to take advantage of this service because the writing will be done in calligraphy and match the rest of the *ketubah*.

The Temple is happy to provide a *ketubah*, and the Rabbi can show it to the couple during one of their premarital meetings.

Two witnesses are required to sign the *ketubah*, and it is customary that they be Jewish and unrelated to the bride and groom.

THE STATE LICENSE

Every couple must obtain a license in order to be married in Virginia. Licenses are issued at every Circuit Court Clerk's office in Virginia and may be used anywhere in the state. The bride and groom must appear in person and pay in cash. A photo ID and Social Security number are required to obtain a license. There is no waiting period for a license and it is valid for 60 days. Since requirements for the license may change from time to time, the couple should call the Circuit Court Clerk's office beforehand to verify them.

The couple must bring the license to the location of the ceremony on the day of the wedding. The Rabbi fills out and signs the license at the same time the *ketubah* is signed.

AUFRUF

It is traditional for the bride and groom to receive a blessing at Shabbat services before the wedding. Often the couple is also given the honor of an aliyah (reciting the Torah blessings) at the service. Whether done in a traditional or more contemporary manner, this ceremony is called an *aufruf*.

ON THE DAY OF THE CEREMONY

Judaism supports the idea that the couple can and should see each other before the ceremony. As such, we encourage families to take photographs before the wedding so they can enjoy the festivities following the ceremony.

The signing of the *ketubah* and the state marriage license takes place 45 minutes before the start of the ceremony. Family members, the bridal party and the photographer are often present for the signing.

After the signing of the *ketubah*, the Rabbi spends a few minutes alone with the couple and their parents to set the proper tone for the ceremony that follows. The couple often does the *bedecken*, or veiling ceremony at this point.

Couples are both very busy and somewhat nervous on the day of the ceremony so they should eat something prior to the wedding. In addition, it is essential that everybody involved in the wedding refrain from alcoholic beverages prior to the ceremony.

WEDDING CUSTOMS

The modern Jewish wedding consists of elements from many sources and times in history. The origin of most customs is ancient, dating from the Rabbinic period (c. 100 BCE – c. 900 CE). The meanings of Jewish customs have evolved continually over time.

THE CHUPAH

The *chupah* is the wedding canopy under which couples are married. It symbolizes the home they are about to create. When most weddings occurred outside, the *chupah* also served to protect the couple from the elements. Even though most weddings now take place inside, it is customary for the ceremony to take place “under the chupah.”

A *chupah* usually consists of cloth attached to either freestanding or handheld poles. The earliest version of the *chupah* was probably a tallit, or prayer shawl, held over the couple by four attendants. This tradition is still sometimes practiced today though the tallit is now usually attached to poles. A *chupah* can also be made from flowers.

For ceremonies at Beth Ahabah, couples may use the Temple’s *chupah* or arrange for one of their own. Since the Temple’s *chupah* is large and stationary, it can only be used in the sanctuary and not at another location.

THE PROCESSIONAL

In Judaism, it is a *mitzvah* to accompany the bride and groom to the *chupah*. Older relatives often lead the processional and sit for the ceremony. Usually the groom, his attendants, if any, the best man and the groom’s parents precede the bride, her attendants, if any, the maid-of-honor and the bride’s parents in the processional. Often the bride and groom are accompanied by their parents who stand under the *chupah* during the ceremony.

The Rabbi generally walks to the *chupah* from the side and before the processional starts. At Beth Ahabah, he enters from the door on the *Bimah*.

Insurance regulations prohibit the use of candles during the processional and wedding.

THE KETUBAH

Traditionally, a Jewish marriage had legal standing enforced by the Jewish community, and the *ketubah* was a written document that established the terms of the agreement. It protected the rights of the bride, stipulated the terms of divorce, and listed the groom’s obligations to the bride. It was, and still is, signed by two witnesses, Jewish and unrelated to the couple, before the ceremony.

In modern times, now that the legal side of marriage is the province of civil authorities, the *ketubah* takes on more of a religious and spiritual quality. In non-Orthodox settings, the text of the *ketubah* has been changed to reflect this newer spiritual emphasis and the mutuality of the commitment made by the bride and groom toward each other and their marriage.

Today there are many versions of the text of the *ketubah*, and they are available from many sources. When selecting a *ketubah*, couples should consider the actual words of the text in addition to artistic quality of the document.

CIRCLINGS

Traditionally, when the bride and groom reached the *chupah*, the bride would circle the groom seven times before the start of the ceremony. This symbolized the love with which the bride “encircled” the groom and the protective quality of their home over which the bride presided.

Today, when more and more Jews want to recapture traditional elements of Jewish life, some couples observe this custom by circling one another, thus affirming the Reform Jewish value of gender equality.

THE RING

In Rabbinic times, when a marriage was a legal and business transaction between families, the groom gave the bride a ring the value of which was agreed upon and could be objectively confirmed. Thus, the ring was solid, usually made of a precious metal, and without stones or carvings because their value was subjective.

Couples married at Beth Ahabah may use any rings that suit their taste. Almost every couple incorporates a double ring ceremony into the wedding in keeping with Reform Jewish values about the equality of men and women in Jewish life.

BREAKING THE GLASS

Jewish weddings end when the groom steps on and breaks a glass wrapped in a cloth. Everyone assembled responds by shouting *mazel tov*, which means “good luck.”

While the act and the response seem to be joyous, this custom actually has several interpretations, all of which are quite serious. One is to remember the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, a sad event in Jewish history. Another is to remind us that both joy and sorrow go hand-in-hand. Yet another is a warning about the fragility of life and how easily our plans, hopes and dreams can be shattered. Finally, it links us to the world around us. We pray that others who are not as fortunate as we are may one day experience the joy we feel on our wedding day, and, hopefully, throughout the married life ahead of us.

THE WEDDING CEREMONY

Today's Jewish wedding ceremony is a series of parts leading up to and then away from the ring ceremony. How the parts fit together, and sometimes even their order, is determined as much by the practice of the individual Rabbi as it is by tradition. The result is a beautifully constructed whole which is meaningful, personal and spiritually dramatic. Only the educated eye can discern the seams.

BEDECKEN

Inspired by the Biblical account of the mistaken marriage between Jacob and Leah, the sister of Jacob's beloved Rachel, the bride and groom in Jewish weddings are expected to see one another before the wedding. The bedecken provides a religious context for that to occur. Traditionally, the groom was escorted to the bride who was surrounded by her family and friends. He then lowered her veil over her face (bedecken means veiling). Today, when few brides wear veils, the bedecken sets the tone for the ceremony to follow and, in that sense, can be understood as the figurative start of a Jewish wedding.

WELCOMING THE COUPLE

The actual and formal wedding ceremony begins once the couple has reached the chupah. They are greeted with words of welcome taken from Psalm 118 and a medieval liturgical poem.

ERUSIN

In Rabbinic times, a wedding had two very distinct sections, each with its own ceremony and separated from one another by a year. The bride continued to live with her parents during this interval.

The first ceremony was called *erusin*, or betrothal; the second ceremony was called *nissuin*, or marriage. The word *kiddushin* was also used for the betrothal ceremony and eventually it became the name for the wedding.

In today's combined ceremony, the traditional or a modified version of *erusin* is recited over a cup of wine. The blessing thanks God for marriage and expresses our gratitude that the couple is entering into marriage.

VOWS

Jewish tradition does not require the couple to make any public vows during the ceremony. Couples may choose to recite vows if they wish.

RING CEREMONY

The ring ceremony is the central part of a Jewish wedding. Traditionally there was only one ring, and it was placed by the groom on the index finger of the bride. He then recited a short but clear declaration of marriage. If the bride accepted the ring and her acceptance and the groom's declaration were properly witnessed, the couple was married.

Today most couples exchange rings and both make the traditional declaration to the other in language which differs only by Hebrew's grammatical requirements. Usually the bride's ring is placed on the ring (fourth) finger of her left hand but couples may use the traditional index finger of her right hand if they wish.

READING THE KETUBAH

In some weddings, the Rabbi reads part or all of the *ketubah* during the ceremony. Traditionally, this marked the separation between the original two sections of the wedding.

SHEVA BERACHOT

Once the bride and groom have expressed their intention to be married and exchanged their rings, the Rabbi then asks God's blessing upon the couple in the form of seven blessings. One is the blessing over the wine. In some weddings the couple shares another cup of wine, while in others the blessing is included as part of the seven without drinking a second time.

PRONOUNCEMENT AND BLESSING

Often, because of state requirements or longstanding custom, the Rabbi pronounces the couple husband and wife. The formal ceremony then concludes with the Rabbi asking God to bless the couple with words from the Torah which are known as the "priestly benediction." In most Jewish weddings the groom then steps on and breaks a glass.

YICHUD

Traditionally, the bride and groom share a short period alone together, called *yichud*, following the ceremony. It allows them to gather their thoughts and prepare for the reception. If the couple has fasted on the day of the wedding, they break their fast during *yichud*.

INTERMARRIAGE

We recognize that many couples grapple with coming from different faiths. Jewish law prohibits intermarriages, or to be more precise, does not recognize intermarriages as valid Jewish marriages. Until the 1960s, intermarriage — marriage between a Jew and a non-Jew — was rare. By the 1980s, almost half of all Jews married someone not born Jewish. Today within Reform Judaism, there is ongoing discussion about the impact of intermarriage and how the movement should best support our families while also preserving our traditions.

Today, many Reform Rabbis officiate at marriages where the couple is building a Jewish identity as a family. Couples contemplating an intermarriage should consult with the Rabbi to discuss the issues facing them as well as the Rabbi's position regarding officiation.

SAME-SEX WEDDINGS

Beth Ahabah welcomes same-sex couples who are committed to building a Jewish family. Marriage is about the commitment of love and respect; we support and affirm the love that LGBTQ people share and the families they build.

OTHER SPECIAL SITUATIONS

ILLNESS IN THE FAMILY

A serious illness of someone close to the bride or groom may cause the couple to reassess their plans for the wedding and the social activities around it. While it is praiseworthy to take the health of an ill relative into account, it is usually not necessary to cancel or radically change the plans for the wedding. Consult with the Rabbi to decide how to proceed.

DEATH IN THE FAMILY

The death of a close relative can be a traumatic, upsetting event. When someone in the immediate family of the bride or groom dies, Jewish tradition prohibits a wedding for 30 days. As one would expect, the festivities surrounding the wedding are also more subdued than originally planned. Reform Judaism is flexible in this matter and encourages the bride and groom to consult with the Rabbi to determine how to proceed.

GLOSSARY

ALIYAH – “Having an aliyah” means having the honor of being called to the Torah to recite the blessings before and after its reading during worship services. Literally, the Hebrew word means “going up.” Pronounced a-lee-ya.

AUF RUF – the name of the ceremony for honoring a bride and groom at a Shabbat service before their wedding. It usually includes a blessing of the couple from the Rabbi and often an aliyah. The word comes from Yiddish. Pronounced uf-ruf.

BEDECKEN – the ceremony before the wedding during which the groom places the bride’s veil over her face. It exists today with many contemporary variations. The word comes from Yiddish. Pronounced bi-dek-in.

BIMAH – the synagogue’s pulpit. The word is Hebrew and literally means “high place.” Pronounced be-ma.

CHUPAH – Hebrew for the wedding canopy. Pronounced chu-pa

ERUSIN – the Hebrew term for the central blessing in what was originally the separate, first part of the wedding and now incorporated in today’s ceremony. It means “betrothal.” Pronounced ay-ru-seen.

KETUBAH – the Hebrew name of the Jewish document which certifies the wedding. It comes from the Hebrew root meaning “to write.” Pronounced ki-tu-ba.

KIDDUSHIN – the Hebrew word now often used to refer to the wedding in general but technically another word for erusin. It comes from the Hebrew root meaning “holiness.” Pronounced ki-du-sheen.

MAZEL TOV – the Hebrew expression meaning “good luck” or “congratulations” and often shouted by the guests at the end of the wedding after the groom breaks the glass. Pronounced ma-zel-tof.

MIKDASH – the Hebrew term for the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. It literally means “sanctuary.” Pronounced meek-dahsh.

MIKDASH M’AT – a Jewish term which refers to a Jewish home and which literally means in Hebrew “a small sanctuary.” Meek-dahsh mi-aht

MITZVAH – Hebrew for “commandment,” referring to a law from the Torah. Pronounced mitz-va.

NISSUIN – the Hebrew name of what was originally the separate, second part of the wedding but now the latter part of the combined ceremony. The central part of nissuin is the reciting of the sheva berachot.. Pronounced ni-sue-eeen.

SHEVA BERACHOT – seven blessings, often chanted by a Cantor, which serve as the centerpiece of nissuin. Pronounced shevva bi-ra-chote

TALLIT – a prayer shawl, sometimes worn by the groom at a wedding and sometimes used as a chupah. Pronounced ta-leet.

YICHUD – the brief period after the wedding when the bride and groom spend a few minutes alone. The word comes from the Hebrew meaning “unity.” Pronounced yee-chood.