

Should we still be breaking glasses at Jewish weddings?

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Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom, Potomac, MD

For years I have been an on and off subscriber to the New York Times. Sometimes I love the Times, sometimes it totally infuriates me...but one section that I have always turned to first; the one part of the paper I consistently look forward to reading, particularly on Sundays is the Wedding section. Some people like to read obituaries; I prefer to read about weddings! I love the stories of how the couple met, where they're from, where they work. But more than that, the Wedding section is no less than a sociological study of the American Jewish community. Every week I'd look to see how many Jews are marrying other Jews, marrying non-Jews; how many have a rabbi officiating, a rabbi and a priest, a rabbi and a minister, or some other combination. In February of 2014 I made the esteemed pages of this section of the New York Times, when I officiated at the wedding of Morgan Satler, who grew up here at Har Shalom to her husband Adam Greene.¹ I thought I had reached the zenith of my rabbinic career!

Last month I came across the wedding announcement of the bestselling author Scott Turow (Presumed Innocent, The Burden of Proof, and other fast paced crime and courtroom novels). Turow is 67, and this is his second marriage, as it is for his bride Adriane Glazer. Now, in case you didn't know—Turow is Catholic and Glazer, as you probably guessed, is Jewish...So who officiated? Well, according to the Times: *Adriane Sarah Glazer and the author Scott Turow are to be married May 29 at a private home in Salem, Wis., and will do so under a provision of Wisconsin law allowing couples to marry themselves.* Now listen to this: *During the ceremony, Dave Barry, the humorist and friend of the couple, is to lead the couple in the smashing of a glass and other Jewish traditions, and the Rev. John C. Cusick, a Roman Catholic priest is to lead several blessings.*²

You see, there's so much to talk about here! First of all, they are marrying themselves...that's interesting! A Catholic priest will recite "several blessings." And the Jewish humorist will "lead the couple in the smashing of the glass." I'm not sure exactly what that means... When I officiate a wedding "leading the couple in smashing the glass" usually means placing the glass

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/09/fashion/weddings/morgan-satler-and-adam-greene.html>

² http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/29/fashion/weddings/adriane-glazier-scott-turow.html?_r=0

near his foot and getting my hand out of the way before he lowers it! What's so interesting here is that in this interfaith wedding, the one Jewish custom that is specifically mentioned...in fact the only religious ritual that is identified between these two faith traditions is the breaking of a glass. And the breaking a glass at the end of a wedding has become so popular that even non-Jewish couples are doing it! A few years ago there was an article in the Washington Post Style section about an Episcopalian, Chinese bride and an Italian Catholic groom who incorporated all kinds of Jewish rituals into their non-Jewish wedding because they loved what they symbolize and stand for... The author wrote, "the groom would step on the glass to remind the couple and their guests that love is fragile and must be protected."³ That's a beautiful sentiment, and one that actually has no connection whatsoever to why Jews break a glass at a wedding!

I'm guessing that if I took a random poll of Jews asking them why we break a glass under the chuppah, they would probably say something like: To remember the destruction of the Temple; or to remember the fall of Jerusalem, even during our happiest hour. The Conservative Rabbi's manual says that "This act reminds us of the holy city, Jerusalem, the trials it has endured through the ages..." The Orthodox Rabbi's manual says that "this...symbolizes that until the Bet HaMikdash [the Temple] is rebuilt our joy cannot be complete." The Reform Rabbi's manual simply says at the end of the ceremony "The glass is broken," without any explanation at all. The truth is that the Reform manual may be the most accurate because the explanation of breaking the glass in remembrance of the destruction of the Temple or the razing of Jerusalem is a relatively modern idea! Did you know that in medieval European synagogues there was something called a *huppahstein* on the northern wall of the sanctuary? The *huppahstein* or marital-canopy-stone was typically a stone carved with Jewish symbols and biblical verses that was used for the purpose of breaking the glass at a wedding. Rather than stepping on it, the groom would hurl the glass at the *huppahstein*, making a loud, shattering sound and sending shards falling to the ground. According to the Talmud, excessive joy always had to be tempered. Too much cheer, too much levity, too much festivity could be a cause for concern. Two Talmudic parables in tractate Berachot describe wedding feasts where the guests really partied hard. At some point someone takes a glass and smashes it, and the people immediately grew more somber, and tune down the revelry. But why? Why put a damper on the happiest day in

³ https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/a-jewish-wedding-for-two-non-jews/2011/10/14/gIQAwRvYN_story.html

two people's lives? Who wants a somber wedding? Well, people who believed that evil spirits are jealous of human happiness, and seek to spoil it or even to harm the people celebrating.

Now before you dismiss this as total *mishegas*, how many of you have said *kinehora*, *poo-poo-poo* or have worn a red bindle bracelet, or have a *chamsa* around your neck or hanging in your house, or maybe one of those deep blue amulets with a giant eyeball in the middle? All of these customs come from that same primordial fear of malevolent forces in the world, and our need to protect ourselves from them. A bride and groom, according to the Talmud, were especially susceptible to being targets of the evil eye and the smashing of a glass was meant to frighten away evil spirits from the wedding celebration! Long before this custom was associated with remembering Jerusalem, it was used as a prophylactic against demons!

Now it shouldn't surprise you that the Rabbis were deeply uncomfortable with the idea of demons or evil spirits, and they tried mightily to stamp out the custom of breaking a glass to frighten them away. But too many people just couldn't imagine their wedding without shattering glass as the crescendo! So instead, the rabbis began to shift the meaning...away from evil spirits and instead toward the remembrance of Jerusalem...as attested to in these rabbi's manuals. Some of these rabbis witnessed the fall of the holy city...saw the Temple in flames with their own eyes...walked through desolate streets and burned out ruins. "*Im eshkacheich Yerushalayim...If I forget thee O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither; let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,*"⁴ they would sing. Breaking a glass at a wedding was one of the ways they continued to mourn, continued to memorialize the place that the great Rav Kook called *yesod kiseh Hashem ba'olam*,⁵ the city that was God's throne in this world.

So I want to ask you a rather provocative question...Does it make sense now, today, in 2016 to continue to break a glass at a Jewish wedding, *zecher le'churban*, in remembrance of the destruction of Jerusalem? I ask this because tomorrow is Yom Yerushalayim, the newest holiday on the Jewish calendar. Until June 7, 1967, the 28th of Iyar 5727 the city of Jerusalem had been menacingly divided--the western half of the city and its Jewish inhabitants and a hostile Jordanian occupation of the eastern half of the city including the Old City. But in 1967, the city

⁴ Psalm 137:5-6

⁵ Rav Kook, *Orot Ha'Kodesh* 3, 191

was reunified, and completely in Jewish hands for the first time in 2,000 years. Listen to the words of Motta Gur, the IDF commander who said this to his troops upon recapturing the city:

“For some two thousand years, the Temple Mount was forbidden to the Jews. Until you came—you, the paratroopers—and returned it to the bosom of the nation. The Western Wall, for which every heart beats, is ours once again. Many Jews have taken their lives into their hands throughout our long history, in order to reach Jerusalem and live here. Endless words of longing have expressed the deep yearning for Jerusalem that beats within the Jewish heart. You have been given the great privilege of completing the circle, of returning to the nation its capital and its holy center...Jerusalem is yours forever.”

Today Jerusalem is a magnificent, world class city. It is a center of advanced learning, with a major world-renown university, and several other colleges and institutes. It is today the largest city in Israel, in both area and population. Over 800,000 people and 5,000 trees live in this cosmopolitan capital. There are over 36,000 actively operated businesses, countless *yeshivot* and religious seminaries making real the words we just sang in the Torah service: *ki mitzion teitzei Torah*, Torah shall come forth out of Zion, *u'dvar Hashem miYerushalayim*, and the word of God from Jerusalem.⁶ There are more synagogues in the city of Jerusalem than any other city in the world! It is a Hebrew metropolis, a Jewish capital, an Israeli city bustling with museums, symphonies, theaters, restaurants, galleries, and all of the institutions of a modern democratic state. What are we mourning for?? Jerusalem certainly isn't perfect. But when was it? Certainly not when King David was in charge, or King Solomon was on the throne. Even when the Temples were standing, there was still poverty, corruption, crime...Can you imagine what our ancestors would have thought of today's Jerusalem...so remarkably developed, such a beautiful city combining the ancient side by side with the modern? It is so hard to bring myself to say to a bride and groom under a chuppah that they should think about the Jerusalem of ruins when it is anything but that today.

Now I know that no one is going to give up breaking a glass at a wedding! But just as we dropped the association of that shattering sound with frightening away demons, I propose that we also cease to refer to a destroyed Jerusalem. If we must speak of Jerusalem, let's talk about it as

⁶ Micah 4:2

a model for healing and fixing what is broken in the world and in our lives. Just as the city was once smashed and ruined, today it is repaired and whole and beautiful. Let that inspire us to repair our relationships, to heal our wounds, to have the courage to rebuild when we feel broken down. That's a message that ought to resonate. The world is filled with brokenness...sometimes our relationships feel broken. But if Jerusalem can be pieced together from rubble, then so can you, so can your marriage, so can your commitment and love.

The seventh *beracha* of the traditional *sheva berachot* recited at a wedding contains the words of the prophet Jeremiah's prophecy: *Od yishama be'arei Yehudah u'vechutzot Yerushalayim...once again in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem kol sasson ve'kol simcha, kol chatan ve'kol kallah*, the voices of joy and gladness, of bridegroom and bride celebrating together will be heard.⁷ Well, friends, you can hear those sounds **right now, today**, in the Jerusalem of the 21st Century. It's not perfect; there's plenty of work to be done to make this an even more ideal Jewish city, but for God's sake let's stop mourning for it and start celebrating it!

Shabbat Shalom & Yom Yerushalayim Sameach!

⁷ Jeremiah 33:10-11