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What makes a Jewish wedding Jewish?

For traditionalists, the wedding ceremony actually begins on the Shabbat immediately preceding the wedding and extends through the festive meal following the ceremony. The following is a guide to the Jewish wedding:

Prewedding rituals

Aufruf: In traditional Jewish communities a groom is called to the Torah to receive an aliyah on the Shabbat immediately preceding his wedding. Today, aufrufs (Yiddish for “calling up”) celebrated in many non-Orthodox communities include both the bride and groom. Customarily, the couple chants the blessings before and after the Torah reading and then the rabbi invokes a special blessing for their upcoming marriage.

Panim: Literally translated as “receiving of the faces,” some couples opt for this ceremony in which the bride – *kallah* — and bridegroom – *choson* — are in separate rooms and male guests visit the groom while female guests visit the bride.

Ketubah signing: For those celebrating a traditional wedding, the signing of the ketubah denotes the official beginning of the wedding ceremony. The ketubah is read aloud and signed by two male witnesses while the groom takes hold of a ritual object to acknowledge that he accepts the obligations outlined in the document. In non-Orthodox ceremonies, both the bride and groom sign the ketubah along with their witnesses who may be of either sex.

Bedecken: In a traditional ceremony, the groom places the veil over the bride’s face after being assured that she is indeed “his” bride. This custom has its roots in the biblical stories when Rebekah veiled herself as a sign of modesty when she met Isaac, her intended and when Jacob was tricked by Laban, who hid Leah under a veil after he he already promised his daughter Rachel to Jacob.

Ceremony rituals

Erusin (betrothal): during this ceremony the bridegroom recites a prayer while giving the bride an object of value (usually the ring). In earlier generations, the betrothal ceremony often preceded the second part of the wedding ceremony by as much as one year. Today, this is viewed as the engagement.

Nesuin (marriage): This portion of the ceremony which begins with the Sheva Brachot (seven blessings), is a liturgical celebration joining the bride and groom. Each blessing progresses to include not only the couple

standing under the chuppah, but the entire Jewish community as well — past, present and future.

Hakafot: Traditional wedding ceremonies begin with the bride circling the groom seven times. An ancient gesture, the circling serves to set aside a sacred space as well as ward off evil spirits. In contemporary ceremonies, variations are often achieved by having the couple join hands and walk seven circles together or a combination thereof.

Welcome blessing: Following the hakafot the rabbi welcomes the couple and guests and usually recites a prayer.

Kiddush and betrothal blessing: The kiddush sanctifies the wine thereby making it holy while the Birkat Erusin (betrothal blessing) explains which relationships God condones and blesses and which are forbidden.

Exchange of rings: In a traditional ceremony the groom places the ring (a pure, solid band) on the bride’s right index finger and recites a prayer. In a contemporary double ring ceremony, the bride gives the groom a ring and recites a prayer.

Breaking of the glass: Broken by the groom, this custom is rooted in the belief from the Middle Ages that the shattering of the glass would ward off evil spirits. Today, it is not uncommon for the rabbi or wedding officiant to tell all assembled that the shattered glass reminds us of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.

Post ceremony rituals

Yichud: After the ceremony, in traditional weddings the bride and bridegroom adjourn to a private room for a symbolic “consummation” of the marriage. The few minutes the couple share together allude to their new intimate relationship and emphasizes that their absolute privacy be respected. Before entering the “*Yichud*” (private) room, a silver spoon is placed at the threshold. Both the groom and bride step over the spoon with their right foot first upon entering the room.

Seudat Mitzvah: Most Jewish celebrations (marriage, circumcision, bar mitzvah, etc.) are followed by a dinner to honor the occasion. At this meal all guests participate in the mitzvah of “*L’Sameach Choson v’Kallah*,” to celebrate in joy with the groom and bride. Although the wedding feast in itself is a mitzvah, the emphasis is on entertaining the newlyweds. By dancing around the *newlyweds*, the community expresses its support for the couple.



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