

Under the Huppah: The Jewish Wedding

Summary: Jewish weddings are traditionally joyous occasions; and while the specificities of Jewish weddings vary, most will include the signing of a ketubah, or marriage contract, the recitation of seven prayers, the smashing of a glass to represent the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, and the presence of a huppah, a special small canopy held over the rabbi and newlyweds for the duration of the service.

For the Jewish community, a wedding is a joyous rite of passage. In Judaism, marriage is considered a holy institution, indicated by the Hebrew word for wedding, *kiddushin*, or “made holy.” Jewish weddings vary in style and form, depending mostly on cultural and family custom and on which tradition of Judaism the couple follows. Despite this rich variety, however, there are certain common elements in most Jewish weddings. For example, most Jewish marriages are bound by a *ketubah* (wedding contract) signed by two non-family member witnesses chosen by the couple. The *ketubah* was historically designed to protect the bride and her family in the financial transactions of the wedding and marriage; today, the *ketubah* represents more of the commitment between the two marriage partners. Most Jewish marriages also take place under the *huppah*, a special canopy which represents the future home of the couple.

The *huppah* with its four corner poles is often held up by four friends or family members, and it is an honor to be selected by the couple for this responsibility. The wedding may take place in a synagogue, in a hotel, in a home, or in an outdoor setting. The particular ceremony beneath the *huppah* varies widely today among Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and Renewal traditions. A rabbi officiates the ceremony and is usually the first to stand under the *huppah*, where he or she greets the couple, who often walk to the *huppah* in procession with their parents. If one of the parents is deceased, a candle might be carried in his or her memory and among families of Holocaust survivors, candles might be carried in memory of the wider extended family that would have been present for this celebration. In many weddings, the parents and sometimes the siblings of the couple stand around the *huppah* during the wedding ceremony itself, as if to emphasize the intersecting family circles into which the couple is entering.

The ceremony begins with blessings over a glass of wine, from which the wedding partners each take a sip. Historically, the wedding formula is recited by the groom as he presents a ring to the bride: “Be sanctified to me with this ring in accordance with the law of Moses and Israel.” In some traditions today, both wedding partners give rings to each other and recite this blessing, and the couple may also decide to write their own vows and recite them under the *huppah*. In a traditional wedding, the *ketubah* is read aloud and presented to the bride. Often the rabbi will take a few minutes under the *huppah* to address the bride and groom directly. The rites conclude with seven traditional blessings, and the wedding partners sip again from the cup of wine.

At the very end of the ceremony, there is another custom almost universal in Jewish marriages: the groom breaks a glass underfoot, symbolizing the destruction of the temple, and reminding the couple and all present that there will be both good and bad times in a marriage. The glass, carefully wrapped in a cloth napkin, shatters—a moment’s intrusion of the world’s reality into the happy flow of events. Then shouts of congratulation are in order: “*Mazel tov! Mazel tov!*”—literally “Good Luck!”—used in this and in other scenarios to convey “Congratulations!”

Jewish wedding parties are joyous affairs, with much food, music and dancing. Traditionally, the couple is entertained with traditional Jewish folk songs, such as “*Hava Negila*” (“Come, sing and be happy”) while wedding guests dance a traditionally Jewish folk circle dance called the *hora*. During this dance, the couple may be lifted up in chairs in the center of the circle as a celebration of joy, bound together by holding a napkin stretched between them. Of course, contemporary Jewish wedding parties will often feature contemporary music and dancing as well.

In the week immediately following the wedding, there is traditional practice called *sheva brachot*, literally “Seven Blessings.” During this week, the newlyweds will share seven festive meals with new people present at each one who will share in their joy.

In marriage and family life, the home traditions of observance and study central to Judaism are to be preserved. For these reasons, many Jewish communities struggle with questions of assimilation and intermarriage, traditionally prohibited according to *halakhah*. Today, however, with intermarriage

increasingly common, especially in the West, the dilemmas of ritual observance for intermarrying couples are present in almost every stream of the Jewish tradition.