

# Jewish Rituals for the Wedding Day

## Fasting

Among some Jews, it is customary for the wedding couple to fast on their wedding day, which is a day of forgiveness, similar to Yom Kippur. As a couple prepares for a new life together, this practice may enhance the spirituality of the day. It also may serve as a marker of the change taking place in their lives. Be sure to consider how your body responds to hunger when deciding if this will be a meaningful observance.



## Badeken Di Kallah (*Veiling of the Bride*)

Although the custom of *badeken di kallah* (veiling of the bride) is not generally practiced by Reform Jews, one may encounter this ritual at some Jewish weddings. In this custom, which grew out of the biblical story of Jacob's love for Rachel, the groom looks at the bride before covering her face with the veil. Jacob worked for Rachel's father, Laban, for seven years in order to win Rachel's hand in marriage. But, at their wedding, Laban secretly substituted his elder daughter Leah for Rachel, later asserting that Jacob had to marry her before marrying Rachel. As a result of that undoubtedly traumatic experience, some Jewish grooms to this day assure themselves *before* uttering their vows that the woman they are marrying is in fact their intended.

## The Wedding Ceremony

With all the guests assembled, the wedding ceremony begins. The processional may include the groom's parents escorting him to the chuppah followed by the bride's parents doing the same with their daughter. Alternately, the two fathers may escort the groom, while the two mothers escort the bride. The processional may be otherwise adapted to suit the needs of divorced or blended families or same-sex couples. Once the bride arrives at the chuppah, it is customary for the groom to come out, meet her, and lead her into the chuppah, where she stands to the right of the groom. At this point the rabbi or cantor offers words of welcome and thanksgiving, often Psalm 118:26: "Blessed are you who come in the name of *Adonai*" and Psalm 100, which expresses thanks to and praise for God. The officiant also may recite these words to a medieval hymn: "May the One who is mighty and blessed above all bless the groom and the bride."

The custom of the bride circling the groom (generally seven times, but sometimes only three) is a part of many modern weddings. The more usual custom of seven circles has many explanations, including that there are seven days in a week and seven *aliyot* on Shabbat. In addition, "when a man takes a wife" appears in the bible seven times and on Simchat Torah, the Torahs are carried around the synagogue

seven times. Lastly, there is a mystical teaching that the bride, in circling seven times, enters seven spheres of her husband's innermost being. One explanation for the basis of circling three times is based on the three times in Hosea 2:21-22 when God, in reassuring Israel, "says": "and I will betroth you unto Me." Another refers to a woman's three basic rights in marriage: food, clothing, and sex. In some instances, the couple circles each other: the bride might circle the groom three times, followed by the groom circling the bride three times, and then the couple making one circle together. Increasingly, circling is being incorporated into Reform Jewish weddings and even same-sex couples are adapting this ritual for their ceremonies.

The first part of the wedding ceremony also generally includes a blessing over wine, the *birkat eirusin* (betrothal blessing), exchange of rings, a recitation of the formula of betrothal and sometimes a reading of the *ketubah*. Your rabbi may use a slightly different order in which the *Sheva B'rachot* precede the exchange of rings.

### **Sheva B'rachot (Seven Blessings)**

The second part of the ceremony (*nisuin*) includes a blessing over a second cup of wine, which is the first of the *Sheva B'rachot* (the seven blessings), one of the most important elements of a Jewish wedding. The traditional blessings build in complexity, becoming more expansive in content and theme. They progressively unfold in praise of creation itself, the creation of human beings, the joy of the couple, the establishment of a household, and an ode to joy that links this individual celebration with the time when joy and gladness will be heard in every city and on every hill. It is believed that each time two people fall in love and marry, the world comes that much closer to perfection.

*We praise You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine.*

*We praise You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, Creator of all things for Your glory.*

*We praise You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, Creator of man and woman.*

*We praise You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, who creates us to share with You in life's everlasting renewal.*

*We praise You, Adonai our God, who causes Zion to rejoice in her children's happy return.*

*We praise You, Adonai our God, who causes loving companions to rejoice. May these loving companions rejoice as have Your creatures since the days of Creation.*

*We praise You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, Creator of joy and gladness, friends and lovers, love and kinship, peace and friendship. O God, may there always be heard in the cities of Israel and in the streets of Jerusalem: the sounds of joy and happiness, the voice of loving couples, the shouts of young people celebrating, and the songs of children at play. We praise you, Adonai our God, who causes lovers to rejoice together.*

Also included in the second part of the wedding ceremony are the vows. The traditional formulaic declaration is:

*Harei at m'kudeshet li b'tabaat zo k'dat Moshe v'Yisrael.*

*Behold, you are consecrated for/to me, with this ring, according to the religion/tradition of Moses and Israel.*

Originally, it was only the man who made this declaration. However, today in modern, egalitarian *kiddushin*, both members of the couple make this declaration. Because Hebrew is a gender-based language, with most words (including nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and verbs) indicating gender and number, the traditional phrase above must be modified it is to be said to a man:

*Harei atah m'kudash li b'tabaat zo k'dat Moshe v'Yisrael.*

Some couples choose to add a meaningful biblical verse to these vows. Rabbis working with interfaith couples often suggest amending "according to the tradition of Moses and Israel" to "before God and these witnesses." Some same-sex couples adapt verses from the Book of Ruth or the First Book of Samuel.

Following the exchange of vows, the rabbi may say a few words or bless the couple.

## **Breaking the Glass**

At the conclusion of the ceremony—in what is probably the best known of all the rituals associated with Jewish weddings—it is customary for the groom to break a glass (sometimes a light bulb, which makes more noise!) by stepping on it. There are various interpretations of this custom. Among others, it reminds us of the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem, teaches that, in times of joy, we must always be cognizant that life also brings sadness and sorrow, illustrates that, like marriage, it is permanent, warns us that love, like glass, is fragile and must be protected, and helps us remember that the world too is broken and that with acts of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), we can help make it whole again. More recently, both members of the couple, including same-sex couples, have chosen to break a glass. At the breaking of the glass(es), guests may shout "*mazel tov*," the Ashkenazi wish for good luck, while Sephardim yell, "*Siman tov*." It also is a custom to sing the song "*Siman Tov U'mazal Tov*" right after breaking the glass.

## **Yichud (Privacy)**

Following the ceremony, the couple may opt to spend a few moments alone before joining their friends and family. This practice, called *yichud* (privacy or seclusion), can be a respite from the strain of being the center of attention for a whole day. It is an island of privacy and peace before the public celebration begins. If they have been fasting, it is customary for the couple to break their fast together during *yichud*, sharing their first meal as a married couple.