

A Guide to the Jewish Wedding

Ethan Bueno de Mesquita
Rebecca Milder

Before the wedding:

Aufruf

During services on Shabbat before the wedding, the bride and groom are called to say the blessings over the Torah reading. This ceremony is called an Aufruf, “calling up” in Yiddish. Traditionally the aufruf serves to announce the forthcoming wedding. After the bride and groom make the blessings, the congregation expresses its hope that the couple will share a sweet life together by showering them with candies.

Tisch

Because learning has such a central role in the Jewish tradition, it is customary during sacred occasions (such as a wedding) to do a little teaching. Accordingly, before the wedding ceremony there is a pre-ceremony called a Tisch, Yiddish for table.

Traditionally, the groom (though in our case the bride and groom) gives a short d’var Torah (words of Torah). It being the couples’ wedding day, the community anticipates that they will not be in peak didactic form. Hence, the assembled guests let them off the hook, preventing them from delivering the full d’var Torah by interrupting with kind teasing and song. This tradition of interruption also helps insure that all Jews, regardless of their level of learning, will be able equally to experience the joy of their wedding day. There is also, for those so inclined, a bit of drinking.

Ketubah Signing

The ketubah is the Jewish marriage contract and is, primarily, a financial document. Traditionally, it lists the dowry received, the brideprice paid, and the groom’s obligations to his new wife. Although there is a rather uncomfortable sense in which the groom is acquiring the bride, the ketubah is also quite progressive in some respects. The bride’s legal status and rights are explicitly defined. We have chosen to use the traditional formulations and to keep the financial spirit of the ketubah. However, we have egaliterized our ketubah by adding parallel financial obligations for the bride and rights for the groom. We were greatly aided in this process by a text written by Rabbi Joel Schwab and by our friend Orit Kedar, without whom the second half of our ketubah would read like something written by third graders. The ketubah is signed by two witnesses prior to the wedding ceremony.

The rabbinic principle of *hiddur mitzvah*, adorning a commandment, holds that an object used to fulfill a commandment should be beautiful. The artwork surrounding our ketubah is an original paper-cut by Jerusalem artist Archie Granot, whom Ethan met the year he lived in Israel.

Kittel

The kittel is a simple white robe, traditionally worn by the groom. It is also worn on Yom Kippur, Pesach, and, finally, as a burial shroud. The whiteness of the kittel and the wedding dress symbolizes spiritual purity, reminding the couple that their marriage day is also a day of atonement (for the same reason, Ethan will be fasting the day of the wedding). As it is written, “If your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (Isaiah 1.18). Further, the simplicity of the kittel helps to focus the couple on the spiritual rather than the material. Finally, because it will be worn in death, the kittel evokes a sense of humility before God. At this awesome moment we acknowledge our own finiteness and the necessity of God’s guidance and blessing.

Bedeken

Before the wedding ceremony the groom veils the bride in a ceremony called bedeken. The wearing of a veil has Biblical roots. We are told that before Rebecca met Isaac (different Rebecca) “she took a veil and covered herself.” (Genesis 24.65) The veil emphasizes the primacy of spiritual over physical values in the union between groom and bride. A biblical story accounts for why a Jewish groom veils the bride only after seeing her face. Jacob was tricked into marrying Leah, believing that she was her younger sister Rachel. He then had to labor for Rachel’s father for seven years before they were allowed to marry. As they say, “once learned, twice a fool.”

Parents’ blessing

Traditionally, the parents of the bride and groom to give them a final blessing before they begin married life. Our parents will do this while our guests move to the site where the main ceremony will occur.

The Wedding Ceremony

Circling

Before the bride and groom enter the chupah, it is traditional that the bride circle the groom. “God has created a new thing; a woman shall go around a man” (Jeremiah 31.21). Tradition varies as to the number of rotations. We will circle each other three times, each circle representing one of the moral obligations with which we bind ourselves in marriage: “I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me with fairness, justice, love, and compassion. I will betroth you to me with faith and you shall know God” (Hosea 2.21-22). As we circle, this text will be sung by Rebecca’s uncle, Rabbi Larry Milder, to a melody composed by Ethan.

Chupah

The ceremony takes place under a wedding canopy, called a chupah, which represents the home that the bride and groom will establish together. The absence of walls recalls the home of Abraham and Sarah, who left their tent open on all sides so that guests approaching from any direction might feel welcome. We have chosen to use a talit, reminding us that the chupah is a sacred space filled with God’s presence and expressing our hope that our home will be as well. After the wedding, the chupah will become Rebecca’s first talit.

Erusin and Nesuin

Originally, a Jewish wedding consisted of two ceremonies celebrated a year apart. Although today we perform them one immediately following the other, the separation of the two ceremonies continues. The first ceremony is called erusin, betrothal. Like so many other sacred moments in Jewish life, we begin with the blessing over the wine, before invoking God's name to sanctify our marriage. As it is written, "I lift up a cup of salvation and call in God's name" (Psalm 116.13). Erusin continues with a second blessing that can be translated, "Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe who has sanctified us with Your commandments and has commanded us regarding sexual propriety, forbidding to us (women) who are merely betrothed and permitting to us (women) to whom we are married through chuppah and kiddushin. Blessed are You, Adonai, who sanctifies Your people Israel through chuppah and kiddushin." Originally this blessing served to remind the bride and groom that they were not technically married at the end of erusin, and could not consummate their relationship until nesuin, a year later. Although this time lag no longer exists and despite the fact that the wording of the blessing is problematic, we decided to retain it for a number of reasons. We are uncomfortable with the idea of religiously mandated sexual prohibitions between adults. Nonetheless, we do believe there is a wisdom to the idea that sexual relations in a lifelong partnership sanctified through kiddushin can take on a new level of spiritual depth. Thus, we understand the phrase "forbidding to us..." as creating a spiritual rather than a moral category. We see this as analogous to our views on the laws of Shabbat. Breaking the laws of Shabbat is not a moral transgression; however, doing so may make Shabbat less spiritually fulfilling than it could have been. Similarly, in our view, there is no sense in which sexual relations outside of marriage are wrong; however, kiddushin may raise them to another level of spirituality.

The final part of erusin is the ring ceremony, also called kiddushin. According to Jewish law, one way in which marriage is enacted is by the groom giving the bride an item of sufficient value in the presence of witnesses. Usually this item is a ring, though it need not be (the Talmudic rabbis consider a bewildering list of possibilities). The rings, unadorned and continuous, symbolize our hope that our love will be eternal. As we place the rings on each others fingers we will recite the ancient betrothal formula, which can be translated: "Be consecrated to me with this ring according to the faith of Moses and the Jewish people." Traditionally, a woman would not recite this formula. According to the Torah, a man can marry multiple wives and so the status of "consecrated to me according to the Law of Moses" did not apply to men. However, in the eleventh century Rabbi Gershom ben Yehudah issued an edict against polygamy. Thus, we have added to our ketubah the intention that when Rebecca begins her recitation of the betrothal formula, she will have in mind the emendation, "In accordance with the edict of Rabbi Gershom." We are grateful to Rebecca's stepfather, Rabbi Mordecai Magency, for helping us find a solution to this difficult issue.

As a reminder that erusin and nesuin are separate ceremonies, we will pause between them to read our ketubah aloud. The translation of our ketubah text is:

On the first day following Shabbat, on the tenth day of the month of Tammuz, in the five thousand seven hundred sixty-first year after the creation of the world, according to the manner in which we count here in the community of Princeton, Massachusetts, the

bridegroom Layzer Pinchas son of Benjamin and Hannah Sarah said to the bride, Rivkah Esther daughter of Wolf Bear and Batsheva, “become betrothed to me according to the laws of Moses and Israel. I will cherish, honor, support and maintain you in accordance with the custom of Jewish husbands, who cherish, honor, support and maintain their wives faithfully. I present you with the marriage gift of two hundred silver zuzim, belongs to you according to the law of Moses and Israel; and I will also give you your food, clothing, and necessities of life, and live with you as husband and wife according to the universal custom.”

And Ms. Rivkah Esther, the bride, agreed and became his wife. The dowry that she brought from her parent’s house, whether in silver, gold, jewelry, clothing, home furnishings, or bedding, Mr. Layzer Pinchas, the bridegroom, accepted as being worth one hundred silver pieces. The bridegroom, Mr. Layzer Pinchas agreed to increase this amount from his own property with an additional one hundred silver pieces paralleling that above. The entire amount is then two hundred silver pieces.

Mr. Layzer Pinchas, the bridegroom, made this declaration: “The obligation of this marriage contract, this dowry, and this additional amount, I accept upon myself and upon my heirs after me. It can be paid from the entire best part of the property and possessions that I own under the whole heavens, whether I own it already, or will own it in the future. It includes both mortgageable property and non-mortgageable property. All of it shall be mortgaged and bound as security to pay this marriage contract, this dowry, and this additional amount. It can be taken from me, even from the shirt on my back, during my lifetime, and after my lifetime, from this day and forever.”

The obligation of this marriage contract, this dowry, and this additional amount was accepted by Mr. Layzer Pinchas, the bridegroom, according to all the strictest usages of all marriage contracts and the additions to them made for the daughters of Israel, according the ordinances of our sages, of blessed memory.

And the bride, Rivkah Esther daughter of Wolf Bear and Batsheva said to the groom, Layzer Pinchas son of Benjamin and Hannah Sarah, “according to the edict of our Rabbi Gershom, the light of the Diaspora, become betrothed to me according to the Law of Moses and Israel. And I will work for, honor, feed, and support you in the custom of Jewish women, who work for, honor, feed, and support their husbands faithfully. And I will provide for you your food, clothing, necessities of life, and conjugal needs, according to the universal custom.”

And Mr. Layzer Pinchas, the groom, agreed and became her husband. And Rivkah Esther, the bride, made this declaration, “If, God forbid, we were to divorce at a time when we are supporting our families equally, I will give you a payment of four hundred silver pieces. And if, God forbid, we were to divorce at a time when I am the principal supporter of our family, I will give you a payment of eight hundred silver pieces.”

And thus said Rivkah Esther, the bride, “I accept upon myself and upon my heirs after me the obligations of this marriage contract. It can be paid from the entire best part of the

property and possessions that I own under all the heavens, whether I own it already, or will own it in the future. It includes both mortgageable property and non-mortgageable property. All of it shall be mortgaged and bound as security to pay this marriage contract, this dowry, and this additional amount. It can be taken from me, even from the shirt on my back, during my lifetime, and after my lifetime, from this day and forever.”

The obligation of this marriage contract and this additional amount was accepted by Ms. Rivkah Esther, the bride, according to all the strictest usage of all marriage contracts and according to the tradition of our (male) sages of blessed memory and our (female) sages of blessed memory.

This contract is not to be considered as a non-serious obligation or as a mere form. And we have witnessed a token of acquisition from Layzer Pinchas son of Benjamin and Hannah Sarah, the bridegroom, to the bride Rivkah Esther daughter of Wolf Bear and Batsheva, and from Rivkah Esther daughter of Wolf Bear and Batsheva, the bride, to the groom Layzer Pinchas son of Benjamin and Hannah Sarah, regarding all that has been written and explained above that is a valid token for acquisition.

And all is valid and binding.

Witness _____

Witness _____

Following the reading of the ketubah, we continue with nesuin. The nesuin ceremony fully establishes the bride and groom as husband and wife. Nesuin is primarily comprised of the seven wedding blessings. However, it also must include an act through which the couple demonstrates clearly and unambiguously that they are married. There are at least three ways to achieve this: they can establish a home together, perform one of the acts to which they committed in their ketubah including providing food or clothing, or the bride and groom can be alone together. As has become tradition, we will fulfill all three. The chupah itself symbolically establishes our home. As is the custom of Sephardic Jews, we will wrap ourselves in a talit, thereby providing one another with a garment. The talit in which we will wrap ourselves was a gift from Ethan’s parents. Finally, at the end of the nesuin ceremony, we will enjoy a few minutes alone together in a private room, a period of time called yichud, togetherness.

The seven wedding blessings will be recited by friends of the bride and groom and can be found at the end of this program. They begin with the blessing over wine. The next three blessings praise God for the whole of creation, for the creation of human beings, and for our spiritual nature, which makes marriage possible. The following blessing expresses the hope that the entire community of Israel will be united in our celebration. This blessing, with its communal focus, precedes the blessings celebrating the specific couple, reminding us of the centrality of our communal obligations, even at this time of personal joy. The sixth blessing expresses the hope that the bride and groom’s happiness will be as sweet as that experienced by Adam and Eve in the Garden

of Eden, suggesting that this celebration provides a fleeting glimpse of the Messianic age. The final blessing praises God for the joy that bride and groom cannot achieve as individuals but only by binding their lives to one another.

The ceremony concludes with the breaking of a glass, a tradition with almost as many explanations as there have been Jewish weddings. The shattering of the glass helps us remember to temper our joy with an awareness of our ethical and spiritual obligations, as it is written, “serve God in awe, rejoice with trembling.” (Psalms 14.23). We are also reminded of the terrible suffering that exists in the midst of our celebration and of the spiritual exile of the Jewish people. Finally, a midrash teaches that a human being is like glass. While we are fragile in our mortality, like a broken glass that can be melted and reblown we ultimately believe that existence extends beyond the narrow horizon of our own awareness and finitude.

Yichud

Immediately following the ceremony we will spend our first few minutes as a married couple alone together. This time is called yichud, unity or togetherness. Although traditionally the marriage was consummated at this point, we thought, as an alternative, that Ethan would break his fast and that we would take a moment for quiet reflection.

Se’udat mitzvah

The tradition teaches that in the world to come we will have to answer for each of life’s joys of which we failed to partake. One of those joys is the celebration of the fulfillment of a commandment with a festive meal, called a se’udat mitzvah. We hope you will join with us in joyful eating, drinking, dancing, and singing.

The Seven Wedding Blessings - שבע ברכות

Baruch ata adonai, eloheinu melech
ha'olam, borei p'ri hagafen.
ברוך אתה יי, אלהינו מלך
העולם, בורא פרי הגפן.
Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe,
who creates the fruit of the vine.

Baruch ata adonai, eloheinu melech
ha'olam, shehakol bara lichvodo.
ברוך אתה יי, אלהינו מלך
העולם, שהכל ברא לכבודו.
Blessed are You, Adonai our God, ruler of the universe,
who created everything for Your glory.

Baruch ata adonai, eloheinu
melech ha'olam, yotseir ha'adam.
ברוך אתה יי, אלהינו
מלך העולם, יוצר האדם.
Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, shaper of humanity.

Baruch ata adonai, eloheinu melech
ha'olam, asher yatsar et ha'adam
b'tsalmo, b'tselem d'mut tavnito,
v'hitkin lo mimenu binyan adei ad.
ברוך אתה יי, אלהינו מלך
העולם, אשר יצר את האדם
בצלמו, בצלם דמות תבניתו,
והתקין לו ממנו בנין עדי עד.
ברוך אתה יי, יוצר האדם.
Blessed are You, Adonai our God, ruler of the universe,
who has shaped human beings in Your image, patterned after Your image and
likeness, and enabled them to perpetuate this image out of their own image.
Blessed are You, Adonai, shaper of humanity.

Sos tasis v'tageil ha'akara, b'kibutz
baneha l'tocha b'simcha. Baruch
ata adonai, m'sameiach tsiyon b'vaneha.
שוש תשיש ותגל העקרה, בקבוץ
בניה לתוכה בשמחה. ברוך
אתה יי, משמח ציון בבניה.

May the barren one (Zion) exult and be glad as her children are joyfully gathered to her. Blessed are You, Adonai, who gladdens Zion with her children.

Sameiach t'samach rei'im ha'ahuvim, שמח תשמח רעים האהובים,
k'sameichacha y'tisr'cha b'gan eiden כשמחך יצירך בגן עדן
mikedem. Baruch ata adonai, מקדם. ברוך אתה יי,
m'sameiach chatan v'chala. משמח חתן וכלה.

Grant great joy to these loving companions as You once gladdened
Your creations in the Garden of Eden.

Blessed are You, Adonai, who gladdens the bridegroom and the bride.

Baruch ata adonai, eloheinu melech ברוך אתה יי, אלהינו מלך
ha'olam, asher bara sason העולם, אשר ברא ששון
v'simcha, chatan v'chala, gila, rina, ושמחה, חתן וכלה, גילה, רנה,
ditsa v'chedva, ahava v'achava דיצה וחדוה, אהבה ואחוה
v'shalom v'rei'ut. M'heira adonai eloheinu, ושלוש ורעות. מהרה יי אלהינו,
yishama b'arei yehudah uv'chutsot ישמע בערי יהודה ובחוצות
yerushalayim, kol sason v'kol simcha, ירושלים, קול ששון וקול שמחה
kol chatan v'kol kala kol mits'halot קול חתן וקול כלה, קול מצהלות
chatanim meichupatam un'arim mimishteim חתנים מחפתם ונערים ממשתה
n'ginatam. Baruch ata adonai, נגינתם. ברוך אתה יי,
m'sameiach chatan im hakala. משמח חתן עם הכלה.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe,
who created joy and gladness, bridegroom and bride, merriment, song,
dance and delight, love and fellowship, peace and companionship.
Adonai, our God, may there soon be heard in the cities of Judah
and the streets of Jerusalem the voice of joy and the voice of gladness,
the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride,
the rapturous voices of the wedded from the chupah,
and of young people feasting and singing.

Blessed are You, Adonai, who gladdens the bridegroom together with the bride.