

## JEWISH WEDDINGS

**Brenda Scott, ADC**

**Creative Forecasting, Be Our Guest – June, 2004**

The first of the 613 *mitzvot* (commandments) in the Torah is “*P’ru u’rv*” (“Be fruitful and multiply,” Genesis 1:28). Marriage is a holy obligation and a *mitzvah* (good deed). Like in other cultures, a Jewish wedding can range from simple to lavish.

Many traditions and rituals continue to be an important part of the marriage ceremony. The *ketubah* is a marriage contract that is signed by the bride (*kallah*) and groom (*hatan*) and witnessed by at least two others just prior to the ceremony. The *ketubah* states the couple’s commitment and obligations to each other. Many are written in both Hebrew and English. Modern *ketubah* artists and calligraphers employ a wide range of design elements so Jewish couples can find a *ketubah* with a text and design that reflects their taste and budget. According to Jewish law, the *ketubah* becomes the property of the bride. Today, many couples frame and hang the *ketubah* as a work of art and a daily reminder of the promises they made.

The *bedeken* (to cover), also known as the veiling of the bride, is an ancient custom dating back to Biblical times. The groom places the veil over the bride’s face to assure her that she is “the one” and to set her apart from all others. The *bedeken* ceremony can take place in private or with families before the couple approaches the *huppah* or *chuppah* (marriage canopy).

Circling is another custom that some couples observe, and it may have a Biblical source in Jeremiah 31:22, which states, “A woman shall go around a man.” The idea of circling seven times comes from the fact that God created the earth in seven days and the seven blessings. This custom varies in practice; some couples circle only three times, corresponding with the three repetitions of the phrase, “And I will betroth thee unto me” in the Book of Hosea (2:21-22). Circling is also seen as a magical means of protection, a way of binding the groom to the bride and symbolically creating a new family circle.

The *huppah* means “that which covers or floats above.” It consists of four poles and a canopy and is seen as a sign of God’s presence when establishing a new home. It is open on all four sides as a reminder of ancestral tents and recalls Abraham’s hospitality. The *huppah* can either be set up before the ceremony or carried in the processional (carrying it is considered an honor). The canopy can be made from any material, and its appearance is entirely a matter of taste. Flowers and greenery often adorn the poles and canopy. A common tradition is to marry under a *tallit* (prayer shawl). Many brides elect to give a new *tallit* to the groom, who will wear it for special occasions in the coming years. There is no set rule as to who stands under the canopy. Generally, the parents of the bride and groom are on either side of the wedding couple.

There are two main parts to the Jewish wedding ceremony. The first part is the *Kiddushin* (sanctification), when the couple promises to keep a Jewish home and other covenants. The betrothal blessing is recited. The highlight is the exchange of rings with the accompanying vow, “By means of this ring, you are sanctified to me, according to the law of Moses and Israel.” The *Nissuin* (second part of the ceremony) features the seven blessings. Between the two parts of the ceremony, the officiating rabbi usually addresses the couple with appropriate remarks.

The seven blessings (*sheva b’rachot*) embrace many of the themes of Judaism: creation, Eden, Zion, redemption, and Jerusalem. There are many ways to “perform” the seven blessings. A rabbi or cantor usually reads or chants them in Hebrew and English. The *sheva b’rachot* provides those present with feelings of peace, love, and blessings. (Could this be why we cry at weddings?)

The breaking of the glass is a well-known Jewish wedding custom. It concludes the ceremony and recalls the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. It also serves as a reminder that, even in times of great joy and happiness, we need to remember sadness, that life is fragile, and that

what is broken will never be the same again. With the breaking of the glass, the congregation shouts, "*Mazel Tov!*" ("Good Luck!" or "Congratulations!").

*Yi hud* (seclusion) is an ancient custom symbolic of the husband bringing his wife to their home. After the ceremony, the bride and groom spend a few minutes together in a room by themselves to sit in peace, reflect on the day, and relax before the reception that follows. This time can serve as a respite in a gloriously hectic day. Receiving lines are not formed when the *yi hud* is practiced.

Candles have a place in the Jewish wedding, but not the unity candle. The bridal party may carry candles in the processional. (Some rabbis ask the couple to provide a pair of candlesticks under the *huppah* to symbolize the beginning of a new home that will be filled with the light of Shabbat and festival candles.) Some candles are merely decorative. The allegory of light can extend even further. At a recent Jewish wedding, the following was on the cover of the wedding booklet: "*From every human there rises a light that reaches straight to heaven. And when two souls that are destined to be together find each other, their streams of light flow together, and a single brighter light goes forth from their united being.*" -Baal Shem Tov

Couples may find that words and customs that are second nature to them are unfamiliar to their friends, acquaintances, and family members. Therefore, a wedding booklet is sometimes provided that explains traditions, gives the names of people in the wedding party, and offers a step-by-step guide to the ceremony. The booklet also serves as a souvenir of the day's festivities.

So as not to mix the gladness of the wedding day and a holiday or Sabbath, weddings are forbidden during certain times of the year. Some authorities prohibit weddings between Passover and Shavuot but do allow one "free day" in that seven-week period.

The varying customs practiced by Jews around the world fill many books. However, the core of the wedding ritual remains the same for all Jews. Only the most common have been discussed here. Information for this article was obtained from the books, *The Jewish Wedding Book* by Lilly S. Routtenberg and Ruth R. Seldin and *The New Jewish Wedding* by Anita Diamant, as well as the Internet and personal observations.

#### **ACTIVITY IDEAS**

- Use the information to discuss all types of weddings.
- Lead residents as they reminisce about their own weddings.
- Ask someone from a synagogue to talk about weddings. Perhaps he could bring a tallit, wine cup, ketubah, etc.
- Ask someone married in a Jewish ceremony to share wedding items, pictures, or videos with residents. **CF**