

Your Wedding

From Registration to Smashing the Glass!



A. Le Marié cassant le verre.
 B. Le Marié veillé.
 C.C. les 2 personnes servant de témoins à la Mariée.

CEREMONIE NUPTIALE
 des
JUIFS PORTUGAIS.

D.H. les 2 Personnes servant de Témoin au Marié.
 K. Le Rabbin. F. les Chantres.
 G. Celui qui sert les Amis qui les Époux promettent.



A. Le Marié donnant l'Anneau à la Mariée, avec deux sous le talon.
 B.B. les 2 témoins de la Mariée.
 C.C. les 2 témoins de Marié.

CEREMONIE NUPTIALE
 des
JUIFS ALLEMANDS.

D. Le Rabbin. * Le Directeur de la Synagogue.
 E. Le Scribe tenant le rouleau pour faire lire les Epous.
 F. deux joueurs sur des Bouteux, ainsi que marchant devant les Mariés.

By Rabbi Jonathan Cohen

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ק"ק שער השמים



Spanish & Portuguese
Jews' Congregation

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Dear Bride and Groom,

Besiman Tov and Mazal Tov!

Congratulations on your engagement! I wish you every happiness together.

Thank you for asking me to officiate at your wedding. I'm looking forward to the big day and am sure it will be wonderful!

Arranging a wedding is a lot of fun, but it's also a big job that can sometimes be stressful. These notes are written to help you with everything you need to prepare for the religious ceremony.

My goal is to help you enjoy every minute of your wedding ceremony, and that it should be fun and meaningful for you and your families and guests. For this reason, it helps if we can discuss the ceremony together so that it can be more personal, and match your expectations within the guidelines of halacha and tradition. If we cannot meet in person, let's meet on Skype.

It's natural to be a bit nervous before your wedding, so if at any stage you are worried about anything at all, please don't hesitate to give me a call and we can chat about everything in the strictest confidence.

Mazal Tov once again! Enjoy your engagement, the ceremony, the celebrations and most important the life you build together!

Wishing you a bright and happy future!

Rabbi Jonathan Cohen

Things to do in Advance

Once you have made the momentous decision to get married, you will probably want to start thinking about when and where to hold the ceremony.

Date

Jewish Law allows you to get married at most times of the year; with the exception of during parts of the Omer in spring, and during the three weeks from the Fast of Tammuz to the Fast of Av in summer. Do check to make sure that your chosen date does not fall out any of these times. If you are not sure about this, feel free to give me call.

Time of Day

You can get married during day time or night time, but weddings should not take place between sunset and nightfall, since this would create difficulties dating the Ketubah (marriage document).

If you are keen to get married with the sun setting behind you, you can time the wedding so that the contractual bits are dealt with before the sun sets, with the ceremony continuing into sunset. It is important to start the wedding at least twenty minutes before sunset and do bear in mind that some of your guests may come late.

Venue

In the Diaspora most couples get married in a synagogue, while in Israel people tend to get married in hotels or halls. The Sephardi custom is for the marriage to take place indoors, while many Ashkenazim prefer a marriage under the sky (a difference recorded in Picart's famous engravings of the two customs, shown on the cover of this booklet).

Please note that the Rabbinate will not register weddings at non-kosher venues, or venues open on Shabbat (even if your own caterer is kosher), so please be sure to check that you are allowed to get married in the venue of your choice, before you book.

It is customary for the couple to arrange travel for the rabbi to and from the wedding.

Registering your Wedding

In order to get married, you must register your wedding. You do this by opening a file at the Rabbanut. They will not open the file more than 90 days before the big day or later than 21 days before your wedding. You can open your file in the city where either of you lives or where the wedding will take place.

To register you will need:

- Fee (new immigrants, students & soldiers are entitled to a discount)
- Passport photographs of each of you
- Identity cards / passports
- Copies of your parents' ketubot
- Two witnesses each to testify that you are both single and Jewish. The witnesses must be adult males over the age of 18 who know you well but are neither related to either of you, nor to each other.
- If the venue for your wedding is not well known, the rabbinate may ask you to produce a copy of their *Tendat Kashrut* (Kashrut certificate).

Couples from England, do not need witnesses, instead they can obtain a letter from the London Beth Din testifying that they are single and Jewish. For details see the United Synagogue website: http://www.theus.org.uk/lifecycle/marriage/getting_married_in_israel/

Registering a marriage is quite a bureaucratic process and many of the rabbinic clerks do not speak good English, so it can be a little intimidating if you are not used to dealing with Israeli bureaucracy. The Itim Institute was set up to help people navigate their way round the Israeli Rabbinate. Itim offers a service registering the wedding for you which will save you quite a headache! Because Itim is a charity which relies on donations, they suggest a donation of \$250 for using this service.

Do register your wedding well in advance. Leaving it to the last minute is risky.

Getting your Israeli Marriage Certificate

Once you have completed the registration process, the rabbanut will issue you with a ketubah and a copy (*be'etek*). The duplicate must be completed by the rabbi and returned by you to the rabbanut within a week of the ceremony – they are strict about it. A few days later, they will issue you with a marriage certificate (*te'udat nisu'in*). This is normally sent to you in the post, though the rabbinate will only send it to an address within Israel.

The certificate is recognised in the UK, though you will need a notarized translation attached to it. This can be arranged through the Israeli Embassy, an Israeli lawyer, or the London Beth Din. Alternatively, you can undertake a civil wedding through your local registry office in the UK.

Pre-Nuptial Agreement?

A lot has been written in recent years about pre-nuptial agreements, designed to reduce the risk of acrimony in the case of a divorce. In the US, the RCA insists on the use of their version of the agreement, and the London Beth Din has its own, optional version. In Israel there is no obligation to sign one. If you wish I can help you think this possibility through and review the options that are acceptable in Jewish law, so you can come to your own decision. It is certainly not something you should be “superstitious” about discussing with each other, as it is actually an expression of love and consideration, much as we hope and pray it will never be needed.

Choosing the Ring

A Jewish marriage takes place when the groom gives his bride an object of symbolic value, normally a ring in the presence of two religious witnesses. To avoid misunderstandings, the rabbis ruled that:

1. The ring must be the sole property of the groom; paid for with his own money. If was a family heirloom, it must have been given to him unconditionally.
2. The ring must be made of pure metal. It can have engravings on it, but no stones.
3. The couple must not *exchange* rings during the ceremony since that implies a swap rather than a gift. The bride can give her groom a ring, but this must take place outside the religious ceremony (can be incorporated just before or just after it).

Wedding Dress

Jewish law does not require the bride to wear white, but today in the west it has become an almost universal custom. Don't forget that the wedding is a religious ceremony and you need to be suitably dressed for it. Shoulders and upper arms should be covered, and the skirt should at least cover the knee.

Some have the custom that the bride does not wear any jewelry under the *chuppah*, to symbolise the idea that you are marrying each other for who you are, not for what you have.

There are many organizations in Israel which collect used wedding dresses that are still in pristine condition and lend them out to other brides. If you would like to borrow a dress, or donate your own after the ceremony to help others, let me know and I will gladly arrange it.

Another beautiful tradition is to help a poor family to celebrate a simcha at the time that you are celebrating yours. Let me know if you would like help with making that happen.

Ketubah

Some couples commission a beautifully illustrated ketubah to hang in their home after the ceremony. If you would like to do this, be sure to get the appropriate text of the ketubah. The Israeli Rabbinat usually offers couples a “standard” Sephardi or Ashkenazi version, but will also accommodate other traditions (such as the Spanish and Portuguese). Note that the text varies somewhat depending on whether it is a first or second marriage. It is also essential to double-check the spelling of the names, date and location of the ceremony on the ketubah since any mistakes will render it unusable. I will help as much as I can, but obviously I cannot take responsibility for your artist's work.

While the basic sum mentioned in the *ketubah* is fixed, most *ketubot* include room for the groom to add two other sums of money: one for the dowry, and an additional sum that he agrees to provide his wife should they get divorced. In practice these figures are usually overridden by the divorce settlement, but they do have some legal standing. Do not put down an astronomical sum of money which you could not afford to pay; it is best to be sensible about these figures, whilst not causing offence to family members who would feel slighted by a small figure.

The sum is sometimes given in multiples of eighteen (the numerical value of the word **חי** life), and can be in any currency. One guideline is how much it costs to live for a year, for example 180,000 NIS or £36,000. You can of course vary this as you wish. The important thing is that you are all comfortable with the amount; then never think of it again.

Family Purity and Mikvah

One of the most beautiful aspects of Jewish living is the practice of Family Purity. Modesty dictates that they are not discussed very much in public, so it is quite possible that you will not have learned much about them. There are also some strange myths which circulate about the *mikvah* making some brides uncomfortable with the idea. Please don't be nervous about it. I can give you some reading material on the subject and suggest classes for you. The Tzohar institute in Israel offers user-friendly, non-coercive teachers. I will be delighted to discuss it further with you, if you wish.

A trip to the *mikvah* before your marriage is a requirement of Jewish law. It is also a very special experience which gives the wedding deeper meaning.

The Israeli Rabbanut requires that you bring a letter from the bride's tutor to prove that you have studied the relevant material, and a note from the *mikvah* lady to prove that you have dipped in the *mikvah*. Again, please don't let this be a source of concern and feel free to ask anything about it.

Planning the Ceremony

Israeli weddings tend to be less formal than weddings in the diaspora. You will however need to

think about what sort of ceremony you would you like. What language(s) would you like it in? How formal should it be? How will you convey your wishes to those you invite? Would you like everyone seated throughout the ceremony or are you happy for them to stand?

Choosing Witnesses

An integral part of the wedding ceremony is that it must be observed by two witnesses. These witnesses have to be kosher witnesses according to Jewish law. That means:

1. They must be adult, Jewish males.
2. They may not be in any way related to the bride, the groom or to each other.
3. They must be strictly, religiously observant – *Shomer Shabbat*, *kippah*-wearing Jews.

The Rabbi can act as one of the witnesses, or you can choose two friends so long as they meet the criteria.

One of the responsibilities of the witnesses is to sign their names in Hebrew on the Ketubah. Jews from the diaspora are not always used this, so please make sure that your witnesses can. If they have any questions, they are welcome to be in touch with me.

Involving Family and Friends in the ceremony

Some people know many rabbis and want them all to participate in their wedding ceremony; others like family members to take part. It is lovely to include your rabbis, friends and family in the ceremony and there are several opportunities for them to participate in the ceremony. Where more than one rabbi is participating, it is very important to clarify in advance which rabbi is the *Mesader Kiddushin* – the main officiant – and to confirm in advance what role each guest will perform.

There is no requirement to have a hazan (cantor) or band at your wedding, but music and singing certainly enhance the beauty and dignity of the proceedings.

If you are inviting friends to read Sheva Berachot under the Chuppah, please ensure that they are accurate and confident when reading the Hebrew text. Please also note that the order of the Sheva Berachot said under the Chuppah is different from the order in which they are said at Grace after Meals. Note also that the first and second blessings are said by one person, so you actually have six – not seven – honours to distribute.

Setting the Right Tone

Your wedding is the ceremony that marks the start of your life together. It is a wonderful day and it's great to celebrate in style. When you start planning your celebrations, you may find that there is a lot of pressure to spend more money than you would like. Don't forget that as important as your wedding is, it is only one day and money may be better put aside for your life together or distributed to the poor and needy. From a Jewish point of view, whilst there is a mitzvah to have a celebratory meal, ostentatious displays are not appropriate. Your wedding is a special day and one that is packed with significance and holiness.

Should you Fast on your Wedding Day?

In some communities it is traditional for the couple to fast on their wedding day, as they prepare to begin their lives anew, and tradition says that their sins are forgiven as on Kippur. Other communities do not fast as they consider the whole day a festival. It's your choice.

Tell me about yourselves

I would like your wedding ceremony to be as meaningful and special as possible. One good way to achieve this is by you telling me more about yourselves, or sharing impressions from family and friends. Here are a few ideas to start with and help you focus your ideas:

- Where did you grow up?
- What schools did you attend? Did you enjoy them?
- Did you go to college/university? If so what did you study?
- Where do you work?
- Are you involved in any communal / charitable / social action causes?
- What are your parents like?
- Which aspects of the way they brought you up would you like to replicate for your own children? What would you do differently?
- Do you believe in God? Are you religiously observant? Is that how you aspire to be when you start your married home? How does your level of religious practice compare with your future husband/ wife's? How will you bring up your children?
- How did you meet each other?
- What made you choose to live in Israel?
- How are you feeling now about the wedding ceremony and your future married life?
- Anything else you have strong feelings about.

Other Family members may also wish to comment on:

- Their perceptions / favourite memories of you.
- Why they think you and your fiancée are well matched
- How they feel about you getting married.
- Any advice they would like to give you for your wedding day.
- What good wishes they would like to share with you for your wedding day and your married life.
- Any family memories of grandparents or great grandparents that your wedding evokes.

Summary of the Marriage Ceremony

Below is a brief run-through of the wedding ceremony. **Those sections marked with an asterisk are not observed in all communities, and we should discuss which of them you want to include.** Don't feel pressured to remember everything, it is actually very straightforward, and once we've discussed your preferences, on the day I will tell you exactly what you need to do.

Signing the Ketubah

The ceremony begins with the signing of the Ketubah. The Ketubah is the document that lays down the responsibilities of the groom to his bride. He promises to feed and clothe her and satisfy her with sexual relations. It also lays down his financial responsibilities to her in the event of a divorce.

In Israel, the signing of the Ketubah is normally done before the main ceremony, though it may also be done under the chuppah. It is usually done in the presence of the two fathers, the groom, the rabbi and the witnesses. In some circles it is done at a "tisch": a small reception where the groom's male friends and relations sit around a table, sing songs and tell Divrei Torah.

However you choose to carry out the ceremony, it comprises of the groom raising a handkerchief in the air in the presence of two witnesses symbolising his acceptance of the conditions laid down in the Ketubah. The witnesses then sign their names on the document to show that they have seen this happen.

Bedeken*

This was originally an Ashkenazi custom (Bedeken is Yiddish for “covering”), but it has been adopted at many non-Ashkenazi weddings too. The groom together with close members of both families, the rabbi and witnesses goes to see the bride and covers her face with her veil.

There are three ways it can be done:

1. The bride waits in a side room with close family members and the groom goes to her with a small entourage
2. The bride sits at one end of the hall and the groom goes to her in a large procession
3. As the bride approaches the chuppah, the groom meets her half way up the aisle and covers her face with the veil

At this point, it is traditional for the parents to give a blessing to the bride. It is also a lovely moment for the bride to offer a private prayer for their future married life.

Procession to the Chuppah

The groom walks to the Chuppah – the marriage canopy that symbolises the home that they will build together – and waits for the bride. This is his moment for offering a private prayer for their future married life.

Traditionally the bride and groom are each escorted to the Chuppah by their parents, or another married couple. The important thing is to decide in advance the composition of the procession, so you don't have any confusion on the day. Also don't forget to coordinate with the musicians/choir/chazzan as to what you would like them to play as you come in (and at other stages in the ceremony) and to make sure that there is someone to give them a signal as you are about to enter.

Standing under the Chuppah

At the Chuppah the groom stands with the bride on his right. His parents stand next to him and hers next to her. Alternatively the fathers may stand next to the groom and the mothers next to the bride.

Whilst at synagogue weddings, the couple always face towards the ark and away from the congregation, at other venues it is common for the couple to face towards their guests and for the rabbi to stand slightly to the side facing inwards. Before the big day, think about how you would like to stand.

Seven Circuits*

Some Ashkenazim have the custom that the bride circles the groom seven times, and this is sometimes adopted by couples from other communities. It can be seen as symbolising the bond which is being built, or breaking down the barriers between them.

First Cup of Wine: Betrothal (Erusin)

The Rabbi addresses a few words to the couple and pronounces the Blessings of *Erusin* (betrothal) which express of the holiness of marriage. The rabbi then passes the cup to the groom's father who then offers it to his son to drink. The cup is returned to the rabbi who passes it to the mother of the bride who in turn passes it to her daughter to drink from.

The Ring

The ring is shown to the two witnesses and the groom confirms that it belongs to him. He then says:

הרי את מקודשת לי בטבעת זו כדעת משה וישראל

“Behold you are betrothed to me by this ring according to the laws of Moses and Israel”

and places the ring on the forefinger of the bride's right hand, watched by the two witnesses.

Tallet*

It is customary among many Sephardim that at this stage the groom puts on a new Tallet and says the blessing Shehecheyanu (“Thank God for bringing me to this season”).

After he has done this and worn it for a moment, it can be draped over the couple for a photo op, or held over them by four people as a chuppah.

Reading of the Ketubah

If not signed earlier, the ketubah is signed now. The Ketubah is then read aloud, after which the groom hands it to his wife, and she in turn hands it to her mother, or someone else assigned to look after it for her till after the wedding, when it should be kept in a safe place throughout your marriage.

Second Cup of Wine: Shevah Berachot (Nisuin)

The Sheva Berachot are recited over a second cup of wine - expressing the joy and sanctity of marriage. They can be sung by other rabbis, a chazan or by friends and family.

When the blessings are complete, the wine cup is passed by the father of the bride to his new son-in-law who sips some wine and then by the mother of the groom to her new daughter-in-law to drink from.

Breaking the Glass

The groom then smashes a glass with his foot symbolizing that even at our happiest celebrations we still remember the destruction of the Temple and unhappiness in the world. In Israel this usually marks the end of the ceremony.

Blessing the Couple*

In synagogue the ceremony usually ends with the rabbi or a Cohen blessing the couple with the priestly blessing. In Israel this is sometimes done *before* the breaking of the glass, as *that* has come to be seen as the end of the ceremony, and a signal to the band to break into a lively tune.

Yichud Room*

At this stage the couple are usually swamped with well wishers, but if the custom of Yichud is being observed, they now make their way to a private room and lock the door. This demonstrates their new status as husband and wife, and the two witnesses remain outside the door for 5 minutes to confirm this.

In the room the couple have something to eat (especially if they have been fasting). Then they unlock the door, pose for a few photographs and join their guests at the festive meal.

Your Lives Together

Naturally, your wedding day should be perfect, but it's only the beginning of your married life. Afterwards, you will start building your home together supporting each other through good and bad times. Marriage is about love and shared ideals. It is about giving each other constant support and cherishing one another, but it is also about the very small details of life such as who takes the rubbish out. To make your marriage work, sometimes you'll have to compromise. Learning to compromise and being willing to take time out from work and lots of other commitments to be with your partner and your family are often the keys to a good life together.

However well you have got to know each other before your wedding day, marriage marks a new era of lifetime commitment and the first year of marriage can be particularly stressful. If at any time, before or after the wedding, you are concerned or finding things a little tough, please, please don't hesitate to come over for a chat or give me a call. It will be my privilege to help.

Your Lives Together with God

By establishing your home as a married couple, you are continuing the Jewish people for another generation. That is a wonderful thing. It's worth thinking about how you would like your married home to reflect that commitment. How will you equip your future children to continue that tradition? Now is an opportunity to think a little bit more about these questions. Perhaps it is a time to think about Friday night candles, recipes for chicken soup, keeping kosher, charity, Shabbat, hospitality, festivals, Family Purity laws and all the other things that make up a traditional Jewish home.

It's good to read a bit more about Jewish life to help you set up a Jewish home together. Here are some books that might be helpful.

Suggested Reading

- Made in Heaven, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan (Moznaim)
- The seven habits of highly successful families, Stephen Covey, (Simon and Schuster)
- Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus, John Gray (Harper Perennial)
- Non violent communication, Marshall B. Rosenberg (Puddle Dancer Press)
- The Marriage Covenant, Rabbi Elyashiv Knohl (Tzohar)
- A Hedge of Roses, Rabbi Norman Lamm (Feldheim)
- The first year of marriage, Abraham Twersky (Mesorah Publications)
- How to run a traditional Jewish Household, Blu Greenberg (Simon and Schuster)
- Practical Judaism, Rabbi Lau (Feldheim)