THE JEWISH WEDDING 101

YOUR GUIDE TO JEWISH RITUALS, MEANING, AND WEDDING TRADITIONS

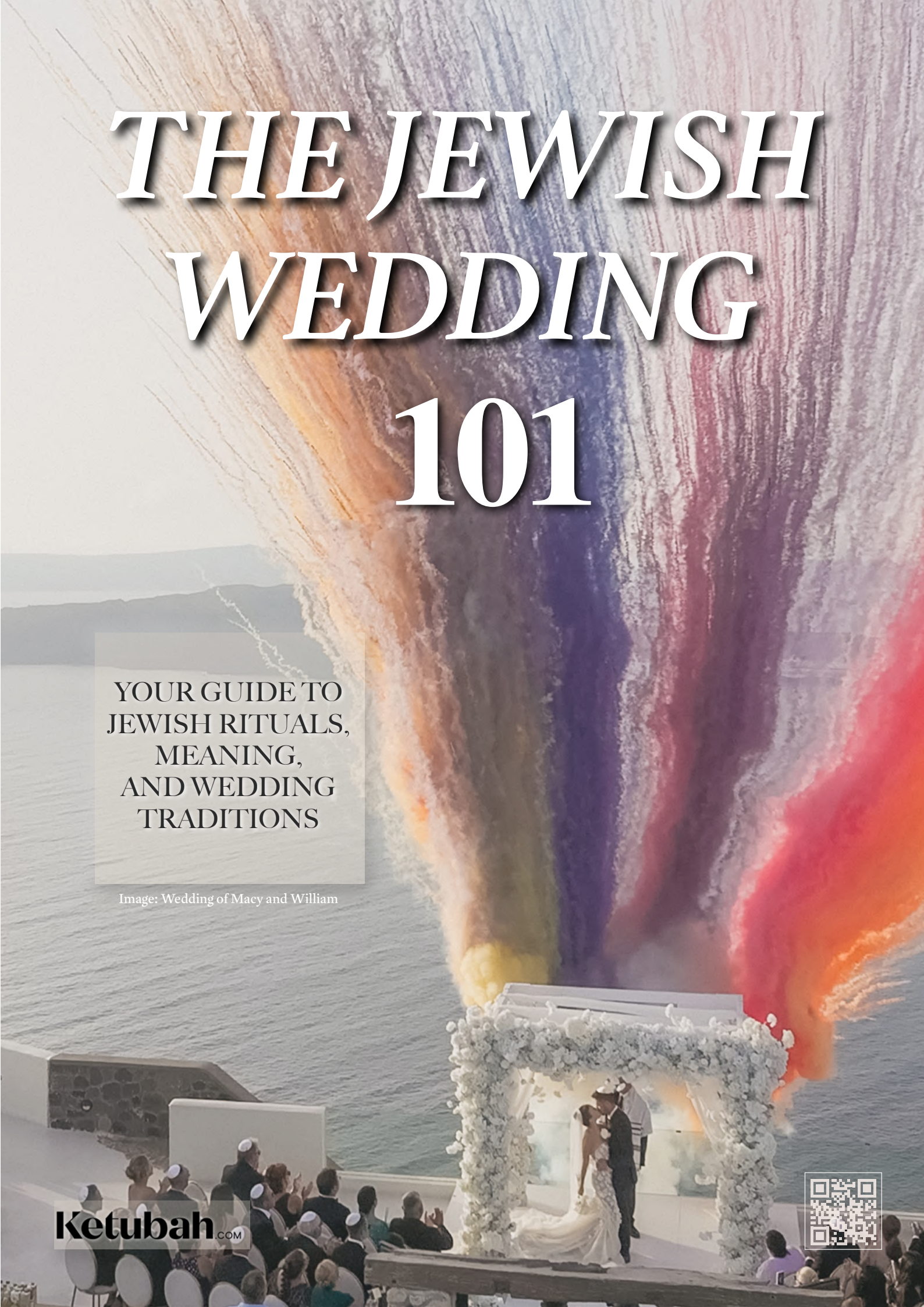

Image: Wedding of Macy and William

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A Note From Ketubah.com



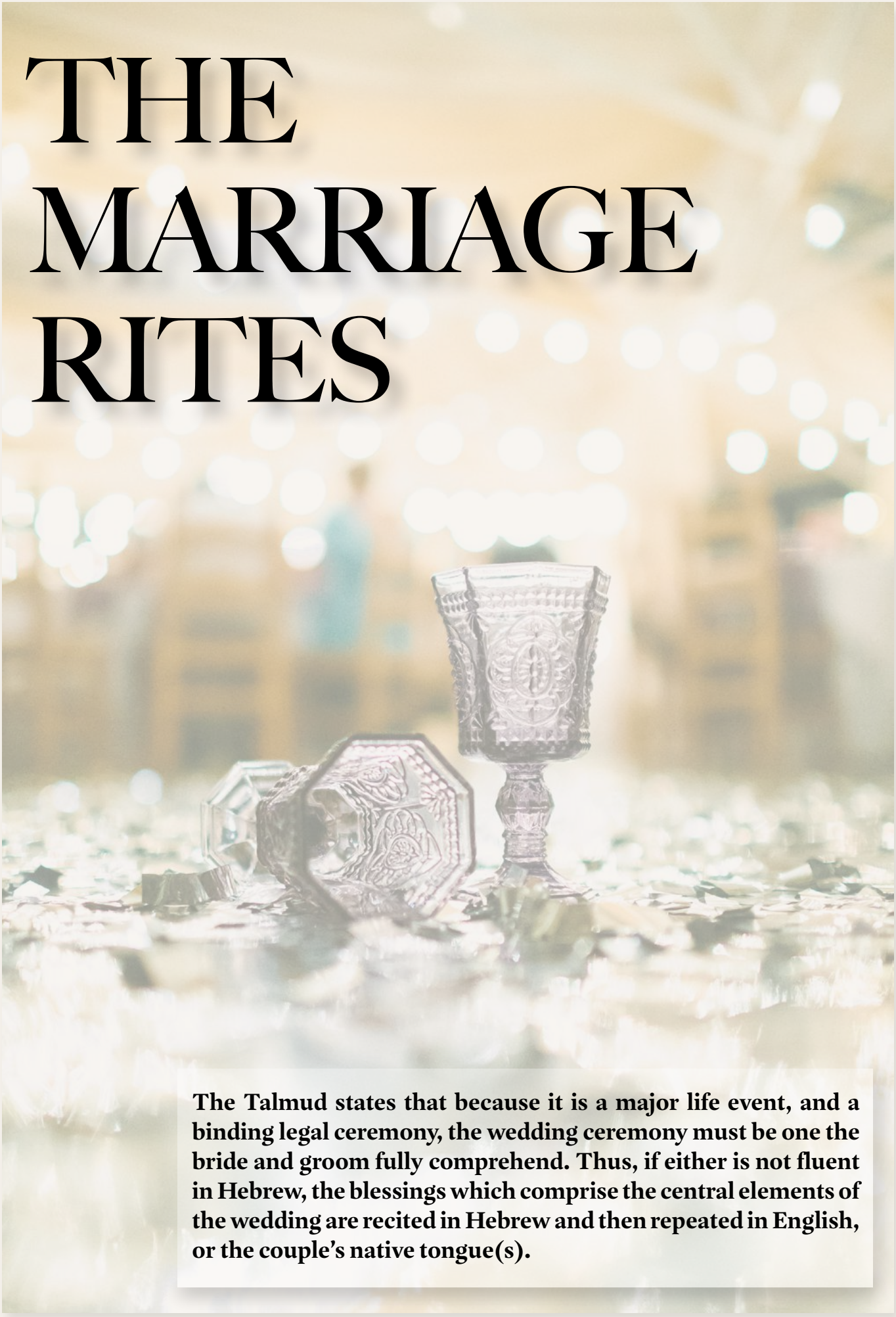
Michael Shapiro - CEO and Founder

At Ketubah.com, our mission is to support couples during one of the most exciting and meaningful times of their lives: planning their wedding and beginning their journey together. We understand that a wedding is not just a celebration but a deeply personal and spiritual milestone.

This eBook was created as part of our commitment to making this process as seamless and special as possible. We aim to provide you with a comprehensive guide to the rich traditions, customs, and artistry that make Jewish weddings so unique. From the history and significance of the Ketubah to the cherished rituals that bring families and communities together, this resource is designed to inspire and inform.

Thank you for allowing us to be part of your special day.

THE MARRIAGE RITES



The Talmud states that because it is a major life event, and a binding legal ceremony, the wedding ceremony must be one the bride and groom fully comprehend. Thus, if either is not fluent in Hebrew, the blessings which comprise the central elements of the wedding are recited in Hebrew and then repeated in English, or the couple's native tongue(s).

∞ The procession

∞ Hakafot: the circling of the groom

∞ Erusin: the engagement ceremony

∞ The ring ceremony

∞ The Ketubah is read aloud by the Officiant. It is then passed to the groom, who gives it to his bride, thereby designating it as her property. She will then typically hand it to her parents or the maid of honor for safekeeping.

∞ Nisuin: the marriage ceremony

∞ The breaking of the glass

∞ The recessional

∞ Yichud

∞ Seudat Mitzvah – the festive meal!



BEHIND THE TRADITIONAL KETUBAH TEXT

Below is a list of the major elements of a traditional Ketubah, in the order in which they appear

A listing of particulars of the wedding event: the date and place of the wedding, and the names of the bride and groom. Sephardic ketubot often mention any significant neighboring geographic features, such as a nearby river or mountain; they may also offer a brief description of the bride and groom in addition to giving their names. The names of the bride and groom's parents are also usually included, but customs vary widely as to the technicalities of this practice.

The so-called 'alimentation' clause, in which the groom promises the bride that he will "work for thee, honor, provide for, and support thee, in accordance with the practice of Jewish husbands";

A promise of mohar – the money a groom sets aside for the security of his wife, in the event that their marriage is dissolved. During the Talmudic period the Rabbis fixed a minimum amount for the mohar (200 zuzim), to ensure that even very poor women would be adequately protected;





ON THE SECOND DAY OF THE WEEK, THE TWENTY-EIGHTH DAY OF THE MONTH OF SHEVAT IN THE YEAR 5768, CORRESPONDING TO THE FOURTH DAY OF FEBRUARY IN THE YEAR 2008 HERE IN UPPER NYACK, NEW YORK, USA, IN THE PRESENCE OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS, THE BELOVEDS ARE FRANKLIN, SON OF SYLVIA AND FRANK FRANKLIN, AND SARAH FREEDMAN, DAUGHTER OF NORMAN AND LEAH FREEDMAN, ENTERED INTO THE COVENANT OF MARRIAGE.

AS WE EMBARK ON LIFE'S JOURNEY, WE PROMISE TO LOVE, CHERISH, ENCOURAGE AND INSPIRE ONE ANOTHER. OUR HEARTS FUSE TOGETHER, CREATING A UNIQUE BOND WITH FRIENDSHIP AND COMPASSION AT ITS CORE. THROUGH THIS UNION, WE VOW TO VALUE AND SUPPORT EACH OTHER, ALWAYS STRIVING TO SHOW SENSITIVITY TO EACH OTHER'S NEEDS. WE SHALL NURTURE ONE ANOTHER EMOTIONALLY, SPIRITUALLY AND INTELLECTUALLY, ALWAYS MINDFUL OF OUR RESPECTIVE QUALITIES AND STRENGTHS. MAY WE CONTINUE TO GROW TOGETHER, MAINTAINING THE COURAGE AND DETERMINATION TO PURSUE OUR DESIRED PATHS. WE PROMISE TO CELEBRATE LIFE'S JOYS WITH GRACE AND OVERCOME LIFE'S ADVERSITIES WITH TENACITY. MAY WE MAINTAIN THE INTIMACY THAT FOSTERS TRUST, HONESTY AND COMMUNICATION. AS LIFE PARTNERS, WE SHALL STRIVE TO BUILD A HOME EMANATING LOVE, PEACE, TOLERANCE AND CHARITY. THROUGH EACH OTHER'S EYES, WE SEE THE WORLD ANEW: MAY WE BE BETTER TOGETHER. ALL THIS IS VALID AND BINDING.

WITNESS _____ עד

WITNESS _____ עד

RABBI _____ הרב

BRIDE _____ הכלה

GROOM _____ החתן

A testament that the bride has willingly accepted this proposal from the groom; The dowry that a bride's father has bestowed upon her. (Note: the dowry is given to the bride to be used specifically as her contribution to the marital household. The bride can additionally own private property, which remains hers alone and is not mentioned in the Ketubah.) This dowry is the nedunya or naddan. Initially the Ketubah contained an itemized list of the moneys and other goods included in the dowry, but over time this was replaced by a standard estimate of 100 zuzim.

A promise of an additional gift, sometimes referred to as tosefet Ketubah, that the groom made to the bride. This mattan matches the dowry sum, and thus is also listed as 100 zuzim.

The establishment of a lien on the groom's property, sufficient to ensure that he can meet the obligations of the mohar, nedunya and mattan. In essence, this makes the Ketubah into a document akin to an insurance document – the groom does not give the bride the monies listed here outright, as a gift, but promises to provide them in the case that their marriage is dissolved (either through divorce or upon his death). The Ketubah ensures that the bride will not be financially devastated if her marriage should end.

A testament that the act of kinyan, or act of sealing the Ketubah document, has occurred. In order to ensure that the Ketubah was treated as an authoritative legal document which could mandate the transfer of property as described above, the Rabbis required that there be an act of formal acquisition associated with the marriage agreement.

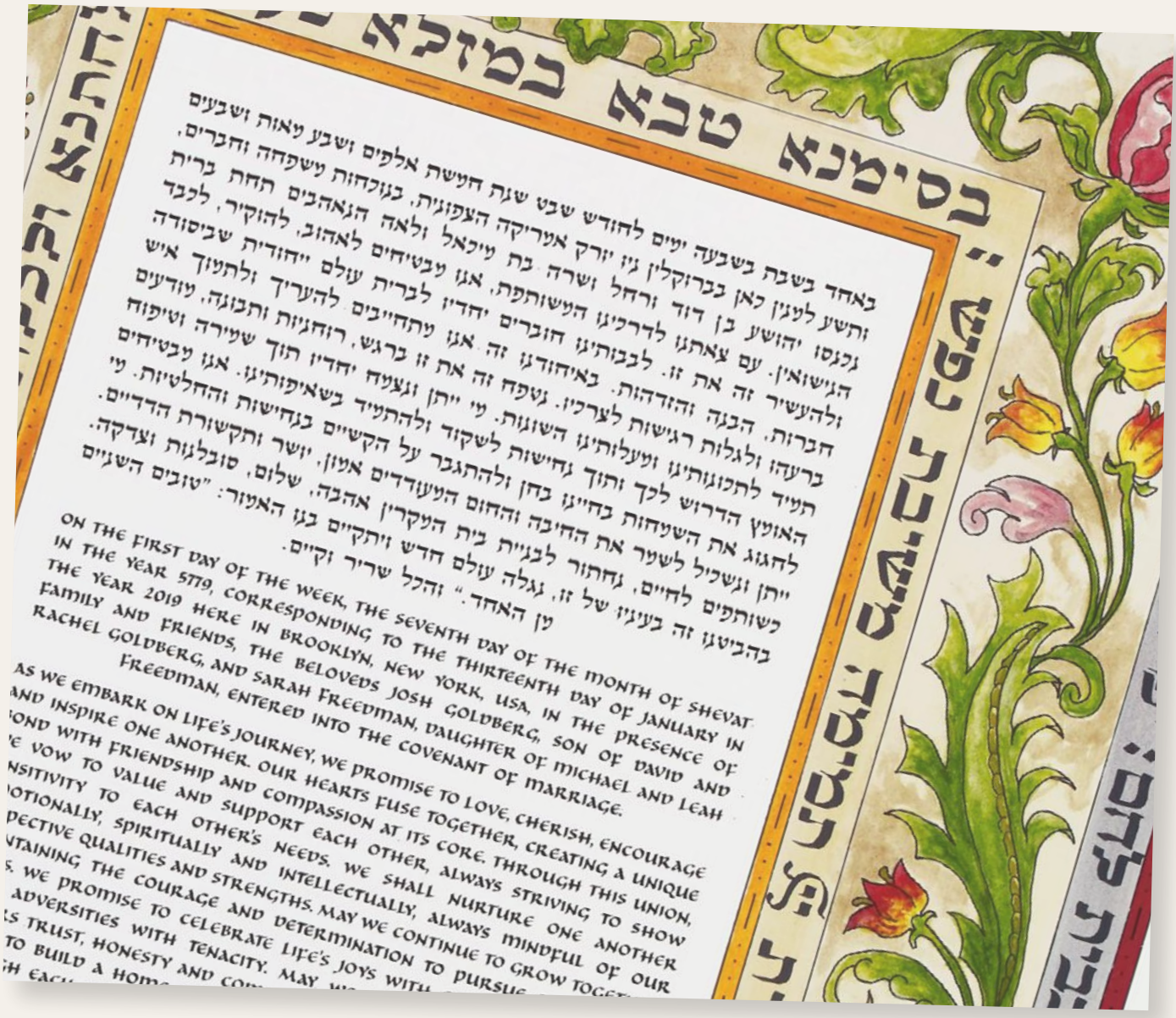
It is important to note that the groom does not purchase the bride – no such relation of ownership is possible or permissible in Jewish law. The kinyan is a symbolic acquisition and must occur in full view of the Ketubah witnesses before they sign it. It is usually signified by the groom's acceptance, and subsequent return, of a token object such as a handkerchief.



The concluding clause which summarizes the terms described above.

The signature of the Ketubah by two witnesses.

The witnesses must have read the Ketubah in full, or have had it read to them, and they must also observe the kinyan prior to signing it. The witnesses must be adult Jewish males.





Other laws and customs which govern the traditional Ketubah:

The Ketubah, once signed and read at the wedding, is given to the wife. It is her guarantee of protection, and so must always remain with her for safekeeping. In no case can a husband keep a Ketubah for his wife.

The witnesses must sign immediately below the Ketubah text, so that no words may subsequently be added to alter its meaning. Similarly, any blank spaces in the Ketubah text must be filled in with a dash, and the last word of the Ketubah should extend to the end of the line on which it is written. (This is similar to the practice of drawing a line after specifying the quantity on a check, so that it may not be tampered with and altered to a different amount.)

A couple can only cohabit if the wife is in possession of her Ketubah. Should it be lost or destroyed, a replacement Ketubah (known as a Ketubah di'irkhesa) must be issued before they can resume conjugal life.

In contrast to the Torah or many other religious documents, a Ketubah need not be written by a specially sanctioned scribe (Sofer) or written on parchment (klaf). This is because the Ketubah is technically considered a legal document rather than a religious item (although it is used in a religious ceremony).

The practice of illuminating the Ketubah, or decorating it and making it pleasing to the eye, is mandated by the Jewish custom of hiddur mitzvah. Hiddur mitzvah is the principle that material objects used in the performance of religious obligations be made beautiful. While decorative ketubot have proliferated recently, they have a long history: the earliest known illuminated Ketubah dates from the 10th century.

There is also a special type of Ketubah that is issued in the case that one remarries one's own former spouse.

Wedding of Danielle and Nathaniel
Ketubah: I Carry Your Heart II by Shell Rummel

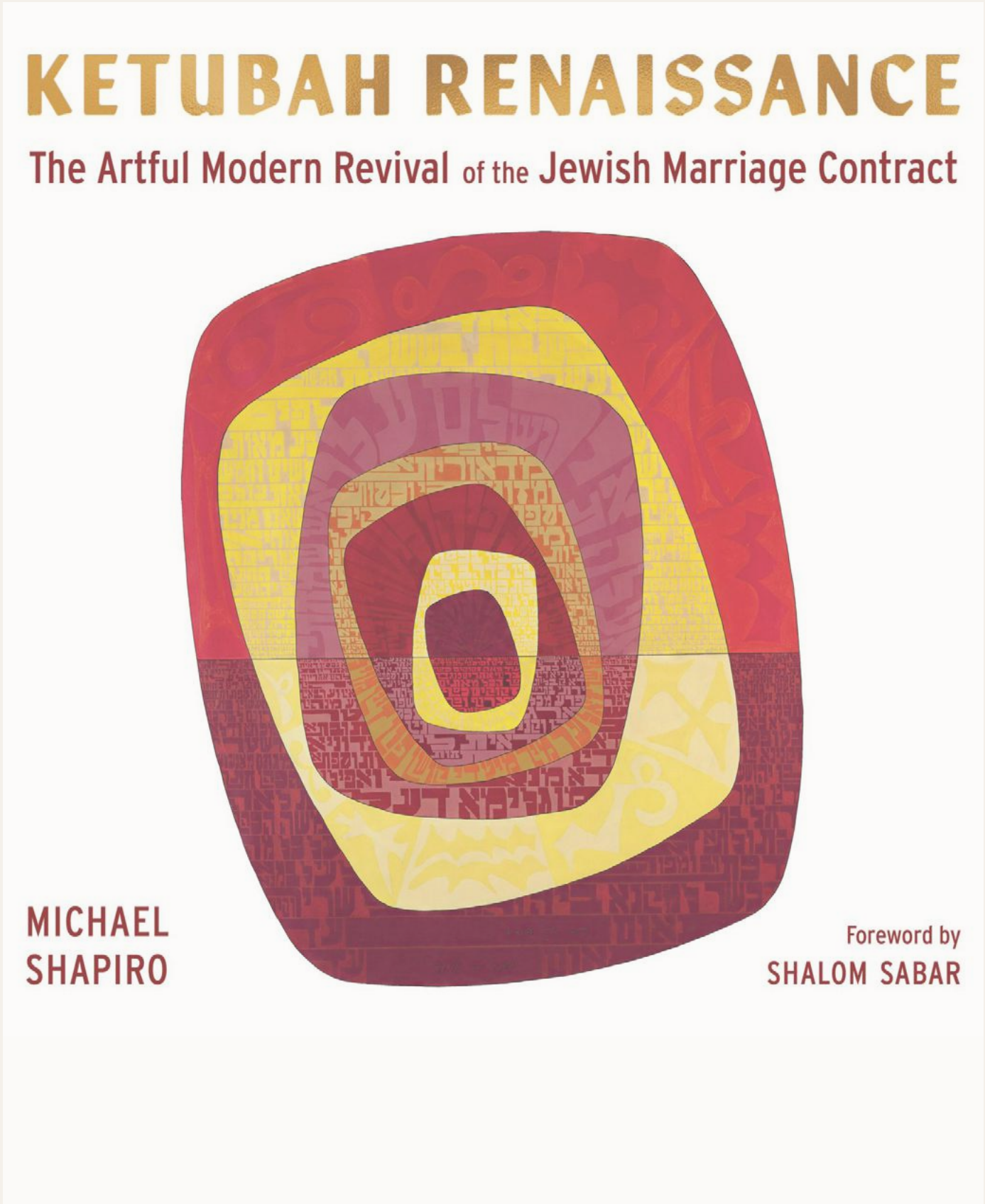


THE ARTFUL MODERN REVIVAL OF THE JEWISH MARRIAGE CONTRACT



Couples and families with upcoming weddings as well as officiating clergy, educators, aficionados of Jewish culture, scholars, and others will discover the evolving history of the Ketubah in all its facets: its artforms, texts, scripts, iconography, production processes, and technological innovations. A curated, chronological Ketubah gallery brings readers up close to sixty influential ketubot and the artists who created them—a colorful cornucopia of breakthroughs that epitomize the Ketubah renaissance.

Originally created 2,500 years ago as a unilateral marriage contract stating what a groom would provide for his bride, the Ketubah evolved from the tenth century onward into a richly decorated expression of love and commitment. Starting in the late 1960s a modern sensibility took root. Influenced by Jewish life and North American society at large, hundreds of artists and calligraphers began to imprint their unique aesthetic onto each Ketubah design—a movement Judaica scholar Shalom Sabar calls "a veritable renaissance of the illuminated ketubbah"—while also updating the original Aramaic text to express contemporary values.



You can buy Ketubah Renaissance at these vendors...

The Jewish Publication Society

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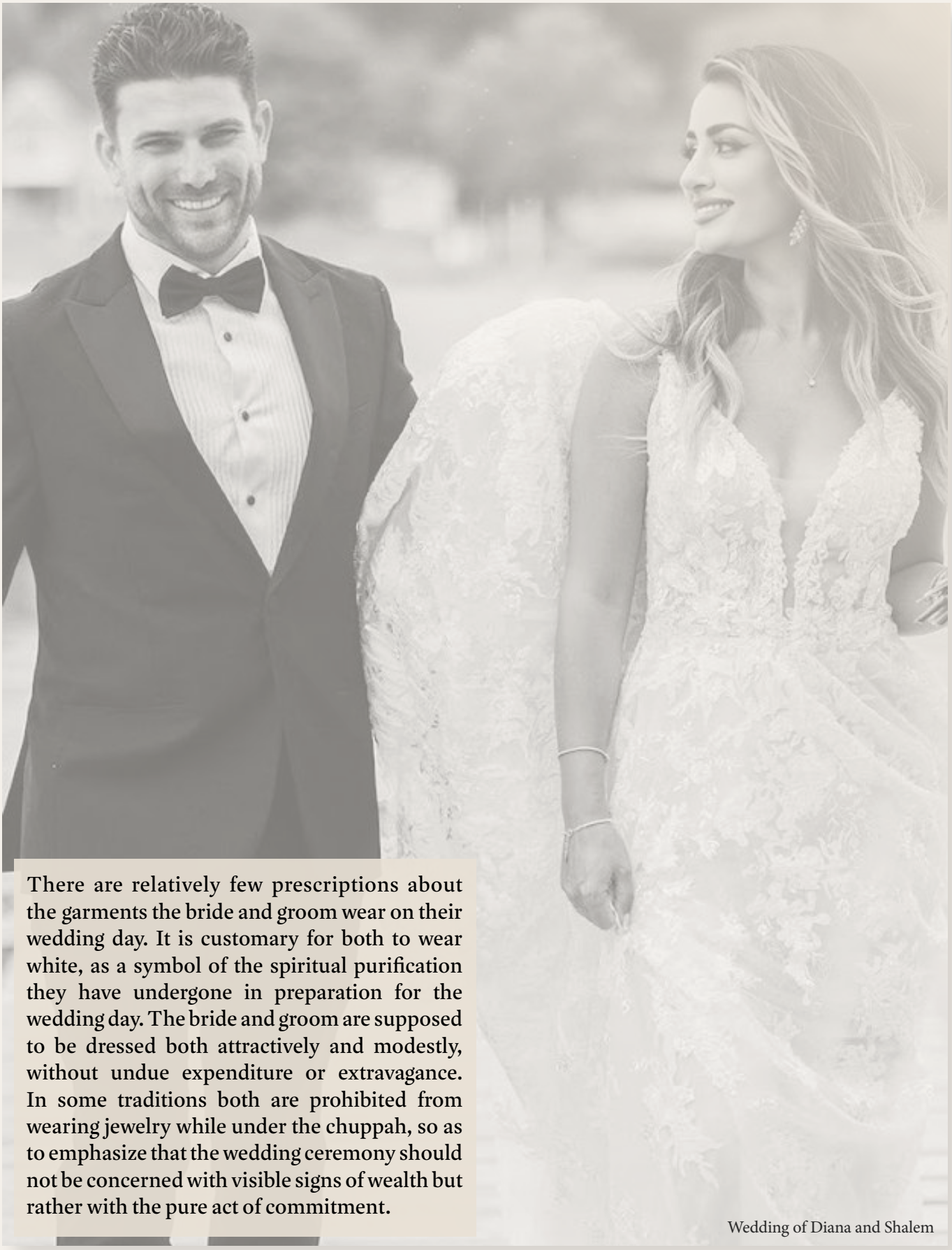
WEDDING ATTIRE



There are relatively few prescriptions about the garments the bride and groom wear on their wedding day. It is customary for both to wear white, as a symbol of the spiritual purification they have undergone in preparation for the wedding day. The bride and groom are supposed to be dressed both attractively and modestly, without undue expenditure or extravagance. In some traditions both are prohibited from wearing jewelry while under the chuppah, so as to emphasize that the wedding ceremony should not be concerned with visible signs of wealth but rather with the pure act of commitment.

Wedding of Diana and Shalem

BRIDE'S ATTIRE

Jewish brides are required to wear a wedding veil. The veil plays a significant role in the day's events, being the focal point of the bedeken, the ceremonial veiling of a bride by her groom, just prior to the performance of the marriage rites.



GROOM'S ATTIRE

Ashkenazi men may choose to wear a kittel during the wedding. A kittel is a robe made of white linen that a man traditionally wears during certain ceremonial events. In addition to his wedding, a man wears his kittel on Yom Kippur and during the Passover Seder; it is also customary for a man to be buried in his kittel, which serves as his shroud. The kittel is a symbol of purity and humility, and is worn over a suit of formal clothes. It is put on just before the man proceeds to the chuppah, and taken off immediately after the ceremony.

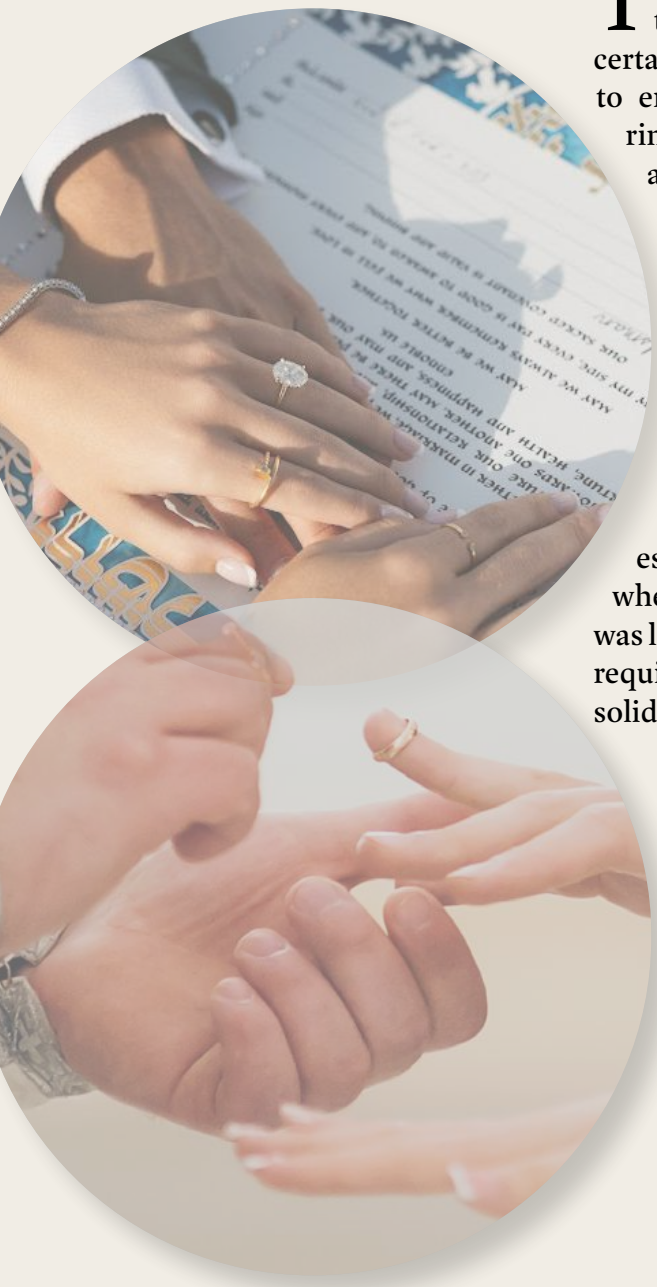


For inspiration for your Jewish wedding day follow us on Pinterest



Wedding of Melanie and Zachary
Ketubah: Floral Hamsa Papercut by Lauren Rosenthal McManus

WEDDING RINGS



The ring must clearly meet the requirement of having a certain minimum value – in order to ensure this, Jewish wedding rings must be made of solid and unbroken metal, without stones or other additions. Rabbis have long held that it is much harder to be certain that the ring is worth the correct amount if it is set with stones, as it is much easier to fool the eye with imitation gems than cheap metals. (This was especially true in eras past, when metal refining technology was less sophisticated.) Thus, the requirement that the ring be of solid metal, and not include any other elements, is meant to assure the bride, and the witnesses at the wedding, that the groom is in fact fulfilling his obligations.

Although we can now quite easily assess a piece of jewelry to determine its worth, the custom of using a simple ring made of plain metal has been retained. The purity and simplicity of the ring indicate that ornamentation and extravagance do not matter at the moment of marriage. It also is a sign that on their wedding day all brides, regardless of how wealthy or poor, are equal in their participation in the marriage rite, and equal in their joy.

Jewish wedding rings must be made of solid and unbroken metal, without stones or other additions

By Jewish law that the groom be the legal owner of the ring



While traditionally made of gold, the ring used in a Jewish wedding may be of any appropriate metal – silver and platinum are frequently used as well. The ring cannot have any breaks – it must be a continuous circle. This symbolizes the unending and continuous love between a bride and groom.

It is also stipulated by Jewish law that the groom be the legal owner of the ring – because it indicates a man's undertaking of financial commitments to his wife, the ring must be one he is rightfully in a position to give. Thus, the ring must either be purchased by the groom, or given to him as a gift (as may be the case if a family heirloom is used), and the groom will be asked to certify that he owns the ring during the ceremony.



THE KABBALAT PANIM, HACHNASAT KALLAH, AND THE CHOSSON'S TISH

There are many different stages to a Jewish wedding, each with their own meanings and traditions. At the very beginning of a traditional wedding there is the Kabbalat Panim, Hachnasat Kallah, and the Chosson's Tish, which are all intimate chances to see and speak to the bride and groom and celebrate in these traditional ways.



The Kabbalat Panim

A traditional Jewish wedding begins with the kabbalat panim, literally 'the receiving of faces'. The bride and groom, each attaining the status of royalty on the day of their wedding, receive their excited guests just as a king and queen would. These are customarily two separate events, one for the bride (Hachnasat Kallah) and one for the groom (Chosson's Tish).

The hachnasat kallah is the celebration of the bride. She is seated on a throne-like chair for the occasion



Wedding of Falyn and Peter
Ketubah: Heirloom by Enya Keshet

Hachnasat Kallah

The hachnasat kallah is the celebration of the bride. She is seated on a throne-like chair (kisseh hakallah) for the occasion. It is customary that the bride's mother, groom's mother, and their grandmothers be seated in chairs on either side. The hachnasat kallah is typically attended by the female guests of the wedding; in their attendance they fulfill the Talmudic injunction to honor and gladden a bride on her wedding day. The guests provide any practical assistance that the bride might require and dance before her.

Part of the intention of hachnasat kallah is to provide for the bride's needs. Thus, if the bride is poor, orphaned, or otherwise without support, the community comes together to ensure that she has not only an adequate, but truly joyous wedding. Rabbinical authorities have decreed that a community is obligated to provide for a bride without means, and is even enjoined to sell items in the synagogue if that is required to raise the necessary funds.



Wedding of Morgan and Joshua
Ketubah: Fantasy Papercut Luxe by Enya Keshet

Wedding of Leslie and Eric
Ketubah: Concentric Circles Papercut I
by Shell Rummel



The Chosson's Tish

'Chosson's Tish' means 'groom's table'. Before the wedding the male guests gather around the groom to celebrate and drink toasts. It is also customary for the groom to attempt to recite a d'var Torah, a lecture on a relevant passage of the Torah. The guests will continually interrupt him and prevent him from continuing by shouting in song, in a good natured effort to ensure that the spirit is kept light and the groom does not feel pressured to perform in already intense circumstances.

The Ketubah is read and signed at the chosen's tish, and then the entire company surrounds the groom in preparation for the the bedeken.

Before the wedding the male guests gather around the groom to celebrate and drink toasts

ON THE DAY OF THE WEDDING



Throughout our Jewish Wedding 101 articles, we aim to create a road map which outlines the events separate articles are devoted to each entry on the list. Keep in mind - this is a preliminary guide, based on the historical model of a Jewish wedding. If your practice of Judaism tends to be more traditional in nature note the adjustments that can be made to create your unique Jewish wedding!

Wedding of Samantha and Jacob



During the week prior to the wedding:

- Seclusion of the bride and groom, who may choose to refrain from seeing each other until their wedding day.

Although there is no religious law which requires it, many couples choose not to see each other in the days immediately prior to their wedding. Some do this for two or three days, others for a full week. This practice is meant to allow the bride and groom to spend time with their respective families before they leave to form a new family together. It also magnifies the impact of seeing one's partner on the wedding day and brings each a renewed appreciation and awareness of the other.

- Those with deceased parents may choose to visit their parents' graves, or to have the El Maleh Rachamim – the traditional memorial prayer – recited at a Torah reading.
- The Aufruf

This is a Jewish custom in which the groom is called up to the Torah for a special blessing shortly before the wedding. It's a celebratory moment often accompanied by singing, good wishes, and the traditional throwing of candy to symbolize a sweet life together.

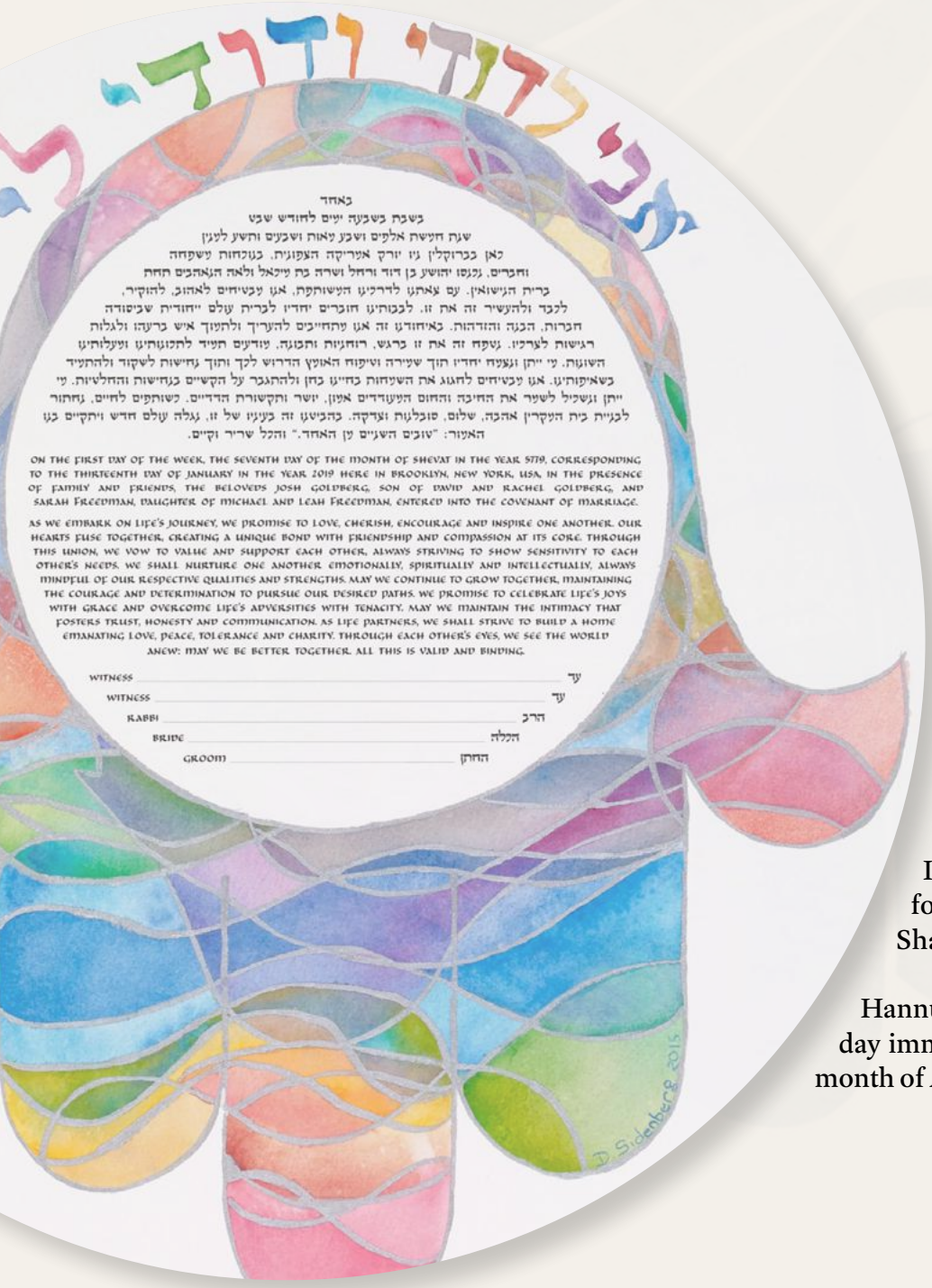
- On the evening prior to the wedding: bride visits the mikvah.

On the day of the wedding, before the festivities begin:

At daybreak, the bride and groom begin their fast, if it is appropriate to do so.

As on Yom Kippur, because the wedding day is a day of cleansing and purification, it is customary to fast. The fast commences at daybreak and ends immediately after the wedding in the yichud room. Thus, the bride and groom commence their married lives by breaking their wedding day fast together. Symbolically, they begin the day's rituals separately and finish them as a couple.

Exceptions to the fast are made if the wedding is held on the evening after Shabbat or a religious festival, since these are joyous holidays and one is forbidden from fasting during such celebrations.



One should also refrain from fasting if the wedding is on the following festive days:

Rosh Chodesh – the first day of the Hebrew month, except the month of Nissan.

Issru Chag – the day immediately following the last day of Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot.

Hannukah, Purim, and Shushan Purim (the day immediately after Purim), the 15th of the month of Av, and the 15th of the month of Shvat.

As on Yom Kippur, because the wedding day is a day of cleansing and purification, it is customary to fast



Wedding of Bradley and Lindsay
Ketubah: Burst of Nature by Angela Munitz

One should stop one's fast immediately if at any point one begins to feel ill – the joyousness of the celebration takes precedence over fasting on this occasion.

- If the groom chooses, he visits the mikvah.
- The bride and groom both recite Viddui and Al Chet, the confessional prayers.

One's wedding day is sometimes referred to in Jewish thought as a personal Yom Kippur, a day of spiritual cleansing, atonement, and rebirth. Thus, a bride and groom are encouraged to reflect upon their sins on the days prior to their wedding and to ask the forgiveness of anyone against whom they may have transgressed. On the day of the wedding, traditionally, each will also recite the confessional prayers, otherwise reserved for Yom Kippur.







One's wedding day is sometimes referred to in Jewish thought as a personal Yom Kippur, a day of spiritual cleansing, atonement, and rebirth



Wedding of Samantha and Jacob
Ketubah: Hamsa Papercut – Gold Leaf by Angela Munitz

Understanding the Ceremony

The Talmud states that because it is a major life event, and a binding legal ceremony, the wedding ceremony must be one the bride and groom fully comprehend. Thus, if either is not fluent in Hebrew, the blessings which comprise the central elements of the wedding are recited in Hebrew and then repeated in English, or the couple's native tongue(s).

THE WEDDING PROCESSIONAL



Wedding of Ruthie and Harrison
Ketubah: Ginkgo Spiral by Temma Gentles

The practice of having wedding attendants, and the great honor that is associated with this role, is sometimes traced back to a Talmudic interpretation of Adam and Eve's union. In Genesis, this is described as follows: "and the Lord fashioned into a woman the rib that he had taken from the man, and he brought her to the man." This is taken to mean that God himself escorted Eve to her wedding. The angels Michael and Gabriel are said to have accompanied Adam.

The custom of having an entourage for the bride and groom also derives from their being thought of as a queen and king – a couple on their wedding day is compared to a royal couple and thus merits the attention of attendants for this very special occasion Historically, kings and queens were never left alone. This is also an instance of g'millut chasadim, kindness and consideration. The bride and groom will take pleasure in the support attendants can offer them.



While there are no stipulations as to who should attend to the bride and groom, most often their parents escort them as they walk to the chuppah In contemporary weddings the bride's parents will usually walk with her, and the groom's parents will walk with him. An alternate practice is for both mothers to accompany the bride and both fathers to attend the groom.

The custom of having an entourage for the bride and groom also derives from their being thought of as a queen and king

Whomever escorts the couple, one common custom holds that the principle attendants each bear a lit, braided candle (the same kind used in Havdallah) throughout the ceremony. There are many reasons for this practice. Most obviously, the attendants symbolically light the way for the bride and groom as they enter into marriage. Moreover, most Jewish celebrations, such as Shabbat and the holidays, are ushered in with the lighting of candles, therefore including candlelight in the wedding ceremony is evocative of these happy occasions.

The greatest moment in Jewish history, the receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai – often described by analogy as a wedding of God and his people – was marked by fire and lightning. Thus, lit candles also signify the joy of entering into a sanctified union.

In addition to parents, wedding parties typically include a maid of honor and a best man. These roles are usually accorded to siblings and/or close friends, although there are no strict rules about this. Bridesmaids, groomsmen, and grandparents are usually present as well, although this is entirely up to the wishes of the couple. (Note: it is not a requirement that all members of the wedding party be Jewish, although some Rabbis may prefer this to be the case.)

While there is no fixed formula governing the order of the processional, the groom must arrive at the chuppah before the bride does. This too is said to harken back to the original wedding, that of Adam and Eve. Because Adam was created first, many interpreters hold that he was already waiting for Eve under the chuppah when she was created and brought to him.

It is customary for the parents of the bride and groom to stand with the couple under the chuppah. The maid of honor and best man sometimes do so as well – customs in this regard vary widely, so it is best to check with your Officiant. Most often, the other members of the wedding party stand by the chuppah for the duration of the ceremony.
(In some communities the guests stand as well.)

The groom must arrive at the chuppah before the bride does



Wedding of Samuel and Erin

It is customary for the parents of the bride and groom to stand with the couple under the chuppah



Wedding of Chelsea and Samuel
Ketubah: Isfahan, Persia, 1879 - The Jewish Museum Collection



The most common order of procession is as follows:

- Officiant(s)
- Groom's grandparents (they are often seated in the first row after entering to avoid any physical discomfort from lengthy standing)
- Ushers
- Best man
- Siblings of the groom
- Groom, with his parents (or with the two fathers)
- Bride's grandparents (they are often seated in the first row after entering to avoid any physical discomfort from lengthy standing)
- Bridesmaids
- Maid of honor
- Siblings of the bride
- Bride, with her parents (or with the two mothers)
- Modifications to this processional can be easily made to accommodate a particular couple's preference, or their familial circumstances (divorce, step-parents, etc.)





THE CHUPPAH

The chuppah is the canopy under which all Jewish weddings are performed. It is composed of a piece of fabric held up by four poles; the poles are sometimes fixed in place, and sometimes held for the duration of the ceremony by four honored guests.



Wedding of Akshay and Kelly
Ketubah: Honeysuckle Papercut by Enya Keshet

The chuppah has its roots in Biblical Jewish life. The word is used in the Torah to refer to the tent set aside for the bride and groom to use on their wedding night. The tent was covered with purple cloth, as an indication of its celebratory nature: purple was the color associated with royalty, and newly married couples are often compared to kings and queens in Jewish thought.

As Jews were dispersed through the Diaspora, and began to live in more crowded conditions, newly married couples typically did not have the means to set up independent households when first married, and would most often live with their families. Thus, the practice of having a separate tent for the couple was gradually replaced by the use of a symbolic representation of their household during the wedding ceremony – the canopy we are familiar with today. This canopy was a visible sign that a new household was coming into being with the wedding ceremony. A lovely ancient custom was to plant a tree at the birth of each child: a cedar for a son and a cypress for a daughter. When that child grew and the time came for his or her marriage, branches of that tree were used as the four poles of the chuppah used in their wedding.

The practice of having a separate tent for the couple was gradually replaced by the use of a symbolic representation of their household during the wedding ceremony – the canopy we are familiar with today



Wedding of Dana and Steven
Ketubah: Sasson Papercut Luxe by Enya Keshet

A lovely ancient custom was to plant a tree at the birth of each child: a cedar for a son and a cypress for a daughter



Wedding of David and Chelsea
Ketubah: Lit Lillies Papercut by Melody Molayem

The configuration of the chuppah – a canopy that is open on all four sides – also derives from the Bible. The Talmud teaches that the chuppah evokes the home of Abraham and Sarah, which was always welcoming to strangers and guests. Abraham and Sarah's tent, and the chuppah used in a wedding, are both symbols of the importance of the principle of hachnasat orchim, the hosting of guests, in Jewish life. By beginning their married life under a chuppah, a couple symbolically creates a household that is both special to them and a welcoming haven for others.



Wedding of Jodi and Daniel
Ketubah: A Feast Of All Your Hours by Debra Band

The chuppah is traditionally considered a sacred space. Some strands of Jewish thought hold that God himself dwells wherever a chuppah may be found. It is also often said that a bride has a special connection to God while under her wedding canopy and can intercede with certain requests at this time. In some traditions, therefore, wedding guests will ask the bride to pray for the health or wellbeing of those especially in need of help when under the chuppah.

While any synagogue should be able to provide you with a chuppah, there is a growing custom according to which a couple creates a personalized chuppah to use during their ceremony and keep afterwards as a memento. Chuppot are ceremonial objects and as such, fall under the principle of hiddur mitzvah. Some couples design and make their own chuppah, while many others have one made for them by their friends and family. There are no religious prescriptions as to the construction of the chuppah canopy. It may be made of any material and set with any pattern that you enjoy and find meaningful. After the wedding, the canopy may be hung on the wall or even kept for one's children.

There is also a longstanding tradition of using a tallit – a traditional prayer shawl – as a chuppah. This custom is especially prevalent in Israel and in Sephardic weddings, which goes back hundreds of years.



Wedding of Shayna and Jared
Ketubah: Garden of Eden by Angela Munitz



Wedding of Ruthie and Harrison
Ketubah: Ginkgo Spiral by Temma Gentles



THE BETROTHAL CEREMONY

The erusin, or betrothal ceremony, is the first of the two major components of the wedding. It consists of the following elements:

1. Although not required, most ceremonies begin with an official greeting and invocation. The traditional welcome that is recited comes from Psalms [118:26]: "Baruch haba beshem Hashem, barchnuchem mebeit Hashem." This means: "Welcome in the name of God, welcome in this house of God." The invocation which often follows, a prayer known as Mi Adir, praises God and asks for blessings on the bride and groom.

2. Kiddush: a glass of wine is poured, and the traditional blessing is recited by the Officiant.

3. Birkat erusin: the betrothal blessing is recited by the Officiant. This blessing thanks God for bestowing marriage rites on us.

4. The bride and groom drink from the sanctified wine. In order to facilitate this, the bride's veil is lifted, often by her mother or maid of honor. Because the wedding is not yet over, the veil is lowered again after she has drunk. (Some customs hold that the Officiant, or other members of the wedding party, may drink from the wine as well.)

THE RING CEREMONY

One of the centerpieces of the traditional Jewish wedding is the bestowal of a ring by the groom on his bride. This constitutes the fulfillment of an essential component of the Jewish marriage rites, the giving and free acceptance of an article of value.

Traditionally, the ring is placed on the forefinger of the right hand during the ceremony. Explanations differ as to why this is the case. Some hold that there was an ancient belief that an arterial lifeline ran from the index finger directly to the heart, and thus accorded that finger particular significance. Others maintain that because the forefinger is the most used and active one, by allowing a ring to be placed on her finger, a woman signified her voluntary and active acceptance of the marriage agreement. In some Sephardic communities, by contrast, the ring is placed on the left middle finger. The reason given for this is that this is the same finger that one binds with the tefillin, and just as that indicates that someone is bound to God, a ring on that finger indicates that one person is bound to another. Most women move the wedding band to the ring finger of the left hand after the ceremony is over.





An arterial lifeline ran from the index finger directly to the heart, and thus accorded that finger particular significance







The giving of the ring is preceded by a repetition of the verse "Harei aht mekudeshet li betaba'at zo k'dat Moshe v'Israel." (Thou art sanctified unto me with this ring, in the tradition of Moses and Israel.) The giving of a ring in the traditional ceremony indicates that the groom has provided for certain guarantees of his wife's well-being in the event of the dissolution of their marriage.

According to Jewish law, because the ring ceremony is the heart of the nuptials and is a momentous legal event, it must be witnessed in the same fashion as the Ketubah. In traditional wedding ceremonies, the giving and receiving of the ring is comprised of the following steps:

1. The groom or his agent gives the ring to the Officiant.

2. The groom identifies the witnesses.

3. The witnesses attest that the ring meets the specifications of Jewish law: that it is made of pure metal, is an unbroken circle without any holes or interruptions, and that it is free of gems or other embellishments.

4. The groom attests that the ring is his legal property and is of the required minimum value.

5. The groom takes the ring from the Officiant, and recites the Harei aht verse.

6. In sight of the witnesses, the groom places the ring on the bride's right forefinger.









Wedding of Tara and Jonathan

The traditional Jewish wedding ceremony makes provisions for the groom to bestow a wedding band on his bride – this was part of his assurance that she would be provided for in all circumstances. Many modern couples, alternately, have a double ring ceremony – one in which each partner gives a ring to the other – in keeping with their egalitarian values. If you would like a double ring ceremony be sure to discuss this with your Officiant: some Orthodox and Conservative Rabbis believe that halachah (Jewish law) does not permit double ring ceremonies, or that it imposes some limitations on the way in which they may be performed.

Another means by which the ring ceremony may be made more egalitarian is by having the bride verbally respond to the groom and formally accept the ring. Some Orthodox and Conservative Rabbis have recently begun introducing this practice to couples that wish to give a more active role to the bride during the wedding, while also adhering to tradition.

THE NUPTIAL CEREMONY

The second major component of a Jewish wedding is the nisuin, the official marriage ceremony



Wedding of Justin and Brittany
Ketubah: Rose Papercut by Enya Keshet

It consists of the following:

1. Although not mandatory, the Officiant will often begin the marriage ceremony with an address, making some comments on the Jewish view of marriage, and if applicable, addressing some personal remarks to the bride and groom.

2. A second glass of wine is poured.

3. The Sheva Brachot, Seven Blessings, are recited by the Officiant.

4. The bride and groom drink from the wine. The bride, now officially married, may keep her veil lifted after this point.



Wedding of Shani and Netanel
Ketubah: Verses of Love Papercut by Enya Keshet

THE NUPTIAL BLESSINGS

The centerpiece of the marriage ceremony, the Sheva Brachot, or nuptial blessings, are recited as part of the wedding ceremony, at the conclusion of the wedding feast.They are also recited at certain meals which are held in the week following the wedding.



Wedding of Hannah and Ari
Photographer: Eric Stephenson



Wedding of Arianna and Grant
Ketubah: Blessing And Peace by Angela Munitz

The blessings are most often recited by the Officiant during the wedding, although this is not required – someone other than the Officiant may be given the privilege of reciting the blessings during the wedding ceremony itself. Honored guests who are not members of the wedding party are typically chosen to recite the blessings at the festive meal which follows the ceremony.



Wedding of Allison and Craig
Ketubah: Four Seasons by Jessica Kraft

Here is a summary of the Sheva Brachot:

1. Kiddush: the first blessing is the familiar sanctification of wine.

2. "... Shehakol barah l'chvodoh": the second blessing praises God for his greatness in being the author of all creation.

3. "... Hayotzer adam": the third blessing praises God as the creator of mankind.

4. "... Asher yatzar et ha'adam betzalmo, betzelem dmut tavnito...": the fourth blessing praises God as the creator of mankind in his image and likeness. [**Multiple explanations by various Rabbis are given as to the difference between the third and the fourth blessings, and the reasons for including both.]



Wedding of Thomas and Arthur
Ketubah: Galilee Dawn Papercut by Ruth Warzecha

5. "... Mesameach zion bebaneha": the fifth blessing expresses a wish that the Jewish nation rejoice in the strengthening of the community through the marriage of two of its members, and praises God for perpetuating the Jewish nation.

6. "... Mesameach chatan ve'kallah": the sixth blessing asks God to bring as much joy to the companions who are about to be wed as he brought to the world in his creation of Eden, and praises God for causing the bride and groom to rejoice.

7. The seventh blessing praises God for creating joy (ten synonyms for joy and gladness are listed), and petitions Him to bring that joy to the land of Israel and city of Jerusalem.

The petition is often sung after the wedding, and is the famous verse "Od ishama be'arei Yehudah... kol sasson ve'kol simcha, kol chatan ve'kol kallah."

According to traditional law, a minyan, or quorum of ten adult males, must be present for the recitation of the Sheva Brachot. They are thus omitted from the wedding ceremony if fewer than



BREAKING THE GLASS



Perhaps the most iconic moment in a Jewish wedding is the smashing of a glass at its conclusion. Historically this was done by the groom, although many contemporary weddings have the bride and groom do this together.

Wedding of Shani and Netanel
Keutubah: Verses of Love Papercut by Enya Keshet

The breaking of a glass at this time is meant to remind those present of the destruction of the Temples, and other hardships suffered by the Jewish people. Even amidst the great joy of a wedding, Jewish tradition teaches that we must always take a moment to acknowledge these tragedies. It is customary to recite Psalm 137 – "If I forget thee O Jerusalem..." – when the glass is smashed.

The practice of smashing a glass during a wedding celebration is sometimes said to derive from a similar incident described in the Talmud. It relates the story of Rabbi Mar de-Rabina, who felt that the guests at his son's wedding were not appropriately mindful of the significance of the occasion and were being too cavalier in their celebrations. He grabbed an expensive goblet off the table and smashed it on the floor, giving the guests a moment's pause and causing them to settle down. This reminded them that a wedding should be marked by solemnity and awe, and not just mindless carousing.



There is also a growing custom of turning the broken glass into a keepsake



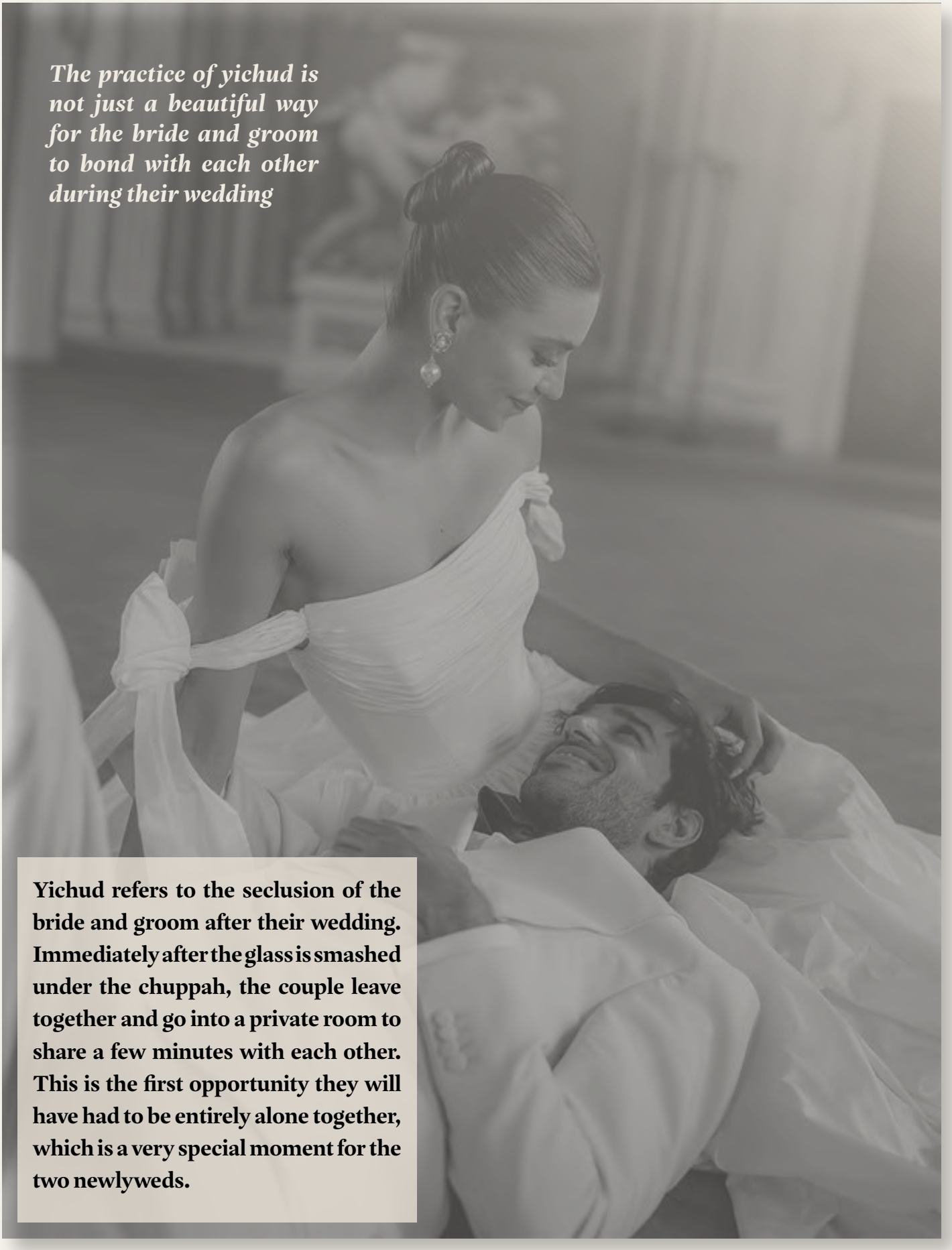




The breaking of a glass at this time is meant to remind those present of the destruction of the Temples, and other hardships suffered by the Jewish people

In some weddings, the glass used for kiddush, the blessing of wine during the ceremony, is the one that is broken later on. Most often, though, a separate glass is set aside for this purpose. There is also a growing custom of turning the broken glass into a keepsake – there are many artists that have come up with interesting and beautiful ways of working with the shards and creating wedding mementos out of them.

YICHUD



The practice of yichud is not just a beautiful way for the bride and groom to bond with each other during their wedding

Yichud refers to the seclusion of the bride and groom after their wedding. Immediately after the glass is smashed under the chuppah, the couple leave together and go into a private room to share a few minutes with each other. This is the first opportunity they will have had to be entirely alone together, which is a very special moment for the two newlyweds.

The practice of yichud is not just a beautiful way for the bride and groom to bond with each other during their wedding, it is an essential component of the marriage rite. A Jewish wedding is not considered valid without it, thus yichud must be witnessed. Two guards are appointed to check that the room the couple uses is empty upon their arrival, and to stand outside the door and ensure that they are not disturbed.

In ancient times, consummation was the last step of the marriage rite – a couple was not considered married until they had cohabited. Yichud is a reminder of this: in sharing a completely private moment, the bride and groom symbolically consummate their marriage.

If the couple has been fasting on their wedding day, they break their fast in yichud, sharing a light meal together before they join their guests for the celebratory feast.

Two guards are appointed to check that the room the couple uses is empty upon their arrival, and to stand outside the door and ensure that they are not disturbed



Wedding of Violet and Evan
Ketubah: Tie The Knot by Lori Loebelsohn



Wedding of Talia and Alen

THE WEDDING RECEPTION

Ways To Celebrate!

Rejoicing after the Ceremony

Jews are commanded to rejoice with the bride and groom on their wedding day- "לשמח חתן וכלה" lesameach chatan ve'kallah. A marriage is a special occasion both for the couple and the community, and all are encouraged to celebrate. Anyone who partakes in a wedding meal is specifically enjoined to make merry with the bride and groom.

Jews are commanded to rejoice with the bride and groom on their wedding day

There are many ways in which this instruction to rejoice is carried out:



Wedding of Macey and William

Music

The inclusion of music as part of the wedding celebration dates back to the Bible. Rabbis in the Talmudic era would often lead assembled wedding guests in song.

While there are no particular pieces of music that Jewish law suggests for the wedding, there are some compositions which are typically not used. Specifically, Wagner's wedding march (popularly known as "Here Comes the Bride") is generally avoided, because of his widely known antisemitism. In addition, Mendelssohn's "Midsummer Night's Dream," often used as recessional music to accompany the wedding party as they depart from the ceremony, is steered clear of in most Jewish weddings, as Mendelssohn rejected his Judaism and converted to Christianity.



Wedding of Jessica and Steven

The Badhan

There was a longstanding tradition among Eastern European Jews that a wedding feast be presided over by a sort of master of ceremonies, whose function was to provide merriment for the couple and their wedding guests. This figure, known as the badhan, was something of a jester-like character, who would tell jokes and perform tricks. Having a badhan at one's wedding fell out of favor in the last century, but the legacy of this custom lives on in the practice of having guests dress up in funny costumes and perform entertaining tricks (commonly known as "schtick") for the bride and groom.





Dancing

Dancing is an iconic and essential part of a joyous Jewish wedding. Folkdances, especially the Hora, are often the focus of this aspect of the celebration, although a great many couples include secular dancing as well. The culmination of the dancing is the traditional lifting of the bride and groom on chairs, so that they may bounce merrily above the crowd, joined together by sharing hold of a napkin or handkerchief.

THE WEDDING RECEPTION

The Wedding Meal

There is so much that goes into any wedding reception which is no different for a Jewish Wedding Reception. The traditions don't just end after the Ketubah is signed and the glass is broken.



Jews are commanded to rejoice with the bride and groom on their wedding day







Seudat mitzvah literally means the meal that is attendant upon the carrying out of a religious obligation. In general, important Jewish events – Shabbat, holidays, and lifecycle milestones, including not just weddings but also brit milahs, bar/bat mitzvahs and funerals, are marked by a communal meal. Moreover, it is a religious obligation to make merry on the day of a wedding and a feast provides the perfect occasion for bringing joy to the bride and groom, their families, and the community as a whole.

All Jewish festive meals include:

Kiddush (consecrating and drinking wine)
Hamotzi (consecrating and eating bread)
A ceremonial washing of hands and the recitation of Birkat Hamazon (grace after meals).

In addition, at the meal which follows a wedding, the Sheva B'rachot – the seven blessings which are part of the wedding ceremony – are recited again.

One tradition suggests the following way of reciting Birkat Hamazon and the Sheva B'rachot: One glass of wine is held aloft for the recitation of Birkat Hamazon, and then set down. A second glass of wine is held aloft and the last six of the seven blessings in the Sheva B'rachot are recited. The second glass is then put down and the first raised again. The first of the Sheva B'rachot, which is also the kiddush, is recited. Wine from the two glasses is mixed, representing the couple's union, and they both then drink from this blended wine.

While there are no strict rules on the matter, custom suggests that the head table at a Jewish wedding focus on the couple and their families. Traditionally, the bride, groom, their parents and grandparents, and sometimes their siblings, all be seated at the head table. It is not required (although it is certainly acceptable) that all members of the wedding party sit at the head table.

The Krenzel / Mezinka Dance

DANCE OF THE LAST CHILD



The krenzel is the celebratory dance which is traditionally performed at weddings when the last child in a family is married.

KRENZEL / MEZINKA DANCE

It honors parents who have the privilege of having all of their children happily settled into families of their own. The parents are placed on chairs in the center of the room, and the wedding guests dance around them, sing, and offer their good wishes.

'Krenzel' is the Yiddish word for crown; the dance is so named because the mother being celebrated is often adorned with a wreath – or crown – of flowers on her hair.



Wedding of Grace and Adam
Ketubah: Shalom - To Life Ketubah By Angela Munitz

SHEVA BRACHOT



The Sheva Brachot, literally 'seven blessings', refers not only to the set of seven blessings which are recited as part of the wedding ceremony, but also to the seven days of celebration which follow a traditional Jewish wedding. Customarily, the week after one's wedding is set aside for rejoicing with family and friends. No work may be conducted, and celebratory meals are hosted by loved ones. At each of these meals, if a Panim Chadashim, a new person – one who was not at the wedding and who has not yet attended one of these festive meals – is present, and if there is a minimum quorum of ten adult males (a minyan,) the Seven Blessings are recited again.



Customarily, the week after one's wedding is set aside for rejoicing with family and friends

Before the blessings for the bread are made, a cup of wine is given to one of the men who begins the blessings for the meal. When he concludes these blessings, he puts down the cup and waits for the Sheva Brachot to begin. A second cup is filled up with wine and given to another man. It is on this second cup of wine that six of the seven special blessings are made for the Chatan and Kallah.

Some have the custom that one person says all six blessings; other have the custom to divide the six blessings up between various guests. When these six blessings are finished, the man who began the blessings on the bread and the meal then recites "boreh perei ha-gofen" which is the last of the seven blessings.

This man will drink from the cup which he is holding, then take the other cup over which the first six blessings were recited, and mix the two cups together so that the blessings become intertwined. One cup is given to the chatan to drink from and the other is given to the kallah. Since these are cups of blessings, it is the custom of those in attendance to take a small sip of the wine too.



The practice of Sheva Brachot dates from Biblical times. The book of Judges describes seven days of feasting which followed Samson's wedding. The custom is now largely confined to Hassidic, Orthodox, and some Conservative communities, as many couples leave for a honeymoon immediately after their wedding.



Wedding of Samuel and Erin

Celebrating Love and Tradition

A Jewish wedding is many things at once: a sacred moment, a cultural inheritance, and a deeply personal expression of love. Throughout this guide, we have traced the path that leads a couple from intention to union through rituals that are timeless, symbolic, and beautifully human.

These traditions, whether centuries old or newly reimagined, share a single purpose: to honor the bond between two people as they step into a future built together. From the quiet anticipation of the days before the ceremony, to the intimate rituals of kabbalat panim and bedeken, to the powerful simplicity of the ring and the signing of the Ketubah, each moment carries its own weight and meaning. They remind us that love is not only felt, it is enacted, witnessed, and celebrated.

Yet within all this structure, there is space for individuality. Couples today weave their own stories into these rituals, blending heritage with personal expression and tradition with modern sensibility. That balance between old and new, formal and intimate, is what makes each wedding uniquely its own.

As you plan, prepare, or simply imagine your day, may this guide serve as both a companion and inspiration. May it help you create a celebration that feels authentically yours, rooted in tradition yet illuminated by your own voice, style, and spirit.

Above all, may your journey together be filled with joy, gratitude, and enduring love; today, under the chuppah, and in all the beautiful days that follow.



Wedding of Jessica and Steven

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