

JEWISH WEDDINGS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

I have recently returned from a trip to the United States where I was fortunate enough to participate in a wedding celebration of my beautiful, talented and beloved granddaughter. This is an experience that I wish for all of my readers to have many times in one's lifetime. After the wedding ceremony during the interminable wait for photographic evidence that I was in fact present at the wedding, I had a few moments to myself in which to contemplate the simplicity, beauty and majesty of the Jewish wedding ceremony.

The ceremony consists of a number of different parts. The veiling of the bride by her groom is an ancient custom having its roots in the Torah's description of the veiling of our mother Rivkah before her marriage to Yitzchak. This is usually a very emotional moment for all concerned. There is the entry of the bride to the chupah - the traditional idea of entering the home of Israel where she and her groom will build their lives together for their mutual happiness and for the glory of God and Israel.

There are customs that have evolved over time around this such as the bride circling the groom and special poems that are sung that mark at one and the same time the joy and solemnity of the occasion. The poems and customs vary among the different ethnic components of the Jewish people but they all have the same purpose to fuse human joy and hope with a God-given mission and a holy commandment of the Torah.

There are varying customs also as to whether the rabbi officiating at the ceremony says a few (hopefully) meaningful words to the couple before the actual ceremony of marriage begins. As a grandfather I never miss the opportunity to do so if the opportunity is granted to me. I am certain that this meant much more to me than it did to the young couple but so what? After all I am the grandfather.

The wedding ceremony is divided into the kiddushin betrothal aspect and then the actual nissuim or marriage aspect. The kiddushin binds the couple together to the exclusion of all other relationships while the nissuim permits their actual living together as husband and wife. The placing of the ring on the bride's finger by the groom and his declaration that he now marries her according to the law of

Moshe and Israel is the culmination of the kiddushin section of the ceremony.

The nissuim part of the ceremony is marked by seven blessings that are recited by the rabbi officiating or by honored guests or relatives. The order and text of the blessings recited to mark the kiddushin and nissuim aspects of the wedding ceremony are recorded for us in the Talmud in tractate Ketubot. These words are of ancient origin and express all of the feelings, hopes, challenges, spirituality and mutual love that are the basis for a meaningful and satisfying marriage.

The rabbis of the Talmud had an unerring ability to fathom the depths of human aspirations and hopes and to be able to place them in relatively few but memorable words. It is these words that particularly make the Jewish wedding ceremony so soaringly majestic.

In these words are included the hope for Jewish redemption and the rebuilding of Jerusalem as combined with the blessings for the couple's attempt to build their own lives and home on a foundation of love, friendship, mutual respect, harmony and peace. To the Jewish view of things the individual home of a Jewish couple is inextricably joined to the project of national Jewish redemption and responsibility to society as a whole.

At the wedding ceremony the ketubah - the written contract of monetary and other physical obligations between the husband and wife are spelled out. The wife retains her ketubah in her possession at all times. According to many customs the ketubah is read aloud as part of the wedding ceremony itself. It lends a legal certainty to the marriage arrangement between the bride and groom.

Over the many centuries, the Jewish wedding ceremony has retained its beauty, solemnity and freshness. It remains meaningful and dignified with an aura of tradition and eternity that surrounds and is infused within it. Many have tried to improve upon it, to make it more up to date, to meet the needs of changing times and mores. All of the fads, however, have always faded and have been unable to meet the test of time and generations. The beauty of the Jewish wedding ceremony accompanies the eternity of Israel through all times and places.

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