

The Jewish wedding contains many symbolic and meaningful rituals that consecrate the new couple's marriage and set them on their path together. Some traditions, including those rituals necessary for a marriage to be valid, are common to Jewish weddings of all denominations. Other rituals are more likely to be practiced in more traditional communities.

Pre –ceremony Rituals

There are a few pre-ceremony rituals that the wedding guests may have the opportunity to share with the bride (*kallah*) and groom (*chatan*). The pre-wedding reception is called *Kabbalat Panim* (literally "greeting of faces"). Often separate receptions for the bride and groom are held. The bride's reception is the *Bedeken* (literally "covering") and the groom's is the *Tish* (groom's table).

The *tish* for the groom will be in another room surrounded by guests who sing and toast him. In more traditional communities the *tish* is where the *ketubah* (marriage contract) will be signed. The *ketubah* outlines the groom's responsibilities and obligations to his wife.

The bride will be seated to receive her guests and may be surrounded by her mother and the groom's mother as well as her attendants. At the end of the *tish*, family and friends lead the groom into the *bedeken* for the bridal veiling.

The Wedding Ceremony

A Jewish wedding ceremony is actually two ancient ceremonies merged into one. The first part, *kiddushin* (betrothal) is the sanctification of the marriage. The second part, *nissuin* (marriage) involves blessing the newly married couple. The two parts are divided by the reading of the *ketubah*.

The actual ceremony takes place under a *chuppah*; a canopy that symbolizes the home that the bride and groom will build together. The groom is led to the *chuppah* first where he awaits the arrival of the bride. After the bride walks down the aisle, she may walk around the groom seven times.

Two cups of wine are used in the wedding ceremony. The first cup accompanies the betrothal blessings, recited by the rabbi. In Jewish law, a marriage becomes official when the groom gives an object of known value to the bride. This is traditionally done with a ring.

Now comes the reading of the *ketubah* (marriage contract) in the original Aramaic text. The *ketubah* outlines the groom's responsibilities — to provide his wife with food, shelter and clothing, and to be attentive to her emotional needs. The document has been signed by two witnesses and has the standing of a legally binding agreement.

A second cup of wine is filled and the *sheva b'rachot*, (sometimes called *sheva brachos*), the seven blessings in honor of the wedding, are recited. These seven blessings link the bride and groom to God as creator of the world, Judaism and tradition.

The wedding ceremony concludes with the groom breaking a glass under his foot. After the breaking of the glass, the guests yell, "Mazel Tov!" which means good luck. The couple is then escorted to a private room for a few minutes alone together.

The Festive Meal (*Seudah*)

It is a mitzvah for guests to bring *simcha* (joy) to the newly married couple on their wedding day. Lively circle dancing usually starts immediately when the bride and groom enter the room. At more traditional weddings there are separate circles for men and women and sometimes the room and/or dance floor will be split by a *mehitzah* (divider). In more liberal crowds, men and women dance together.

Please take note:

- Sometimes wedding invitations will list two different start times. The first time will be for the *Kabbalat Panim*, and the second for the actual wedding ceremony. Guests may show up any time after the first time listed, but no later than 15 minutes before the second time listed.
- It is customary for the couple not to see each other for one week preceding the wedding. Therefore, prior to the wedding ceremony, the bride and groom greet guests separately.
- Some brides and grooms fast on their wedding day until after the ceremony. It's completely fine to eat in front of them at the *kabbalat panim* (pre-wedding reception), but you may want to think twice before offering them refreshments.
- Why does the groom lower the veil? One commonly accepted explanation is to avoid what happened to Jacob when he was tricked by Laban into marrying Leah before marrying Rachel because Leah's face was covered by her veil. (Genesis 29: 16-30)
- In very traditional communities it is best for women to dress modestly. Practically speaking this means a skirt (not pants) at or below the knee, worn with stockings. Shoulders should not be bare, necklines are best kept at or near the collarbone, and sleeves at or below the elbow are appreciated.
- Jewish weddings do not usually follow the custom of having the bride's and groom's guests sit separately; however, at some Orthodox weddings the men and women may sit on opposite sides of the aisle.
- There are many explanations for the custom of breaking the glass. Among them is a reminder that relationships, as fragile as glass, must always be treated with care, love and respect. The broken glass also reminds us of the destruction of the Holy Temple in ancient Jerusalem and that even in the happiest of times we should be aware of the suffering of others.
- During the reception don't be surprised to see guests dancing, juggling, or otherwise performing for the bride and groom. It is a *mitzvah* to entertain the newlyweds.
- In more traditional communities it is also a mitzvah for the bride to dance with each of the female guests and for the groom to dance with each of the males. Do don't be timid about joining in the dancing. Knowing the steps is not important; having fun is.
- Traditional Jewish weddings will not include the "garter ceremony."