

## *Jewish Weddings V/S Eastern Weddings*

### **Introduction:**

Judaism is one of the very strict and orthodox religions and is exceptionally difficult to follow. But many believe that it is worth transmitting to the current generations and hence could be refashioned to suit the present times. But Jewish catalog writers found it difficult to resolve to this idea and therefore made it a point to project the problems, give suggestions and tried to help in forming resolutions for the future.

When coming to Jewish marriages, we could say that they have elaborate rituals and traditions which they most faithfully follow. Jews consider a marriage as a partnership for life and strongly believe that it is a fusion of souls which would be happy, peaceful and lasting if God is a part of the union. An arranged marriage is called a betrothal which in Hebrew is called "elrusin." A dowry was paid by the girl's father and if the girl was getting older, fathers were forced to offer an incentive to marry off their daughter. (Trepp, 1980)

According to the Bible, Adam was the first man God created and Eve was the first woman which he created from Adam's body. Therefore they strongly believe that marriage seals this oneness where the man and woman become complete. The Jews believe that if God is not the centre of their married lives, they would go to damnation. Once a family decides on a suitable bride, then the joyous news must be shared with the public. It is the job of the groom's mother to act first. The bride's mother is then to have an "in-law" dinner. (Routtenberg, 1967)

## **Jewish Weddings:**

### **“The Ketubah” (Marriage Contract)**

Before the wedding ceremony could start, the first thing that has to be done is the signing of the marriage contract. The priest or “rabbi” undertakes upon himself to explain the terms and conditions of the Ketubah to the groom. In a symbolic gesture, the rabbi holds out the corner of a handkerchief which the groom takes and agrees to be bound by what is written in the Ketubah. Soon after, other witnesses are called in to sign the Ketubah after the groom.

In ancient times, this marriage contract offered important legal protection to the bride, but according to these modern times, the Ketubah acts only as a reminder to the couple of their spiritual and moral responsibilities to each other. It explains in detail the mutual obligations of the bride and groom towards each other. As it is herein written, "Be my wife in accordance with the law of Moses and Israel. I will work for you; I will honor, support and maintain you, as it becomes Jewish husbands who work for their wives, honoring and supporting them faithfully...."

### **The Veiling of the Bride:**

Soon after the signing of the Marriage Contract, the couple and all their friends and relatives move towards the “Chuppah” or “Huppah”, where the groom has to veil the bride. They are treated like king and queen because it is their special day and are escorted to the huppah. The huppah is a link to the Jewish past, and a symbol of cohabitation. (Routtenberg, 1967. This is a very exciting part of the

ceremony because according to the traditional custom, the bride would not have seen the groom for three whole days preceding the wedding ceremony.

The escorts carry candles which in Hebrew is called “ner” which has a numerological value of 250. The significance of this is that a man has 248 organs in his body and a woman has 252 organs. When they are summed up we get 500 organs of both man and woman. So two candles, (250 into 2 =500) represents both the man and the woman oneness when they are united during the ceremony under the huppah.

This Jewish tradition of the “veiling of the bride” is what is called “badeken” which is a Yiddish word meaning “to cover over”. The tradition of “badeken” stems from an ancient story of Yaacov, Rachael and Leh. Yaacov worked for Lavon for a period of seven years, in order to earn the right to marry his daughter Rachael.

When the seven years of hard work was complete Lavon had to give his daughter Rachael in marriage to Yaacov which he did not like, so instead of Rachael, he veiled his other daughter Leh and thus tricked Yaacov into marrying her. Yaacov had to work for another seven years under Lavon and finally earned the right to marry Rachael.

Hence this ceremony of the veiling of the bride is very important to make sure that the groom is marrying the right woman. After the groom is satisfied that he is marrying the right woman, he covers his bride’s face with the veil and she

remains veiled right through all the seven benedictions that take place beneath the huppah.

### **Circling the Groom:**

This is another Jewish tradition followed by most where the bride has to walk around the groom beneath the huppah before the rabbi arrives to perform the wedding ceremony. This tradition has significance from the lines of Jeremiah in the Bible 31:21, where Jeremiah says, that a woman encompasses and protects a man.

It is traditional for the both the bride and groom to fast throughout the day. The belief is that as the groom waits for his bride under the huppah he is especially close to God. As the bride goes around, the groom prays for his unmarried friends and for anyone who may be suffering from an illness. Sometimes, people hand over notes to the groom to say a special prayer for them.

Some brides circle their grooms thrice whereas others circle seven times around their grooms. The tradition of circling three times comes from Hosea 2:21-22, where God says, "'I betroth you to myself forever; I betroth you to myself in righteousness and in justice, in love and in mercy; I betroth you to myself in faithfulness...". For brides who circle around seven times, the significance is taken

From how Joshua circled the wall of Jericho seven times and the walls fell down. So also, after the brides completes circling around the groom seven times, the walls between them would fall away and their souls would be united.

### **Engagement over the blessing of Wine:**

The service or ritual begins with two benedictions which are performed over a cup of wine. The couple is engaged over the blessings of the first cup of wine. At the end of the ceremony, both the bride and groom drink wine from the glass.

### **The Wedding Ring:**

During the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the use of the wedding ring during the wedding ceremony began. The wedding ring symbolized many different things. The first and foremost symbol attached to it is that it is a symbol of fidelity and attachment to show that a couple is now married and have to stay true to each other. It also symbolizes money because according to the Jewish custom, the groom is supposed to buy the wedding ring with his own money. The ring being circular also symbolizes a continuous chain which unites all the generations to come. In this context, the ring is a symbol of hope that the new couple would start a family and so add a new link to the chain of Jewish history.

During the wedding ceremony, the groom takes the right hand of the bride in his and places the ring on her forefinger while chanting the prayers of the marriage ritual. One of the reasons as to why the ring is placed on this finger is because it is easier for the witnesses to see. The reason why the ring is placed on the right hand is because the right hand is considered to be a symbol of strength. Each and

everything we need to bless or which is important or precious to us we take with our right hand.

**The Ketubah or Marriage Contract:**

The “Ketubah” or Marriage Contract is written in Aramaic, so the rabbi has to translate what is written there in for the bride and groom to understand. Soon after, the groom hands over the marriage contract to the bride.

**The Second Glass of wine:**

A second glass of wine is brought and seven benedictions are performed where the rabbi prays for God to comfort Zion, bless the young newly weds with happiness and restore Judea and Jerusalem. This part of the marriage ceremony not only prays for the couple but also combines communal hopes. Once again the bride and groom drink from the second glass of wine.

The groom brings the wedding ceremony to a close when he steps on a glass and breaks it. This custom is taken from Talmund, where a rabbi smashed a glass to warn the people at the wedding not to indulge in excessive joy for even in times such as this, the Jews are supposed to remember the massive destruction that took place at the Temple of Jerusalem.

### **Consummation of the marriage:**

Jews do not believe in going on honeymoons as it is not the tradition. In ancient times, the bride and groom retire to a private room which is called “Heder Yichud” to consummate their marriage. According to Jewish thought a couple should begin to build a family soon after the wedding is over. But now – a – days, the couple just spends a few moments with each other before they go and mingle with all their relatives and other guests.

### **The Wedding Party:**

Since the bride and groom fast on the day of the wedding, they break their fast by eating “challah” or sweet bread that has been prayed over by the rabbi. The party continues with traditional songs and dances, such as the “hora”. Everyone attending the wedding contributes to the festivities as they believe in “mitzvah” (good deed) (Routtenberg, 1967) in order to make the bride and groom happy. To add to the joyous occasion, the bride and groom are lifted on chairs and taken around the hall.

During the festive meal, the rabbi speaks a few words and glasses are raised in toast to the couple. Once everyone has eaten, they say their grace after meals and also include the seven benedictions, and then they disperse together. For the next week or so, friends and relatives invite the bride and groom to their houses for a special festive meal. Finally the big wedding cake is cut and all take a piece before wishing the couple a happy wedded life.

## **The Eastern Orthodox Cultures**

The Eastern Orthodox Cultures include people from Mediterranean and Eastern groups that include Russian, Lebanese, Greek, and Romanians. The traditions and customs resemble those of the Roman Catholic and Episcopal faiths, where the Eastern Orthodox leaders are the patriarchs rather than the popes. The traditional wedding service is deeply rooted in the Byzantine rituals and is long drawn and time consuming.

The presence of a torch fire was considered a symbol of sanctity during a wedding ceremony because they believed that evil spirits were harbored by darkness. In ancient Greece, the bride bathed herself in a fountain or river which was holy to the goddess of wedlock and purified herself before the wedding ceremony.

Usually the bride and groom fast before the wedding ceremony which takes place during the morning liturgy. Weddings cannot take place during the Lenten Season as it is a period of mourning.

The Bride and the groom partake of the Sacrament of Penance and receive Holy Communion before the wedding ceremony. The Eastern Orthodox Church permits interfaith marriages, but it is compulsory for one partner and one witness to be Eastern Orthodox.

### **The Betrothal Ceremony:**

The Greek Orthodox wedding Ceremony is a Christian ceremony which is made up of The Betrothal and the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony. The bride and groom

stand at the entrance of the church and the priest walks down the aisle to meet them. He asks them if they have come of their own free will and then invites them and all the attendants to enter and stand before the altar.

The priest blesses the rings and gives it to them. They place the rings on the fourth finger of their hands and then recite the marriage vows. They are then given each a lighted candle to show that Christ is the light of the world who would light the path of their new life together.

The priest then takes the Stephana or crowns and makes the sign of the cross with it three times. The groom receives the crown, kisses it and places it on the head of the bride. In the same way the bride does the same thing. The crown signifies that they are mature Christians prepared for the responsibilities of a good Christian life. Prayers and excerpts are read from the Bible and the couple drinks wine from a common cup to signify that they would share all the joys and sufferings together.

Then holding the Bible in his hands the priest leads the couple around the altar three times to signify that the word of God should lead them forth and the circle represents eternal married life because a circle has no end. During the reception, there is a folk custom where the bridal veil is removed and replaced with a "babushka," to signify the transition from a girl to a woman.

Looking at the traditions and ceremonies of both the Jewish Weddings and weddings of Eastern Cultures, the impression I get is that their ceremonies and

rituals are very long drawn and a bit tedious. Many of their customs are rather interesting but at the same time they don't suit the Modern times.

People now – a – days, do not prefer lengthy rituals that are too elaborate and time consuming. They prefer ceremonies to be short and sweet and with not too much of a fuss.

Certain customs of the Jewish wedding such as the “Ketubah” or the marriage contract that has to be signed before the marriage ceremony could take place seems to be quite interesting as it is amusing because the marriage could take place only if this important document is signed.

According to the marriages taking place in Eastern cultures, the blessing and exchanging of rings and the crowning of the bride and groom holds rich symbolism of an eternal married life which they begin as mature Christians. I feel that this ritual holds a lot of significance for a good married life.

The Heder Yichud” or consummation of marriage in the Jewish custom seems very much out of place in these modern times and just does not fit in with the present day festivities. On the other hand, the “huppah” is still significant today, not only among these cultures but many other cultures. The only difference is the bride does not see the groom for a whole day. But on the whole, the weddings of both these cultures are very impressive and they carry many positive points which are very much useful even in the present times.

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