

Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

Marriage



Context

Though marriage, as an institution, is no longer an inevitable step in a couple's journey, it remains an important ritual moment for many lucky enough to find a life partner. We are proud that this applies equally to all in our form of Judaism, regardless of gender and sexuality, and that we actively campaigned for Marriage Equality in the UK.

*We are also proud of the work we have done to ensure that marriage rituals reflect the values and relationships of our members. As **Rabbi Dr Deborah Kahn-Harris**, Principal of the Leo Baeck College explores below, a modern Jewish marriage ceremony can look very different to those of the past – or it can look very similar, but proclaim a different set of meanings and symbolisms.*

Content

We live in rapidly changing times when it comes to marriage. At the time of writing of this document, marriage equality for same sex unions has finally come into force, but as of yet civil partnership for heterosexual couples has not been enacted. At this cultural juncture, it is worth noting that 'the Assembly of Reform Rabbis maintains its continuous commitment to Jewish marriage as the best basis for a successful and meaningful Jewish life.'ⁱ This statement applies to all – LGBTQⁱ couples as well as heterosexual couples.ⁱⁱ While the rest of this document will be devoted to a more in depth look at the wedding ceremony itself, a Jewish wedding is only the beginning of a Jewish marriage. As rabbis, we are committed, too, to the long term support of Jewish marriages, as they function as a key building block of Jewish life.ⁱⁱⁱ

So what constitutes a Jewish wedding? For the purposes of this paper, a Jewish wedding is one that takes place between two consenting Jewish adults and employs both form and content with recognisable Jewish tropes.^{iv} This definition is broad in order to give scope to the myriad of ways that Reform (and other) Jews worldwide have been responding to and developing the traditional Jewish wedding service and its attendant legal contract, the *ketubah*, particularly over the past thirty years.^v

A traditional Jewish wedding service takes place under a *chuppah*, wedding canopy, and has a number of core parts: the betrothal (*erusin/kiddushin*), the signing of the *ketubah*, and the recitation of the *sheva b'rachot*. In addition some ritual practices, such as *bedeken* (the veiling of the bride), circling (either the bride around the groom or both circling each other), and breaking glass may form part of the ceremony as well, though these items have no legal (*halachic*) weight. As Reform Jews we act in full knowledge of the *halachah*, without being bound by it. Couples and officiating rabbis should work together to arrive at a ceremony that is meaningful and acceptable to all parties. Some traditional aspects of the ceremony might be reinterpreted, others might be cut completely, still others reinvented in order to create a wedding that has both legal bind and personal meaning.^{vi} In order to achieve such a ceremony, couples need to understand the basis of marriage in Jewish law and how contemporary Jewish rabbis and scholars have sought to address those issues.

In particular, the two key areas of *kiddushin* and *ketubah* ought to be examined closely by any couple wishing to enact an egalitarian wedding service. Very briefly, the major act of the *kiddushin* section of the wedding ceremony is *kinyan*, which means acquisition. *Halachically* the groom acquires the bride, in particular her sexual exclusivity. He acquires her through presenting her with an item (traditionally a ring) worth at least one *prutah* and then reciting in Hebrew the formula which states "Behold, by this ring you are set apart for me according to the law of Moses and Israel".^{vii} The reverse is not *halakhically* possible, that is, a bride cannot acquire the sexual exclusivity of a groom either through this statement or the giving of a ring.^{viii}

In our Reform liturgy, nevertheless, you will see that we have both an exchange of statement above and, under most circumstances, an exchange of rings in our ceremonies. While this solution allows for a service that feels more egalitarian, it has no *halakhic* basis. In fact, many Orthodox scholars believe that a double ring ceremony renders the entire wedding invalid – like paying the newsagent £2.90 for your Sunday paper, only to have the same newsagent pay your £2.90 back. Would you have really purchased the paper or not? The traditional wording of the *ketubah* also presents challenges for Reform Jews. The *ketubah*, or marriage contract, classically was a means of protection for a woman in the event of a divorce, listing the sum owed to her in such a case. It was not a romantic document. The current Reform *ketubah* is a much amended document, which is fully equal, but also very sparse.^{ix}

Both in the case of *kiddushin* and *ketubah* ample opportunity exists for couples to work with their officiating rabbi to arrive at much more meaningful and creative solutions. The possibilities are too numerous to detail here, but fully egalitarian ceremonies based in a thorough understanding of Jewish law are possible. For example, a couple could choose to write their own *ketubah* detailing the ways in which they intend to be committed to each other in their marriage. In the case of *kiddushin* a range of both *halachic* and non-*halachic* solutions abound. For example, Rabbi Professor Rachel Adler details an alternative to traditional *kinyan* in which instead of a groom acquiring a bride, bride and groom together acquire a partnership (in the same way in which two people would acquire a business partnership under *halachah*).^x In this ceremony instead of exchanging rings, the couple place two items of equal value into a bag, raise the bag together, and recite a newly composed blessing. The two items can then be removed from the bag and exchanged.

In addition, all of the other elements of a Jewish wedding can be thought through to create a more meaningful service. How do you feel about circling? Learn about the origins of this practice and consider what meaning it might have for you. Read carefully through the *sheva b'rachot*, especially as they appear in our Reform liturgy. These beautiful blessings are a key part of the ceremony and largely already fully egalitarian, but the repeated use of heteronormative language might be something that you wish to consider changing (whatever type of relationship you are in). What additional readings, prayers, or music might you wish to add to your service? This wedding is your wedding, hopefully your only one, so take care to ensure that it is not merely meaningful, but something that you can reflect on for years to come as the firm foundation of your ongoing marital relationship.

Contemplation

The opportunity to adapt and personalise lifecycle rituals has never been greater. Rabbis in our Movement understand the importance of working with individuals, couples and families to create rituals that reflect the values of participants, with meanings that those involved can express with integrity. How do we effectively combine the structures of the past with the values and meaning of those ceremonies for today? Can we take rituals that are based on a very different set of values and cultural assumptions to ours, such as ketubah and kiddushin, and make them our own?

ⁱ <http://news.reformjudaism.org.uk/assembly-of-rabbis/assembly-of-rabbis-statement-on-celebrations-following-mixed-faith-civil-weddings.html>

ⁱⁱ While the Assembly has not at this stage addressed the question of religious commitment ceremonies for polyamorous relationships, if you are in such a relationship and all parties to this relationship wish to have a Jewish ceremony enacted, please speak to your rabbi to explore possibilities.

ⁱⁱⁱ Of course, we acknowledge that for some people marriage is neither possible nor preferable for a variety of reasons and that such people are full and complete Jews and members of our communities.

^{iv} For a statement on mixed faith blessings, see <http://news.reformjudaism.org.uk/assembly-of-rabbis/assembly-of-rabbis-statement-on-celebrations-following-mixed-faith-civil-weddings.html>, accessed 12/01/15.

^v Owing to the practicalities of space, a discussion of the development of the *ketubah*, in particular, will not be possible here. It should be noted that studies of the *ketubah* in antiquity demonstrate that it has not always been formulated as it is now in most Orthodox communities.

^{vi} By legal bind I am referring here to Jewish law.

^{vii} A *prutah* was the coin of smallest significance in rabbinic times.

^{viii} Since the proclamation of Rabbi Gershom in the 11th Century banning polygamy in Ashkenazi communities (which was later taken up by Sephardim), effectively marriage has led to male sexual exclusivity. Nevertheless male monogamy is not purchased in the same way that female monogamy is in a traditional Jewish wedding.

^{ix} The wording of the current Reform *ketubah*: <http://www.reformjudaism.org.uk/a-to-z-of-reform-judaism/life-cycle/ketubah.html>

^x Adler, Rachel 1998 'B'rit Ahuvim: A Marriage Between Subjects', *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics*, (JPS: Philadelphia), pp. 169-207.