

New Jewish Rituals

Secular Jewish Weddings

New Ways to Say “I Do”

THERE ARE PROBABLY as many explanations for the ritual of stepping on the glass at the close of the wedding ceremony as there are rabbis. Most are *bobe mayses*, often rooted in superstition.

Perhaps stomping the glass began as a gesture to appease a deity or the spirits of ancient ancestors — who may not tolerate hubris or frivolity on the part of living mortals — as a way of saying, “We’re not really having that good a time here. Please, let us marry in peace.” Some anthropologists have offered the idea that the sound of the breaking glass (matched by shattering plates at a Greek wedding) is intended to scare away demons that prey on couples and try to wreak havoc in their relationship. Today, however, the only demons we’re afraid of reside deep within us, and I doubt that loud noise will do much to scare them away.

The most common explanation is that even at times of happiness we should never forget the tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people over the centuries, starting especially with the destruction of the temple. This morbid perspective puts undue emphasis on our history of suffering, and is certainly a strange theme to suddenly introduce at a wedding — an occasion for joy, not oy.

Perhaps the real draw of the ritual is that, quite simply, it links us to tradition and the generations that have come before us. Beyond this, explanations are superfluous. As I say at many weddings, the ritual is just plain fun, and that is reason enough to perpetuate it. Fun is good. Breaking

things and not getting punished for it is good, too.

In the name of egalitarianism, I always give both partners the option of stepping on a glass at the end of the ceremony. If there are kids from prior marriages, we invite them also to step on a glass.

The process of reviewing the traditional elements and language of a wedding is one of the hallmarks of a secular approach. We determine which customs can be retained as is, which we want to reject as archaic, sexist or dishonest, and which we can retain with modified language.

The *khupe*, or wedding canopy, for example, represents the home the couple will live in together. Its doors are open to an interchange with the world. Is a *khupe* essential to a Jewish wedding? No, and some couples elect to pass on it. For many, however, the *khupe* provides a strong connection to the generations that have come before and stood under a similar structure. Rather than having a florist erect a *khupe* for them, they may build their own. (The most unique I’ve seen so far was made of hockey sticks, a tribute to the groom’s love of that sport!)

By contrast, the traditional ritual of the bride circling the groom to indicate her subservience to her husband is unacceptable. One couple danced a figure eight around each other, but it required a good deal of practice and choreography. Most are happy to forego the ceremony altogether.

Another traditional component of a wedding is the Seven Marriage Blessings, or *Sheva Berakhot*. The theistic content of this reading, which extols how we are created in the image of God, and its Israel-centric theme, wishing for a Zion rebuilt and a Jerusalem resounding with the sounds

of merriment, can be quite off-putting to secular Jews in America. For these reasons, I originally felt that the *Sheva Berakhot* no longer belonged in our repertoire. Yet when a couple asked about it, I used the opportunity to revise the passage so that it would be philosophically consistent with a secular Jewish worldview. My new interpretation is based on the idea that the blessings are intended to encircle the couple in the larger context of their families, their friends, and the world around them. Some couples may welcome these revised blessings as a way to involve



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Lawrence Bush/Bruce Sager/Richard Codor, from *Babushkin’s Catalogue of Jewish Inventions*

family and friends — perhaps by assigning each verse to a close person in their lives. Other couples may dispense with the fixed reading but invite seven close family members or friends to address them with a brief personal wish for their future. Some light seven candles, each signifying a value that is important to them as they enter their marriage. These are all beautiful ways to give modern expression to an old custom.

The exchange of vows offers another opportunity for modern interpretation. The traditional phrase, “You are betrothed to me according to the laws of Moses and Israel” (recited in both Hebrew and English), does not usually speak to secular Jews. Instead, they use the opportunity to find modern words of love and devotion at this most intimate of moments. For those who prefer a Yiddish connection, I provide a version translated by Jeffrey Shandler: *Mit dem fingerl bistu mayn (vayb/man) in libe un in glaykhkeyt* — “With this ring, you are my (wife / husband) in love and in equality.”

I also encourage couples to write their own personal statements of love for their partner. For some this is too intimate to share in public, but for others, this is a highlight of the service when, as I put it, they “share their private feelings in front of their one or two hundred closest family and friends.” Despite the fact that I make sure a couple shares these statements prior to the ceremony in a private moment, they feel remarkably new and deeply emotional when said aloud at the wedding. That’s when the handkerchiefs often come out!

As for the *ketubah*, or Jewish marriage document, this was essentially a pre-nuptial agreement meant to protect the woman’s financial status in the eventuality of divorce. The contract, which dates back to the early Second Temple period, was remarkably progressive in its day. However, its traditional Aramaic text doesn’t honor a spirit of mutuality in economic matters, and also asserts the presumptive virginity of the bride.

Many couples now write their own *ketubot*, usually omitting all financial references and introducing, in their place, their vows and pledges of love and devotion. A cottage industry of artists and calligraphers is at the ready to provide virtually any conceivable modern version of this document. When my wife and I were married, the *ketubah* we designed left space not only for two formal witnesses and the rabbi but for all our guests to sign around the borders. This became a very personalized document that recalls for us the special community of family and friends who shared that day. We chose to sign the marriage license privately before the wedding, and then went table to table during the reception to have the *ketubah* signed.

Of course, each Secular Humanistic officiant has his or her own sensibility about how to conduct wedding ceremonies, and his or her own boundaries for what is required, open for discussion, or off-limits. Still, we share several unifying, guiding principles.

First is a principle of acceptance. We honor the love between a couple and the choices they make to be with each other, regardless of different cultural or religious backgrounds. We would never expect someone to convert to or adopt Judaism in order to qualify for our services. We wouldn’t expect any sort of pledge that future children will be raised exclusively as Jewish. We make no distinction between straight or gay couples. Perhaps our most important criterion is that both partners be comfortable with the non-theistic language of Secular Humanistic Judaism.

Second, because we promote inclusivity, we want to find ways to honor both partners’ backgrounds. This may mean including readings from different traditions, often in other languages. Even when both partners are Jewish, we may honor their commitments to other teachings; at a recent wedding, for example, the groom rang a bell for a moment of meditation, to honor the couple’s involvement with Buddhism. Honoring other traditions may also mean finding ways to co-officiate with non-Jewish clergy, some of whom articulate a theistic message that may not be ours.

Third, a whole new world opens up for us because we are not bound by halakhic rules. We don’t feel constrained by the traditional concept that *Shabbat* is off-limits for weddings, for example; we are perfectly comfortable conducting a Saturday service.

In the end, couples will have their own sensibilities about what is right for them. What will strengthen their bond of love with one another? What will connect them to their Jewish heritage or the heritage of other cultures? How will they navigate family tensions? These questions will be answered differently by each couple. Hopefully, they will retain some memory of the ceremony itself, perhaps not of the words expressed, but of the sentiments felt. Indeed, I am delighted when a couple feels at ease to share a kiss or two during the service. I make a point of giving them permission to do so, and it becomes a kind of private game to see who will get away with it first. This, I think, is a great new ritual worth passing on. ■

The Association of Humanistic Rabbis (www.shj.org/AHR.htm) maintains a list of Humanistic rabbis in North America. The Leadership Conference of Secular and Humanistic Jews (http://lcshj.org/) maintains a list of licensed lay leaders known as madrikhim or madrikhot in Hebrew, or vegvayzer in Yiddish. The Portal of Secular Jewish Rites (www.tkasim.org.il/) provides information for officiants and secular ceremonies in Israel.