

Guidelines for Couples Getting Married by
Rabbi Michael E. Harvey
The Hebrew Congregation of Saint Thomas

I am delighted that you are considering celebrating your marriage and the beginning of your life together in St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands. You could not choose a more beautiful place to celebrate your marriage, and if you are considering having the ceremony itself in our historic and beautiful Synagogue, you will be consecrating your marriage in a building steeped with the history of the Jewish People from the end of the Fifteenth Century in Spain and Portugal, through the settlement of those Jews in the Dutch West Indies, and ultimately, in 1781, arriving on our beautiful Danish Island. Our building and all its furnishings date back to 1833, when the Jewish Community built this building, the Congregation's third Synagogue building.

Before the Wedding

Before the wedding takes place, some preparation on your part is needed. I *strongly* recommend that the Bride and Groom participate in some form of premarital counseling before their wedding. This can be done with local Rabbis or even other clergy. If you wish for me to do the premarital counseling, please let me know well in advance, as we will have to meet via skype or phone multiple times. In addition, I require that couples participate in Prepare and Enrich, an online premarital counseling site that provides forms and questionnaires. More information about Prepare and Enrich can be found [here](#). I also recommend purchasing The New Jewish Wedding by Anita Diamant. This book will help guide you through what kind of Jewish wedding you wish to have.

Music

In addition to being a Rabbi, I am able to sing and play guitar, and I am happy to add musical accompaniment to your wedding while officiating. That being said, we welcome other musicians should you so choose.

Please note that I will need to review what kind of music, if any, you plan for the ceremony. Certain classic wedding music, such as "Here Comes The Bride" by Wagner, is not appropriate for Jewish weddings, as Wagner developed the theories of Aryan Superiority upon which Hitler built his racist doctrine. Luckily, Jewish liturgy provides plenty of meaningful and beautiful music to play for processions and recessions. I am happy to offer suggestions should you want them.

Before the Ceremony

Please let us know when you wish to be in the Synagogue on your wedding day, if your ceremony is being held here, and whether the bride and or groom wish to get dressed in the Synagogue.

You may wish to arrange for photos be taken before the ceremony. There are photographers already on island that we are happy to recommend.

If you wish to have a Ketubah, you may choose one from any of the many Ketubah vendors online. If you live in a large metropolitan area, you may be able to shop for one in person. Our Judaica Shop has beautiful, paper-cut Ketubot that are among the most beautiful you will find anywhere. Each one is

customized by hand in exquisite calligraphy. Please call the Synagogue to find out about these Ketubot at 340-774-4312.

When choosing your wedding date, please note that weddings on Friday must take place well before Shabbat begins and may not take place on Saturday until dusk, when Shabbat ends. Sundays are also wonderful days for weddings, as these would not interfere with Shabbat.

The bride, groom, immediate family members, and two Jewish witnesses who are not immediate family members and are over 13 years of age will need to meet 45 minutes to an hour before the ceremony to sign the Ketubah. If you wish to participate in a *bedekken*, this also would take place before the ceremony. During the *bedekken*, the groom traditionally puts the veil over the bride's face. This is based on the story in Genesis of Jacob working for Laban for seven years for the right to marry his younger daughter, Rachel. After those seven years, however, Laban substituted his older daughter, Leah, under the veil and Jacob married the wrong sister. If the bride does not wish to wear a veil, the *bedekken* can serve as the modern day "first look," when the bride and groom see one another for the first time on their wedding day.

The *Ketubah* ceremony typically happens in private with just the immediate families present, but the *Bedekken* ceremony can vary, as a private ceremony, with only the women, or with the entire wedding party.

The Wedding Ceremony

In traditional Jewish weddings, the groom enters with his father on his left arm and his mother on his right arm. They follow any groomsmen, best man, or ring bearer, if you choose to have them. The bride also enters with her father on her left arm and her mother on her right arm and they are also preceded by her wedding party, if applicable.

The groom will greet his bride just outside the *chuppah* and escort her on his right arm under it. Before they enter the *chuppah*, the couple may choose to circle each other. Traditionally, the bride circled the groom seven times, but we embrace a more egalitarian view, and ask that the bride and groom circle one another each three times, and then walk the last circle together as a couple.

Things you will need for the Ceremony:

- 1) A Wedding license taken out in the Virgin Islands, unless you are already legally married elsewhere (in which case I will need to see a copy of your wedding license).
- 2) Two rings to exchange. Traditionally they should be simple without gems or writing, though in practice couples are free to choose whichever rings they would like.
- 3) A Ketubah that you provide.
- 4) Two, preferably Jewish, witnesses above the age of 13 to sign the ketubah, and two witnesses (may use the same witnesses from the ketubah) to sign the civil marriage license.
- 5) A *chuppah* or wedding canopy (we provide the *chuppah* if the ceremony is in the Synagogue). We also have four 1.5" X 8' wooden dowels, painted gold. Any kind of cloth may be attached to

the poles, including *tallitot*. which may be held by four *chuppah* "holders." These can also be brought to weddings held outside of the Synagogue.

- 6) A Kiddush cup or wine glass from which the couple shares wine or grape juice when the kiddushin blessings and the Seven Wedding Blessings are recited.
- 7) Wine or grape juice. They can be purchased in most local supermarkets. We recommend white wine or grape juice, so as to avoid stains on the wedding clothes. While we do not require Kosher wine, it is recommended.
- 8) If participating in the "breaking of the glass" at the end of the ceremony, we recommend using a lightbulb instead of a wine glass. The lightbulb shatters easily and provide less of a risk. You should also bring a cloth napkin or bag to hold the item.
- 9) If the Ceremony is not at the Synagogue, we will need a small table on which we can place a number of the above items.

Further Questions

You can reach me by phone at my office, 340-774-4312 during the day, or, if I am not in my office, you can try me on my cell phone at 704-804-0512. You can also reach me by email at rabbimike@synagogue.vi. We can also conference on-line with skype.

I look forward to speaking with you and celebrating with you on this most momentous life-event.

Rabbi Michael E. Harvey