

Your Jewish Wedding

Welcome Letter,
Checklist for the Ceremony
Background Material,
Relationship Building
and Communications Issues,
Genetic Counseling
and Medical Information,
Sample Ketubah Texts,
Practical Suggestions
And Information Sheets

What You Need To Know
To Prepare For Your
Wedding Ceremony

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Welcome Letter

Kiddushin is the Hebrew word for “marriage.” It comes from the same root as *kodesh*, which means “holy.” Both words contain within them the implication of “sacred” as “set aside, unique, unlike anything else.” The bond we form with a life-partner is meant to be just that –the most sacred, the most special, the most exclusive and unique relationship in our lives.

There were three essential ingredients in the ancient Jewish wedding ceremony: the giving and acceptance of an object of value, the signing and reading of a marriage document, and the consummation of the marriage. In Biblical times, it is said, *any* of these three items were enough to form a marriage; by the time of the Talmud *all* of them were seen as required. And the customs surrounding Jewish wedding ceremonies have continued to grow and evolve ever since that time.

This packet is for you. It is meant to obtain basic information that we, the clergy, need to work with you; to give you practical guidance regarding what you will need for the ceremony; and to begin to introduce you to the rich customs and traditions associated with Jewish weddings. These pages will also serve as a springboard for a discussion of communications and relationship issues, as well as a brief presentation of some important issues in genetic counseling about which all Jewish couples should be aware. Appendices provide some guidance about practical matters such as the processional and the arrangement standing under the *chuppah*, as well as sample texts which you might choose for your *ketubah*. (All Hebrew terms are explained in detail later on as well.)

We know that Jewish families today come in many different forms, and couples looking ahead to a wedding ceremony should speak directly with me. *Please note that this packet was originally assembled for a heterosexual marriage of two Jews. It has been partially revised to reflect the needs of same-sex and/or interfaith couples, but some additional appropriate adjustments may be necessary.*

We look forward to making this sacred occasion one of the most memorable and special days of your lives.

With my very best wishes,
L’shalom (In Peace),

Michael L. Feshbach
Rabbi

List of people and things you will need for your wedding ceremony

- Chuppah**
- Small table for under the Chuppah**
- One bottle of (kosher?) wine – uncorked!**
- Two kiddush cups or nice wineglasses for use in the ceremony**
(if the kiddush cups you will use have personal meaning or sentimental value share that information with the rabbi)
- Glass to break during the ceremony (more authentic than a lightbulb!)**
- Cloth napkin in which to wrap the glass**
(Keepsake glass-breaking kits available in Jewish bookstores)
- Easel to hold the Ketubah if it is framed immediately after it is signed**
- Civil papers from the jurisdiction in which you are getting married**
(preferably provided to the rabbi in advance)

For a wedding of two Jews:

- Two witnesses to sign Ketubah (must be Jewish*, not related to you, and they both must know their full Hebrew names – which includes their parents' Hebrew names where applicable).**
- Your Hebrew names (in the form requested on the Information Sheet that comes with this packet).**

For an interfaith wedding:

- Two witnesses to sign Ketubah (identity of witnesses and whether Hebrew names are needed should be discussed)**
- (Depending on the Ketubah you select) Your Hebrew names (in the form requested on the Information Sheet that comes with this packet).**

What you say to one another during the exchange of rings:

For an opposite-gender wedding of two Jews

Groom says to the Bride:

הֲרֵי אַת מִקּוֹדֶשׁ לִי בְּטִבְעָת זֶה בְּדָת מֹשֶׁה וִיּוֹשְׁרָאֵל
Harey At M'kudeshet Li B'taba'at Zo K'dat Moshe ViYisrael

With this ring you are consecrated/set aside to me,
according to the tradition of Moses and the Jewish people.

Bride says to the Groom:

הֲרֵי אַתָּה מִקּוֹדֶשׁ לִי בְּטִבְעָת זֶה בְּדָת מֹשֶׁה וִיּוֹשְׁרָאֵל
Harey Attah M'kudah Li B'taba'at Zo K'dat Moshe ViYisrael

With this ring you are consecrated/set aside to me,
according to the tradition of Moses and the Jewish people.

For an opposite-gender interfaith wedding

Groom says to the Bride:

הֲרֵי אַת מִקּוֹדֶשׁ לִי בְּטִבְעָת זֶה בְּדָרְכֵי אַהֲבָה וּמִנְהָגֵי הָעוֹלָם
Harey At M'kudeshet Li B'taba'at Zo K'darkai Ahava u'Minhagai HaOlam

With this ring you are consecrated/set aside to me,
according to the dictates of the heart and the ways of the world.

Bride says to the Groom:

הֲרֵי אַתָּה מִקּוֹדֶשׁ לִי בְּטִבְעָת זֶה בְּדָרְכֵי אַהֲבָה וּמִנְהָגֵי הָעוֹלָם
Harey Attah M'kudah Li B'taba'at Zo K'darkai Ahava u'Minhagai HaOlam

With this ring you are consecrated/set aside to me,
according to the the dictates of the heart and the ways of the world.

For a same sex wedding of two Jews

Lesbian wedding: both brides would say to one another:

הָרֵי אַתְּ מִקּוֹדֶשׁ לִי בְּטִבְעַת זֹה בְּדָת מֹשֶׁה וִיּוֹשְׁרָאֵל
Harey At M'kudeshet Li B'taba'at Zo K'dat Moshe ViYisrael

With this ring you are consecrated/set aside to me,
according to the tradition of Moses and the Jewish people.

Gay male wedding: both grooms would say to one another:

הָרֵי אַתָּה מִקּוֹדֶשׁ לִי בְּטִבְעַת זֹה בְּדָת מֹשֶׁה וִיּוֹשְׁרָאֵל
Harey Attah M'kudah Li B'taba'at Zo K'dat Moshe ViYisrael

With this ring you are consecrated/set aside to me,
according to the tradition of Moses and the Jewish people.

For a same sex interfaith wedding

Lesbian wedding: both brides would say to one another:

הָרֵי אַתְּ מִקּוֹדֶשׁ לִי בְּטִבְעַת זֹה בְּדָרְכֵי אַהֲבָה וּמִנְהָגֵי הָעוֹלָם
Harey At M'kudeshet Li B'taba'at Zo K'darkai Ahava u'Minhagai HaOlam

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Harey Attah M'kudah Li B'taba'at Zo K'darkai Ahava u'Minhagai HaOlam

With this ring you are consecrated/set aside to me,
according to the the dictates of the heart and the ways of the world.

You are directed to say this, word by word, by the rabbi; if you practice this at home leave a word out on purpose as you would not want to be “married” prematurely!

Background Material

The Jewish wedding ceremony as it is performed today reflects a long period of evolution and adaptation. Practices vary within and between different Jewish communities, and there are both standard elements and requirements in Jewish law about what “must” be included, as well as choices to be made about traditions that are simply “customary” even if they are widely followed. The following pages will take you through some of the standard customs, practices and terms associated with Jewish weddings.

In today’s world, so much information is available on-line that we seem to be able to find the answer to any question with the click of a mouse. Still, there are issues of unstated biases or unshared assumptions, and evaluation of information gleaned from “googling” remains an issue.

Therefore while there are many web-sites from which you can obtain this information, I will provide my own summary. Since this is meant to be a brief introduction, I also recommend the following books, where you may read about these practices in more depth and detail:

The New Jewish Wedding Book, Revised Edition, Anita Diament
(author of *The Red Tent*)

The Everything Jewish Wedding Book, Helen Latner

The Complete Jewish Wedding Planner, Wendy Chernok Heftner

The Creative Jewish Wedding Book, Gabrielle Kaplan-Mayer

Meeting at the Well: A Jewish Spiritual Guide to Being Engaged,
Daniel Judson and Nancy H. Wiener, URJ Press

Beyond Breaking the Glass: A Spiritual Guide to Your Jewish Wedding, Rabbi Nancy H. Wiener, CCAR Press

Customs, Practices and Terms

Ketubah

The word *ketubah* literally means “written.” This is the (originally and often still) handwritten document which serves as the marriage contract. The *ketubah* is signed immediately before the wedding ceremony, and is read during the ceremony.

The text of the traditional Jewish *ketubah* became standardized sometime before the year 200 BCE. It was written in Aramaic, the spoken language of the Jewish community in the land of Israel at that time, because it was considered important that all parties clearly understood the terms and stipulations of the document. For this very same reason – that the document be understood by all – an English translation is provided in almost all *ketubot* used in Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative wedding ceremonies. Traditional language also appears, but in non-Orthodox ceremonies that language is usually Hebrew -- which is at least a living language, spoken by Jews in the world today -- rather than Aramaic.

Non-Orthodox *ketubot* have made major changes in the content of the document as well. The *ketubah* was originally meant as a legal document given by a groom to a bride, outlining his obligations to her in terms of food, support, and conjugal satisfaction (hers!) At a time when women had little economic security, and in comparison to surrounding cultures in which women were treated as property, the traditional *ketubah* was a major step forward.

We live, however, in a different world – one of expectations that are mutual, of women with earning power and independence, with romantic love a powerful and usually decisive factor in the selection of a partner, rather than (pre?)arrangement based on economic consideration alone. The texts of liberal *ketubot*, therefore, reflect the values shared by today’s couples: mutuality (the text is egalitarian), emotional and spiritual qualities, and even creativity and personalization.

The *Ketubah* is often handcrafted, or is, at least, words of text that are carefully integrated into a beautiful background. A *ketubah* is perhaps the most important work of art you will have in your home (traditionally couples were not allowed... well, never mind that). It should be chosen with as much care and devotion as goes into any other part of planning your wedding.

The only requirement I have for a *ketubah* is that the text be egalitarian, one of the many modern alternative texts in which men and women are treated as equal partners.

Samples of *ketubot* in a variety of styles and with a variety of options can be found at any Jewish bookstore. Or, of course, you can order a *ketubah* on-line. Leading web-sites include:

www.ketubah.com
www.judaicconnection.com
www.ketubah-gallery.com

These are only three sites and carry no particular endorsement. There are many other options to choose from as well.

Interfaith and same-sex *ketubot* are available from most but not all vendors.

For more information see:

<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=187&letter=K>

Auf Ruf

An *auf ruf* is the custom of coming up to the Torah for an *aliyah* (reciting the blessings before and after a section of the Torah is read) on a Shabbat preceding the wedding. The rabbi and congregation then bless the couple, and present them with a gift from the community. In some circles the couple is also showered with (soft! wrapped!) candy or nuts and raisins as a symbol of sweetness and support. This usually takes place at the Friday night or Saturday morning service immediately before the wedding, but other arrangements are possible as well. (The word is German and literally means “calling up,” a reference to the raised platform from which most synagogues read the Torah, and closely parallel to the Hebrew term *aliyah*, which also implies an “ascent.”)

Mikvah

Immersion in the *mikvah*, the ritual bath, is an ancient Jewish custom of purification and preparation immediately prior to a wedding. The family purity aspect of the *mikvah* was meant for women only and for monthly use, a custom followed by few non-Orthodox Jews, but the immersion prior to the beginning of something as momentous as a marriage is a custom now sometimes followed by non-Orthodox Jews, men as well as women. The questions of whether this would be meaningful or appropriate for you should be discussed with the rabbi.

For a Sunday wedding immersion might take place that morning; for a Saturday night wedding it might be the Friday morning preceding the wedding. Different *mikva’ot* have different policies regarding aspects of this custom, so here, too, a discussion with the rabbi is appropriate.

Signing of the ketubah

The *ketubah* is signed immediately before the public part of the wedding ceremony begins. In most non-Orthodox ceremonies the couple and their families are together for the signing. (The idea of the groom not “seeing” the bride in her dress until she walks down the aisle does not derive from Jewish tradition. In fact, it *cannot be* derived from Jewish tradition, for reasons which will become apparent below; see the section on “*bedeken*.”)

Aydim (Witnesses)

Since the *ketubah* is a Jewish legal document, it requires the signatures of two witnesses, both of whom must be Jewish (at least for the wedding ceremony of two Jews to each other) and must know their full Hebrew names. The full Hebrew name is your name and the Hebrew names of your parents, if applicable. If the witnesses know but are not able to sign their names, let the rabbi know in advance; the rabbi can either teach them to sign or can help them do so at the time of the ceremony.

Because witnesses are supposed to be impartial and not immediately affected by the outcome of what they observe, relatives of the couple may not serve as witnesses. The witnesses may also not be related to each other.

In liberal (non-Orthodox) circles women are allowed to serve as witnesses as well as men. Also in more liberal circles, the couple and the rabbi often sign the document as well.

Civil papers

Each state or jurisdiction has its own rules and requirements regarding both the participants in a ceremony and the officiant at a ceremony. It is the couple’s responsibility to obtain the civil papers and have them present at the time of the ceremony; it is the rabbi’s responsibility to be authorized to perform a ceremony in that jurisdiction. If it is easier or more comfortable for the couple, the civil papers may be left with in the hands of the rabbi for safekeeping the week before the ceremony.

B’deken

B’deken is the Jewish custom of looking under the veil of the bride, or putting the veil on, prior to the ceremony. Not all brides in liberal Jewish weddings wear veils, so the custom is not always followed.

But, astonishingly, there is an argument in Jewish circles about whether the word derives from Hebrew or from Yiddish, and the answer to that question determines which story in Genesis you believe is the basis of the custom!

Perhaps the word is Hebrew, deriving from the verb “*livdok*” (the *b* and the *v* are basically the same letter in Hebrew), which means to “inspect, examine,” or “check out.” In that case, the custom comes from the story of Jacob in Genesis who, famously, did *not* carefully check out whether he was marrying the woman he thought he was, and, in the morning, discovered not his intended bride, Rachel, but her sister, Leah.

On the other hand, the word could be Yiddish, related to “bedeck,” or, in English, “decking someone out, adorning them.” If that is the case, this refers to the story, also in Genesis, of Isaac “beautifying” his bride, Rebecca, before they were married to one another.

Whatever the origin of the term, this (optional) custom involves placing a veil over the head of a bride, and then lifting the veil to “check” who is underneath.

Processional

There is no rule governing the entrance of the wedding party, but there are many customs. The groom and the bride are each led to the *chuppah* (see below) by their parents or significant relatives in their lives, who may or may not then remain standing under it. The groom customarily enters first and awaits the bride under the *chuppah*. Some processions involve the bride entering, either with or just after her parents, coming part way down the aisle, and then waiting as the groom returns to the aisle, shakes the bride’s father’s hand, kisses the bride’s mother, then sends his soon-to-be in-laws on their way towards the *chuppah*. The couple then completes the last part of the journey down the aisle together.

The processional is often significantly different in same-sex ceremonies. See Appendix, “Order of Processional.”

Chuppah

The *chuppah* is a canopy of some kind which is held up or suspended over the couple, the clergy, and any other members of the wedding party who are standing there. The *chuppah* is symbolic of the new home the couple will build. More specifically it originated in its current form in the Middle Ages as an echo of either the ancient practice of escorting the bride to the groom’s home, or the marriage chamber which the couple entered following the “public” part of the service.

A *chuppah* may be quite elaborate or extremely simple. It may be a *tallit* (prayer shawl) or any large piece of cloth, and it may be either free-standing or hung from tall poles which are then held up by hand. Having four *chuppah*-holders is a great way to involve family and friends.

Traditionally in a heterosexual wedding, the bride stands to the groom’s right underneath the *chuppah*. Note that this is the reverse of what is the case in American Christian weddings! See Appendix “Under the Chuppah.”

Erusin

The Jewish wedding ceremony is divided into two major sections, each with its own ritual, each with its own cup of wine, and separated by the exchange of rings and the reading of the Ketubah. These two sections were once separated in time by as much as a year; the first section is called *erusin*, which means “engagement” or “betrothal.” After opening readings and prayers, this section traditionally served as a reminder that certain obligations of marriage began from the time of the engagement (for instance, if the betrothal were broken a *get* – a document of divorce, would still be required), but certain other...liberties that were once thought to be behavior exclusively a part of married life...were not yet permitted.

Today the non-Orthodox version of this section of the service speaks about the sanctity of marriage and the quality and unique nature of the marital relationship.

Kiddush

The two different cups of wine during the wedding service are reminders that these were two different ceremonies, joined together as one in today’s Jewish wedding. Wine – as anyone who has ever tasted Manischewitz or Schapira’s Kosher Wine (“so thick you can cut it with a knife!”) can attest -- is a symbol of sweetness in Judaism. We use it to mark the beginning of Shabbat and many sacred seasons of the year, as well as to mark happy occasions in our lives. It is an essential part of the wedding ceremony.

It would be especially appropriate to use kiddush cups of special meaning or sentimental value to your family or you as a couple. Kiddush cups presented at a Bar/t Mitzvah, purchased in Israel, or used in the family are common examples.

Ring(s)

The wedding “contract” by which a man “acquired” a woman (sorry, that was the traditional language; obviously we use very different language today) was “sealed” by the giving of a symbolic gift of value. Thus a man presented a woman with a ring, and the ring had to be plain and unbroken (because Jewish law requires that the value of the object used to effectuate a marriage be known, and there were not easily accessible measures by which to appraise the value of jewels outside of big cities in the Middle Ages).

Today almost all ceremonies at which liberal clergy officiate are “double ring” ceremonies, at which both partners present each other with a ring. The ring is placed on the right forefinger (the index finger) during the recitation of the vow, as early science believed that the artery of that finger led straight to the heart. The ring is then placed on the ring finger.

This is also the point in the ceremony when, if a couple chooses to write and share their own words in addition to the traditional ones, they would recite those “vows.”

Reading of the *Ketubah*

The “terms” of the contract must be publicly known. Today we would often read the opening paragraph of Hebrew, and the entire English of a *ketubah*. When a *ketubah* is placed in a heavy frame immediately after it was signed, an easel should be provided so the *ketubah* may be visible – and accessible – during the ceremony.

In one last vestige of the gender-based origin of these customs, it is often the case that the rabbi will present the *ketubah* to the groom, and the groom will then present it to the bride. The bride then needs to give the document to someone who can handle it with care until it can be framed and displayed during the reception and then in the couple’s home.

Wedding homily

Words of blessing, explorations of the meaning of marriage or connections with the calendar or weekly portion, as well as personal remarks about the couple, follow at this point in the ceremony. What is said here is the most variable element of the entire ceremony, and should be discussed with the officiant. (The custom of a rabbi speaking at a wedding ceremony did not actually develop until the Middle Ages.)

Nissuin

The word *nissuin* means “marriage,” and this is the section of the ceremony that originally marked the actual marriage. *Nissuin* consists of the *Shevah Berakhot*, the Seven Wedding Blessings (see below).

Shevah Berakhot

The *Shevah Berakhot*, the Seven Blessings open with the blessing over (and culminate in the drinking of) the second cup of wine. The blessings continue on themes which praise God, thank God for the creation of the individual human being, refer to the capacity to have children (“your creatures who share with You in life’s everlasting renewal”), pray for the happiness of the couple, and connect this couple with the larger context of Jewish life and the story of the Jewish people through references to Israel and Jerusalem.

It is a wonderful custom to ask close friends who otherwise might not have a role in the ceremony to recite the English of the Seven Blessings. A variety of possible translations of these blessings are available, including creative and interpretative ones and if you are interested in doing this you should speak with the rabbi about it.

Civil marriage

Words and blessings towards the end of the ceremony affirm that the marriage is recognized and valid in the eyes of the state as well as according to the rituals of Jewish tradition.

Priestly Blessing

The well known words of the Priestly Blessing (“May God bless you and keep you...”) bring the ceremony almost to a close. There is a Sephardic (Jews of Spanish/Southern Europe/Northern Africa ancestry) custom of wrapping the bride and groom in a *tallit* during this part of the service. The *tallit* may be one of significance to the family, or may be the one the rabbi is wearing during the ceremony. Parents are often the ones who place the *tallit* around the couple.

Breaking the glass

The single best-known feature of the Jewish wedding is the breaking of the glass at the end of the ceremony. There are a number of explanations for this custom. It might have originated either as a sexual reference of some sort, or as a superstitious practice of making a loud noise to scare away evil spirits. Traditional explanations, however, have focused on a) a reminder of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, teaching us that even at moments of private celebration we are connected to the larger story of our people, b) that even at times of joy and personal wholeness we must remember the suffering and brokenness of the world, and c) that love and marriage are fragile, and delicate, and must be protected.

Today, there is something relatively new available from Jewish gift shops and bookstores: a pre-wrapped glass which will catch the shattered fragments, preserve them, and allow them to be used in some artistic way (even as a *mezzuzah!*) in the couple’s home.

In an age in which we try to make everything else egalitarian, it is rare – outside a same-sex ceremony with two women – to see a woman take up the offer of stepping on the glass as well. There is no philosophical barrier here in liberal Judaism, but a practical one: high heels do not inspire many people to make this attempt.

Mazal Tov

MaZAL tov is the Hebrew term, *MAzel tuf* is Yiddish, but either way the words mean “congratulations,” and are shouted out right after the glass is broken, and as the couple kisses in front of all their guests.

Yichud

Last in, first out... the couple leads the recessional, then, traditionally, retires to a secluded room to spend their first few minutes of married life alone together. If a couple is fasting on their wedding day (out of the question for Saturday night weddings, as fasting is not allowed on Shabbat unless Yom Kippur falls on Shabbat) they may break their fast together with some fruit and cheese here, but this is not, of course, the original purpose of this time together.

The word *yichud* means “togetherness,” and originally this was the first time a couple was ever alone together, and it did not last for a few minutes but a much longer time frame. It is here that the couple would complete the final of the three required parts of the Jewish marriage ceremony (the giving and accepting of something valuable, the signing and proclamation of the marriage document...and cohabitation).

Today *yichud* is a symbolic and much briefer reminder of what it once was. It is powerful as a breath of privacy and quiet intimacy before the revelry and loud cheer of the celebration that follows.

Guards may be assigned to watch the outside of the doors of the room to which the couple has retreated, protecting them from being disturbed for a while, and gently knocking to bring them back out after ten or fifteen minutes. These guards may be young nieces and nephews, or close friends.

Dates when weddings should not be performed

There are certain times of the week, and certain periods of the year, during which Jewish weddings are not performed. There are also slight variations in this practice between different denominations of Judaism.

Shabbat: Jewish weddings do not occur on Shabbat. Saturday night weddings traditionally do not begin until after it is fully dark. Some Reform rabbis are slightly more lenient on this point; my own personal practice is to require that Shabbat be over by the time the wedding ceremony is over, but I would not insist that Shabbat be over before I leave my house to come to the place where the ceremony is held, or before we gather to sign the civil papers and the *ketubah*.

Major holidays (Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, the first and last days of Sukkot, Simchat Torah, the first two days and last day of Passover, Shavuot) **and Tisha B’Av** (a more minor holiday in late July or early August, but a major day of mourning in Jewish history).

Sefirat HaOmer, the period of the “counting of the omer,” in between Passover and Shavuot. This is a traditional 50-day period in the Spring during which weddings were performed; some Conservative rabbis will perform weddings during this time period from the 33rd day on, and many Reform rabbis, myself included, are willing to officiate at weddings throughout this time period.

The days leading up to Tisha B’Av. Orthodox rabbis will not perform weddings during the period in the summer leading up to Tisha B’Av; many non-Orthodox rabbis, myself included, would limit the avoidance of weddings to the day of Tisha B’Av itself.

As both the Jewish calendar and the schedule of individual clergy are quite complicated, it is always a good idea to check with the clergy you want to officiate at your ceremony *before* finalizing the plans with the venue and the caterer.

Wedding Programs

Many couples prepare handouts and “programs” for their ceremonies, naming the participants in the ceremony and outlining basic Jewish customs and practices for those who might not be familiar with them. These programs can enhance your guests’ appreciation for many of the choices and decisions you make regarding your ceremony. Ask the rabbi if you are interested in seeing sample copies of such wedding programs.

T'na'im: "Conditions"
Communication Issues:
Towards a Mutual Understanding of Your Relationship

Most couples deal with a wide-range of topics regarding communication style, hopes and dreams of parenthood, core values and relationship with the larger community, in the days when a relationship moves beyond first dates and shows the potential to become serious and long-term. But not everyone has these conversations, and not every couple covers everything. This is your chance to do so; there is no one other than the clergy person officiating at your wedding whose job it is to make sure you cover these topics with each other.

Please take some time together to discuss and react to the following subtopics related to various aspects of your relationship. You may want to put your thoughts in writing to look back on at some future time. In any case, I will want to discuss your ideas with you.

And for those couples who are interested, more intensive and in-depth premarital counseling is available as well. This exploration is a sign of *strength* in a relationship, and not an indication of visible weakness or potential problems!

I. Building a relationship.

What expectations do each of you have regarding the other in your relationship? What do you need from each other?

How is the communication between the two of you?

What is helpful and what needs improvement?

How do you work out conflict? Is this satisfactory?

If not, what can be changed?

II. Creating a Jewish home.

What will make your home a Jewish home?

How would someone coming in to your home know
it is a Jewish home?

III. Children.

What expectations do you both have concerning children?

Do you want any? If so, how many? When? Why/why not?

Have you had discussion about what might happen if your
plans do not work out? And you have children you do
not expect? Or cannot have children you really want?

How will the responsibility for child care be handled?

How will you handle discipline?

What type of education do you hope to give your children?

What type of *Jewish* education do you hope to give them?

IV. The Larger Community

How do you envision your relationship,
as a couple and as individuals, with

- a. The greater Jewish community
- b. The general community
- c. The state of Israel
- d. Your respective family
- e. Your partner's family
- f. Your close friends

V. Career Choices

How and where do your career choices fit in to all of this?

VI. Spiritual Life

How and where do you find spiritual fulfillment?

How does and how might Judaism fit in to your lives?

Genetic Counseling

There is one area of counseling in regards to family planning which no one else will automatically bring up, and which rabbis should discuss with all couples they marry who fit into the profile described below. All groups which practice a high degree of endogamy (in-marriage), even where that pattern is not universal, are subject, over time, to the creeping presence of discernable genetic diseases. This pattern is clearly visible amongst sub-groups of Jews as well. Among Ashkenazic Jews (Jews of Eastern, Northern and Central European backgrounds) in particular, there are several genetic diseases about which all couples from this background should be aware. While the number and type of genetic tests for these diseases will change over time, the most prominent and devastating disease which Jewish couples should be aware of -- and prepared to prevent -- is Tay-Sachs.

Much of the information on the following pages comes from the web-site of the National Institute of Health. Where that information was too technical I have substituted alternative or additional explanations as well.

What is Tay-Sachs Disease?

General answer: Tay-Sachs is an inherited disorder caused by the absence of a vital enzyme, resulting in the destruction of the nervous system. It is always fatal; to date there is no cure.

More medical description: Tay-Sachs disease is a fatal genetic lipid storage disorder in which harmful quantities of a fatty substance called *ganglioside GM₂* build up in tissues and nerve cells in the brain. The condition is caused by insufficient activity of an enzyme called *beta-hexosaminidase A* that catalyzes the biodegradation of acidic fatty materials known as *gangliosides*. Gangliosides are made and biodegraded rapidly in early life as the brain develops.

Progression of the disease: Infants with Tay-Sachs disease appear to develop normally for the first few months of life. Then, as nerve cells become distended with fatty material, a relentless deterioration of mental and physical abilities occurs. The child becomes blind, deaf, and unable to swallow. Muscles begin to atrophy and paralysis sets in. Other neurological symptoms include dementia, seizures, and an increased startle reflex to noise. A much rarer form of the disorder occurs in patients in their twenties and early thirties and is characterized by an unsteady gait and progressive neurological deterioration. Persons with Tay-Sachs also have "cherry-red" spots in their eyes.

What are the odds of Tay-Sachs striking your family? The incidence of Tay-Sachs is particularly high among people of Eastern European and Askhenazi Jewish descent. While there are both Jewish and non-Jewish carriers of the recessive TSD gene, 85% of its young victims are Jews, and these are predominantly of Eastern European descent.

Approximately one in 25 Jews is a TSD carrier. In the non-Jewish community the rate is one in 250.

A carrier couple (that is, a couple in which *both* parents are carriers) is “at risk” and has a one in four chance with each pregnancy of producing a Tay-Sachs baby; the chance for an unaffected child is three in four. A family history free of the disease does not mean you are free of risk; most babies with Tay-Sachs are born into families with no prior history.

Are you a carrier? Carriers do not have Tay-Sachs. They are capable of passing the TSD gene to their children. It takes two carriers to produce a Tay-Sachs baby.

Patients and carriers of Tay-Sachs disease can be identified by a simple blood test that measures beta-hexosaminidase A activity. Once again, to be clear: *both parents* must carry the mutated gene in order to have an affected child.

Why are we talking about this now? Because there are two steps that a Jewish couple should take. The first is to be screened, to see if you are a carrier. *Not every physician can do this test “in house,” but any doctor can order the test, and all area labs should be able to handle the screening.*

If, and only if, both partners are carriers, then, when a pregnancy is established, prenatal diagnosis of Tay-Sachs through amniocentesis would be indicated.

If a test shows the fetus to be afflicted with this fatal disease, genetic counseling and the option of terminating the pregnancy can be considered. Remember that even if both partners are carriers, there is a 75% chance with each pregnancy that the child will be fine.

What research is being done?

The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS), a part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), conducts research about Tay-Sachs disease in laboratories at the NIH and also supports additional research through grants to major medical institutions across the country.

Organizations to contact for more information:

National Tay-Sachs and Allied Diseases Association

2001 Beacon Street
Suite 204
Brighton, MA 02135
info@ntsad.org
<http://www.ntsad.org>
Tel: 617-277-4463 800-90-NTSAD
(906-8723)
Fax: 617-277-0134

March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation

1275 Mamaroneck Avenue
White Plains, NY 10605
askus@marchofdimes.com
<http://www.marchofdimes.com>
Tel: 914-428-7100 888-MODIMES
(663-4637)
Fax: 914-428-8203

Genetic Alliance

4301 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.
Suite 404
Washington, DC 20008-2369
info@geneticalliance.org
<http://www.geneticalliance.org>
Tel: 202-966-5557 800 336-
GENE (4363)
Fax: 202-966-8553

National Organization for Rare Disorders (NORD)

P.O. Box 1968
(55 Kenosia Avenue)
Danbury, CT 06813-1968
orphan@rarediseases.org
<http://www.rarediseases.org>
Tel: 203-744-0100 Voice Mail 800-
999-NORD (6673)
Fax: 203-798-2291

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This information came from the NIH website on Tay Sachs:
<http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/taysachstaysachs.htm>

Appendix One: **Sample Ketubah Texts**

This Ketubah is a recent creation written in Modern Hebrew. It is an egalitarian text which focuses on the type of partnership that is being created. The relationship is described as one of mutual support, respect, and devotion. Several intentions are included: sharing and being open with each other; cherishing each other's uniqueness; comforting each other in times of sorrow and joy; and challenging each other to realize his/her full potential. The marriage envisioned creates commitment by developing the fulfillment and satisfaction of the partners. This text connects the marrying couple to Israel and Jewish history in several ways. First, the bride and groom consecrate themselves to each other "according to the tradition of Moses and the Jewish people". This reflects the formula that begins the traditional texts except that it deletes the word "laws" [of Moses] Second, the couple pledges to celebrate Jewish holidays and life cycle events. Third, they pledge to join their home "ever more closely to the community of Israel."

We witness that on the day of the week, the day of the month of , in the year ,
corresponding to the day of , , here in :

The bride, , daughter of , says to the groom: With this ring you are consecrated unto me as my husband, according to the tradition of Moses and the Jewish people. I shall treasure you, nourish you, support you and respect you as Jewish women have devoted themselves to their husbands, with integrity.

The groom, , son of , says to the bride: With this ring you are consecrated unto me as my wife, according to the tradition of Moses and the Jewish people. I shall treasure you, nourish you, support you and respect you as Jewish men have devoted themselves to their wives, with integrity.

We promise to try to be ever open to one another while cherishing each other's uniqueness; to comfort and challenge each other through life's sorrow and joy; to share our intuition and insight with one another; and above all, to do everything within our power to permit each of us to become the persons we are yet to be.

We also pledge to establish a home open to the spiritual potential in all life; a home wherein the flow of the seasons and the passages of life are celebrated through the symbols of Jewish heritage; a home filled with reverence for learning, loving, and generosity; a home wherein ancient melody, candles, and wine sanctify the table; a home joined ever more closely to the community of Israel. This marriage has been authorized also by the civil authorities of . It is valid and binding.

ב בשבת ב יום לחישת אלפים
ושבע מאות ושים ו לבריאות עולם למנין שאנו מונין
כן במדינת אמריקה הצפונית הרינו מעדים בזה כי
אמרה אל הרי אתה מקודש לי בטבעת זו
כשותפי לפי מסורת קהילת ישראל. אנטרכ, אזונך, אטמך ואכבדך, כשם
שגברים ונשים בני ובנות העם היהודי הקדישו עצם לאהובי לבם
בכבוד.

אמר אל הרי את מקודשת לי בטבעת זו
כשותפי לפי מנהג קהילת ישראל אנטרכ, אזונך, אטמך ואכבדך, כשם
שגברים ונשים בני ובנות העם היהודי הקדישו עצם לאהובי לבם
בכבוד.

אנו מבטיחים לנשות ולהיות פתוחים זה לזו בכל עת תמי, תוך כדי שמירת
יהודו של כל אחד מאיתנן, להתייצב יהדיו מול אטגרינו ההדדיים ויכלתנו
לחולק ולהתנהם בשמחות החיים ובצערם לגלות את תשומתינו ואת
מחשובתינו זה לזו, ומעל לכל לעשות כל שביכולתינו לאפשר זה לו לגדול
ולהפוך לדמותו אותה נועדנו להיות.

כמו כן, הננו מתחייבים ליצור בית הפתוח לרוחניות הגלומה בכל צורות
ה חיים, בית בו זרימת העונות ומערכות החיים נחוגים באמצעות סמלי
מסורתינו היהודית; בית המלא ביראה ללימוד, לאהבה ולנדיבות; בית שבו
ניגון עתיק, נרות ויין מקדשים את השולחן, בית המctrף ומתרmid להשאר,
בקרב קהילת ישראל.

ニישואים אילו אושרו גם כן על ידי השלטונות האזרחיים במדינת
ニישואים אילו הם שרים ותקפים.

This next text is also written in Modern Hebrew. It is an egalitarian text which forgoes preparations for disaster in order to focus on the type of partnership that is being created. The relationship is described as a sacred marriage covenant. Choosing to be married is emphasized, as is a pledge to continue this marriage all through their lives. Several intentions for the marriage are included: supporting, loving, sharing, comforting, and challenging each other; also equality, sensitivity, and intimacy. The marriage envisioned develops the fulfillment and satisfaction of the partners. The text connects the marrying couple to Israel and Judaism by reflecting that they are "standing under the chuppah" and committing to build a Jewish home together. Just as was the case with the first *ketubah* text above, this one also does not make provisions for divorce. Divorce is left to the civil courts.

We witness that on the day of the week, the day of the month of , in the year , corresponding to the day of , , here in , the bride, , daughter of , and the groom, , son of , entered into this sacred marriage covenant. Standing under the chuppah we said to each other: as beloveds and friends we choose to walk life's path together.

We pledge to be equal partners, loving friends, and supportive companions all through our life. May our love provide us with the freedom to be ourselves, and the courage to follow our mutual and individual paths. As we share life's experiences, we vow to create an intimacy that will enable us to express our innermost thoughts and feelings; to be sensitive to each other's needs; to share life's joys; to comfort each other through life's sorrows; to challenge each other to achieve intellectual and physical fulfillment as well as spiritual and emotional tranquility. We will build a home together and fill it with laughter, empathy, faith, imagination, trust, friendship, companionship and love. A home in which holidays and heritage are celebrated in accordance with our Jewish culture and tradition. May we live each day as the first, the last, the only day we will have with each other. We joyfully enter into this covenant and solemnly accept the obligations herein.

בברית הנישואים הקדושה זו. כשהם תחת החופה אמרו זה לזו: כאוהבים וصاحبם בוחרים אנו לצעד במסלול זה ייחודי. אנו מתחייבים להיות שותפים שווים, חברים אהובים, ורעים התומכים זו בזו במשך כל ימות חיינו. מי יתן ותעניק לנו אהבתנו את החופש להיות כפי שהיננו, ואת האומץ להמשיך ולצעוד במסלוליינו ההדדיים והפרטיים. עם שאנו מתחלקים בניסיונות החיים שלנו, מבטיחים אנו ליצור קירבה אשר תאפשר לנו לבטא את מחשבותינו והרגשותינו העמוקות ביותר; להיות רגשים לצרכינו ההדדיים; לחלק ביננו את שמחות החיים; לנחם זה את זו בעיתות הצער שבחיינו; להציב זו לזו אתגרים להגשמה שכליית וגוףנית, כמו גם שקט רוחני ושלווה רגשית. ביחד נקים בית ונמלא אותו בשחוק אמפתיה, אמונה, דמיון, בטחון, חברות, רעות ואהבה; בית שבו נחוגת את חגינו ו מורשתינו על פי תרבותנו היהודית ומסורתינו. מי יתן ונחיה כל יום בימיו כאילו היה היום הראשון, האחרון והיחיד של היוטינו בצוותא. برنامج-لب באמצעות ברית זו ובملוא הכנות מוקבים אנו על עצמנו את מחוייבותה.

Information and texts taken from
http://artketubah.com/Ketubah/ketubah_text_reform.shtml

Appendix Two:
Order of Processional
(Heterosexual Wedding)

There is no set Jewish law on the issue of a processional. The following is a proposal based on experience. It is a suggestion, not an expectation.

Chuppah Holders? (unless using a stand-alone *chuppah*)

Rabbi/Cantor

Usher Pairs?

Best Man (with or without Maid/Matron of Honor at this point)

Groom, accompanied by parents

Maid/Matron of Honor (if she has not already come down)

Ring Bearer? (utterly optional)

Flower Girl? (" ")

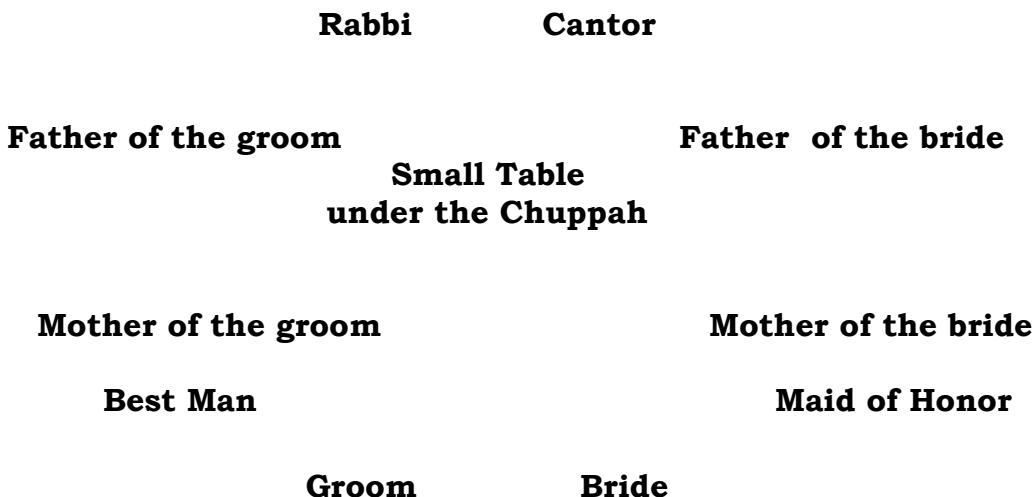
Bride's parents, coming in halfway (or two-thirds), stopping.

Bride, coming in alone, to the point where her parents are waiting

Groom: goes back down from the Chuppah, shakes his future father-in-law's hand, gives his future mother-in-law a kiss, then sends them on their way ahead of the couple.

Bride and Groom complete the last half (or third) of the way to the Chuppah arm in arm as a couple. (If the tradition of circling is to take place – optional and not encouraged -- it would take place just before the arrival under the chuppah.)

**Appendix Three:
Under the Chuppah
(Heterosexual wedding)**



Usher pairs may be “flanked off” in either direction below or around the *chuppah*. The table under the *chuppah* holds two kiddush cups, a bottle of wine (opened or uncorked!), the glass to be broken and a napkin in which to wrap that glass, and, unless it is already in a frame (in which case it would be on display with an easel), the rolled ketubah.

Appendix Four: For Interfaith Couples

In the summer of 2008, I changed my position on officiation at interfaith marriages, and have performed such ceremonies under certain conditions since that time. I do hope, despite how common interfaith marriage has become, all couples are still able to appreciate how much of a change this is in the Jewish world. Nevertheless, I believe that welcoming families and officiating at the weddings of those who see themselves as “within” the Jewish community has truly been a blessing. There are many aspects of this issue that are best suited for direct, in-person conversations. And every new family formed with partners from different backgrounds goes through its own journey. I welcome the chance to have those conversations, or to be a resource on such a journey.

For our present purposes, here are the criteria that I use in working with interfaith couples:

I officiate at interfaith marriages for couples who can agree to:

A Jewish wedding – modified to take into account the spiritual identity of the participants, but without co-officiation by clergy of other faith traditions.

Jewish learning – where both partners study Judaism together, not necessarily with an intent to convert, but with an openness to the traditions they will bring into their lives.

A Jewish home – with honor to the holidays and celebrations, the culture and traditions that reflect why they would ask for a Jewish wedding in the first place.

Jewish continuity – a commitment that, should the couple be blessed with children, they raise those children as Jews.

And **Jewish affiliation** – a commitment to practice Judaism as a family actively, within the context of a spiritual community, which, to me, means as members of a synagogue.

Information Sheet

Date of Wedding: _____

Time of the ceremony: _____ Approximate number of guests: _____

Location (including full address): _____
(please attach or send directions)

PARTNER ONE

Name: _____

Hebrew Name: _____ bar/bat (son/daughter of)
_____ (father's Hebrew name, if applicable) v' (and)
_____ (mother's Hebrew name, if applicable)

Date of Birth: _____

Present address: _____

Future address (if different): _____

Home phone: _____ Office phone: _____

Mobile phone: _____ Fax number: _____

E-mail: _____ Occupation: _____

Synagogue affiliation: _____ Denomination: _____

Previous marriage? Yes/No If "Yes," circumstances: _____

(If divorce, was a get issued? _____ [recommended but not required])

Children? (please list by name and age): _____

Siblings: _____, _____

PARTNER TWO

Name: _____

Hebrew Name: _____ ben/bat (son/daughter of)
_____ (father's Hebrew name, if applicable) v' (and)
_____ (mother's Hebrew name, if applicable)

Date of Birth: _____

Present address: _____

Future address (if different): _____

Home phone: _____ Office phone: _____

Mobile phone: _____ Fax number: _____

E-mail: _____ Occupation: _____

Synagogue affiliation: _____ Denomination: _____

Previous marriage? Yes/No If "Yes," circumstances: _____

(If divorce, was a get issued? _____ [recommended but not required])

Children? (please list by name and age): _____

Siblings: _____, _____

Additional Information for the Clergy

Will there be an *auf ruf*? Yes/No.

If yes, when and where?

Will there be a photographer? Yes/No

A videographer? Yes/No

Do they understand what they should and should not do? Yes/No

Guidelines: flash photography permitted during the ketubah signing and during the processional, recessional, and stepping on the glass. Otherwise all photographers and videographers should be both stationary and use only natural light.

Are you using one wineglass/kiddush cup or two?

Is there any significance to the kiddush cups? Yes/No.

If yes, what are the details?

Is the *chuppah* made from a *tallit*? Yes/No

If yes, is there a story or significance behind the *tallit* being used?

Do you want to write your own vows to recite to one another?

Do you want friends to recite the English of the *Sheva Berachot* (the Seven Wedding Blessings?) Yes/No

If yes, what are their names, in what order will they be reading, and where will they be standing?

Do you want a *tallit* wrapped around your shoulders as a couple for the final blessing? Yes/No.

If yes, who do you want to place the *tallit* over your shoulders?

The rabbi? Parents? Other:

Will you be departing immediately from the recessional to a secluded area for *yichud*, a time of togetherness for the first few minutes of your married life? Yes/No.

If yes, who have you asked to “guard” the door, and for how long?

Have you arranged for some food to be in that room?

Other information?

Sentimental selection of wine?