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# CELEBRATING A JEWISH WEDDING I

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## Engagement to the Bedeken

A Jewish wedding actualizes the most transformational event in a person's life. Prior to the wedding there are two separate, independent individuals. After the wedding, there is a married couple with a unified soul and combined goals. The groom (*chatan*) and bride (*kallah*) are actually one soul that was split in two before they were born. Beneath the chuppah (wedding canopy), these two halves of the soul joyfully reunite (Zohar 1:85b).

Because of the meaning and momentousness of the occasion, the Jewish wedding ceremony entails many customs and rituals, a totally unique experience that remains with the bride and groom for their entire lives. These customs originate from a rich blend of historical and spiritual underpinnings, representing a tradition that has roots in both the marriage of Adam and Chavah (Eve) and the “national marriage” of God and the Jewish People at Mount Sinai (Berachot 61a; Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer 41).

The wedding day is not only a day of personal joy for the bride and groom, but is also a day of happiness for the entire Jewish nation, as this couple brings continuity into the next generation. The customs of the wedding, whether their function is legal, moral, or celebratory, reflect these central themes. There are two Morasha shiurim that discuss the steps and meaning of a Jewish wedding spanning the engagement through the week of *Sheva Berachot* (festive meals that take place each night where the Seven Blessings said at the chuppah are repeated). The first class addresses the engagement through the signing of the *ketubah* (marriage contract) and the *bedeken* (veiling ceremony). The second class discusses the steps from the chuppah to the *Sheva Berachot*.

The Morasha shiurim on the Jewish View of Love and Marriage, and Dating and Relationships are prerequisites to these classes.

Some of the questions we will address in this first shiur include:

- How and when do a couple become engaged?
- What is the significance of a person's wedding day?
- Why is a legal document – the *ketubah* – an intrinsic component of the wedding?
- What is the purpose of the *bedeken*?

## Class Outline:

- Section I. Overview
- Section II. The Engagement, Tena'im, and Aufruf
  - Part A. The Engagement and Tena'im
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- Section III. The Wedding Day
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## SECTION I. OVERVIEW

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Let's put the wedding day in context: Is it the happiest day of the couple's life or is it a momentous, joyous occasion celebrating the beginning of their marriage?

*"... No bride in her right mind, if nature could produce such a wondrous creature, would want her wedding to be the Happiest Day of My Life. This would mean that everything from then on, such as the marriage itself would be downhill."*

*You gotta love Miss Manners. She tells it like it is, unafraid of attacking a multi-million dollar industry that is built around this dangerous and deceptive idea. The line between fantasy and reality has gotten seriously crossed.*

*The proof of this is that the latest company to hop on the bridal industry bandwagon is none other than Disney. The idea of a fairy tale wedding seems to take on literal significance as dresses are fashioned in accordance with favorite characters such as Snow White or the Little Mermaid. The line between fantasy and reality just got even muddier – the line between a child's dream and (what should be) an adult's sober vision.*

*I don't want to be the wedding grinch. I don't begrudge any bride her wedding finery. But when the wedding is seen as the end, not the beginning, we're all in trouble. When marriage is sold as a Disney fairy tale, coping with daily challenges can be intimidating, especially since they are so unexpected. Of course there should be happiness and joy on a wedding day. But it is the excitement of unrealized potential, of the possibilities unfolding. It should not be the thrill of achievement.*

*A wedding is not an accomplishment; it's a gift. But a successful marriage is an accomplishment. With our wedding day, the real work begins. (Emuna Braverman, Fairy Tale Wedding, aish.com)*

Now we proceed with the steps of celebrating a Jewish wedding, beginning with the engagement...

## SECTION II. THE ENGAGEMENT, TENA'IM, AND AUFRUF

### PART A. THE ENGAGEMENT AND TENA'IM

Most couples are advised to date as long as necessary to decide that they have met their *beshtet* – the “destined one,” and are then encouraged to enjoy a relatively short engagement leading up to the wedding.

#### 1. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *Made in Heaven*, pp. 22-23 – The couple can meet and become engaged on their own, or with the help of a third-party matchmaker (a *shadchan*).

There comes a time when a couple realizes that they are right for each other. At this time, the man usually proposes marriage. If the woman accepts, they consider themselves engaged. In Jewish practice, this marriage proposal is actually the first step of formal engagement. The Talmud refers to the marriage proposal as *shidduchin* (שִׁדּוּכִין, Kiddushin 13a).

Even in ancient times, couples often met on their own decision to marry. Jacob met Rachel on his own, without going through his or her parents (Genesis 29:10-11). Of course, it was a widespread Jewish custom – and still is in many circles – for parents to arrange the marriages of their children. But even when marriages were arranged, both the young man and the young woman had to give their full consent. Stories about couples being forced to marry against their will are nothing but myths ...

Very often, matches are made without any intermediary. In other cases, there is a go-between. This intermediary may be a relative or friend, or he may be a professional matchmaker. In either case, since he (or she) makes the *shidduchin*, he is known as a *shadchan* (שָׁדְכָן). In some Jewish circles, marriages are still arranged through a *shadchan*, and in the case of a professional, a matchmaker's fee is paid. Nevertheless, there is nothing particularly Jewish or “traditional” about using a matchmaker.

#### 2. *Ibid.* p. 25 – The custom is for the groom to give the bride a gift when they get engaged.

It is an ancient custom for the groom to give his bride an engagement present ... Nowadays, following the general custom, the man usually gives his bride a diamond engagement ring. The custom of giving a diamond is so ingrained that many couples feel that they are not engaged without one. This, of course, is nonsense. In many of the best marriages, the bride was never given a diamond engagement ring. The main thing is that she should be as precious to her husband as a diamond, and not that she wear one on her finger.

Judaism teaches that every match has an aspect of Divine Providence.

#### 3. Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Sotah 2a – Heaven proclaims the destiny of each match.

Rabbi Yehudah said in the name of Rav, “Forty days before the fetus is formed [i.e. at the time of conception], a heavenly voice announces, ‘The daughter of this man shall be for that man.’”

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: ארבעים יום קודם יצירת הולד, בת קול יוצאת ואומרת: בת פלוני לפלוני.

In trying to find one's predestined match, one needs to keep “signs” and “coincidental events” in perspective. Is the following incident typical of what one should expect on a *shidduch* (match) that culminates in a happy marriage?

Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein was teaching at the Mirrer Yeshivah and was most impressed with one particular student, young Rabbi Ephraim Mordechai Ginsburg. When Reb Yechezkel's oldest daughter Zlata became of age, he requested that Rav Yeruchem Levovitz, the Mashgiach at the Mirrer Yeshiva, should arrange the shidduch. The shidduch was presented and soon after they were engaged.

Rebbetzin Zlata Ginsburg relates a fascinating story that occurred in the afternoon, shortly before their first meeting: "At that time, I taught in the local Beit Yaakov school. The house where my future husband rented a room was three houses away from the school. The afternoon of our first meeting it was raining, and I was holding my umbrella while going to teach. Meanwhile, my future husband was coming home from yeshivah to change before our first meeting at my house that evening. As we passed each other, our umbrellas became entangled, leaving us standing together underneath until we were able to untangle our umbrellas. I was mortified. When I finished teaching I ran home and told my father what had happened. Later that evening my father related the episode to Reb Yeruchem. Reb Yeruchem told him that it was a sign that 'they'll stand together under the chuppah.'" (From Rabbi Moshe Bamberger, Sheva Berachos, ArtScroll, p. 82, based on Yated Ne'eman).

Whereas the Ginsburgs were fortunate to share such a "providential" experience as understood by the luminary Rabbi Yeruchem Levovitz, many dating couples who share "coincidental occurrences" and "signs" rightly decide that they are not suited for one another. We need to use common sense. So how then can we know who is our beshert?

4. **Emunah Braverman, Beshert, aish.com – Although one's spouse may be pre-destined, it's more important to search for the necessary elements that create a good marriage: kindness, loyalty, honesty, shared values, and hard work.**

"How will I know he's my beshert, my soul mate?" one of my students asked me the other day.

"It doesn't matter," I replied. "Make a commitment to him, put in all the hard work and effort necessary and he'll become your beshert."

Beshert is one of the most confusing and misleading ideas in Jewish life. Although the Talmud states that forty days prior to the formation of the fetus, a Heavenly voice comes down from Above and decrees who is to be mated with who (source 3 above), this activity in the spiritual realm does not inform us of the practical choices that we have to make.

In fact, it can become a distraction. It leads us to look for signs and omens and the mysterious ways of the cosmos that brought us together, and to ignore the more important elements required to create a good and productive relationship.

The fact that you "never" go to that store and you're "never" home from work at that time and that he was buying "exactly" the same thing as you may be a cute story to tell your grandchildren (or not), but it doesn't demonstrate whether he's kind and loyal. The moon, the stars and that special glow don't speak to whether he's honest and trustworthy.

And all the physical attraction in the world tells us nothing about his staying power over the long haul, about his true understanding of the word commitment. That's why I suggest that if we need to talk about beshert (and it seems we do!) it should come at the end of the discussion, not the beginning. When two people build a life together, when they start with a foundation of shared values and good character, and if their commitment is strong, they will create a healthy marriage.

With all the hard work, with constant giving to their spouse, they will create an irrevocable bond. Through their family activities and community involvement they will deepen their unity. Their sense of intimacy and connection will only grow over time.

Beshert is what you get after you pay your dues. Beshert is what you get when you put someone else's needs before your own. Beshert is what you get when you keep pushing forward no matter how rough the road. Beshert is what you get after years of struggle and joy, years of pain and celebration, years of effort and laughter.

There is a slightly mystical aspect to beshert – it's what you get when you're not looking for it, when you're not fooled by illusory externals and pseudo-spirituality. Beshert is what you get after using your time to be loving and caring, after creating a true marital unit out of two individuals. It is true that everything is in the Almighty's hands, but not necessarily in the way we initially think. If we do the real job necessary to make a marriage work, then the Almighty performs a miracle for us – we see that although we didn't recognize it at first, we have married our beshert after all.

From the moment a couple is “officially” engaged, the couple has decided to build their lives together. Often a joyous engagement – “*vort*” (literally “word,” referring to the words of commitment between the bride and the groom) is held where family and friends gather to bless the couple and wish them well.

Occasionally, the *tena'im* (conditions) ceremony, which affirms the commitment of the bride, groom, and their respective families to the marriage, accompanies the engagement, but is most commonly held on the wedding day itself. The next source elaborates.

5. **Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism, p. 20 – The Tena'im and breaking the plate.**

When the families have met, and the young couple has decided to marry, the families usually announce the occasion with a small reception, known as a *vort*. Some families sign a contract, the *tena'im*, meaning “conditions,” that delineates the obligations of each side regarding the wedding and a final date for the wedding. Because the contract, which involves financial obligations, is binding, others prefer to delay the *tena'im* until the wedding reception, an hour or so before the marriage (Sefer HaNesuiim Kehilchatam 3:184-5).

At the time of the *tena'im* a plate is customarily broken. Traditionally, the china plate is jointly dropped by the respective mothers of the bride and groom (Elyah Rabbah 560:7). The reason for breaking the plate is to demonstrate the strength of commitment to the forthcoming wedding. Alternatively, the breaking of the plate expresses sorrow over the destruction of the Temple (Mishnah Berurah 560:9). It may also allude to the coming “break” between the parents and their children, who will leave their homes to live with their spouse.

6. **Ibid. – The engagement period.**

During the engagement period the bride and groom get to know each others' families and continue to meet. Even though the couple is engaged, the same restrictions regarding touching and being alone together still apply (Be'er HaGolah, Yoreh Deah 192:7; Shulchan Aruch, Even HaEzer 22:2). In addition, they are forbidden to sleep in the same house.

There is a common custom among Ashkenazi Jews for the bride and groom to stop seeing each other one week before the wedding, in order to enhance the joy of meeting at their wedding after a period of separation (Magen Avraham, Orach Chaim 282).

Prior to the engagement, important medical, psychological, and personal information that would impact the marriage should be shared to prevent unnecessary conflict or even divorce if withheld.

## 7. Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D., Hamodia, February 3, 2011 – Importance of sharing important medical, psychological, and personal information before the engagement.

[The following is Rabbi Twerski's response to a case where information was withheld and was subsequently revealed during the marriage.] Numerous times I have stated my view and pleaded with parents and people involved in a shidduch not to withhold important information. A healthy marriage is based on mutual trust and failure to reveal information undermines this trust. I cannot express a halachic opinion [on this case]. There are cases where failure to reveal information can be grounds for *mekach ta'us* (invalid procedure), and one may ask for an annulment, but this must be discussed with a *posek* (Jewish legal authority).

Once engaged, the couple forges ahead with the exciting plans of reserving the wedding hall, caterer, band, photographer, etc. They also study the philosophy of *shalom bayit* (building a home built on giving, trust, and mutual respect), and the laws of *taharat hamishpachah* (guidelines for marital intimacy). The wedding date is set to harmonize with the woman's menstrual cycle.

## PART B. THE AUFRUF CELEBRATION

As the next source describes, on the Shabbat before the wedding, it is the custom for the groom to be called to the reading of the Torah. This is called an *aufwurf*, which literally means "calling up." It is usually accompanied by a kiddush for the community and the family enjoys festive meals.

### 1. Rabbi Menachem Packsher, Invei HaGefen, 6:1 – The aufwurf celebration.

On the Shabbat before the wedding there is an increased atmosphere of joy in honor of the groom. The bride and groom wear their new clothes that were purchased for their wedding ... some call this Shabbat the *aufwurf*. On Shabbat morning the groom is escorted to the synagogue, accompanied by song and praise ... there is an obligation on this Shabbat for the groom to be called up to the Torah.

שבת שקודם החתונה מרבים בשמחה לכבוד החתן, והחתן והכלה כבר לובשים בשבת זו מלבושים חדשים שהכינו לחתונה... ויש שקוראים אותו שבת האפרוף... בשבת בבוקר כבר נתקבל המנהג בכל תפוצות ישראל שמלווין את החתן מביתו לבית הכנסת ומזמרים לפניו שירות ותשבחות... בשבת זו חיוב לחתן לעלות לתורה.

Why is the *aufwurf* so meaningful for the groom, and by extension, for the bride? To understand this, we need to understand a fascinating enactment by King Solomon.

### 2. Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer 17 – King Solomon added two gates to the Temple through which grooms and mourners would enter, to enable those nearby to give them encouragement. This custom was transferred to the synagogues and study halls after the Temple was destroyed.

King Solomon saw that practicing kindness was great before God. When he built the Temple, he built two extra gates, one for grooms and one for mourners ... Those walking up to the Temple on Shabbat would sit between these gates. When a groom would enter the Gate of the Groom, they would call to him, "May the One Who Dwells in this house bring you joy with sons and daughters."

ראה שלמה שמדת גמילות חסדים גדולה לפני המקום ב"ה וכשבנה ביהמ"ק בנה שני שערים אחד לחתנים ואחד לאבלים ... והיו ישראל הולכים בשבתות ויושבין בין שני שערים הללו והנכנס בשער חתנים היו יודעין שהוא חתן והיו אומרים לו השוכן בבית הזה ישמחך בנים ובנות.



When a mourner entered the Gate of Mourners, they said to him, "May He Who Dwells in this house bring you consolation." When the Temple was destroyed, the rabbis enacted that grooms and mourners go to the synagogues and study halls. The community would see the groom and rejoice with him and see the mourner and sit on the ground with him in order to fulfill the precept of practicing kindness.

והנכנס בשער האבלים ... היו יודעין שהוא אבל והיו אומרים לו השוכן בבית הזה ינחמד.... ומיום שנחרב ביה"מ מק התקינו חכמים ז"ל שיהיו חתנים ואבלים הולכין לבית הכנסת ולבתי מדרשות. ואנשי המקום רואים את החתן ושמחים עמו ורואין את האבל ויושבין לארץ כדי שיצאו כל ישראל ידי חובתן בגמילות חסדים ...

What is the connection between a groom and a mourner? Why should the multitudes of people going up to the Beit HaMikdash (Temple) give them so much attention?

3. **Rabbi Beryl Gershenfeld, Ner Le'Elef audio shiur – Both the groom and a mourner are going through stressful times and are in need of compassion and encouragement.**

God commanded that there should be eight gates for the Beit HaMikdash (see Mishnah Middot 1:4). Then Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon) added two gates on his own. Why? Furthermore, these gates are so significant that it is through these gates that the Messiah will come. Why are these two gates accorded such a special status?

There is another question that must be asked about the Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer above: We can understand that a mourner, who has just suffered a devastating loss needs to be comforted, but why does a groom need to receive support and encouragement from other people? If anything, it would seem that those who are still single should need encouragement, not the groom himself.

Shlomo HaMelech was so named because he made shalom (peace) between the upper worlds and lower worlds. Shlomo was able to determine with his own wisdom that God wanted gates to be placed in the Beit HaMikdash for the benefit of grooms and mourners. What is the common connection between a groom and a mourner that Shlomo HaMelech found it necessary to add gates for each that is discussed in the above Midrash?

Both the groom and a mourner are going through very stressful times and are in need of compassion. We need to identify with them. The groom and bride are going through a big change. They know they are trying to build a life-long relationship. They are nervous about whether they will be able to succeed in their marriage, and whether their spouse will also be able to succeed. Life changes in general are difficult to adjust to, and with the imminent wedding, the groom and bride are very sensitive, may lack self-confidence and are therefore in need of *chesed* (loving kindness). Consequently, it is important to show solidarity with them as they approach this event. Similarly, the halachah of comforting a mourner requires us to sit down next to the mourner, to show compassion.

4. **Ibid. – Additionally, since the groom is about to rise to a greater spiritual level through marriage, he requires a *shomer* (escort) to protect him.**

Another explanation is based on the analysis of the Maharal and the Gra of the Mishnah (Berachot 54a) which states that a groom requires a personal guard or escort [*shomer*]. They explain that this concept is related to the transgression of the Golden Calf. The Jewish People committed the sin of the Golden Calf immediately after they received the Torah on Mt. Sinai. How could they have committed such a grave transgression so soon after receiving the Torah? When a person (or, in the case of Mt. Sinai, the entire Jewish People) is about to rise to another level, the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) attacks with even greater intensity, knowing that if the person succeeds in reaching the next level, he will

eradicate the yetzer hara on the previous level. Thus, at the very last moment, the yetzer hara makes the most powerful effort to hamper a person's spiritual growth.

Consequently, just before Moshe (Moses) descended with the Ten Commandments, the yetzer hara was working very hard to prevent the Jewish People from accepting the Torah.

Similarly, a groom before his wedding is about to rise to a new spiritual level, and the yetzer hara tries to attack with even greater intensity and prevent him from making this spiritual stride. Consequently, he requires a shomer, and the community must also gather to perform chesed with him by encouraging him and showing solidarity, thus helping him to overcome the yetzer hara.

If we really understood what a wedding represented, we would go on and cheer each groom and bride. The groom is a representative for the Jewish People. It's like he's coming down from Har Sinai. With a mourner we are sitting on the ground. With the groom, we need to make him happy. We must empathize with him and rejoice with him. We need to have a vision that there are 25,000 other people there at the wedding rejoicing with you! That's the kind of energy you need to invest into the wedding.

Now we are ready to move on to the wedding day!

#### KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

- ≈ The wedding day is the day on which two individuals spiritually re-unite their souls that were originally one unit before they were born. On the wedding day the couple begins the process of building and deepening their relationship in this world. A wedding is not an accomplishment; it's a gift. But a successful marriage is an accomplishment. With the wedding day, begins the real work of re-unifying the two halves of the whole.
- ≈ Although one's spouse may be pre-destined from before birth, rather than looking for signs or circumstantial evidence to prove this, it's more important to search for the necessary elements that create a good marriage: kindness, loyalty, honesty, shared values, and hard work.
- ≈ The engagement is celebrated with a small reception where family and friends gather to bless the couple and wish them well. Some families sign a contract (*tena'im*) that lists each side's financial obligations to the wedding.
- ≈ On the Shabbat before the wedding (aufruf), the groom is called to read from the Torah. His family and friends provide him with encouragement and reassurance that he has the qualities necessary to be a good husband.

## SECTION III. THE WEDDING DAY

The wedding day is the most important, transformational, joyous, and holiest day of our life. It is the day on which a person gains a certain level of spiritual completion and takes a giant stride towards fulfilling his or her fundamental purpose in life. Brides and grooms are well advised to make the most of the day, in prayer, repentance, and contemplation of their future lives. In addition, the bride and groom are considered as a king and a queen; they do not leave the house without escort, and they are given special respect. Some uphold these customs from the beginning of the wedding week.



## PART A. WHEN TWO HALVES BECOME A WHOLE

The following sources describe how the two halves of the couple become a “whole” on the wedding day.

*One of Rabbi Aryeh Levine’s students, of marriageable age, was about to embark on the seas of matrimony. So he came to Reb Aryeh and asked, “How should I behave toward my wife? How should I treat her?”*

*Reb Aryeh looked at him in wonder. “How can you ask a question like that? A wife is like your own self. You treat her as you treat yourself.”*

And indeed, when his own good wife Hannah felt pains, he went with her to the doctor and told him, “My wife’s foot is hurting us...” (Simcha Raz, *A Tzaddik in our Time*, p. 150)

### 1. Bereishit (Genesis) 1:27 – The creation of man.

And God created man in His image. In the image of God He created *him*, male and female he created *them*.

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא  
אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם.

The verse appears to contradict itself. First it states that God created one human, but then it refers to two, male and female. As the next source explains, the original human being was androgynous, a unity of both male and female. Only later was there a division into the male and female halves.

### 2. Bereishit 2:18, with Ramban – Husband and wife are two halves of a whole.

God said, “It is not good for man to be alone. I will make him a compatible helper [lit. one who helps opposite him].”

#### Ramban:

*It is not good for man to be alone* – [Originally] they were created [as one being] with two faces [and in this sense “man was alone” in that there was no one separate from him]... but God saw that it would be better if one partner would stand opposite the other, so they could see each other, and they could be apart or together as they wish. This is the meaning of the [continuation of the] verse, *I [God] will make for him a compatible helper*.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֱלֹהִים לֹא טוֹב הָיִיתָ הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ אֶעֱשֶׂה לוֹ  
עֶזְרָא כְּנֶגְדּוֹ.

#### רמבן:

“לא טוב היות האדם לבדו” - ... זו פרצופים נבראו  
[עירובין יח.]. ... וראה הקב”ה כי טוב שיהיה העזר  
עומד לנגדו והוא יראנו ויפרד מומנו ויתחבר אליו כפי  
רצונו, וזהו שאמר “אעשה לו עזר כנגדו.”

### 3. Rabbi Pinchas Stolper, [www.traditiononline.org](http://www.traditiononline.org) – The complete human being includes both the male and female components, as God originally created Adam. Two halves of a whole is more than just “we,” but rather a new “I.”

The Biblical view of marriage is unique among the many extant religious, philosophical, and sociological views. The Bible sees a married couple neither as two people who have made a contractual agreement, nor as two individuals who have entered into a lasting loving partnership, but as two halves of a whole, each of whom finds his or her missing half and thus reconstitutes a whole-ness, by recreating a pre-existent, independent entity. The Bible’s married couple is higher than the most harmonious, romantic, united-in-eternal-love “we.”

It represents the creation of a new “I” in recognition of God’s creation of man and woman not as complementary halves of a unit known as the family, but as two halves of a single *persona*; a *persona* which, even before birth, was designated as one whole personality, and which, in marriage, transcends its temporary, post-natal bifurcation, each side of which finds its other half. Thus is created the ideal, reconstituted personality.

## PART B. A PRIVATE DAY OF ATONEMENT

### 1. Bereishit 36:3, with Rashi – All the past transgressions of the bride and groom are forgiven on their wedding day.

[And Eisav married] Bosmat, the daughter of Yishmael.

#### Rashi:

But earlier in (Bereishit 28:9) she is called Machalat! [The answer is that] we find in the Aggadic Midrash of the Book of Shmuel/Samuel (Ch. 17): Three [categories of people] are pardoned for their transgressions: a proselyte who converts [to Judaism]; one who is appointed to a high position; and one who marries. [The Midrash] derives a proof [for the last case] from here: She was therefore called Machalat (מחלת), because [upon Eisav’s marriage to her] his sins were pardoned (נמחלו). [Machalat is derived from *mechilah* which means forgiveness.]

וְאֵת בְּשִׁמַּת בֵּת יִשְׁמָעֵאל.

#### רשי

ולהלן קורא לה (כח ט) מחלת. מצינו באגדת מדרש ספר שמואל (פרק יז) שלשה מוחלין להן עונותיהם גר שנתגייר, והעולה לגדולה, והנושא אשה, ולמד הטעם מכאן, לכך נקראת מחלת שנמחלו עונותיו:

Why are their transgressions pardoned?

### 2. Maharal, Gur Aryeh on Bereishit 31:3 (with the commentary of Rabbi Yehoshua Hartman) – The chatan and kallah are a completely new creation and therefore their past transgressions are no longer associated with their new identity.

The reason why all these individuals [have their transgressions pardoned is] they are now a new creation. They are no longer simply a continuation of their previous, initial creation. For this reason God forgives them. In other words, it is as if they are a completely different person. And since it is if they are now a different person, their transgressions are pardoned.

A husband and wife before the marriage are called “half a person” ... and now that they are a complete entity they are a new creation.

והטעם דכל אלו בריה חדשה הם, ומכיון דאינם בריה ראשונה (פירוש – אינם המשך הבריאה שהיו קודם לכן) הקדוש ברוך הוא מוחל להם (ובחידושי אגדות לסנהדרין יד [ג, קלן] כתב בזה“ל: “וכאילו הוא אדם אחר לגמרי, ומאחר שהיה כאילו אדם אחר – מוחלין לו עונותיו.”)

...וזה כי איש הנושא אשה כל אחד נקרא מתחילה חצי אדם ... ועתה גוף שלם בריה חדשה.

3. **Rabbi Beryl Gershenfeld, Ner Le'Elef audio class – The chatan and kallah are identified as “givers” focusing on others, symbolized by white.**

The transformation that a chatan and kallah undergo at the wedding takes them from being individuals concerned with themselves to being part of a larger whole (the husband-wife relationship), whose task is to give to each other. Their new perspective, which is more oriented outside of themselves, causes them to be different people, and consequently their sins should be forgiven. There is an allusion to this transformation in the color of the clothes that the chatan and kallah wear. The kallah wears a white dress, and the chatan wears a white kittel under the chuppah.

The Mateh Moshe and the Tanya write that a kallah is required to wear white at her wedding. Rav Meir M'Rottenberg writes that the chatan is required to wear a white kittel.

Rabbi Moshe Cordovero writes that the color white, which reflects all other colors, is always symbolic of chesed and giving. The Hebrew word for white is לבן, which is related to the word לב, heart, which also represents giving since the heart pumps blood throughout the body. This is part of the atonement for the chatan and kallah: When they get married, they become “givers.” They go from being individually focused (פרט) to looking outward to others (כלל).

As the next two sources describe, the day of the wedding is like Yom Kippur.

4. **Rabbi Menachem Packsher, Invei HaGefen, 6:1 – The private Yom Kippur of bride and groom.**

On the day of the chuppah it is customary for the groom and the bride to fast, because this day is like the day of Yom Kippur for them [Rema, Even HaEzer 61:1].

ביום החופה נוהגין שמתעניין החתן והכלה כי יום זה  
כיום כפורים אצלם.

5. **Ibid. – The responsibility to make the most of the day.**

See how wondrous this day is! There is no day in the world that is more favored (Midrash Talpiot, Ki Tisa). For our Creator, the gracious King who deals kindly with His creatures, gives the bride and groom the opportunity to reach physical and spiritual completeness, allowing them to enter the bond of marriage without sin and fault, thus to establish a house of God in perfection.

How great is their responsibility at this unique time of favor, on the day of their wedding, to pray for Divine compassion and to repent wholeheartedly, to confess their sins and to pour out their hearts before God ... that they should establish their home in perfection, in the way of Torah and fear of God, and live a life of joy and peace.

וראה מה גדול יום זה, שאין לך יום בעולם חביב ממנו  
(מדר"ת פר' כי תשא), אשר בוראנו יוצרנו מלך הרחמן  
המטיב לברואיו נתן לחתן ולכלה הזוכים ביום זה לבוא  
לשלימות הגוף והנפש, שיכנסו בנפש זכה וטהורה ע"י  
מחילת עוונותיהם ולכפר על פשעיהם, ויזכו להקים  
בתים נאמנים לה' בקרב ישראל בתכלית השלימות,

ומה גודל אחריותם בעת רצון נשגב זה ביום חופתם,  
על בקשת רחמים ולהתעורר בתשובה ולהתוודות על  
עוונם ולשפוך שיח ולבקש מלפניו ית"ש... להקים בית  
בתכלית השלימות בדרך התורה והיראה וחיים שמחה  
ושלום.

## PART C. AS A KING AND QUEEN

The bride and groom are compared to a king and queen. As befits royalty, the bride and groom wear honorable clothing, do not go outside unaccompanied, and are praised by all.

### 1. Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer 16 – The chatan is compared to a king.

A chatan is similar to a king. Just as everyone praises the king, so too is the chatan praised all seven days of the celebration. Just as a king wears honorable clothing, so too does the chatan wear honorable clothing ... Just as a king does not go outside to the market alone, a chatan should not go outside unaccompanied to the market. Just as the king's countenance shines like the light of the sun, so too does the face of the chatan, as it says, "And it [the sun] is like a chatan emerging from his wedding canopy..." Tehillim/Psalms 19.

החתן דומה למלך מה המלך הכל מקלסין אותו שבעת ימי המשתה, כך חתן הכל מקלסין אותו שבעת ימי המשתה, מה המלך לובש בגדי כבוד, כך החתן לובש בגדי כבוד ... מה המלך אינו יוצא לשוק לבדו, כך החתן אינו יוצא לשוק לבדו, מה המלך פניו מאירות כאור החמה, כך חתן פניו מאירות כאור החמה, שנא' (תהלים יט) והוא כְּחַתָּן יֵצֵא מִחֻפָּתוֹ וגו'.

### 2. Rabbi Menachem Packsher, Invei HaGefen 4:8 – According to some customs, the bride and groom have a constant escort from the Shabbat before the wedding.

There are places where it is customary that the bride and groom are accompanied from the Shabbat preceding the wedding. For from this Shabbat they are already considered to be "bride and groom," and require guarding. Each person should act according to the custom of his place.

יש מקומות שנוהגים שהחתן וכן הכלה כבר לא הולכין לבדם רק עם מלווה מהשבת שלפני החתונה, דמשבת זו כבר הם קרויין חתן וכלה המעוניים שמירה, וכ"א ינהג לפי מנהג מקומו.

Why is a chatan compared to a king?

### 3. Rabbi Beryl Gershenfeld for Ner Le'Elef – A chatan and a king both have great responsibilities to fulfill.

Why do we compare a chatan to a king? A king is a person who has a great task to perform; he has to run an entire country and coordinate all the components of his kingdom to keep it running smoothly.

A chatan also has a very difficult job, in a similar sense. Just as a king has to bring many different individuals and factors together and keep them running smoothly, a chatan must create a relationship between two different individuals – himself and his wife – in order to build a marriage.

Because of the great import and great difficulty of the tasks facing a king and a chatan, each of them is in need of a show of solidarity and encouragement. In order to function as an effective ruler, a king needs to have confidence in his own intelligence and abilities and in his own decisions. Similarly, a chatan needs to be given encouragement and a show of support. Part of the obligation to bring joy to a chatan is to encourage him and give him confidence in his own abilities. When a chatan sees that he is appreciated and that people have confidence in him, he will be able to make decisions and carry them out, which is a vital part of his future married life.

### KEY THEMES OF SECTION III:

- ⌘ The complete human being includes both the male and female components, just as God originally created Adam. On the wedding day the two halves of a whole become more than just “we,” but rather a new “I.”
- ⌘ Since the groom and bride are a completely new creation, their past transgressions are no longer associated with their new identity and are therefore erased.
- ⌘ Additionally, the couple fast on the wedding day since it is like a personal Day of Atonement for them.
- ⌘ The groom is compared to a king since he is assuming responsibility for his new bride, just as a king takes responsibility for those under him.

## SECTION IV. RECEPTION, KETUBAH, AND BEDEKEN

The first parts of the wedding ceremony are the reception, in which the bride and the groom, together with their respective families, greet their guests. The bride sits on a distinctive, ornate throne-like chair, and greets friends and family, who wish her *mazal tov* and offer their heartfelt wishes and words of encouragement. The *ketubah* (marriage contract) is finalized at the groom's reception.

When the time for the *chuppah* arrives, the groom and his entourage first enter the women's section for the *bedeken* (veiling) ceremony, in which the groom covers the face of the bride with a white veil. Depending on the custom, both the bride and groom are dressed in white, symbolizing their purity from transgression (Kol Bo 75; Yeshayahu/Isaiah 1:18).

### PART A. SIGNING THE KETUBAH

The most important procedure at the groom's reception is the completing and signing of the marriage contract or *ketubah* (literally, “that which is written”). It is a contract that a man makes with his wife to provide her with the basic rights of sustenance, clothing, and intimacy. It also promises her a sum of money should her husband divorce her, or predecease her.

Well over a thousand years before the concept was established in the secular world, the Sages enacted that every marriage should incorporate a *ketubah*. The *ketubah* is an integral and legally required part of the wedding ceremony.

#### 1. Rabbi Menachem Packsher, Invei HaGefen 6:14-15 – The reception, the white robe (*kittel*), and the parents' blessing.

It is customary to conduct a reception, with men on the side of the groom and women on the side of the bride ... The bride sits on a special chair which is termed a “*kallah chair*” ... The officiating rabbi checks the *ketubah* to ensure that all is in order, and designates valid witnesses ... The groom is dressed in a white robe (*kittel*), and the bride is dressed in white as well. Ash is placed

נוהגין לעשות קבלת פנים האנשים לחתן והנשים לכלה ומברכים אותם... והכלה יושבת על כסא המיוחדת לה שקורין “כסא כלה”... והמסדר קידושין בודק את הכתובה אם הכל כשורה ומיחד העדים שיהיו כשרים... מלבישין את החתן הקיטל, וגם הכלה... הולכת בגדי לבנים, ומשימין אפר על ראש החתן זכר לחורבן ההורים מברכין את החתן והכלה לפני החופה

on the groom's forehead, in memory of the destruction of the Temple ... The parents bless the bride and the groom, in the same way that God blessed Adam and Eve at their marriage: "God blessed them [Adam and Chavah]" (Bereishit 1:28).

ע"ד שבירך הקב"ה את אדם וחוה "וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים" (בראשית א: כח).

2. **Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism, p. 22 – The signing of the ketubah in which the husband promises to take care of his wife.**

At the reception itself, the first thing usually done is the completion, signing, and witnessing of the ketubah, or marriage contract. This contract is ordained by Mishnaic law (circa 170 CE) and according to some authorities dates back to Biblical times. The ketubah, written in Aramaic, details the husband's obligations to his wife: food, clothing, dwelling, and intimacy. It also creates a lien on all his property to pay her a sum of money and support should he divorce her, or predecease her. The document is signed by two witnesses, and has the standing of a legally binding agreement, that in many countries is enforceable by secular law. The ketubah is often written as an illuminated manuscript, and becomes a work of art in itself, and many couples frame it and display it in their home.

3. **Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 89a – The ketubah is designed to protect the wife.**

Why did the Sages enact that a woman should receive a ketubah? It is in order that divorcing one's wife should not be taken lightly.

מאי טעמא תקינו לה רבנן כתובה כדי שלא תהא קלה בעיניו להוציאה.

4. **Likkutei Halachot (Breslev), Ishut 4 – The ketubah ensures the permanence of the husband-wife relationship.**

It is prohibited for a man to cohabit with his wife without a ketubah ... because the husband-wife relationship may not be similar to an extramarital relationship which is only temporary ... rather it must be an absolute and permanent connection ... This is the secret of the Sages' teaching that the reason for the ketubah is to discourage divorcing his wife [Yevamot 89a, i.e. that the relationship not be temporary]. Rather the connection must be strong and permanent, and this is affected by the ketubah, by which a person obligates himself so that even if his wife should leave him [if he should divorce her], she would not leave empty-handed, and he must bestow upon her in abundance ... for the [heavenly] abundance [that a husband receives] is brought down [to him] through her.

אסור לדור עם אשתו בלא כתבה... כי צריך שלא יהיה החבור, חס ושלוש, כמו בעילת זנות, שהוא רק לפי שעה... רק שיהיה החבור קשר גמור וקיים... וזה סוד מה שאמרו רבותינו זכרונם לברכה שטעם הכתבה כדי שלא תהא קלה בעיניו להוציאה, היינו כנ"ל, כי צריך שיהיה הקשר קים וחזק, וזה נעשה על ידי הכתבה שמחייב עצמו שאפלו כשתצא ממנו לא תצא ריקם, רק שמחייב לתן לה שפע... ששפע הזאת נמשך על ידה דיקא.

## PART B. THE BEDEKEN CEREMONY

After the signing of the ketubah is completed, the groom then performs the bedeken, Yiddish for "veiling."



1. **Rabbi Menachem Packsher, Invei HaGefen 6:18 – The bedeken (veiling) ceremony and the blessing given to the bride.**

The groom, together with his escorts, father, future father-in-law, and the important members of the community, walk to the bride [who is seated in a throne-like chair surrounded by her family and friends]. The groom covers her face with a veil. Some authorities maintain that this is a part of the legal marriage ... therefore the groom himself covers the bride in the presence of the witnesses ... The people present give the bride their blessing, in the words of the blessing given to Rebecca, "Our sister, may you come to be thousands of myriads" (Bereshit 24:60).

החתן עם השושבינים והמחותנים וחשובי העיר  
הולכים להכלה והחתן פורס סודר על ראשה, ומכסה  
פניה, וי"א שהוא אחד מדרכי הקנינים מחופה... ולכן  
מכסה החתן בעצמו (ועדים רואים)... והאנשים  
העומדים שם מברכים את הכלה בברכת "אַחֲתֵנו אֵת  
הַיְי לְאַלְפֵי רִבְבָּהּ".

2. **Maurice Lamm, The Jewish Way in Love and Marriage p. 207 – The source of the bedeken ceremony.**

The source of the veiling is the Bible ... Rebecca veils herself as she is told that Isaac is approaching. "And she said to the servant, 'What man is this who walks in the field to meet us?' And the servant said, 'It is my master.' And she took her veil and covered herself" (Bereishit 24:64).

3. **Rabbi Aron Moss, chabad.org – By veiling his bride the groom is telling her: I am not marrying you merely for your external beauty, but rather for your inner beauty. She is telling him: I am not marrying you for your money or assets, but rather for who you are.**

Men fall for beauty. The fact that there are plenty of pretty girls with rotten characters does nothing to stop the male quest for a beauty queen. And so, many wonderful girls are overlooked simply because they do not fit into today's narrow and superficial definition of beauty.

Meanwhile, women say they want a man who is financially stable, which is often just a euphemism for a rich guy. Somehow she thinks that if he has a seven-digit bank balance he will know how to look after her. As if buying expensive jewelry and luxurious holidays is the only way to show her that he really cares. And the really nice guys who are not such high flyers are often left behind.

Of course we need to be attracted to our spouse. And of course we all need money to survive. But these are not the most essential ingredients for a happy marriage. Too often people fall for the outer version of what they truly seek. Rather than physical beauty, what we are really looking for is inner beauty and a sweet heart. It is not wealth we seek, what we really want is a steadfast and dependable source of support. It is only when we see beyond the superficial and meet a real person that we have a chance of finding and keeping our soul mate.

This is the message behind the veil. When the groom veils his bride, he is telling her, "I am not marrying you for your pretty face. I am marrying you for the beautiful person you are. So I can marry you with your face covered. Your beauty shines from within" [see Mata'amim 55]. And the bride being veiled is telling him, "This veil will prevent me from seeing what type of wedding ring you place on my finger. I don't care. I will accept whatever ring you give, because along with it, I get you. It is you I want to marry, not your money or the jewelry you buy me" [see Rema, Even Ha'Ezer 31:2].

A rich guy can lose his money; a pretty girl her looks. But inner beauty and spiritual wealth are ours forever. A marriage based on such eternal values will conquer just about anything.

4. **Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Love and Marriage*, pp. 208-209 – More ideas behind the veiling ceremony.**

**a. The veil is a symbol of the married woman.** It expresses a dignity, which Isaiah (3:18) calls *tiferet*, and which was reserved for women of station. Ezekiel (16:20) speaks of “covering with silk” the woman he loves. Interestingly, Rebecca does not wear a veil while on the journey in the company of the servant, Eliezer, but instinctively dons it when sighting Isaac. This may account for the insistence of major authorities that the groom himself veil the bride, and that it should never be done without him – it is only his presence that makes her veil significant.

**b. The veil is symbolic of her new inapproachability to others, not only sexually, but as *hekdes*, a sanctified object in the Temple.** The sacred objects of the Tabernacle were “veiled” before being taken up to be carried by the Levites. The betrothal ceremony is likened, in a legal sense, to those sanctified objects of the Temple. This is the significance of the term *kiddushin*: the groom, in marriage, sets the bride aside as *hekdes*. The analogy strikes deeper if we compare it to the face of Moses, which radiated light after he received the commandments. Moses placed *masveh* (a veil) over his face as though to imply separateness, withdrawal, almost an other-worldliness [Shemot/Exodus 34:35].

**c. The symbol of the veil most often referred to is “modesty.”** Although the Bible makes no requirement of women wearing veils for modesty, it is inescapable in this context. It is a sign of *tzniut* (modesty) par excellence – the retiring, discreet, quiet presence. The diametric opposite is arrogance, best symbolized by *azut panim* (barefacedness – shamelessness). It is given a remarkable expression in the law. According to *Ibn Yarhi*, the veil demonstrates that this was not a “betrothal in the market place,” whose grossness, even though it is within the law, was condemned by the Rabbis, and whose perpetrators were flogged by the court of Rav in the days of the Talmud. The symbolic modesty of the veil teaches an important lesson: that “the glory of the princess is the interior” of the person [Tehillim/Psalms 45:14]. No matter her beauty and her charm, her inner qualities of soul and character are more important. The veil covers the externals in order to direct the attention of the inner person.

**d. The veil also conveys psychological significance.** Netziv [Bereishit 24:65] notes that the instinctive action of veiling at the sight of Isaac symbolized Rebecca’s married life with him ... Her veil was the symbol of her capacity to be both a wife, sharing life goals and hopes with her husband, and a private person.

**KEY THEMES OF SECTION IV:**

- ≈ The first parts of the wedding ceremony are the reception, in which the bride and the groom, together with their respective families, greet their guests. The bride sits on a distinctive throne-like chair, and greets friends and family, who wish her *mazal tov* and offer their heartfelt wishes and words of encouragement.
- ≈ The groom signs the *ketubah*, which is a contract that a man makes with his wife to provide her with the basic rights of food, clothing, dwelling, and intimacy. It also promises her a sum of money should her husband divorce her, or predecease her. On a deeper level, the *ketubah* was instituted to protect the interests of the wife, and the commitment in writing adds permanence to the new union.
- ≈ When the time for the *chuppah* arrives, the groom and his entourage enter the women’s section for the *bedeken* (veiling) ceremony, in which the groom covers the face of the bride with a white veil. The veil indicates the priorities of the couple: he’s not just marrying her for looks, and she’s not just marrying him for money.

## CLASS SUMMARY:

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### HOW AND WHEN DO A COUPLE BECOME ENGAGED?

There comes a time when a couple realizes that they are right for each other. At this time, the man usually proposes marriage. If the woman accepts, they consider themselves engaged. Occasionally, the tena'im (conditions) ceremony, which affirms the commitment of the bride, groom, and their respective families to the marriage, accompanies the engagement, but is most commonly held on the wedding day itself.

### WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF A PERSON'S WEDDING DAY?

It is the day on which two individuals spiritually re-unite their souls that were originally one unit before they were born. On the wedding day, the couple begins the process of building and deepening their relationship. A wedding is not an accomplishment; it's a gift. But a successful marriage is an accomplishment. With the wedding day, begins the real work of re-unifying the two halves of the whole.

### WHY IS A LEGAL DOCUMENT – THE KETUBAH (MARRIAGE CONTRACT) – AN INTRINSIC COMPONENT OF THE WEDDING?

On a practical level there are many details that will need attention in the new marriage. Therefore, the ketubah is a contract that a man makes with his wife to provide her with the basic rights of food, clothing, dwelling, and intimacy. It also promises her a sum of money should her husband divorce her, or predecease her. On a deeper level, the ketubah was instituted to protect the interests of the wife, who is the more vulnerable member of the couple. Additionally, the commitment in writing adds permanence to the new union.

### WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE BEDEKEN (VEILING)?

When the groom places the veil over his bride he is in essence expressing: "I am not only marrying you for your external beauty, but rather for your inner beauty." And she is telling him: "I am not marrying you for your money or the jewelry, but rather for who you are." Additionally, the veil is a symbol of modesty and unavailability to other potential husbands.

## ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED READING & SOURCES

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Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *Made in Heaven: A Jewish Wedding Guide*, Moznaim Publishing Company.

Rabbi Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Love and Marriage*, Harper and Row Publishers.

Rabbi Moshe Bamberger, *Sheva Berachos*, Mesorah Publications.