

שהשמחה במעונו

A GUIDE TO THE WEDDING CEREMONY ACCORDING TO THE SYRIAN-JEWISH TRADITION

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For observant Jews, a wedding is far more than a personal celebration of the bride and groom. Friends and family members who gather for a wedding rejoice and celebrate over the creation of a new Jewish home, a new Jewish family. Ever since the time of Avraham and Sara, the home, the family unit, has constituted the foundation and backbone of Jewish life. It is there – even more so than in the synagogue or yeshiva – where our sacred Torah tradition is practiced, preserved and passed down from one generation to the next. A wedding, therefore, is the celebration of the continuity of our nation and our heritage, as yet another Jewish family is formed, creating the next link in the magnificent, millennia-old chain of Torah tradition.

Understandably, then, a Jewish wedding is not merely a social event, but also – and primarily – a religious event. While it is certainly a moment of great personal joy for the bride, the groom and their families, it is, additionally, a momentous and even sacred occasion for all *Am Yisrael*, who enthusiastically welcome a new Jewish home into its ranks. Therefore, the wedding ceremony – from beginning to end – is governed by a system of detailed *halachot* (laws) and ancient customs that reflect the unique spiritual significance of this event.

In the pages that follow, we will outline the various stages of the wedding according to the Syrian-Jewish tradition, paying special attention to the particular laws and customs observed during each stage, and their underlying religious meaning.

The Ketuba

Even before the formal wedding ceremony begins, as the guests begin filling the wedding hall, the groom sits down with the *מסדר קידושין*, the officiating rabbi, to sign a document called the *ketuba*. The *ketuba* is a strictly legal, halachic document in which the groom assumes certain obligations toward his bride. It is customary for the groom to sign the *ketuba*. Essentially, the groom makes a basic commitment through the signing of this document:

עונה, כסות, שאר – The Torah (Shemot 21:10) obligates a husband to care for his wife both materially and emotionally, by providing her with food and clothing, and by spending time with her. In the *ketuba*, the groom commits himself to these basic obligations of marriage.

Before the wedding ceremony, the rabbi, acting as the bride's agent, presents this document to the groom and explains the commitments he makes through his signature. The groom also shakes the rabbi's hand, an act that serves as an oath that he will uphold his commitments to his new wife. Two witnesses observe the signing and then add their signatures to the *ketuba*. The two witnesses attest the groom's verbal commitment by the way of a

kinyan kudar, by lifting an object such as handkerchief. The *ketuba* is then folded, and the groom hands it to the bride, announcing, **הרי זה כתובתך** (“Behold, this is your *ketuba*”). It is customary for the bride to give it to her mother, who keeps the document in a safe place.

The signing of the *ketuba* at the wedding reflects the central role of commitment and responsibility in marriage. In order for the marriage to succeed, the bride and groom must understand their obligations to one another, and be prepared to commit themselves unconditionally to bring each other happiness and satisfaction.

After the signing of the *ketuba*, the families and guests assemble for the actual wedding ceremony.

The Hupa – A Sacred Occasion

The *Zohar* teaches that the moments of the wedding ceremony under the *hupa* are an especially auspicious time to pray. According to tradition, the *Shechina* (Divine Presence) descends and accompanies the bride, the groom and their families under the *hupa*. Angels and the souls of deceased relatives of the bride and groom are also present. The event of a *hupa* is thus a uniquely sacred occasion.

It is therefore customary for the bride and groom, especially, to pray under the *hupa*, and there are even special booklets printed with prayers to be recited under the *hupa*.

The dress and conduct of everyone present at the *hupa* must be appropriate and reflect the solemnity and sanctity of the event. People in attendance should maintain proper decorum, and ensure to answer **ברוך הוא וברוך שמו** and **אמן** to all the *berachot*. It is also an opportune time for everyone to pray for any needs that they have, whether it is health, livelihood, children, or any other personal need.

The custom of the Syrian-Jewish community is for the bride and groom to stand under the *hupa* with their backs facing the audience. The bride stands to the right of the groom. The bride’s family stands next to her under the *hupa*, and the groom’s family stands next to him. The officiating rabbi stands in front of the couple.

The Introductory Blessings

The first stage of the halachic process of marriage is *kiddushin*, betrothal, whereby the groom formally designates the bride as his wife by giving her an object of value. The term *kiddushin* is related to the familiar Hebrew word **קדושה**, holiness, expressing the Torah’s perspective on marriage as something sacred, a spiritual bond between two souls that brings holiness into the world. (*Kiddushin* is also referred to as **אירוסין**, or “engagement,” but should not be confused with the typical engagement, which has no halachic significance, and merely involves the decision of a man and woman to marry.)

In ancient times, the *kiddushin* was performed at the time of the engagement, when the bride and groom decided they would marry. Nowadays, however, the betrothal takes place at the wedding, under the *hupa* (canopy).

Before the groom performs the act of *kiddushin*, the rabbi recites three *berachot* over a cup of wine. First, he recites the blessing over wine...

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הַגֶּפֶן:

followed by a *beracha* over spices...

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא עֵצֵי מִיַּי בְּשָׂמִים:

followed by the special *beracha* over the *mitzva* of marriage...

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִנְנוּ עַל הָעֲרִיּוֹת וְאָסַר
לָנוּ אֶת הָאֲרוּסוֹת. וְהִתִּיר לָנוּ אֶת הַנְּשׂוּאוֹת לָנוּ עַל יְדֵי חֲפָה בְּקִדּוּשֵׁינוּ. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה
יְיָ, מִקְדָּשׁ עַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל יְדֵי חֲפָה בְּקִדּוּשֵׁינוּ:

In principle, it is the groom who should be reciting this *beracha*, as he is the one performing the *mitzva*. However, since many grooms might not know the proper text of the *beracha*, it became accepted for the rabbi to recite the *beracha* on the groom's behalf, so as not to embarrass those who cannot recite it personally.

After the rabbi recites these blessings, he sips some of the wine and then gives the cup to the groom, who also takes a sip. The groom hands the cup to the bride's mother, who lifts her daughter's veil and gives her a sip of wine.

It is customary to use white wine at the *hupa* ceremony, so that in the case of a spill it does not stain the bride's white wedding dress.

The Act of קידושין

The practice in the Syrian-Jewish community is to use a coin, such as a half-dollar, for *kiddushin*, in accordance with the custom of Hacham Yaakov Kassin *zt"l*. Other communities use a ring, which is also acceptable. If a ring is used, it should be a simple silver or platinum ring, without any stones, so that the bride does not misevaluate its worth.

In order for the act of *kiddushin* to be halachically valid, it must be viewed by two eligible witnesses designated for this purpose. The witnesses must be Torah-observant, God-fearing adult males, who are not related to each other or to the bride or groom. It is proper for the couple to choose distinguished, pious rabbis for this role, rather than friends. The groom verbally designates the two men as witnesses, emphasizing that they are designated to the exclusion of everyone else. The rabbi then shows the coin (or the ring) to the witnesses, and asks them to confirm that it is, in their assessment, worth at least a *peruta* (approximately 10-30 cents or so). He then turns to the groom and confirms that the coin (or ring) belongs to him, as the betrothal must be done with an object legally owned by the groom. Some rabbis also lift the veil and ask the groom to confirm that the bride is indeed the woman he intends to marry. (This was the practice of Hacham Yaakov Kassin *zt"l*.)

At this point, the bride extends her right hand and, if she is wearing gloves, removes the glove from that hand. The groom (usually prompted by the rabbi) makes the formal declaration...

הרי את מקודשת לי בכסף הדין כדת משה וישראל
(“You are hereby betrothed to me with this money, in accordance with the law of Moshe and Israel”)

If he betroths with a ring, he declares..

הרי את מקודשת לי בטבעת זו כדת משה וישראל
(“You are hereby betrothed to me with this ring, in accordance with the law of Moshe and Israel”)

It is imperative for the bride and groom to understand the meaning of this text. Therefore, it is customary for the groom to make this declaration both in Hebrew and in English translation.

After reciting this text, the groom places the coin in the bride's hand. The bride must ensure to receive the coin, and not to take it from the groom. If a ring is used, the bride extends her index finger, and the groom places the ring on her finger. The designated witnesses must view the act of *kiddushin*.

Immediately after the *kiddushin*, the rabbi announces, **מקודשת בסימן טוב**, confirming that the *kiddushin* has been properly performed, and the bride and groom are now halachically betrothed to one another. The bride may then give the coin or the ring to her mother for safekeeping.

It is customary in the Syrian-Jewish community for the rabbi to deliver a brief speech to the bride and groom at this point in the ceremony. Now that the stage of **קידושין** is complete, a pause should be made before the couple proceeds to the next stage of the marriage process, called **נישואין**. In some communities, the *ketuba* is publicly read to form a break between the two stages of the process, but the custom in the Syrian-Jewish community is for the rabbi to speak for approximately 4-5 minutes. His remarks usually focus on the fine qualities of the bride and groom in order to endear them to one another and enhance their joy and excitement over the marriage. This is also commonly used as an opportunity to make humorous remarks that bring joy and laughter to the bride and groom, which fulfills the *mitzva* of **שמחת חתן וכלה** (rejoicing with the bride and groom). Furthermore, it is customary to make mention of deceased family members of the bride and groom, who, as the *Zohar* teaches, are present under the *hupa* at the time of the wedding.

נישואין – Consummating the Marriage

The second and final stage of becoming married is called *nisu'in*. Different views exist among the halachic authorities in defining what precisely constitutes *nisu'in*. Some authorities maintain that this stage is fulfilled by the bride and groom simply standing together under a canopy, whereas others require that the bride and groom wrap themselves together in a garment. It is therefore customary in the Syrian-Jewish community for the couple to not only stand under a canopy, but also wrap themselves in a white *tallit*. If the *hupa* takes place before sundown, then the groom recites the *beracha* **להתעטף בציצית** before wrapping himself in the *tallit*. After donning the *tallit* (regardless of whether the wedding takes place before or after sundown), the groom recites the

beracha of **שהחיינו**, having in mind to thank Hashem for the new *tallit*, for his new wife, and for the *mitzva* of marriage which he is now privileged to fulfill. The *tallit* is then draped around the bride, so that they are both wrapped together in the *tallit*. It is customary for the bride to purchase the *tallit* for her groom before the wedding.

After the bride and groom are wrapped in the *tallit*, the *hazan* chants a blessing, taken from the blessings bestowed upon Yaakov Avinu by his father, Yitzhak...

ויתן לך האלוקים מטל השמים ומשמני הארץ ורוב דגן ותירוש

“God shall grant you from the dew of the heavens and from the fat of the earth, and abundant grain and wine” – Bereishit 27:28).

The rabbi then takes a second cup of wine, upon which seven special blessings are recited, beginning with the *beracha* of **בורא פרי הגפן** over the wine. The rabbi himself may recite all seven *berachot*, though it is customary to call distinguished family members and guests to the *hupa* to recite the blessings. The final *beracha*, which is also the lengthiest, is customarily assigned to the *hazan*, who chants the blessing, often with musical accompaniment.

The text of the *berachot* is as follows:

(1) בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הַגֶּפֶן:

Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, king of the world, who has created the fruit of the vine.

(2) בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהֵכֵל בָּרָא לְכְבוֹדוֹ:

Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, king of the world, who has created everything for His honor.

(3) בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, יוֹצֵר הָאָדָם:

Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, king of the world, creator of man.

(4) בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר יָצַר אֶת הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ. בְּצֶלֶם דְּמוּת

תְּבִנָּתוֹ. וְהִתְקִין לוֹ מִמֶּנּוּ בְּנֵן עַדִּי עַד. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, יוֹצֵר הָאָדָם:

Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, king of the world, who has created man in His image, in the image of the form of his design, and prepared for him, from him, an everlasting structure. Blessed are You, Hashem, creator of man.

(5) שׁוֹשׁ תְּשִׂישׁ וְתִגַּל עִקְרָהּ בְּקִבוּץ בְּנֵיהָ לְתוֹכָהּ בְּשִׂמְחָה. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ

מְשַׂמַּח צִיּוֹן בְּבָנֶיהָ:

The barren woman [Jerusalem] shall rejoice and exult with the speedy and joyful gathering of her children in her midst. Blessed are You, Hashem, who makes Zion rejoice with her children.

(6) שְׂמֵחַ תְּשַׂמַּח רְעִים אֲהוּבִים כְּשִׂמְחָה יָצִירָהּ בְּגֵן עֵדֶן מִקְדָּם. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ,

מְשַׂמַּח חֲתָן וְכֻלָּה:

Bring joy to the loving friends [the bride and groom] as You brought joy to Your creation [Adam and Hava] in the Garden of Eden, in the beginning of time. Blessed are You, Hashem, who brings joy to the bride and groom.

7) בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר בָּרָא שְׂשׂוֹן וְשִׂמְחָה. חֲתָן וְכֵלֶה. גִּילָה רִנָּה. דִּיצָה וְחֻדְנָה. אֶהְבָּה וְאַחֲנָה. שְׁלוֹם וְרַעוּת. מִהֲרָה יְדוּד אֱלֹהֵינוּ יִשְׁמַע בְּעָרֵי יְהוּדָה וּבַחֲצוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם. קוֹל שְׂשׂוֹן וְקוֹל שִׂמְחָה. קוֹל חֲתָן וְקוֹל כֵּלֶה. קוֹל מְצַהֲלוֹת חַתְּנִים מְחַפְּתִים. וְנִעָרִים מִמִּשְׁתֵּה נְגִינָתָם. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, מְשַׂמַּח הַחֲתָן עִם הַכֵּלֶה (וּמְצַלִּיחַ):

Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, king of the world, who has created rejoicing and happiness, groom and bride, exultation, glee, exuberance and joy, love and fraternity, peace and friendship. Hashem our God, may the sound of rejoicing and the sound of happiness, the sound of a groom and the sound of a bride, the sound of the euphoria of grooms from their canopies and youths from their musical festivities, soon be heard in the cities of Judea in the outskirts of Jerusalem. Blessed are You, Hashem, who brings joy to the groom together with the bride.

After the recitation of the final *beracha*, the rabbi gives the cup to the groom, who takes a sip of wine and then hands the cup directly to the bride, who also sips the wine.

The Priestly Blessing

It is customary at this point for the rabbi to invite family members, rabbis and other distinguished guests who are *kohanim* to come under the *hupa* and bless the new couple with the *birkat kohanim* (the priestly blessing). One *kohen* is chosen as the leader, and he leads the other *kohanim* in the recitation of the blessing:

וַיְדַבֵּר יְיָ אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: דַּבֵּר אֶל אֶהֱרֹן וְאֶל בָּנָיו לֵאמֹר כֹּה תְבַרְכוּ אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
אֲמֹר לָהֶם: יְבָרְכֶךָ יְיָ וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ: יָאֵר יְיָ וְיִחַן: יִשָּׂא יְיָ וְיִדְוֹד פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ
וְיִשֵּׂם לָךְ שְׁלוֹם: וְשָׂמוּ אֶת שְׁמִי עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֲנִי אֲבָרְכֶם:

May Hashem bless you and protect you. May Hashem shine His countenance upon you and grant you grace. May Hashem show you favor and give you peace.

The rabbi then blesses the couple with the blessing with which the townspeople of Bet-Lehem blessed Boaz upon his marriage to Rut (Rut 4:11):

יְיָ יְדוּד אֶת הָאִשָּׁה הַבָּאָה אֶל בֵּיתְךָ וְכִלְאָהּ אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ שְׂתֵיָהֶם אֶת בַּיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעָשָׂה חַיִל
May Hashem make the woman who enters your home like Rahel and Leah, both of whom built the House of Israel, and may you prosper.

The marriage between Boaz and Rut resulted in the emergence of King David, from whom the Mashiah descends. We bestow upon the new couple the same blessing given to Boaz and Rut, in the hope that they, too, will beget righteous children and descendants who will inspire and redeem the Jewish people.

Commemorating the Destruction of Jerusalem

A famous pair of verses in Psalms (137:5-6) proclaims:

אִם אֲשַׁכַּחְךָ יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי: תִּדְבַּק לְשׁוֹנֵי לְחֻכֵי אִם לֹא אֲזַכְּרֶיךָ אִם לֹא אֶעְלֶה
אֶת יְרוּשָׁלַם עַל רֹאשׁ שִׂמְחָתִי.

“If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand be forgotten. Let my tongue cling to my pallet if I do not mention you, if I do not bring up Jerusalem at the height of my joy.”

These verses introduce the concept of reflecting upon the destruction of the holy city during our greatest moments of joy and celebration. Even at life’s happiest moments, our joy is incomplete as long as the *Bet Hamikdash* is not

restored. And even as we celebrate the creation of a new Jewish home, we must take a few moments to remind ourselves that God's home still awaits its restoration.

Therefore, at the end of the *hupa* ceremony, the groom breaks a glass cup in commemoration of the "breaking" of the *Bet Hamikdash*. The groom steps on the glass with the heel of his right foot. Before stepping on the glass, he recites the aforementioned verses from Tehillim, and takes a moment to reflect upon the loss of our Temple.

After the breaking of the glass, the family members extend warm greetings to one another, and the bride and groom are escorted by the guests out of the *hupa* room with festive song and dance. Although a husband and wife generally should not engage in any physical contact in public, after the *hupa* it is proper for the groom to take the bride's hand and hold it as they leave the *hupa*, to demonstrate that they are now husband and wife.

After the *hupa* ceremony, the guests enter the banquet hall for the reception, while the bride and groom go into a private room, often referred to as the "*yihud* room." It is customary for the bride and groom to exchange gifts and affectionate words in the privacy of the "*yihud* room" in celebration of this special moment. And since many brides and grooms do not eat on their wedding day, food and drinks are generally brought to the "*yihud* room" so that the couple can have something to eat and drink.

According to Sephardic custom, the "*yihud* room" is not locked, and no witnesses are required to stand outside the room.

שמחת חתן וכלה – The Celebration

It is a *mitzva* to celebrate with the bride and groom to enhance their joy. The couple, families and guests enjoy a festive celebration, with fine foods, drinks, music, singing and dancing. The wedding celebration is both an act of kindness toward the bride and groom, whose special day is enhanced by the festive participation of their friends and family, but also expresses the notion that the occasion is a cause of celebration for all of us, the entire Jewish nation. The guests all give praise and thanks to the Almighty for bringing the bride and groom together and for creating yet another Jewish home.

At the end of the meal, a special *zimun* is recited before *birkat ha'mazon*. After *birkat ha'mazon*, the seven *berachot* that were recited under the *hupa* are repeated, and, as under the *hupa*, the bride and groom drink the wine upon the completion of the *berachot*.

The wedding celebration ends – marking the beginning of what we hope will be a long, happy, fulfilling life for the new couple. It is customary to extend to a bride and groom the blessing, **שתבנו בית נאמן בישראל**, that they should succeed in "building a faithful home in Israel," a home of peace, joy, Torah and kindness, a home that will be worthy of God's ongoing presence each and every day throughout their lives, **עד מאה ועשרים שנה, אמן**.

