

Life-Cycle Events

“Moments in Time”

By Lois Shenker

Life-cycle events – those moments that are the milestones of our lives – continue to live on in our memory long after they are over. They link us to the traditions of our past and send us to the future with renewed hope.

In the Jewish tradition, the life-cycle events of birth, Bar and Bat Mitzvah, weddings, death and mourning carry specific rituals, most of which have been used for centuries. For example, at a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, the child is able to put on a *tallit* for the first time. Parents usually present one to the child on the pulpit at the Friday-evening service. The act of passing the heritage from parent to child enhances the ceremony and gives it more meaning than a simple rite of passage. The same is true at a wedding when the glass is broken. This is the last act of a Jewish wedding except for the kiss. Theoretically, the actual ceremony is over; the couple is married. The addition of this special Jewish ritual sets it apart from other weddings.



Jewish Weddings

Traditional Jewish weddings are performed by rabbis. The ceremony takes place under a *chupah* (“wedding canopy”). It may take place at any time other than Shabbat (Friday from sundown until Saturday at sundown), Jewish holidays and some designated periods on the Jewish calendar.

The ceremony begins with words of greeting, after which the rabbi says blessings over a cup of wine shared by the bride and groom. In traditional ceremonies, the bride will circle the groom seven times. The groom then presents the bride with a ring, which may be accompanied by the bride presenting the groom with a ring. The groom’s declaration to the bride, first in Hebrew and then English, is: “Be thou consecrated unto me with this ring according to the laws of Moses and Israel.” If she gives her groom a ring, the bride may make the same declaration or use one taken from the “Song of Songs” or some other appropriate source. The *ketubah* (“wedding contract”) is read, and the cantor or rabbi chants

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the *sheva brachot* (“seven blessings”) in Hebrew. These blessings rejoice in creation, the relationship between humanity and God, and the happiness of the bride and groom. At some point in the ceremony, the rabbi addresses personal remarks to the couple. At the conclusion of the ceremony, the rabbi often asks the couple to receive God’s blessings as a special prayer is said on their behalf. Finally, the groom (and sometimes the bride) will shatter a glass vessel, wrapped in a cloth, with his (her) foot. When the glass is broken, the congregation often shouts: “Mazel Tov!”

Bridal parties (bridesmaids, ushers etc.) are at the option of the bride and groom, as in any other wedding.

Orthodox (and some Conservative) brides will visit the *mikveh* (“ritual bath”) in the week prior to their wedding as a special form of spiritual

cleansing to prepare them for their new life transition.

The groom, if he chooses, may be called to the Torah for a special blessing at a service preceding the wedding where the Torah is read. Most commonly this is done on the Shabbat before the wedding, but may also be done any day the Torah is read during the week before the wedding. This custom is called an *aufruf*. If the synagogue allows women to be called to the



Torah, the bride and groom may be called individually or as a couple. Following the reading of the Torah portion, a special blessing is said for the couple in honor of their forthcoming marriage. As the couple returns to their seats, they often are serenaded and showered with candy in the hope that they will have a sweet life.

The *chupah* under which the wedding takes place symbolizes the bridal chamber and the Jewish home the couple is about to create together. It also is symbolic of the importance of hospitality.

Often, the bride and groom walk down the aisle on the arms of both parents. Sometimes, the parents stand under the *chupah* with the bridal couple during the ceremony.

The traditional *ketubah* is a wedding contract, a legal document signed by witnesses before the ceremony. It is designed to protect the rights of the bride and to codify the groom’s obligations to her. While its language is somewhat archaic and some of the obligations do not meet contemporary standards, its original intent was to assure that the groom was financially responsible for his wife’s needs and personally responsible for treating her in a kindly and humane manner. Today, it is common for non-Orthodox couples to commission artistic *ketubot*, and to use ones with more egalitarian or poetic language.

In traditional ceremonies, the ring is placed on the index finger of the right hand, this being considered the traditional ring finger and historically also the one most clearly seen by the witnesses who sign the *ketubah*. It is usually returned to the ring finger after the ceremony.

The breaking of the glass at the conclusion of the ceremony has been

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interpreted by many to symbolize the remembrance of sorrow at our moment of greatest joy. It commemorates the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, in the year 70 C.E., and reminds us that life consists of both joy and sorrow.

A few additional customs may apply. The first is a pre-wedding ceremony called the *badehkin*, during which the bride is veiled by her groom. This can be done privately or in the company of the wedding guests and reminds us of the biblical story of Jacob, who toiled for seven years for his bride Rachel, only to find her older sister Leah when the wedding veil was removed.

During the ceremony itself, the bride may circle the groom, recalling a biblical passage that says a woman shall court a man. She may circle seven times recalling the completeness and the perfection of the creation. Some brides and grooms now circle one another. The groom may be dressed in a *kittel*, a white robe-like garment, which he will wear over his clothing.

Following the ceremony, the bride and groom may spend a short time in private while they eat a light meal since it is traditional to fast before the ceremony. This custom is an important symbolic act, demonstrating the fact that they are married. It goes back to the time when men and women were never alone, unchaperoned, prior to marriage. The eating of a meal alone together thus symbolizes their being alone for the first time as man and wife.

Birth

Jewish children are given Hebrew names at birth, in addition to their English names. In the Jewish Ashkenazi tradition, Jewish children are named after relatives, friends or other loved ones who are deceased. In the Sephardic tradition, Jewish children are named after living relatives.

The most prominent ceremony surrounding a birth in our tradition is the circumcision of the male child, performed on the eighth day after birth. The ceremony is called a *brit milah*, which means covenant, harkening back to when Abraham entered into a covenant with God and circumcised himself as a sign of that covenant. The circumcision is performed by a highly trained person called a *mohel* or, if one is unavailable, by a Jewish doctor under the supervision of a rabbi. Today it is common practice to use a local anesthetic to relieve the infant of pain. The actual circumcision is done in the presence of family and friends, but it is not necessary to watch if one does not wish to do so. A *brit* is an occasion for great joy and celebration in the Jewish tradition. It adds yet another link in the chain of our history – one that is bright with hope for the future.



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A part of this ceremony is the giving of the baby's Hebrew name and the special prayer for newborns, also given to girls when they are named. This prayer asks that the baby's life will include *Torah* ("learning"), *chupah* ("marriage") and *ma'asim tovim* ("good deeds").

While there is no specific covenant ceremony for girls, many have been created in recent years, and it is becoming more common to have the same kind of celebration that occurs at a *brit* (minus any surgical or medical procedure, of course). A covenant ceremony for a girl may be called a *brit bat* (meaning covenant of a daughter) or *simchat bat* (meaning the celebration of a daughter). The baby girl is given her Hebrew name, and friends and family join in the event to welcome and celebrate her. If a covenant ceremony is not held, the baby girl is given her name in synagogue. This is traditionally done the first time the Torah is read after her birth, or at an appropriate service determined by her family and rabbi.

Most often, the circumcision ceremony takes place in the home, as does the covenant ceremony for girls, though other venues are fine. A celebratory meal or reception usually follows.

Bar and Bat Mitzvah

The ceremony of Bar or Bat Mitzvah is the formal rite of passage into adulthood for Jewish boys and girls. A boy actually becomes a Bar Mitzvah simply by achieving his 13th birthday. For girls, the traditional age of religious adulthood is 12; today, the decision for the age of Bat Mitzvah is made by individual synagogues, families and communities.



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According to Jewish law, young men and women are obligated to observe Jewish laws at this time, whether or not they have a formal ceremony. In common practice, however, one is said to become a Bar or Bat Mitzvah when one is called to the Torah for the first time. The ceremony takes place at any service at which the Torah is read. It most frequently occurs on Shabbat morning. In more traditional synagogues, there may not be a ceremony for women, as they do not read from the Torah publicly, or the Bat Mitzvah may take some other form.

The ceremony is the culmination of much effort and preparation on the part of the young person. The requirements and preparations differ, depending on the custom of the synagogue, and the movement of which it is a part. In all cases, however, they include the ability to read a certain amount of Hebrew; the understanding of and participation in specific prayers; and the ability to say or chant the appropriate blessings when called to the Torah.

In most cases, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah will chant the portion of the service known as the *haftarah* as well. This is a passage taken from the writings of the Prophets that follows the Torah portion; it is a different passage each week. The passage chosen for each *haftarah* is common throughout Judaism, so on any given Sabbath the same passage will be read in all synagogues.

Often, the choice of who will be called to the Torah to say blessings, or *aliyot*, before the reading is given to the family of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Often, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is seated on the *bimah* ("pulpit") during the service. Religious honors are usually given to family members and friends.

The occasion of a Bar/Bat Mitzvah is an occasion of great joy and celebration. It is a special form of blessing for Jewish parents to see their children take on the faith of their fathers and mothers. It is on this occasion that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah wears a *tallit* for the first time; in fact, many parents present this item as a gift to their child for this special event (in some Orthodox synagogues, however, a man does not wear his own *tallit* until he marries). The day represents a huge milestone in Jewish life as a child moves towards adulthood.

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