

Jewish Weddings, Board of Jewish Education, New South Wales (with certain additional information provided by me)

<https://bje.org.au/knowledge-centre/jewish-lifecycle/marriage/>

Following adolescence, Judaism perceives that the next great stage of life is marriage. The decision to leave one's parental home and to share one's life with another, in love and respect, is seen to be critical to the ongoing success and continuity of the Jewish people. To enter this state, Judaism provides a series of rituals and ceremonies.

There is no direct equivalent to the 'engagement' in Judaism. No ring is given or vows exchanged prior to the wedding ceremony – simply an announcement that these two people will marry at some stage in the future. It is true that that in some religious circles we have a practice known as *tenaim* (conditions), at which conditions for the marriage are drawn up and signed prior to the wedding. *tenaim* constitute a mutual agreement between the parents of the prospective bride and groom concerning the date and financial arrangements of the marriage. The drawing up of *Tenaim* dates back to the third century of the Common Era and serves both to discourage disorganized arrangements as well as misunderstandings which can lead to hurt feelings and strained family relationships.

In reality, the Jewish wedding ceremony itself contains the engagement, which in earlier times was held up to a year before the marriage blessings. Nowadays both parts, the *erusin* (the betrothal) and the *nisuin* (the marriage blessings) are held at the same time to avoid any legal complication were the *erusin* to take place, but not the *nisuin*.

This double ceremony takes place beneath a *chuppah*, which is a canopy representing the new home of the bride (*kallah*) and groom (*chatan*). The term *chuppah* is also used to refer to the actual wedding ceremony. The *chuppah* often takes place inside a synagogue, but other popular locations are hotels, homes and parks. Many religious couples deliberately choose to be married outside, under the sky so to speak, since the number of stars in the sky are said to represent the future fruitfulness of the couple.

On the Shabbat preceding the *chuppah*, the *chatan* is entitled to an *aliyah* in an orthodox synagogue. In Conservative and Reform synagogues both the *chatan* and the *kallah* receive an *aliyah*. This call to the *Torah* is accompanied by great rejoicing and is also known in Yiddish as the *aufruf*. Some couples choose to have the *aufruf* one week earlier. The *kallah* also has responsibilities leading up to the wedding day, most importantly, she attends the *mikveh* (ritual bath) and immerses herself and purifies herself in readiness for her wedding night.

The wedding must not take place on a Sabbath or major festival, but is allowed on all other regular days of the week. There are a number of weeks in the year which have a sad aura about them due to incidents in Jewish history, and during these weeks no marriages may be conducted. The wedding day itself takes on a special character for the *chatan* and *kallah*, who treat the day with added solemnity and fast from rising in the morning until the ceremony is completed. There are a few exceptions to this if the wedding day is a minor festival.

Immediately prior to the *chuppah*, the *chatan* authorizes two observant men to act as witnesses to his marriage. The Conservative and Reform branches of Judaism admit both men and women to this role. These two witnesses then sign the marriage document, known as the *ketubah*. The *chatan* is then led to where the *kallah* is waiting and he lowers her veil over her face as a sign of the modesty expected from a married woman. This ceremony, which also includes a poignant blessing from father to daughter as she embarks on married life, is known as *bedeken*. Some also consider that the purpose of this ceremony is so that the *chatan* may check the identity of his future wife and not make the same mistake as Jacob who married Leah instead of Rachel because her face was covered and he could not see her true identity.

Soon after these rituals are completed the various parties to the wedding find themselves beneath the *chuppah*. The first ritual under the *chuppah* in a traditional wedding has the *kallah* circle the *chatan* seven times. A series of blessings are recited, the rabbi gives a short address, the wedding ring is handed over, the *ketubah* is read out, more blessings are said, including the *sheva brachot* and a glass is broken to remind everyone present that in spite of the joy of the moment, Jewish history in general and the history of Jerusalem in particular have contained many sad moments. The priestly blessing is then recited and following a brief interlude when bride and groom share time alone with each other, all the participants and their guests make their way to the reception at which eating and drinking, singing and dancing, speeches and toasts are the order of the day.

For more religious couples the wedding festivities are extended over a whole week and special banquets are organized by friends and family in their honour. This week has a title: it is known as *Sheva Brachot* (Seven Blessings), because seven additional blessings are added to the prayers said after a meal during the first week of the marriage when the bride and groom are in attendance.