

A Nontraditional Jewish Wedding Ceremony (With a Few Greek Traditions and a Twist On the 7 Blessings)

Knot Note: Some names and information have been redacted for the couple's privacy.

At the center-front of the room is a huppah. Under the huppah is a small decorated table, to hold reading cards and ritual items: the stefana, the honey and walnuts in small dishes on a small gold tray with small silver spoons, and a glass in a cloth. Also under the huppah is a microphone on a stand, and a second microphone on a stand is placed nearby, for the Seven Blessers to use.

The DJ plays gathering music plays as guests arrive. When the ceremony is to begin, Beth and the Groomsmen enter from the side and take their places, Beth under the huppah and the Groomsmen on her left side, outside the huppah. Groom's Best Man stands nearest to Beth.

When the men are in place, the DJ begins the processional music.

The Processional of the Wedding Party

The Groom enters, escorted by his parents, who walk with him to the huppah and take their seats.

Groom comes into the huppah.

The Bridesmaids

The Maid of Honor

The Flower Girls

The Bridesmaids and Flower Girls take their places outside the chuppah.

The Bride enters, escorted by her parents.

If necessary, officiant signals to guests to stand,

Groom leaves the huppah to greet Bride.

He and her parents embrace, the parents go to their seats, and Groom and Bride come back up the stairs into the huppah.

Officiant invites guests to be seated.

Welcome and Gathering Words

Officiant:

Good evening, and welcome to the wedding of Bride and Groom. I am Beth Z. Palubinsky, an ordained officiant, and I am honored that Groom and Bride asked me to be part of their ceremony. You are the most important people to them, so to have you here to witness their marriage is a great gift, and on their behalf I'm pleased to welcome you.

About the Wedding Huppah

Officiant:

We're standing beneath a huppah, the traditional Jewish wedding canopy. In English, "huppah" roughly translates as "that which covers or floats above us." Its roof is flimsy, and wind and rain can blow through it. But its outline gives us a sketch of what may be. The huppah is the house of promise. Its open sides remind us to welcome people into our home.

Groom and Bride, the huppah is your symbolic home tonight. Let its fragility and openness remind you that the most important thing about a home is the people in it who love each other, and who share their love generously with others.

Introductions of the Wedding Party and the Guests

BETH:

Now, I want to tell you a bit about Bride and Groom's bridesmaids and groomsmen.

The tradition of bridesmaids probably began in Ancient Rome, where law required that some witnesses at weddings wear clothes matching the bride's attire, to fool evil spirits that might want to get in the way of the happy day.

Meanwhile, in the ancient British Isles, a marriage often came about when a man kidnapped a woman -- more because he wanted her property than because he wanted her. He couldn't do this without some back-up, so he'd get a brawny friend or two to help him pull off the abduction.

Groom and Bride's attendants have much happier and less risky jobs to do tonight, and let me introduce you to them.

Bride's Bridesmaids are her closest friends, from their elementary school days, and her Maid of Honor is her sister.

Groom's groomsmen and his Best Man are his close friends from places and times throughout his life.

And the three flower girls are beloved cousins.

Officiant:

And now, I ask you all to do something. Take a moment to greet each other. You've come from far and wide to this wedding, from coast to coast of the U.S. and from Israel, Greece and points in between. So shake hands, say hello, meet the people sitting in front of you, behind you, next to you.

[Officiant gives guests about 15 seconds to meet and greet, introducing herself to guests sitting near the front. The guests enthusiastically introduce themselves to each other, with a lot of laughter and smiles.]

And one more request. Please refrain from taking photos during the ceremony. Give Groom and Bride the fullness of your hearts and minds, being present for them. Thank you.

[The Flower Girls now take seats with their parents.]

Remembering Absent Loved Ones

Officiant:

Tonight, Bride and Groom feel the presence of loved ones who aren't with us any longer but who left behind great wisdom and spirit. You'll see their photos on a table just outside this room – including the Bride's grandfather, the Groom's maternal grandparents, and his paternal grandfather. Their absence is alive with hidden presence, and nothing they gave us is ever lost or forgotten.

[Bride gives her flowers to her Maid of Honor now.]

The Love Story of Bride and Groom

Officiant:

Did Bride stalk Groom? This question has lurked in the corners of my mind since I first heard how they met, and here's one reason why.

They'd been briefly introduced at an after-hours club one spring night, but neither thought much of it. Then, six months later, on Hallowe'en night, things took a magical turn. As Groom got ready to go out that night, he had a strange feeling that something life-changing was about to happen. And how right he was - because as she headed out that same night, Bride spotted him on the street, and now she was interested.

So she followed him, and they ended up at the same club. She said hello, asked if he remembered her from before. At first, Groom brushed it off, but as the evening went on he warmed up. A few days later, he found her on Facebook and they made a date for happy hour – and they've been together ever since.

Bride said to me that the love they have for each other now is the foundation on which they will build whatever lies ahead. And Groom said that they will work hard, knowing that bad times will pass, good times will come. Both know that they will always experience the awesome feeling of love that is in the air around them, and all of us, tonight.

Honoring the Parents

Officiant:

When you ask people to name their heroes, some say friends, some say god, some say a sibling or a grandparent or a teacher. But most name their parents.

Bride's Mother and Father, Groom's Mother and Father, you are Bride and Groom's heroes and heroines. You have believed in them and encouraged them. You have shown them the world and allowed them to dream, aspire and achieve. They follow your examples of love, devotion,

understanding and patience. You've given them roots that anchor them to home and family, and wings to take to the world on their own. For this, they honor and thank you.

The Declaration of Intent

Officiant:

Bride and Groom, I'm required to ask if you understand what this new union will demand of you. So together please answer my questions.

Are you prepared to enter into marriage according to the laws of the State?

Bride and Groom:

I am.

Officiant:

Do you come freely and without reservation, pledging to live openly together as Wife and Husband in a committed and binding relationship?

Bride and Groom:

I do.

Officiant:

Will you love, protect and support each other, in good times and bad, in sickness and in health, in abundance and want, for as long as you live?

Bride and Groom:

I will.

The Exchange of Marriage Vows

Officiant:

Now comes the time in the wedding when we hear what the bride and groom have to say to each other. We want to hear the public affirmation of their intent and their pledges, spoken in their own words. Bride and Groom have written their own vows, and neither has heard the other's until now.

[Officiant takes the reading cards from the table and gives the card to Bride. Officiant guides Bride and Groom to face each other, close to the microphone, and steps back.]

Bride:

What was it about the second time we met
that made me run after you?
Was it the big, red, obnoxious hat
you wore for Halloween,
or your smile that makes me fall in love with you
over and over again, even on this day?

It's those things and so much more
that made me a part of your life,
which today becomes our life together,
and I make you these promises.

If you never conquer your fear of heights
I promise to take the pictures from the top
so that you don't miss out on the views.

I promise to be faithful and supportive
and to make our family's love and happiness
my priority.
I promise to be patient
when you are taking time
to make the best possible decision for us.

I promise to make sure
that the two of us find time to be alone.

I promise to keep kissing you
so many times that we lose count.
I will dream with you,
celebrate with you,
and walk beside you
through whatever our lives may bring.

I vow to appreciate the gift of having
someone who makes me feel the way you do.

We will travel the world together,
we'll grow old together,
and through it all
I will work as hard as I can
to make you feel as special as you make me feel,
forever and ever.

[Officiant takes the card from Bride and gives Groom his card.]

Groom:

Today you and I are absolute beginners,
starting a brand new chapter in our lives.

The chapter where it's no longer just "I", but "we."
The chapter where you will be my queen,
the mother of our children,
a friend who will know me

better than anyone,
with whom I will share
my most intimate thoughts and feelings.

I promise to work hard to ensure we live
an interesting, committed and conscious life,
a life full of travel, adventure and excitement.

I promise to never take our relationship for granted.

I promise to embrace your strengths
and have your back when you feel uncertain.
Together there'll be nothing we cannot achieve.

I promise to be patient.

I promise to be your teacher and your student.
Help you improve your Russian while I learn some Greek.

I promise to make you smile.

But most importantly,
I promise to never forget
that relationships require a lot of hard work,
and to succeed, I'll have to give this marriage
just as much love and effort as I will take from it.

I love you!

[Officiant takes the cards from them.]

The Exchange of Wedding Rings

Officiant:

We don't know for sure where the custom of wedding rings came from. Maybe ancient Egypt, where rings were woven from reeds growing on the Nile banks. Maybe from the Anglo-Saxons, who used bands of iron to show that a woman's property had passed to her husband.

Wherever it started, rings have become the most tangible symbol of a couple's decision to join in love with each other. They say to others that we're married, and they remind the ones wearing them of the pledges they have made. They are round like the sun and the moon, like the eye and the embrace of love.

[Officiant takes Groom's ring from Best Man.]

Officiant:

Groom, place the ring on Bride's finger and repeat after me.

Groom:

Bride, I give you this ring
as a symbol of my enduring love.
With it, I wed you
and give you my body, soul and heart.

[Beth takes Groom's ring from Best Man.]

Officiant:

Bride, place the ring on Groom's finger and repeat after me.

Bride:

Groom, I give you this ring
as a symbol of my enduring love.
With it, I wed you
and give you my body, soul and heart.

Officiant:

Let your rings always remind you that your love shines like the sun and moon, lets you see clear as the clearest eye, and, like an embrace, is a grace upon the world.

The Ritual of the Stefana

Officiant:

[Beth takes the stefana from the table.]

Bred deep in Bride's bones is her Greek heritage, so tonight we are enacting a Greek wedding ritual called "the Crowning." The crowns are called stefana. Bride's Mother brought them from Greece just a few months ago, where they were made especially for tonight.

The ritual comes from the Byzantine era, when the crowns were first fashioned to symbolize the creation of a new kingdom – the home and family of the newly married couple. They also were meant to remind the bride and groom of the Biblical martyrs and so inspire them to make sacrifices in order to be perfect mates. And some say that the stefana on the groom's head stood for the clouds where the saints lived, imbuing the groom with a kind of saintliness all his own!

The honor of crowning goes to the *koumbaros*, a valued and trusted man, and Groom's Best Man has the honor tonight.

[Best Man steps forward. Bride and Groom stand close beside each other, backs to their guests for this part of the ceremony. Beth places the crowns on their heads. Then Best Man stands behind Bride and Groom.]

Officiant:

Best Man, you'll exchange the crowns three times, one time for each question that I'll ask Bride and Groom.

[Best Man crosses his arms, taking Bride's crown in his right hand and Groom's crown in his left hand. With each question Beth asks, Best Man moves the crowns in the air, back and forth for each question. He'll end with Bride's crown back over her head and Groom's back over his head].

Bride:

Bride and Groom, will you share the task of ruling your new kingdom with wisdom, justice and dignity?

Bride and Groom:

We will.

[Best Man exchanges the crowns.]

Officiant:

Will you be always loyal and steadfast?

Bride and Groom:

We will.

[Best Man exchanges the crowns a second time.]

Officiant:

Will you concentrate more on each other than on your own needs and desires?

Bride and Groom:

We will.

[Best Man exchanges the crowns the third and last time and hands them to the officiant, who places them on the "altar" table.]

The Seven Blessings:

Officiant:

In a religious Jewish ceremony, the rabbi recites "The Seven Blessings" over the bride and groom. The blessings speak of the creation of the world and humankind, the importance of marriage, and the hope for harmony in the world.

But what is a blessing? John O'Donohue wrote that it's a shared wish, an expression of common hope, warmth and protection, that a blessing suggests that every life is wrapped in a garment of spirit that links it to every other life, and that when you give a blessing, one returns to you to enfold you.

Tonight, Bride and Groom, you'll get blessings from some of your bridal party. They prepared them for you, and you haven't heard their blessings before now.

[Beth gives them their cards and, one by one, they come to the microphone.]

Bridesmaid:

Hand in hand, you stand here today, uniting together as one. Two beautiful souls whom I have the privilege and honor of calling my friends. I wish for your home to always be filled with glistening sunshine and abounding laughter. May your hearts always be full of the overwhelming love and cheer you feel today, and may you always walk through life together, hand in hand.

Bridesmaid:

Marriage is an art. It's remembering to say, "I love you" at least once a day. Being on the same page, same line. Doing things for one another not because you have to, but because you want to. Having patience, understanding, flexibility and a sense of humor. Never taking one another for granted. Having the capacity to forgive and forget. Growing together. Always saying and showing appreciation for one another. It's standing together facing the world. I wish you a beautiful journey in your marriage.

Groomsman:

I would like to bless you with a lifetime of LOVE.
What is LOVE, you ask?

L is for Listening.

So listen to each other and understand each other.

O is for Overlook.

No one is perfect, so don't get hung up on the little things – like when Groom takes three hours to get ready for a night out.

V is for Value.

Your friends and family have gathered here because they care for you and love you. Share your life and its special moments with them.

E is for Encourage.

You guys are becoming a team, and as a team it is important to support and encourage each other in every endeavor that each one of you partakes.

So, years from now, as you look back on this day, I want you to remember it as the day that you LOVED each other the least.

Bridesmaid:

Having somewhere to go is home, having someone to love is family, having both is a blessing. Bride and Groom, my wish is for you to be blessed with a loving home, filled with laughter, warmth and only good vibes. May you create a family that honors and respects each other, each and every day. And may your doors always be open to the love and affection from great family and good friends.

Groomsman:

Some would claim when you get married, your life as you knew it has ended. But I strongly disagree. I believe that, when you find that special person that you want to be with, a whole new life opens up for you, and the things you thought were good before, now become even better and more FUNNER.

Groom, it took you a WHILE to get here, and I am wondering why you were holding out so long, with this wonderful girl in your life. I am glad you finally came to your senses and joined the club. Thank you, Bride, for hanging in there. I wish you both health and luck, and the rest, as they say, you can buy!

Bridesmaid:

Here are three things some very wise people have told me.

One said,

"The best love is the one that makes you a better person without changing you into someone other than you." So, may you respect each other's individual personality and perspective, and always give each other room to grow.

Another said, "Good relationships don't just happen. They take time, patience, and two people who truly want to be together." So, no matter how hard it may get at times, never give up.

And lastly, one said, "Love one another and you will be happy. It's as simple and as difficult as that." So, if you always look out for the other's best interest, then both of you will always be happy."

Officiant:

And, finally, what wedding would be complete without the wisdom of Metallica, whose lyrics Groomsman chose for you?

Groomsman:

So close no matter how far
Couldn't be much more from the heart

Forever trusting who we are
And nothing else matters

Never opened myself this way
Life is ours, we live it our way
All these words I don't just say
And nothing else matters

Trust I seek and I find in you
Every day for us something new
Open mind for a different view
And nothing else matters

[Thank them all, take their cards, and put them back on the table.]

The Ritual of the Honey and Walnuts

Officiant:

In some Greek isles, a wedding ceremony ends with honey and walnuts offered to the bride and groom, and to honor Bride's family heritage, we'll do this tonight.

We use walnuts because they break easily into four parts, symbolizing the bride, the groom, and their two families, and the honey stands for the sweetness ahead for the bride and groom and their families.

[Beth asks Bride's mother to step forward. Beth hands the walnut dish and spoon to Mother, who gives bits of walnut to Bride and Groom to eat. Then Beth hands the honey dish and spoon to Mother, who gives Groom and Bride tiny tastes of the honey. We put the dishes and spoons back onto the table, and Mother takes her seat.]

The Pronouncement of Marriage and the First Kiss

Officiant:

Bride and Groom, tonight you two have done many things. You have declared your intent to become wife and husband. You have made binding pledges and exchanged rings. You have enacted important rituals that symbolize a life-long commitment to family, friends and each other. Therefore, with the authority given me by the State, and with great joy, I pronounce you Mr. and Mrs. Groom. You may now share your first kiss as Husband and Wife.

[Bride and Groom kiss, to the enthusiastic applause of their guests.]

Breaking the Glass

Officiant:

But there's one more thing we must do to make you really, truly married: break the glass! Why do Jews break a glass at the end of the wedding ceremony? The truest answer is, "Who knows?" Here's one explanation.

A glass is a beautiful object. It requires great skill and care to create, and it can be broken beyond all hope of repair in a few mindless seconds. A marriage is like the glass: it takes constant care and attention, and it can be broken in a second. So you do this old ritual to remind yourselves to pay close attention, not only to one another but also to the marriage you're making tonight.

So, here goes – and *[to the guests]*, if this is something new to you, let me tell you that the traditional response to the glass-breaking is loud shouts of "Mazel tov," which means "Good luck and congratulations!"

[Beth puts the glass down onto the floor. Groom breaks it, stepping with the heel of his shoe. Groom and Bride embrace and kiss again. The guests shout, cheer, applaud. This will signal the DJ to play the recessional tune. Bride will take back her bouquet from Maid of Honor, and she and Groom will stand, arm in arm, and turn to face their guests for a moment before stepping off. When they reach the end of the aisle, the rest of the wedding party will recess.]

The Second Kiss as Husband and Wife!

The Recessional

Bride and Groom

Bridesmaids and Groomsmen, in pairs

The Flower Girls

The Parents

Beth

By Beth Z. Palubinsky, Life-Cycle Celebrant®, Officiant