

Jewish Wedding in Romania: Tradition and Modernity

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ABSTRACT: The Jewish wedding is a complex and symbolic ceremony that reflects a combination of religious customs and community traditions. In ancient times, marriages were arranged by parents or tutors and were considered contractual institutions aimed to ensure the continuity of the family and property. In the Talmudic period, marriage began to be seen more as an expression of love and feelings, and the concept of betrothal emerged. In the Middle Ages, marriage became increasingly religious. New traditions and customs emerged and were meant to reflect the spiritual importance of marriage. This article presents a general description of the Jewish wedding ceremony, focusing on its historical, cultural, and religious aspects, aiming to contribute to the understanding of Jewish bridal cultural interferences and the preservation of Jewish wedding traditions in an increasingly interconnected world.

KEYWORDS: marriage, Jews, Jewish wedding, Chuppah, Ketubah, Sheva brachot, hora, tradition

Introduction

In early antiquity, marriage was often a contractual institution aimed at ensuring the continuity of family, property and preserving tribal heritage (Burrows 1970). In many ancient societies, obviously including the Jews, marriage was arranged by the parents or tutors, and children were often married from childhood. Men could marry more than one woman, while women could marry only one man. Bigamy was forbidden in the Ashkenazi communities (Jews coming from central or Eastern Europe) based on a decree given in the year 1000 by Rabenu Gershom Meor ha-Gola (Wigoder 2016, 602). This decree is still valid today in almost all Jewish communities. Marriage (among Jews) was and is seen as a social and economic obligation rather than an expression of love or feelings (Rotaru 2011, 5).

As the Encyclopedia of Judaism shows, in the Second Temple era (63-70 BC), some freedom of choice began to emerge so that twice a year, young men who were not married had the opportunity to choose their future wives from among the women who participated in the vineyard dances (Wigoder 2016, 133).

According to Jewish tradition and understanding, marriage is more than a contract between a man and a woman, it is a mystery, an institution with cosmic significance. In the view of the Talmudic sages, marriage is a renewal of the covenant between God and the Jewish people. The wedding day is a time of purification and spiritual fulfillment, similar to Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year.

Short history

The traditional Jewish wedding, called *chatunah*, blends biblical, historical, mystical, cultural, and legal traditions. These traditions are passed from generation to generation, forming a chain of Jewish continuity that goes back more than 3,800 years. "In the Hebrew Bible, there are no regulations or other details about the wedding ritual; the marriage is regarded as a kind of legal transaction, but its concrete form is not described" (Grossman 2001, 21).

A woman is "acquired" (a term used in popular dialects) in three ways: she is acquired by money, by a contract, or by performing a sexual act. Talking about price, "Since the seventh century, this price has been paid in the form of a silver or gold ring in the presence of witnesses by the groom to the bride" (Sturzebecher 2022).

The marriage was arranged between the parents of the bride and groom, or the older brother, in the absence of the father. Some examples given could be found in the Old Testament, in the first book, Genesis 24:29, 34, where Abraham searches for a wife for his son Isaac, Jacob's negotiations with Laban for Rachel, and Hamor's approach to Jacob regarding Dinah and Shechem. In the same way, Judah arranges the marriage of his firstborn (Genesis 38:6). They married within kinship groups, not because they were in love, but because their parents considered that marriage advantageous for their families, but also for the couple (Judges 21:21).

In ancient times, the husband "bought" his wife or wives who became his property, but this did not prevent the relationship between the two from developing harmoniously and in time to love each other. According to Jewish law, Jews could marry at a very young age, at the age of 12 for girls, *bat mitzvah*, and at the age of 13 for boys, *bar mitzvah*, this being the age of spiritual maturity, when they answer for their mistakes. The determining criterion for marriage was the ability to enter into a contract and express their will. This condition excluded the disabled, mentally ill, deaf, and dumb, who could marry if they proved competence in making a decision.

Intermarriage, marrying someone from another nation or religion, was forbidden according to Deuteronomy 7, Ezra 9, Joshua 23, etc. If this happened, parents mourned and performed a symbolic burial of the child if the child contracted a mixed marriage. Some members of Orthodox families hold *shiva* (mourning period) for someone who married outside the Jewish faith to prevent Jewish cultural and religious assimilation. Therefore, for ultra-Orthodox Jews, intermarriage is considered *the silent Holocaust* (Berger 2010, 149).

At the same time, for most Jews, these marriages could be performed by converting to Judaism (See the example of Sephora, Moses' wife - Exodus 4:24-26).

Traditions and customs

The Talmudic sages imposed a period of betrothal before marriage. Marriage without betrothal cheapens the institution of marriage because it gives the impression that it is an impulse decision without much thought or preparation.

Jewish marriage is a transition to a new stage in life in which the bride and groom are endowed and empowered with new powers and responsibilities. These powers are symbolized by the wedding ceremony, which is a spiritual and symbolic ceremony. During the ceremony, the bride and groom are forgiven for their past sins and are given the ability to plan their future and bless others. To honor their special status, family and friends hold a reception before the ceremony in their honor.

The reception is an occasion to celebrate their new life together and wish them blessings for the future. Two separate receptions are held (usually in adjoining rooms), one for the bride and one for the groom. By tradition, the bride and groom refrain from seeing each other for a full week before the wedding in order to increase their love and desire for each other, as well as their subsequent mutual joy at their wedding. They will only meet again at the *badeken* (veil-covering ceremony) following the reception.

The groom covers the bride's face with a veil to focus on her inner beauty. The custom of covering the bride's face with a veil originated with the matriarch Rebekah, who covered her face when she met her groom, Isaac (Genesis 24:65). The veil underlines the fact that the groom is not only interested in the bride's outer beauty, which fades with time but rather in her inner beauty, which she will never lose. It also emphasizes the innate modesty that is a hallmark of the Jewish woman. The bride's face remains veiled throughout the *chupah* ceremony, giving her privacy in this sacred time (Chabad.org, n.d.)

Also, during this time, the dowry is negotiated, consisting of contributions from the bride's family, in money or goods, for the new household. The contract is signed: the *Ketubah*, which reaffirms the fundamental conditions imposed by the Torah on the husband, such as providing food, clothing, and marital rights for his wife, which are inseparable from the marriage. It includes the husband's guarantees to pay a certain amount in case of divorce and compulsory inheritance rights for his heirs if he dies before his wife.

In *Ketubah*, there are no reciprocal oaths. The wife only agrees to accept her husband's marriage proposal. But it is definitely not an act of sale; the man is not buying the bride. In fact, the *ketubah* represents more the witnesses rather than the husband or wife. By this instrument, they attest to the groom's actions, promises, and declarations and the bride's willingness to accept the proposal of marriage.

The Ketubah is a charter of a woman's rights in marriage and a man's duties. *The Ketubah* is designed for the protection of the woman, and every legal nuance in this regard has been crafted so that her husband will not find it easy to divorce her. In a society traditionally focused on the needs of men, women have always needed more defense and protection against violation of personal rights than the man. The *ketubah* document recalls the wedding between God and Israel when Moses took the Torah, the "Book of the Covenant," and read it to the Jews before the *chupah* ceremony at Mount Sinai.

It is more than a compensation system that strengthens relationships between families and encourages or supports marriage. Also, as part of the betrothal ceremony, the groom places the wedding ring on the bride's finger in the presence of witnesses. As he puts the ring on his finger, the groom says to her, "With this ring, you are consecrated to me, according to the law of Moses and Israel." In the past, mothers of prospective spouses would break a vessel, referring to the fact that just as a shard cannot be repaired, it is better to marry and then divorce than to break a prenuptial agreement (Wigoder 2016, 135).

After getting the gift, the woman becomes the legitimate wife of the groom (Deuteronomy 22:23, 24), even if the physical relationship has not been consumed. The "betrothal" period was followed by the marriage ceremony, which took place outside the governmental authority or synagogue. The Jewish wedding ceremony, *chuppah*, usually takes place in the afternoon and can extend into the late evening. The exact duration can vary depending on local traditions and the couple's preferences. (According to information obtained from the Oradea community, the duration was between 3-7 days.)

The bride and groom are accompanied to the *chupah* by escorts, who are usually the couple's parents. The groom arrives first, and the bride is coming later. After the groom arrives at the *chupah*, the moderator (or another person who is honored with this duty) welcomes the groom on behalf of all gathered by singing *Baruch Haba* and *Mi Adir*, a short Hebrew greeting that also includes a request for God's blessings on the new couple. When the bride arrives at the groom's side, she surrounds the groom seven times, during which time the cantor (moderator) sings *Mi Ban Siach*.

This short hymn extols the bride's modesty and faithfulness and, again, calls on God to bless the bride and groom. The bride encircles her groom seven times to break down any remaining walls or barriers between them, referring to the time when Joshua and the Israelites surrounded seven times the walls of Jericho to break down its walls.

Chupah is a *canopy* that sits on four pillars and is usually decorated with ornaments. *The* marriage ceremony takes place under this canopy which is open on all sides, as a demonstration of the couple's commitment to establish a home that will always be open to guests, as it was Abraham and Sarah's tent.

The final stage of the marriage ceremony

After the ceremony, there follows a seven-day celebration called *sheva brachot*: the recitation of *Sheva Brachot* - "The Seven Blessings". There are social events that take place during the first seven days of the marriage and bring the community together to celebrate the new union, the blessings are recited under the *Chuppah*, each of them expressing different aspects of life seen as a couple's journey. These blessings emphasize themes of joy, love, companionship, and the ultimate goal of establishing a peaceful home. The glass of wine shared during the ceremony reinforces the idea of shared responsibility and mutual support.

This celebration is an opportunity for family and friends to enjoy the new couple and wish them blessings for their future together. It is a family celebration attended by friends and relatives. Such a rite is found in the second book of Maccabees, chapter 9, from verses 37 to 39. The wedding feast was usually held in the groom's house, where there were dances, love songs (Song of Songs 4:1-7), poems, and an important part of the feast consisted of the prayers of blessing for the bride and groom (Psalm 45 – which is a wedding song), followed by a banquet that lasted 7 days (Genesis 29:7; Judges 14:4).

Another custom was to read chapter 31 of Proverbs, which presents the model of an ideal housewife, as the future bride was supposed to become. The recitation of this chapter is also done after the wedding by the husband in front of his wife every Friday evening. In the apocryphal book of Tobit, chapters 7 and 8, written in the early 2nd century B.C., there are wedding prayers for the young Tobias and Sarah, prayers that also refer to the couple Adam and Eve.

Then follows the breaking of the glass, a poignant moment at a Jewish wedding reminiscent of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. It also symbolizes the fragility of human relationships, emphasizing the need for compassion and understanding. After breaking the glass, the guests exclaim *Mazel Tov*, which means good luck, to wish the couple a prosperous and joyful life together.

The festive meal that follows the ceremony is an important part of the Jewish wedding celebration. It is customary to serve various symbolic foods, such as *challah* bread, to represent sustenance and abundance. In addition, dancing and music are integral components of the celebration, with upbeat tunes enhancing the joyous atmosphere.

From the signing of the *Ketubah* to the breaking of the cup and the festive meal, every element of the ceremony has symbolic meaning, emphasizing the deep commitment and spiritual dimensions of the union. The emphasis on community participation further reinforces the idea that marriage is not just a union between two individuals but a celebration that involves the entire community, creating a foundation for a strong and lasting partnership (Rotaru 2016, 29-43).

Romanian traditions incorporated into the Jewish wedding atmosphere

The wedding ceremony is rich in cultural meaning and ritual, reflecting a mix of religious customs and community traditions that have evolved over centuries. In recent years, weddings of people belonging to the Jewish community in Romania have become more modern. Many couples choose to have secular or mixed ceremonies that include elements of both traditions. These weddings take place outside the synagogue, in locations such as restaurants, hotels, or even outdoors. However, they are not recognized by the Jewish community.

Returning to the Jewish community in Oradea, it should be noted that before the war, Oradea was a vibrant and diverse city with a significant Jewish community. The Jewish presence in Oradea dates back some centuries, contributing to the cultural, economic, and social structure of the city. After the war, Holocaust survivors returned to Oradea to rebuild their lives and communities. Unfortunately, the number of those who survived was extremely small, out of more than 33,000 Jews from Oradea who were deported, only between 2,700 and 3,000 Jews returned.

*"In this context, in the post-war period, the Oradea community made great efforts to rebuild its community, and marriage played a key role in this process. One of the consequences of the Holocaust, in terms of marriages, was that there were very few Jewish women, and young people who were going to marry, and they could not find Jewish partners, so that those mixed families appeared. From the point of view of the Mosaic religion, marrying a non-Jew is absolutely forbidden. To better understand what it means to be a Jew in terms of the Mosaic religion: A Jew is one who has a Jewish mother or became a Jew by conversion. Certainly in this post-war period there were Jewish marriages, only they were very few. In the dark years of the Communist regime, religious marriages were almost forbidden. In other words, those who survived the horrors of the Holocaust became atheists, and broke all ties with Jewish religious life. Another negative aspect that led to the disappearance of Jewish marriages was that, both in Oradea and in other cities in Romania, there were no spiritual leaders, there were no rabbis. However, after 1990, rabbis from Israel with Romanian and Oradea origins appeared in the community and tried to revive the spiritual life of the community. A pressing problem faced by the Jewish community of Oradea was of those who were not *halacha* Jews (i.e. after their mother, were only after their father or had Jewish ancestry), and who could not be considered Jews from a religious point of view. In order to solve this problem, a conversion centre was set up in Oradea. Those who wanted to be recognized as *halacha* Jews could attend these conversion courses. After completing these years of study, the candidates took an exam before a rabbinical court, which decided which person was ready to take on those responsibilities pertaining to Jewish life. For the couples participated in these courses, automatically along with the mandatory conversion process, a Jewish wedding was performed. Since 2011 in Oradea Jewish weddings have been celebrated,"* says in an interview with Mr. Rezmuves Ivan Robert, worship official in the Jewish Community of Oradea, on January 05, 2024.

From the Romanian music and dances integrated into the Jewish atmosphere of the last years, the following stand out *Hora*. "The hora is a dance of Romanian and Israeli origins that is traditionally performed at Jewish wedding receptions. It begins with guests holding hands and dancing in circles around the newlyweds" (Forrest 2023). Romanian Jews who emigrated to Israel brought with them the tradition of the *hora*, a dance from Romanian folklore that is now also practiced in Israel. This dance flourished only in the 20th century and is now an important part of Jewish wedding receptions. It is usually danced twice: at the beginning of the wedding to welcome the guests and start the celebration, and immediately after dinner to re-energize the crowd and create an atmosphere of joy. The most popular songs sung during the *hora* dance are *Hava Nagila* (meaning "let us rejoice") and *Siman Tov U'Mazal Tov* (meaning "a good omen and good fortune will come to us"). As the *hora* dance reaches its climax, the newlyweds are lifted into the air in a gesture of celebration of their love and union. "The couple is thought to be spiritually elevated on the day of their wedding," says Rabbi Cherney (Forrest 2023).

During their lift in the air, the newlyweds hold a napkin between them, each holding a side. Rabbi Cherney explains: "In religiously observant Jewish communities, men and women have not touched prior to the wedding. While this is very different in religiously liberal Jewish communities, the tradition of connecting through the napkin continues on. The couple is connected even though they are not physically touching each other. Interestingly enough, waving a napkin at a wedding, instead of clinking glasses, is also a symbol of joy and cheer amongst those who are hard of hearing!" (Forrest 2023).

There are other aspects of intercultural, musical, and choreographic Romanian taken over/integrated in Jewish weddings, but that requires a new presentation in another article.

Conclusions

"A living culture faces any historical challenges" (Cioban 2018, 63). In conclusion, the tradition and all its Jewish symbolism (Cohen 2015, 123-145), with its roots hidden in the Bible, has an influence on both the Jewish community and the community that adopted them. What has preserved Jewish traditions so well is probably the importance of religion to Jews. According to Solomon Rapfael Hirsch, a promoter of Orthodox Judaism who said that "the commandments of the Torah must be the letter of the law for us, even if we do not understand the reason and purpose of any of them. The fulfillment of the commandments must not depend on our investigations" (Puscas 2017, 42; Rotaru 2015, 318-322). As Macelaru (2011, 171) says: "So then, a story that builds coherently on the past, accurately assesses the possibilities of the present, and presents an appealing future, will also enlarge people's views of their possibilities. In other words, the biblical story, in this way, will motivate a remaking of the presently lived "story" so that it will resemble more closely the "story" people desire for."

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