

Reshut Hakallah: The Symbolism of the Chuppah

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The *chuppah*, or marriage canopy, is often likened to the home that the *chatan* and *kallah*, the groom and bride, are embarking on building together. However, not all traditional sources support this view. Halakhic sources depict the *chuppah* as a home, but it is a home that belongs to the *chatan*, and its role in the ceremony is to mark the transfer of the woman from her father's house to her husband's house. One must look to the aggadic sources for a view on the symbolism of the *kallah's* entry into the *chuppah* that is more in line with our modern sensibilities. Within the *aggadah*, the *chuppah* represents the beginning of a mutual and equal relationship between the *chatan* and *kallah*, who are on the verge of establishing a home together.

The dominant view in halakhic sources is that the *chuppah* is the *reshut*, or domain, of the *chatan*, and this is why he enters it first and then brings the *kallah* into his home. According to the *Shulchan Arukh* (*Even Ha-Ezer* 55:1) the marriage has only taken place once the bride has entered his house, which in the halakhic sources is the symbolic purpose of the *chuppah*. This symbolism seems to be further reinforced by the *minhag* (a custom in which my husband and I partook at our own wedding) that the *chatan* enters the *chuppah* and then comes back out when the *kallah* arrives, in order to accompany her inside. This *minhag* is widely understood as representing the woman's leaving the domain of her father and entering the domain of her husband. It is as though the groom, being a good host, greets the bride and says, "Welcome to my home."

This interpretation of the *chuppah* can be extracted from certain aggadic (non-legal narratives) as well. When *bnei Yisrael* were about to receive the Torah at Mount Sinai, the *midrash* states that Moshe told the people to leave the camp and go to the mountain because God, the *chatan*, was waiting to meet His *kallah*, the people, in order to accompany them into the *chuppah* (*Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer*, chapter 41). A similar image can be found in the liturgy of Kabbalat Shabbat, "*L'cha dodi likrat kallah*," "Come, my beloved, to meet the bride." Like the halakhic sources, these aggadic texts portray the encounter at the *chuppah* not as a mutual meeting, but rather as the bridegroom's welcoming the bride into *his* house.

The *Song of Songs* and the aggadic sources that expound upon it provide a different perspective on the role of the bride at the *chuppah*. The book in and of itself is understood by most commentaries as an allegory for the loving relationship between the nation of Israel and God, in which Israel is portrayed as the bride and God the groom. In Chapter 4, the bride sings out to her husband:

Awake O north wind, and come south;
blow [*haphichi*] upon my garden [*gan*], so
that [the smell] of the spices may flow out.
Let my beloved come to *his* garden and eat
from its choicest fruit.
I have come to my garden, my sister, my
bride...

The *kallah* refers to the garden first as hers (*my* garden), and then as his (his garden). Only in response to the *kallah's* offer does the beloved accept her overture and call the garden his own. Moreover, it is the *kallah* who is in the *chuppah* first, awaiting the arrival of her *chatan*.

Based on these verses, the *midrash* makes a statement that is radically different from the perspective found in the halakhic sources:

Rabbi Hanina says, the Torah teaches you appropriate behavior [*derekh erez*], that the *chatan* should not enter the *chuppah* until the *kallah* gives him permission [*reshut*], as it says, "Let my beloved come to his garden" (*Shir Hashirim* 4:16) and afterward it says, "I have come to my garden" (*Pesikta deRav Kahane*, Chapter 1).

The need for the permission (*reshut*) of the *kallah*, as it is expressed in this *midrash*, suggests that the *chuppah* need not be viewed exclusively as the *reshut* of the *chatan*. Rather, it is a shared, mutual dwelling into which they are both about to enter for the first time. One can then interpret the *minhag* of the *chatan* meeting the *kallah* and accompanying her into the *chuppah* in an entirely different way. The concept — that the consent of the *kallah* must be granted before the wedding ceremony in the *chuppah* begins — alters the symbolism of this *minhag*. The *minhag* is no longer about the transfer of the woman from one man's space to another's,

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but rather is representative of the voice of the *kallah*, whose message is that she is ready to enter into and share a new home with her *chatan*. Instead of representing the striking absence of a role for the *kallah* at the *chuppah*, it symbolizes her noteworthy presence.

These sources make clear that different interpretations of the *minhag* can be drawn by different communities. From the halakhic material, one may derive a more traditional view of the

chuppah as symbolic of the husband's domain and the bride's movement from her father's to her husband's house. The *midrash* and *Shir Hashirim*, on the other hand, offer a view of marriage as a joint endeavor, in which both individuals participate and share responsibilities. Far from representing the woman's transfer from one domain to another, the *chuppah* in these sources signifies a home built on joint consent and mutual involvement.

Under the Chuppah

RACHEL FLORMAN

I was a senior in high school when Steve Martin's *Father of the Bride* came out. I don't remember anything about the movie. But I do remember leaving the theater determined that when I got married my father would not give me away. I was vigorously opposed to the idea that a change in marital status might indicate a change in my relationship with either of my parents.

Sixteen years later, I was planning my wedding. My fiancé, Jonathan, agreed that we should skip the procession. We decided instead to begin our ceremony with family and friends joining us, literally, in the creation of our *chuppah*. We were attracted to the *chuppah* as a symbol of our home and of the people and events that would define it.

At the wedding, as our friend Clare Burson played a traditional klezmer *dobriden* on the fiddle, 40 friends and family members came forward one by one, carrying handmade lanterns. Each participant hung his or her lantern from the *chuppah* frame, contributing to an expanding glow of light. Jonathan and I were the last to hang our lanterns



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and, as we did, the rabbi joined us under the *chuppah*.

Through this ceremony, Jonathan and I wanted to acknowledge the importance of friends and family in our lives. We both depend on the love and support of the people who surround us; our relationship with each other builds on our relationships with others. The act of assembling the *chuppah* expressed our combined communities' support of the life that Jonathan and I were beginning with our marriage. The

roof of lanterns provided symbolic light and warmth, offered as a wish for our future home.

The preparation for the event was itself collaborative. In the months before the wedding, my parents, friends, and relatives helped figure out the logistics of the project and helped produce the lanterns and the frame. We planned and worked together in person, via email, over the phone, and by holding sketches up to Web cams as we video chatted. With the enthusiastic efforts of so many contributors, the

process of making the components was an enormously important part of the *chuppah*. The ceremony itself became an emotional culmination as I watched key people in our lives construct the space, both literally and symbolically, where we would be married.

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Remaking Ritual

JANE KANAREK

One of my favorite examples of rabbinic responsa literature, or *teshuvot*, was written by Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, the great legal decisor of 20th-century Orthodox North American Jewry. In this *teshuvah*, Feinstein prohibits the bride from giving a ring to the groom during the wedding ceremony, whether during the *chuppah* itself or even shortly after (*Iggrot Moshe*, Even Ha-Ezer 3:18). Although Feinstein opens his response by admitting that once the groom has presented the bride with a ring and betrothed her, the woman's actions are irrelevant, he nevertheless continues with a strongly worded prohibition. It is the reasons for the

prohibition that I find to be most instructive.

None of the reasons for prohibiting two-ring ceremonies come from marriage law. They come from the legal realms of idolatry, ritual purification, forgetting law, changing law, and property damage. For example, Feinstein cites a discussion from the *Babylonian Talmud* (*Shabbat* 14b) about immersion for the sake of ritual purification. In this case, people were immersing themselves in pools of disgusting water that had collected in caves. After immersion, they would pour water on their heads and bodies in order to wash off the stinking water. While the first immersion effects the transition

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