

A Journey Toward Marriage

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Wedding season is approaching, which means that wedding preparation time is here. As the founding director of the Israel-based program Reut: The Center for Modern Jewish Marriage, I run programs for engaged couples that help prepare them not only for the wedding day but also for their marriage. Our seminars and retreats include interactive sessions on *zugiyut* (“couplehood”), sexuality in marriage, marital fiscal health, mikveh and rhythmic sexuality, understanding and personalizing the Jewish wedding ceremony, and the legal issues involved with marrying in Israel.


While I have much to say about each of these topics, I will focus here on the last two items on the list (although, all aspects of marriage preparation are related to *zugiyut*). Since all issues of personal status in Israel are in the hands of the rabbinate, all marriages and divorces must go through that body; there is no such thing as civil marriage in Israel. All marriages are religious. This means that all legally recognized Jewish weddings in Israel must follow the rabbinate’s interpretation of Jewish law. This presents a serious ideological problem for couples who do not agree with the rabbinate’s interpretation of Jewish law, who want an egalitarian ceremony, or who simply do not abide Jewish law.

A few options exist for such couples. To be legally recognized as married in the State of Israel, a couple can marry abroad (Cyprus is the most popular destination) in a civil ceremony and then register as married in Israel. These couples can also have a religious (or secular) ceremony inside or outside Israel (not sanctioned by the rabbinate) that reflects their personal ideological and/or religious approach to marriage.

Though I do not recommend this option, it works for couples who feel a need to be registered as legally married. But for couples who do not feel this need, I recommend marrying in a ceremony of the couple’s design with a rabbi of their choice and then not registering as married. I prefer this option because once a couple is registered as married in Israel, if they end up seeking a divorce, the procedure must go through the rabbinate, even if the wedding ceremony took place abroad. But if the couple does not

register as married, they can draw up a legal contract laying out the legal terms of their relationship, and if they end up divorcing, they can terminate this contract and draw up another, if need be (to divide assets, figure out custody issues, etc.). Choosing to not register avoids involving the rabbinate, which is advisable since the Israeli religious courts are misogynistic when it comes to divorce; Orthodox Jewish law permits only the husband to initiate divorce.

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Couples who marry without a rabbinate-recognized ceremony create a ceremony (with the help of a rabbi or other knowledgeable individuals) that reflects their understanding of marriage and relationship. After walking couples through the traditional ceremony (so that they understand its structure and meaning), we explore alternative options that retain (to varying degrees) the Jewish flavor but deviate (also to varying degrees) from the model of husband acquiring wife. Some options are completely egalitarian and bilateral, so that there is no act of unilateral acquisition and therefore no need for a *get* (Jewish writ of divorce). I have had the honor of helping couples create ceremonies that reflect their vision of what their marriage is about (and even officiating at a few). Exploring their values — what is common and what is different in their approach to marriage — not only cements their relationship but also provides an opportunity for the wedding, the ritual of marriage, to express those values. At the conclusion of the program, we recite *tefillat haderekh*, the prayer one recites when setting off on a journey. 

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