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## Fall's featured wedding custom

### The ceremonial use of wine in Jewish weddings

In countries as different as Japan and Russia, couples have traditionally used wine in their wedding ceremonies. Frequently these couples share one or more glasses of wine with each other and with some of their family members. Here I discuss the use of wine in Jewish wedding ceremonies, primarily addressing the non-Jewish audience.

Wine plays a part in many of the rituals that mark Jewish holidays and rites of passage. In most cases someone recites a blessing while holding a cup of wine<sup>1</sup>, and then that person drinks the wine or gives it to others to drink. Every Sabbath, particularly observant Jews gather their families around a table three times for ceremonial meals. At the Friday night and Saturday morning Sabbath meals (and sometimes at the Saturday afternoon meal as well), one person at the table chants blessings over a cup of wine and then drinks at least a mouthful of the wine. While the other family members are not required to share the wine, at least the adults are usually encouraged to take a sip. In Judaism, wine itself is never considered sacred, but it is often used to represent one or more particular sacred qualities. It also represents joy, and it is ceremonially drunk during most festive holidays and rites of passage. Jewish teachers on this topic frequently quote the Biblical passage, "Wine cheers God and man" (Judges 9:13).

During the Jewish wedding ceremony, the bride and groom drink wine twice. The first portion of the ceremony is called the betrothal ceremony, because it follows the script of the ancient engagement ceremony, which was merged with the wedding ceremony in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. In the part of this service that involves wine, the rabbi recites the usual Hebrew blessing concerning wine, which can be translated as, "Blessed are You, Source of all life, creating the fruit on the vine" (Shire, 50). Then s/he recites another blessing, which praises God for sanctifying His people through marriage. The rabbi also makes this blessing while holding the cup of wine. (While there is no requirement that the rabbi rather than another person recite these blessings, the task is most often assumed by the rabbi.) This is a typical use of wine in Judaism: in the first blessing, the performer praises God for creating wine, but during subsequent blessings, s/he holds the wine but does not refer to it. People say that such blessings are "made over the wine," and there is a sense that the blessings infuse the wine.

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<sup>1</sup> I say "cup of wine" instead of "glass of wine" because the cups that are used in Jewish ceremonies are rarely made of glass. Silver might be the most common material for these cups.

After the rabbi performs the two betrothal blessings, s/he usually hands the cup to the groom, who takes a sip of the wine and then passes the cup to the bride, who also takes a sip. It is also common for the bride's mother to hand the cup to each partner. Sometimes after the groom and bride drink, they pass the cup to their parents and/or other close family members, who also drink. In some weddings the bride holds the cup while the groom's parents drink and the groom holds the cup while the bride's parents drink.

In traditional Jewish weddings, the bride wears a veil over her face during the wedding ceremony. The groom places the veil on the bride just before the public wedding ceremony in a brief ritual of devotion of the partners to one another. If the bride is wearing a veil, someone lifts the veil from her face when the groom finishes drinking, and then replaces the veil after the bride drinks. This role is most often taken by the bride's mother, the bride's and groom's mothers together, or the groom.

Later in the ceremony, after the groom gives the bride a ring (and perhaps receives one in return) and the Jewish wedding contract is read aloud, seven wedding blessings known as the *Sheva Brachot* are recited over a second cup of wine. Although the first wine cup can be refilled for these blessings, a separate cup is usually used. A note on the word "blessing" is in order. In Judaism, those prayers that are usually called "blessings" are not blessings in the usual sense of the word. A Jewish blessing does not confer any benefit on the thing that is blessed. Instead, the person reciting the blessing addresses God, praising Him for something He has created or some act He has performed.

It is common for the rabbi to recite the *Sheva Brachot*, but it is also common for a different guest to read each blessing. Sometimes a soloist sings all seven blessings. If a different person recites each blessing, each of these performers makes the blessing while holding the cup of wine. Then s/he passes the wine to the next performer. Often each speaker is introduced before s/he recites the blessing; not only does this honor the performer, it honors the blessings by allowing some time between them for the bride, groom, and guests to absorb their contents. Anita Diamant gives a few other meaningful options: the blessings might be "read or chanted in Hebrew by the rabbi or cantor<sup>2</sup> with English translations read by designated family members and friends," they might be "read by married couples who are asked to share the honor of a blessing; one reading the Hebrew, the other, the English," or they might be "read or chanted in Hebrew by the rabbi with the English translation read in unison by all the guests, who are given copies of the text." (Diamant, 179). After all the blessings are read, the cup is passed to the groom and bride in much the way the first cup was passed to them. They both take a sip of wine. Although relatives might share the first cup of wine with the couple, this second cup is reserved for the bride and groom.

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<sup>2</sup> A cantor is a clergyperson who is primarily a singer, leading the congregation in the many Jewish prayers that are sung.

Some couples' parents drape a single prayer shawl over the couple before the seven blessings are recited. I particularly like this tradition: while the two partners drink sanctified wine from a shared cup, they are held together from outside by a single sacred shawl. But all Jewish weddings might be described this way, because they are conducted under a *chuppah*, a canopy that unites, sanctifies, and protects the couple underneath it.

Many Jewish holidays are celebrated with a meal, and most Jewish wedding receptions include a meal. At the end of the meal, one guest leads the others in chanting a set of blessings that is recited by many people at special meals and is recited by particularly devout Jews after every meal. This set of blessings is usually known in English as "Grace After Meals." On special occasions, the leader chants Grace After Meals while holding a cup of wine. At the end of Grace After Meals following the wedding meal, the *Sheva Brachot* are repeated. Each blessing might be recited by a new performer. Before the *Sheva Brachot* are read, another cup of wine is poured, and each speaker holds this cup when s/he recites a blessing. Once all the blessings are completed, the person who recited Grace After Meals takes a sip from his/her cup, but the performers who recited the *Sheva Brachot* do not sip from their own cup. At this point, the wine from the Grace After Meals cup and the *Sheva Brachot* cup is mixed into a third cup. The bride and groom each take a sip from this "cup of blessing," and they might also share its wine with others, most often their parents but occasionally the entire crowd. Although this third cup is the mixture of the wine used for Grace After Meals and the wine used for the seven marriage blessings, it is often understood by guests as representing the mixing of bride and groom. In one similar interpretation, Anita Diamant says that the third cup of wine "represents the combined joy of bride and groom, the completion of both betrothal and nuptials, the establishment of a new entity – a marriage in which all elements are shared. It is a pouring of two lives into one, a hope for future generations, for the unification of all apparent opposites" (Diamant, 198). Sometimes after the wine from the first and second cups is mixed in the third cup, some of that mixture is poured back into the first and second cups. In these cases, the bride drinks from one of the original cups, the groom drinks from the other, and the guests drink from the third cup.

In many Orthodox communities, various friends of the bride and groom might host meals to honor the marriage every day for up to a week after their wedding. As long as each of these celebrations includes one person who was absent on all of the occasions when the blessings were recited before, and ten men are present, the seven blessings are recited again at each meal.

I doubt my ability to analyze the use of wine in Jewish wedding ceremonies because I have only a little experience with Jewish ritual, while many Jewish scholars have spent their lives interpreting ceremonial acts including this one. But I can at least say that, when wine is used in Jewish weddings, God is praised and implicitly thanked for many aspects of marriage as well as other aspects of Creation. And I can say that the bride, the groom, and their loved ones are given the opportunity to drink from the same cup, which ritually unites them. Not only do they drink from the same cup, they share a cup of wine that has been used to praise God.

The act of drinking wine at the wedding appears to function at least as a sort of toast: by drinking, the bride and groom and their families say, in effect, “I’ll drink to those praises and blessings; I’ll agree to those praises and celebrate them.” But the bride and groom both fast from the night before their wedding until they take their first sips of wine. Clearly they are purifying themselves so that they can be filled with something more important than the drink for a toast. Although I would guess that Jewish scholars have more sophisticated interpretations, it would appear to an outside observer that all the people who drink this wine are consuming the blessings that were made over it. This would be easiest to imagine if the couple was consuming the things that non-Jews usually call blessings. For instance, someone might approach the couple, wish them a marriage full of some quality represented by a drink, and the couple would consume the drink. And in fact some of the seven wedding blessings do contain petitions for the marriage, and these sound something like the phrases that non-Jews call blessings. For instance, the sixth blessing contains a petition that can be translated as, “Grant abundant joy to these loving friends, as You bestowed gladness upon Your created being in the Garden of Eden of old,” and the seventh blessing contains the line, “Lord our God, let there speedily be heard in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem the sound of joy and the sound of happiness, the sound of a groom and the sound of a bride, the sound of exultation of grooms from under the bridal canopy and youths from their joyous banquets” (Steinsaltz, 221). But even in the more distinctly Jewish blessings over the wine, it might be said – at least by a casual outside observer - - that the bride and groom are consuming the statements of praise for the God who created their marriage, in the sense that, by drinking the wine, they are ritually enacting their enjoyment of the marriage that God brought about.

Just what qualities are they consuming? I won’t interpret the blessings here, but they are printed below. Of the many qualities that wine represents in Jewish ceremonies, one of the most important for the wedding is bounty. In the months before and after their wedding, the bride and groom are overflowing with emotions and wishes. Many of the people who have loved them are packed into one space to celebrate with them, and at every chance these people express their good wishes for the marriage. The wedding is a festival of plenty. On the Sabbath, many people symbolize God’s bounty by pouring wine into a cup until the cup overflows. I am guessing that this enacts a line from Psalm 23, the psalm that begins “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want,” one of the best-known psalms among Jews and Christians alike. This psalm is sung every week at the third Sabbath meal by Orthodox Jews, making them particularly familiar with it. Although the narrator of this psalm is in danger, the psalm celebrates all the gifts and guidance that God is giving him. Because God is caring for the narrator, his “cup runneth over,” even in the presence of enemies<sup>3</sup>. I think this psalm would make an excellent reading at the wedding of

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<sup>3</sup> “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want” and “My cup runneth over” are taken from the King James translation of the Bible, which is, of course, a Christian version of the Bible from England, and not a translation that is likely to be used by Jews. However, I’m using this translation because it is so well-

two Jewish or Christian believers, because it celebrates God's guidance through difficulties, which every married couple will encounter; because it could help establish the triangular relationship between the two spouses and the parent-like God, a relationship that I imagine is primary to many devout couples; and, of course, because it celebrates the bountiful gifts that God gives its speaker. Although wedding wine is not poured until it overflows its cups, surely the wedding is an occasion for celebration of bountiful blessings, and on this day, the bride, groom, and anyone else who drinks their ceremonial wine might feel that they are imbibing God's bounty.

Translations of the wedding blessings vary widely. The following translation of the two betrothal blessings is by Rabbi Dr. Michael Shire. The translation of the seven marriage blessings is by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz.

“The Blessings of Betrothal (the first cup of wine)

“Blessed are You, Source of all life, creating the fruit of the vine

Blessed are You, Source of all life, making us holy through Your Commandments and making Your people Israel holy by the ceremony of the chuppah and the sanctity of marriage.” – Shire, 50-52

The *Sheva Brachot* (recited over a second cup of wine)

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has created all things for His glory.

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, Creator of man.

Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, who created man in His image, in the image [of His] likeness [He fashioned] his form, and prepared for him from his own self an everlasting edifice. Blessed are You, Lord, Creator of man.

May the barren one [Jerusalem] rejoice and be happy at the ingathering of her children to her midst in joy. Blessed are You, Lord, who gladdens Zion with her children.

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known and because I have never read a more beautiful translation than “My cup runneth over,” or one more appropriate to a wedding.

Grant abundant joy to these loving friends, as You bestowed gladness upon Your created being in the Garden of Eden of old. Blessed are You, Lord, who gladdens the groom and bride.

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who created joy and happiness, groom and bride, gladness, jubilation, cheer and delight, love, friendship, harmony, and fellowship. Lord our God, let there speedily be heard in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem the sound of joy and the sound of happiness, the sound of a groom and the sound of a bride, the sound of exultation of grooms from under their bridal canopy and youths from their joyous banquets. Blessed are You, Lord, who gladdens the groom with the bride” (Steinsaltz, 219-221; brackets his).

Sources:

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