CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP
in Jewish-Christian Weddings

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JUDAISM 101

Judaism is one of the Abrahamic religions and includes rituals, beliefs and a code of ethics. It includes the history of a people who believe themselves to be chosen for a covenant with God.

Today Judaism includes adherents (called Jews) of most races and nations. The foundational document of Judaism is the Torah (which is also the first five books of the Christian Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). The Torah teaches there is only one God. Beginning with their first three patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God made a covenant with the Jewish people that still stands today.

The covenant includes God's blessing for the Jewish people, both in terms of numbers of people and in terms of a gift of the "promised land." The covenant also calls Jews to live by a wide-ranging code of ethics. Despite their deep connection with God, Jews have been persecuted through the ages in several ways and times.

Today there are four major Jewish movements in the United States and Canada: Reform Judaism, Reconstructionist Judaism, Conservative Judaism and Orthodox Judaism. Hebrew is the traditional language of Jewish worship and is used in varying degrees in each movement.

As of 2015 there were over 4 million Jews from all four movements in the United States of America, and there were over 2,500 houses of worship, known as synagogues or temples.
WHAT CHRISTIAN CLERGY NEED TO KNOW ABOUT JEWISH WEDDINGS

Observant Jews believe marriage is a divine command. It is a sacred bond and a human, personal fulfillment.

Marriage is assumed to be the natural and most desired state for adults, and celebrating it is a commandment in the torah as an acknowledgment that joy is a part of life. The Hebrew word for marriage is kiddushin which is translated as "sanctification." The ceremony can be officiated by either a rabbi or a cantor.

Usually invitations are issued for Jewish weddings. An RSVP and a gift are appropriate. Monetary gifts are often given in multiples of 18, the numeric equivalent of chai, or life. Gifts are not brought to the wedding; instead they are sent to the bride’s home or taken to the reception. Appropriate attire depends on the formality of the wedding itself. A yarmulke or kippah is required for men at Orthodox, Conservative and Reconstructionist ceremonies. These will be provided. In Jewish weddings often a huppah, or wedding canopy, is connected to four poles and lifted above the couple for the ceremony. The huppah symbolizes the canopy of the heavens under which all of life takes place. There are special blessings given, such as the shehecheyanu, which speaks of thankfulness for life, for opportunities and for the current moment of celebration. There are special readings, which can be poems, prayers or portions of the Scripture. There are wedding vows and rings exchanged. And, seven blessings are recited as a whole to remind the couple of God’s relationship to the world. Then, after the benediction is offered, often the groom stomps on a glass (which is wrapped inside a cloth, so the shards are contained). This is an ancient tradition that can be interpreted in several ways. One interpretation is the broken glass is a reminder that, even in the midst of great joy, the memory of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E. is an influence of sadness for all Jews.
There is also often the signing of the ketubah, or the wedding contract before, during or after the ceremony. Sometimes witnesses are asked to sign as well. Often it is elaborately decorated and is hung in the home of the couple.

It is traditional for the bride and groom to take time apart from their guests between the ceremony and the reception. Initially, this period of privacy was in order to consummate the marriage. Today it is a time for the couple to catch their breath and reflect on the ceremony before moving to the party. A Jewish wedding is a great time of celebration, so usually a reception will follow the ceremony. Often a meal is served, and often there is music and dancing. If the families involved follow kosher guidelines (Jewish dietary laws), the food will not mix dairy and meat. A blessing will probably be given before eating. Often it will be the ha ‘motzi, which is a benediction over the bread. Additionally, sometimes a prayer at the end of the meal will be shared. This is called a birkat hamazon. During the reception it is common for the wedding couple and their parents to be lifted up in chairs. There are also traditional dances, some of the popular ones being called Hora and Mezinke. It is very appropriate for guests to greet the new couple by saying “Mazel tov” which means "good luck" in Hebrew, but is usually used to mean "congratulations."

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Part of the ceremony may be the tradition of the groom stomping on a glass.
CULTURAL CONTEXT IS IMPORTANT

We have described here very general information about Judaism in North America. It is always a good idea to talk with the couple getting married directly about which movement in which they hold membership and to talk with the rabbi or cantor who may also be participating in the service. It is also important to remember that some Jews have traveled to North America from all over the world. They have brought with them their own cultural contexts, which will vary from country-of-origin to country-of-origin. If you have questions, make sure you ask.
Resources for Deeper Study

The Council of Bishops Office of Christian Unity and Interreligious Relationships, publisher of this brochure, wishes to acknowledge the contents are intended as a guide and have been developed from a general North American context. United Methodists of other cultural contexts are encouraged to volunteer to create a similar resource applicable specifically for them.

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Union for Reform Judaism:
212-650-4000
www.urj.org

United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism:
212-533-7800
www.uscj.org

Jewish Reconstructionist Communities:
215-576-0800
www.rrc.edu

Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America:
212-563-4000
www.ou.org

The Perfect Stranger’s Guide to Wedding Ceremonies: