

## JEWISH MARRIAGE

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Marriage has always been highly valued in Jewish tradition. To marry was deemed an obligation, and celibacy, as practised by such minority sects as the Essenes, has never been favoured by mainstream Judaism. The priests of old usually married, as did the rabbis who succeeded them in ministering to the people.

For Judaism, marriage serves three interrelated purposes. First, the propagation of the human species, as commanded in Genesis 1:28, “Be fruitful and multiply”. According to talmudic law, this obligation is deemed to have been fulfilled when a man has begotten at least one son and one daughter, just as God created male and female in the Garden of Eden.

Secondly, marriage affords loving companionship. Again in the words of the Book of Genesis, “It is not good that man should be alone.... Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Genesis 2:18 and 24). Ideally, marriage is a lifelong relationship of mutual fidelity, respect and consideration. Certainly, in the traditional sources, which reflect ancient patriarchal society, marriage is viewed primarily from a male perspective, but it is noteworthy that

great emphasis is placed on the rights, economic, social and sexual, of the wife. A typical rabbinic teaching praises the man “who loves his wife as himself, and honours her even more than himself” (Yebamot 62b).

Thirdly, marriage establishes the family as the basic social unit, and the home as the “little sanctuary” (Ezekiel 11:16) in which the father corresponds to a priest, the mother to a priestess, and the table to an altar. It is where children can grow up under the loving protection and guidance of their parents, and where the Jewish religion can be practised and transmitted from generation to generation.

That, broadly speaking, is the philosophy of Jewish marriage. We might also note that the notion of Romantic Love — a mediaeval European concept — played little or no part in Jewish or other marriages in the ancient world, which were commonly arranged by the parents. Nowadays, in almost all Jewish communities, young people choose their own marriage partners: Jewish law does not permit anyone to be married against his or her will. Even so, in some instances their choice is subject to a number of restrictions.

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It might seem superfluous to begin by mentioning that Jewish marriage is monogamous, but this was not always the case. Male (but not female) polygamy was permitted in biblical and talmudic times, although increasingly rarely practised; but it was not until the twelfth century that it was formally prohibited among Ashkenazi Jews, although it is still theoretically permissible, where the law of the land allows it, among Sephardi Jews.

A more pertinent restriction is that a Jewish marriage is only possible where both parties are Jewish. Jewish opposition to mixed marriages stemmed, in ancient times, from the fear that paganizing influences would subvert the nation's religious life; it stems today from concern at the demographic consequences for the survival of the Jewish people should inter-marriage continue at the high level - between 25 and 50 per cent - that it has reached in America and some European countries, including Great Britain. If that sounds like a negative reason for regretting marriage out of the Jewish faith, a more positive one, which statistical surveys seem to confirm, is that a couple's chances of cementing a stable marriage are strengthened by a background

of shared outlook, aspirations and religious values.

When one of the partners is not Jewish, he or she can, of course, convert to Judaism and thereafter be married in a religious ceremony. All that needs to be said here is that conversion under Liberal Judaism auspices is more welcoming and less rigorous than under Orthodox Judaism, but that subsequent recognition as a Jew will tend to be limited to non-Orthodox communities worldwide.

A third restriction is the 'forbidden degrees' of consanguinity and affinity stated in the Bible (principally Leviticus 18), and elaborated in later rabbinic law. These forbidden unions broadly accord with those prohibited by the civil legislation of most countries, but two complications need to be mentioned. The first concerns a husband who disappears without trace, for example at sea, or during a war. Whereas the civil authorities may declare the putative widow free to re-marry, traditional Jewish law would not permit her to do so without what it regarded as indubitable evidence of his death.

Other complications may arise in divorce cases. Jewish tradition

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extols marriage but recognises that a breakdown of the relationship can occur, for a variety of causes, and so allows divorce. In Orthodox Judaism, the religious procedure for this, based on Deuteronomy 24:1-4, can only be initiated by the husband, and after a civil dissolution of marriage has been granted. If, for whatever reason, a Jewish couple who have obtained a civil divorce are unable or unwilling, to proceed with a religious divorce, called in Hebrew a *get*, then according to traditional law the woman is still 'tied' to her former husband; were she to re-marry in such circumstances, her second marriage would be technically adulterous, because in contravention of the 'forbidden degrees', and therefore any children of it would be *mamzerim*, — that is, the offspring of a prohibited union and debarred, in their turn, from marrying another Jew who is not similarly a *mamzer*. Liberal Judaism disregards the law and disabilities of the *mamzer* as being ethically unjust. We permit a man or woman to re-marry in synagogue without a prior religious divorce, although, to safeguard themselves, we recommend that they should transact a *get*, and will put them in touch with the relevant Orthodox authorities.

Similarly, traditional Judaism does not permit the religious marriage of a divorcee to a Cohen —that is, to someone bearing the name of the ancient priestly caste. Liberal Judaism has discarded all laws and practices pertaining to the hereditary priesthood, and so would allow such a marriage to be solemnised in synagogue.

It can be seen that Liberal Judaism generally adopts a more enlightened attitude to the whole question of marriage and religious divorce, but do consult a rabbi from the Liberal Judaism Rabbinic Conference if you have any queries or anxieties about this complex issue.

As is evident from the obligations and expectations surrounding it, Judaism regards marriage as a serious undertaking, not to be entered into lightly. The ideal Jewish marriage could be described as a triangle, with two human beings at its base, and their Creator at its apex. In a Jewish marriage, the partners complement each other and fulfil themselves, their union blessed and sanctified by God. It is a solemn commitment, requiring patience, tact and loving sympathy; liable at times, as all human relationships are, to anger,

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disappointment and pain; but at its best affording the potential for that happiness which, according to the blessings of the marriage ceremony, Adam and Eve experienced in the Garden of Eden.

(For further information, see also *Guide to Jewish Marriage* by Rabbi John D. Rayner, published by Liberal Judaism)

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