

# A Chupah on Friday night?!

Category: Acharei Mos, Kedoshim, Vayikra

*When the Rema made a fascinating decision on quick notice.*

## Family Negotiations

When should you schedule a wedding? What is the best day of the week to get married?

Among Jews, the best day of the week is Tuesday, because the third day of creation was doubly blessed by G-d; He said "It was good" not once, but twice. However, weddings are not limited to that day; we hold weddings on all days of the week. In South America, where weddings sometimes last an entire night, they are often held on Motzaei Shabbos.

However, there is one day of the week when no weddings are held: Friday night, the eve of Shabbos. Jewish law forbids us to hold marriages on Shabbat itself, because you may mistakenly come to write a Kesubah (Orach Chaim 339:5). For that reason and for practical reasons as well, weddings are usually not held on Friday either. However, until about one hundred years ago, it was very common in Eastern Europe and in other locations to hold Chuppahs specifically on Friday afternoon and wedding celebrations on Friday night.

Why was that customary? The most common explanation is that it lowered the cost of the wedding celebrations by coupling it with Shabbos dinner.

But recently, I heard a different explanation from a podcast of Rabbi Dovid Katz, a well-known Jewish historian:

In those days, people would marry off their children at a very young age; it was common for grooms to be fifteen and brides only thirteen. That being the case, it was clear that someone needed to provide for the needs of the young couple until they were old enough to support themselves. The families would therefore commit to provide dowries, and the young couple would move into a new room in the home of the parents (that was often added on.) (See Toras Menachem v. 39 p. 43).

For the most part, these marriages were arranged. A matchmaker would shuttle between the parties to hear what each one offered to provide, and after telling a few lies to each side, he would close the shidduch, receive his payment, and go on his way.

If the families lived in different towns, they would plan to have the wedding at a halfway point, so that each side would only travel half the distance. Then, meeting each other for the first time, they would begin negotiating the concrete details of the dowry. Each family would bring their family's toughest negotiator, and the two fellows would lock themselves into a room to hammer out the details of the agreement. Only after a deal was reached and the *tenoim* signed, would they go to the chuppah.

These negotiations had the potential to drag on endlessly, causing grief to the guests, bride, groom and families. Therefore, weddings were scheduled for Friday afternoon. With Shabbos coming, there was a clear deadline, and the two sides would be forced to reach a deal.

## The Wedding Crisis

Around 450 years ago, one such wedding was scheduled for Friday afternoon in the city of Krakow, Poland. Krakow was one of the important Jewish centers of its day, and its rabbi was the world renowned Rema, Rabbi Moshe Isser'ls.

This wedding was bittersweet, because the bride was orphaned of both her parents. Her father had arranged the match, but had sadly died shortly before bringing his daughter to the chuppah. Her uncle, her mother's brother, had taken upon himself the responsibility to bring the match to fruition.

The day of the wedding arrived. The bride's relatives had promised to provide the dowry to which the father had committed, but when the moment of truth arrived, they could only show two thirds of the sum. The groom wasn't pleased in the slightest; he insisted on receiving the entire amount, and no matter how much they pleaded with him, he refused to go to the chuppah. It became a city-wide crisis. All the city dignitaries begged him not to publicly shame an orphan; they threatened and cajoled him and begged him — and then, he finally agreed. But by then, Shabbos had already begun. It was too late to hold the chupah.

The Rema, who was already a very well-known rabbi, made a quick decision. In order to protect the dignity of the orphan girl, he decided to hold the chuppah on Friday night.

Obviously, his decision raised an uproar. How could he blatantly disregard Torah's prohibition?

Being the brilliant rabbi that he was, he wrote a long Halachic responsa explaining his decision. The prohibition to hold weddings was actually an argument between Rashi and Rabbeinu Tam. Although the ruling follows Rashi, who prohibited it, it was permissible to invoke Rabbeinu Tam's more lenient opinion when faced with strenuous circumstances. "And there is no more strenuous circumstance," the Rema wrote, "than when the life-long dignity of an orphan girl is at stake, especially when the entire match is at risk..." (Shu"t Rema 125).

## **The Ultimate Wedding**

The Jewish people have always had a soft spot for orphans. In Psalms, G-d is called "the father of orphans." Since orphans don't have a father to turn to, G-d personally takes responsibility for them. For this reason, the Rema was so careful about preserving her dignity, and rushed to marry her off on Shabbos to ensure that the match was carried through.

We are now in the days of Sefirat Haomer, when we mourn the death of the twenty-four thousand students of Rabbi Akiva who died in an epidemic. According to our tradition, they died over a period of thirty three days between Passover and Shavuot, and therefore we observe traditions of mourning for thirty three days.

The only question is: which thirty three days?

According to one opinion, they begin from the first day of Passover and conclude on Lag Baomer, which is why Lag Baomer is a day of celebration when it is permitted to hold weddings. According to a second opinion, it begins on the second day of Iyar and concludes on the day before Shavuot (Shulchan Aruch Hilchos Pesach 493:5).

The Sephardim follow the first opinion, and observe the mourning period until Lag

Baomer, but Ashkenazim always like to fulfill all the opinions. Since, according to one opinion, the mourning should begin in the beginning of Iyar through Shavuot, the common custom is that we do not hold weddings at all between Passover and Shavuot.

However, there is one day that weddings are held: Lag Baomer. This year, Lag Baomer falls out on Friday, which means that many people will revive the custom of getting married on a Friday afternoon (although it is also possible to hold the weddings on Thursday night after dark). What is fascinating is that Lag Baomer is also the Yahrzeit of the one who took a stand of *ahavat yisrael* to care for a lonely orphan bride — the Rema himself.

Why are weddings so important? Why are people so excited to be invited to weddings? On a simple level, weddings remind us of the days when we were young and beautiful, and it gives a good feeling to all the participants.

But the Rebbe explained a deeper reason. Weddings remind us of the marriage of G-d and the Jewish people. And it's more than just a reminder; with every Jewish couple that gets married, we actually hasten the marriage of G-d and the Jewish people with the coming of Moshiach — may it be speedily in our day.