

# Shlom Bayyit

## A Pre-Nuptial Agreement Ahead of Its Time

It's June – the most popular month for weddings. Its popularity can be traced back to the Romans who paid special homage to Juno, their goddess of marriage. Yet long before this tradition arose, the Jewish people viewed marriage as both a sacred and imperative union. "It is not good for man to be alone," says God (Genesis 2:18) and Eve, his companion and partner, is created. We read (Genesis 24: 1-7,22,51-53,56-61) about Rebecca's betrothal to Isaac and begin to understand that marriage is also a legal and contractual agreement. The **Ketubah**, a Jewish Marriage Contract, spells out the husband's obligations.

### In ancient times

The **Ketubah** translated as "the writing" has its roots in the times of our Babylonian exile. It is one of the first legal documents giving financial and legal rights to women. The manner in which the groom would support his bride, as well as what she would receive upon the dissolution of their marriage by death or divorce, is detailed. The concept spoke to the progressive thinking of our ancestors asserting that women should be protected in a marriage – a pre-nuptial agreement ahead of its time!

### In modern times

Among Orthodox Jews this traditional **Ketubah** contract, written in Aramaic, (the language of the masses and of all legal documents during Talmudic times) is used today; only slight revisions have been made. It is the only Jewish marriage contract text that is recognized as legal in the state of Israel.

Conservative Jews often include an additional paragraph, called the Lieberman clause, which requires a husband to grant his wife a religious divorce (*a get*) if a civil one is sought. This insures that each party can remarry under Jewish law. (A growing number of Orthodox Rabbis are following suit on this matter.)

More egalitarian language and interpersonal obligations rather than financial and legal ones are found among **Ketubot** written for Reform Jews. Because there are a variety of available texts, couples may consult their rabbi to determine one that is right for them. English summations of the obligations are often included.

### At the wedding

Before the Ceremony - two people are asked to sign the **Ketubah** bearing witness that the groom agrees to fulfill his obligations to the bride. The witnesses may not be relatives (Deut. 24:16)

During the Ceremony – two distinct events

unfold: *kiddushim* (the betrothal) – there's the blessing over the wine, the ring(s). Then *nissuin* (the marriage) – there's more wine, the *sheva b'rakhot* (7 blessings – note that important #7)), and the breaking of the glass. Ten centuries ago these were two separate ceremonies often occurring a year apart as the husband made preparations for a new home. Today, the two are performed together and the reading of the **Ketubah** is a demarcation between them. The signed certificate is then entrusted to the bride.



### A work of art

Recently there has been a renewal of interest in Jewish Scribal Art and elaborate **Ketubot**. Hand-painting, calligraphy, historical Jewish motifs or biblical verses are commissioned to personalize the contract. As a work of art with personal significance, their **Ketubah** is often prominently hung in a married couple's new home. View magnificent **Ketubot** collections from around the world at <http://jnu1.huji.ac.il/dl/ketubbot/>.

To all those celebrating a June wedding anniversary or attending a June wedding, we extend a *Mazel Tov* (the Ashkenazi term "Good Luck") and *Siman Tov* – (the Sephardic expression "Congratulations"). Recall that we greet the Sabbath "Bride;" Judaism's sentiments about the power and holiness of marriage are clear.