

Kramer

מרכז לעניני חנוך



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EXCERPTS FROM A LETTER

(Re: Some Aspects of the Marriage Ceremony)

... in reply to your question regarding the significance of the custom during the marriage ceremony that the bride make seven circuits around the groom under the Chuppah.

The answer to this question, it seems to me, has to cover the following sub-questions: (1) The significance of the circuit, (2) its repetition seven times, (3) the bride circling around the groom and not vice versa, (4) the bride then joining the groom, standing by his side within that circle.

I trust the following may give you a satisfactory answer.

It is stated in the Zohar (Part III, 7:2) that marriage, which is a union of two distinct persons, is in reality a union of two halves of the same soul. Each one, when born, possesses but half *) of that soul which becomes one and complete only in wedlock, through Chuppah and Kiddushin.

This is why marriage is one of the greatest soul-stirring experiences of the bride and groom, for their respective souls have

*) This does not mean, of course, that it is half a soul in every respect. But in the sense that in some respects, viz. the settling up of a home, an individual is but a "half," and his soul is likewise a "half."

found at last the other half. Something of this joy is experienced, by way of illustration, at the re-union of two close relatives or beloved friends who had been separated for decades.

To a certain extent, therefore, the marriage marks the beginning of a complete and full life, while the pre-marital life of either the bride or groom may be considered in the nature of a preparatory period.

The union of the two parts of the same soul is not a union of two identical halves which ~~make~~ one whole. But they complement each other, each of them ~~enriching~~ the other with powers and qualities which hitherto were not possessed by him or her. For the "masculine" and "feminine" parts of the soul have basic differences, reflecting, broadly speaking, the character differences of the sexes. One such difference is what our Sages called "the nature of the male to conquer," i.e. the propensity of the male to conquer new 'provinces' (in business, profession, science, etc.) outside his home. This quality is generally not found in the female. On the other hand, the woman is called in our sacred literature the "Foundation of the House," for within the house her personality and innermost qualities are best expressed and asserted (Psalms 45:14).

It has been mentioned earlier that marriage, in a sense, marks the beginning of a full life. The wedding ceremony reflects this by an allusion to the beginning of all life, especially human life. The Blessings of Betrothal (Birchoth Hanesuin) also begin with a reference to the creation of the first man, the first woman, and their wedding.

Ever since the creation of the world, human life has been based on the seven-day cycle. G-d created the world in six days and hallowed the seventh as a day of rest. Man was then commanded to work for six

days of the week, but to dedicate the seventh as a Sabbath unto G-d. When a Jew is about to set up a home and begin a full life, it is fitting that this principle of a happy life should be symbolized during the wedding ceremony. Hence the "Seven Days of Feasting," and the "seven Blessings" (Sheva Berachoth). This brings us also to the seven circuits of the bride around the groom.

Bearing the above in mind, as well as the earlier introductory remarks concerning the basic character differences between the male and female, the ceremony of the seven circuits which the bride makes around the groom suggests the following explanation:

The groom, who takes the initiative *) in bringing the union to fruition, is initially the center of the new Jewish home. He is the first to take his place under the Chuppah. When the bride is led to the Chuppah, she proceeds to make a circle around the groom. This symbolizes the delineation (in space) of their own world within the outer world, with her husband-to-be as its center. She continues to make circuits one after the other seven times, symbolizing that she, the "Foundation of the House," founds an edifice that would be complete on the first day of each and every week to come as on the second day, third, etc, to the end of all times and seasons, a lasting and 'eternal edifice' - Binyan adei-ad - (with the infinity of the "cycle"). Her own contribution to this sacred union is also implied in the fact that she makes the circuits around the groom.

*) This is expressed, e.g. by the saying of our Sages that "it is the custom of the man to seek a wife." During the marriage ceremony this is symbolized by the fact that the groom declares "Harei at, etc." (Be thou betrothed unto me, etc.), while the bride remains silent.

Having completed the seven circuits, the bride stands beside her husband-to-be in the center of the circle, for after the preparations for the building of their home, both of them, the husband and the wife, form its center. From here on, throughout the entire ceremony, both the bride and groom form the center of the holy ceremony, like a king and queen surrounded by a suite of honor. Their lives become united into One full and happy life, based on the One Torah with its precepts, given by the One G-d.

With all good wishes ...

Rabbi Mendel Schneerson

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