

Sukkot – 5768
Huppah

Shabbat Shalom and Hag Sameah.

I'll never forget my first wedding ... that I officiated at.

It was during rabbinical school, and my close college friend, Andy, asked me to officiate at his wedding. I was a bit nervous, but I was sweating more because the wedding was outside. That would have been fine, except it was the middle of July, 95 degrees, and incredibly humid.

While most of the bridal party thought we should head indoors, Dayna, the bride, asked that we not relinquish her dream of an outdoor wedding. Suffice it to say, we did the best we could and, although we did pass out water and lemonade, a few guests were overcome by the heat.

Anyone getting married in the near future or planning a wedding, please remember this.

As we studied the ceremony, discussing what it means to build a Jewish home together, we found ways to personalize the ceremony.

One of the ways that Andy and Dayna did this was by commissioning an artist to silk-screen a beautiful *huppah* for their wedding. They met with the artist and gave her different themes, ideas, and values that were important to both of them. The artist then painted a beautiful *huppah* with scenes of nature and peace. On the day of the wedding, I saw the huppah unfurled in the outdoor setting. It was a gorgeous white silk *huppah* with gentle, soft pictures above us. It beautifully reflected my friends: peaceful, loving people, who enjoy nature and hiking, who care about the environment and the world.

What it was not, however, was shelter. It was quite exposed, and on that hot day it really didn't provide any shade.

The huppah is a fascinating ritual item. It is supposed to symbolize the new home the couple is building; in addition, at the wedding it serves as a focal point, a place where God's divine presence is felt most intensely.

But where does it come from?

The first mention comes from the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, where the Psalmist mentions the *huppah* in describing how the heavens respond to God's command: "He placed in the (them) [heavens] a tent for the sun, who is like a groom coming forth from the chamber [the huppah], like a hero, eager to run his course." Around 400 BCE, the prophet Yoel (Joel) declares that everyone should

come together – including *khallah m'hupata* – a bride from her bridal chamber (2:13).

The Talmud states that a marriage does not take legal effect until the bride has entered the *huppah*. But what exactly is this *huppah*? Many medieval rabbis were uncertain about what precisely the Talmud was thinking of when it said “the *huppah*.”

According to many authorities the *huppah* was the groom's house, or, if not, it was a room or space other than the bride's parental home. This makes sense since originally the Jewish wedding was two distinct ceremonies: *erusin* – betrothal with a ring - and then some time later, *kiddushin* – the seven blessings after which the couple moved in together. During the intervening months, the groom had to work and make money to buy or find a place for them to live.

By entering the groom's house or new space, the bride declared her official independence from her family, accepting the protection of her husband. Rabbinic scholars debate whether for this purpose an actual house is required, or whether the requirement can be fulfilled through some sort of symbolic structure or act.

Much of that original function of the *huppah* has now come to be embodied in a separate portion of the marriage procedures that we call "*yihud*," ("coming together") when the newlyweds take a few minutes to be alone in a room together after the conclusion of the wedding ceremony to demonstrate their new status as a married couple.

In most early sources, it was this secluding of the bride and groom that was designated the *huppah*. They were also concerned that the groom own this room and demonstrate that by decorating it with special ornamentation.

Writing in the twelfth century, Rabbi Isaac ben Abba Mari of Marseilles relates that it was customary to decorate the designated room with colorful cloths and tapestries, or to fashion a kind of *sukkah* adorned with myrtle leaves and roses.

Rabbi Isaac also mentions another custom – one of which he disapproves – namely that of spreading a cloth or a *tallit* over the heads of the couple during the recitation of the marriage blessings. This closely approximates our current practice, though Rabbi Isaac did not consider it acceptable. By the sixteenth century we encounter the earliest references to the four-posted *huppah* with which we are now familiar. Initially it was accepted with some reluctance, but it is now in universal use among Ashkenazi Jews. It is not only a standard now, but also a beautiful part of a Jewish wedding.

In addition to its technical function in the formalizing of the marriage, the *huppah* was endowed with many rich symbolic associations. For example, the midrash relates how the very first wedding in history was accompanied by a *huppah* – in fact, according to one legend, God made ten *huppot* for Adam and Eve, each of them fashioned of gold and precious gems, while the angels entertained the first couple in song and dance.

The event in Jewish history that is considered the paradigm of all weddings is the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai. In the biblical account of the marriage between God and the people of Israel, our sages also discovered allusions to the presence of a *huppah*, whether in the enveloping cloud of darkness that hovered over the people, or in the fact that the Israelites, about to enter into their marriage with God, were made to stand "*beneath the mountain*"-- just as the bride stands beneath the sheltering *huppah* on her wedding day.

So, we have our custom of the *huppah*, closed on the top with a decorative covering or *tallit* and open on the sides. This image reminds us of Abraham's tent that was open to others, the model of Middle Eastern and Jewish hospitality. Our *huppah* is not closed off, symbolizing that, while the couple creates a space that only the two of them will enter, they remain engaged with the rest of the world, building a home that will fulfill the mitzvah of *hakhnasat orhim* - welcoming guests.

Now, you might be wondering, what does this have to do with anything? Why discuss the *huppah* today on Sukkot, outside of the fact that we have a double *aufruf*?

Well, the *huppah* and the *sukkah* feel similar; they are open, one on the sides and one on the top. They are both places where we sense God's presence more intensely.

The origin of the *sukkah* is unclear. The Torah states that they were the temporary homes our ancestors made during their years in the Sinai wilderness. Some claim that the huts with the branches on top are the harvest huts that ancient farmers (and, actually, some present-day Arab farmers) used while they were bringing in the harvest each year. They slept in the fields in such structures to keep track of the produce until it could be safely brought in from the countryside to the villages in which they lived.

As a religious practice, the *sukkah* becomes something different. While often the harvest was a time of plenty, it was the beginning of a time of vulnerability for the ancient Israelites. After Sukkot, the rainy season begins; their lives depended on the rainfall that would come during the next few months. No rain, no future.

We are commanded to go live in a temporary hut that is open to the heavens and the rain – a stark reminder that while God’s love is present in the world, it is not an all-encircling shield. Like the sukkah or the uncertain rainfall, there are no guarantees.

In the same vein, the *huppah* is not sturdy – I had one almost blow away at an outdoor wedding a few weeks ago. It is open to the wind and the elements. It reminds the partners underneath of the sacredness of the moment, but perhaps also of the fragility and the vulnerability. Marriages, like people, are fragile and can fall apart without love, joy, devotion and work. A marriage is also where we are exposed and vulnerable, and in that sense is the most challenging and fulfilling relationship we can have.

The great Hasidic master, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter, the Gerer Rebbe who lived in Warsaw a century ago, taught that the sukkah is like the *huppah*. He interprets the phrase *Ani Adonai Mekadeshkhem* – I am Adonai who sanctifies Israel as we were taken out of Egypt – to mean I am Adonai who did *kiddushin*, from the same word – *kadosh* – holy, that is the second half of a Jewish wedding. Thus, God marries us on Yom Kippur and the Sukkah is the seven-day wedding celebration, a time of intimacy for God and the Jewish people.

Think about the words – *huppah* from *Het Fay Fay* – meaning to cover, and sukkah from *sekhakh* – *Samekh Khaf Khaf* – also meaning to hide or cover. One was the place where originally the couple was hidden from others and the other a place where God gently covers us.

An even deeper connection can be the theological underpinnings of the wedding and Sukkot. While the *sheva brakhot*, the seven blessings of the wedding contain echoes of creation, they also point to the future redemption of the world. The tradition sees the wedding as an opportunity for creating new life, and since the new child born could be the Messiah – the wedding is a taste of the Messianic age.

Sukkot is filled with the theme of redemption; some of the *haftarot* discuss this and the 70 sacrifices that we read about in its Torah reading relate to the 70 nations of the world. In the Messianic age, all the nations of the world will gather in Jerusalem under God’s *Sukkat Shalom* – God’s tent of peace.

Thinking back to that moment, standing under Andy and Dayna’s *huppah*, seeing their love for each other – it was a reminder of the shalom that we can bring into the world. It was a reminder to me of the *sukkat shalom*, the sukkah of peace.

May we all be blessed with the blessings of *huppah* and the Sukkah of feeling God’s presence and God’s shelter. Amen.

