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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

# Jewish Family Customs.

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THE family is the unit of the community; it therefore possesses more than ordinary importance in Jewish life, which has existed upon a purely communal basis ever since the downfall of Judæa. It is the bond of cohesion which has resisted the dissolving forces of dispersion, which has safeguarded the purity of the race, and preserved the continuity of religious tradition. It is the stronghold of Jewish sentiment and of the historic consciousness, the scene in which some of the most essential features of religious practice find their principal expression, the medium in which Jewish life unfolds itself in its most typical forms and intimate phases, with all those habits, customs, and superstitions, that make up national individuality. To found a family is regarded not merely as a social ideal but as a religious duty. The Rabbis declared that the first positive command in the Bible was to propagate the species, basing their dictum upon the injunction, "Be fruitful and multiply," in the first chapter of Genesis. They laid potent stress upon the institution of marriage, invested it with the highest communal significance, and endowed it with the aureole of sanctity. They regarded the bachelor with contempt, which almost amounted to aversion; they felt for the spinster unbounded pity. Only he who had founded a house in Israel was worthy to be considered a full-fledged member of the community, to whom all honours and offices were open; only she who had become a mother in Israel had fulfilled her natural function and realized her destiny. The traditional importance of family life still holds sway in modern times, though in the East the domestic circle is broken up by forced emigration, and in the West it suffers assimilation to the predominant conditions.

The Rabbis of ancient times prescribed the eighteenth year as the age for marriage. In the Russian Pale of Settlement, in

Galicia and in Palestine, this Rabbinic counsel is still devoutly followed, while in other Eastern countries, Morocco, Persia, and India, marriage often takes place soon after puberty. In Russia political conditions have combined with moral considerations to produce early marriages, for married men are exempt from military service. Moreover, the father who has a dowry for his daughter seeks to secure her marriage before the dot can be imperilled by a riotous outbreak. On the other hand, in Western countries early marriages are rendered less frequent by economic conditions, though they are more frequent than among the general population, owing to the zeal and energy Jewish parents display for the nuptial welfare of their children, particularly of their daughters. The standard of material comfort aimed at in Western lands may, and does, postpone the age of marriage, but the traditional ideal of family life acts as a check upon a distant postponement. The vitality and influence of this ideal correspond very largely to the degree of devotion which any particular community may show to the general raditions, social and religious, of Jewish life. In families where that devotion is intense, and where the multiplicity of orthodox observances is preserved, there early marriages are most frequent, or at least the desire for them is keenest. But in households that have long been established in a Western environment, and whose members have become assimilated to the social conditions around them, the age for marriage approximates to that among the general population.

The influence of environment in determining the age for marriage also operates in regard to the methods by which the event is arranged and the customs by which it is celebrated. In Eastern countries most remote from European civilization, such as Morocco, Persia, and India, the marriage is arranged by the parents of the young couple, who, owing to their extreme youth, submissively acquiesce in whatsoever fate is decided for them. In Eastern Europe the parental negotiations are preceded by the labours of a matrimonial agent, who is one of the most typical and interesting figures in Jewish life at the present

day. The profession of the *Shadchan*, as he is called, is rendered necessary by the segregation of the sexes, which is strictly observed in most of the communities in Eastern Europe, and by the limited opportunity of acquaintance among young people. The *Shadchan* is a prized visitor in the home of every marriageable girl, and his visits continue until their object is attained. No girl without a dowry, unless endowed with natural charms, is likely to be helped by his services; the larger the dowry the greater are his opportunities of effecting a satisfactory union and receiving a handsome commission. Nobility of pedigree or family repute (*yihuth*) is another important asset on the side of the bride; it resolves itself ultimately into the family reputation for piety, learning, philanthropy, and communal influence. In the case of the bridegroom the highest virtue is excellence in Talmudic study, which far surpasses in value a splendid pedigree or a dazzling income bedimmed with ignorance. In most of the teeming communities of Russian and Galician Jewry the father still regards sacred learning as the noblest possession in a son-in-law, and if he can ally his daughter to a budding Rabbi he believes it is an act that will find especial grace in the eyes of the Almighty. The lack of worldly means or prospects on the part of the bridegroom, if he should have no intention of adopting a religious profession, forms not the least deterrent, for in these communities it has been the custom for generations for the father of the bride to keep his son-in-law in his own house for the first two years after marriage, and then to set him up in a house and business of his own. The services of the *Shadchan* in arranging such unions are in great and constant demand; his area of operations is very wide, extending throughout the Russian Pale, and even across the frontier into Galicia and Roumania, and occasionally by means of correspondence to more distant lands. He keeps a notebook of particulars about marriageable maidens and wondrous young scholars in all the provinces within his ken, and effects alliances between families separated by hundreds of miles and hitherto utterly unaware of one another's existence.

His ways and wiles are ingenious and infinite, and have formed the theme of many an entertaining novel in Hebrew, Yiddish, and more modern languages. His match-making is sometimes a supplement to another calling, generally of a religious order, such as that of synagogue precentor or ritual slaughterer, though it is also compatible with a purely secular occupation; while occasionally it forms his sole or staple industry, to which he devotes unflagging energy and unbounded ardour. The couples whom he brings together hardly know one another before marriage, and sometimes see each other for the first time on their wedding day. Happiness under such circumstances might seem to be problematical, but the factors that make for its attainment are the youth of both persons, the absence of any previous attachment or fancy on the part of either, and the fact that marriage affords them the first opportunity of learning and developing the sentiment of love.

Proceeding Westwards we find that the arrangement of marriages tends to vary approximately in accord with local customs and conditions. The comparative freedom of intercourse between the sexes allows of the natural development of personal affinities, though the process may be retarded by a vigilant and critical mother. The Talmudic scholarship of a young man enjoys little of the importance attaching to it in the marriage-market of Eastern Europe; it is put into the shade by secular scholarship and scientific distinction, the respect for which, particularly prevalent in Germany, is a modern form of a medieval tradition. But throughout the predominating section of Western Jewry the decisive element in the bridegroom's suitability, apart from the personal factor, is his worldly position and prospects. As for the bride she must, like her sister in the Russian Pale, be provided with a dowry, or be possessed of compensating beauty, otherwise she is likely to be doomed to spinsterhood. Despite the general freedom of intercourse between the sexes, furthered by the growth of social clubs and the increasing tendency of Jewish girls to earn their own living, the duties of the *Shadchan* are

by no means obsolete. On the contrary, throughout the lands of the West he drives a busy if somewhat uncertain trade, though his livelihood hardly ever depends entirely upon his brokerage. In America, where the instability of the nuptial tie seems also to have affected Jewish life, he is even insured by the contracting parties against a breach of promise. In Germany and Austria he has in recent years found an insidious rival in the Press, in the advertisement columns of which anxious mothers invite offers for the hands and fortunes of their accomplished and domesticated daughters, specifying the exact amount of their marriage portion and the particular shade of their religious conformity, while would-be bridegrooms publish details of their commercial or professional status and their requirements as to the wealth, beauty, and domestic virtues of prospective brides. Despite these match-making agencies, whether of professional brokers or newspaper advertisements, mutual affection plays a great and growing part as a prelude to marriages in the West, and the period of engagement that precedes the wedding—an arrangement not known, or at least not observed in the East—enables the couple to gain a much-needed knowledge of one another. Western Jewry is sharply divided from Eastern Jewry in the facility and frequency of marriages for love pure and simple, and likewise in the care and prudence exercised to prevent improvident unions. In the East the religious importance attaching to marriage, the stigma attaching to celibacy, and the innate faith in the Almighty as the bountiful Provider of daily needs, usually outweigh material considerations, but this spiritual attitude finds little or no acceptance in the West, where the material sustenance of wedded life must generally be assured before its obligations are entered upon. This difference of attitude results not only in the postponement of marriage in the West, but also in the increase of celibacy, a tendency which is favoured by the sense of independence acquired by women who earn their own living, and who find therein a source of consolation or distraction not open to their sisters in the East. Thus, the economic con-

ditions of the modern world tend to modify profoundly the ideals of family life treasured by the children of Israel throughout the ages.

In ancient times the ceremony of betrothal (*erusin*) was a solemn act, almost as binding as that of marriage. It consisted in the signing by both parties of a contract which imposed a penalty upon the one guilty of breach of promise, and its provisions could be set aside only by formal divorce. The betrothal was followed twelve months after by marriage (*nissuin*, "home-taking"). But when the Jews became dispersed among the nations they found the ancient custom inexpedient or impracticable, so they combined the two ceremonies in the marriage service. A Jewish betrothal, therefore, resembles in character the usual engagement in the West, though it receives a sort of religious sanction in the synagogue, in which the bridegroom, on the Sabbath following, is called up to the reading of the Law. In the case of a breach of promise, the aggrieved party who desires compensation cannot obtain it by Jewish law but must resort to the law of the land; but this procedure is not generally adopted owing to the modesty of the girl whose sad experience would become the dominant theme of gossip, not merely in the Jewish community of her own city, but of the entire land. For within the world of Jewry the limelight of publicity beats as fiercely as in any village upon an unfulfilled romance, and the distressed heroine who hopes to meet another lover finds discretion the better part of valour in dealing with the author of her passing affliction.

The religious solemnization of marriage is, in its essential features, the same in all communities; its festive celebration differs very widely, being influenced by conditions of environment. The wedding may not take place on Sabbaths, feast-days, or fasts, or in specially prohibited periods; but on the Sabbath before the wedding-day the bridegroom is called up to the reading of the Law, and a blessing is invoked upon him and his bride and relatives. In orthodox communities both the bride and bridegroom fast on their wedding-day until the festal repast,

in expiation of their sins, and the bride takes a ritual bath; but these customs, while strictly observed in the East, are falling into desuetude in the West. The scene of the wedding ceremony is usually in the synagogue, where the rule as to the separation of the sexes, which is enforced at all religious services, is disregarded for the joyous event. The service is generally conducted by the minister with choral assistance, and sometimes with the accompaniment of instrumental music even in synagogues that are innocent of such an element on ordinary occasions of Divine worship. The actual solemnization takes place under a canopy (*huppah*) which is stationed before the Ark of the Law, and beneath which the young couple take their places, supported by their respective sponsors, who are known in Jewish idiom as *Unterführer*. In Western countries such modern features as best man, bridesmaids, and even page-boys, have been adopted pretty generally. The canopy is a survival of the litter in which the bride in ancient days was carried off, or of the room in which she was left alone with her husband for a time. The celebrant recites the marriage benediction, offers a cup of wine to bride and bridegroom, and then the latter, placing a ring upon his bride's finger, makes the declaration: "Lo, thou art dedicated unto me by this ring, according to the Law of Moses and Israel." The marriage document, which is an Aramaic composition on parchment, is read; the minister utters a blessing over a second cup of wine; and the bridegroom crushes a glass under his foot. This last custom is a symbol of grief for the loss of Zion; it is a survival from Talmudic times, and is disregarded in more advanced communities. An address by the officiating Rabbi usually follows, particularly in Western countries, and then the marriage register is signed.

Compliance with the civil law of the land as regards marriage is insisted upon by the religious authorities, who invariably have official relations with the responsible department of the Government. The civil law is occasionally disregarded by the poor, either from poverty, owing to the expense of the registration, or from ignorance; and they have a private wedding (*stille*

*Chasunah*) at home, which is solemnized by an impecunious Rabbi. Such marriages occur both in Eastern Europe and in Western Ghettos, but they are on the decrease owing to a growing knowledge of the perils involved by illegitimacy.

No alliance may take place between a member of the Jewish faith and a Gentile, unless the latter previously becomes a proselyte, nor between a member of the priestly caste, a Cohen, and a widow or a divorced woman. Marriage with a brother's widow, which, when there was no issue, was regarded as obligatory in Bible times (Deut. xxv. 5-6), is generally discountenanced, and the ceremony for evading the obligation (*halizah*—"taking off the shoe") is observed pretty widely (Deut. xxv. 7-10). The widow may not remarry until this ceremony has been carried out, and an unscrupulous brother-in-law may refuse to submit to it unless she will pay him a sum of money. The Reform view, however, is that *halizah* is not essential to the marriage of the widow, and the ceremony is ignored by those of a liberal tendency.

The social celebration of a wedding assumes different forms in different places. In Oriental countries the festivities continue over several days, and the leading of the bride to the home of her husband amid gladsome acclaim is a custom in which a large circle of friends participate. In the swarming centres of Jewry in Russia and Galicia, particularly in the townlets with a tense Jewish atmosphere, the wedding is almost a communal event. It is the occasion of a reunion of relatives and friends from far and wide, who make as merry as they can in the distressing conditions around them. The feast is prolonged to a late hour, while profound discourses on Talmudic themes are delivered not only by the spiritual leaders of the congregation, but also by the bridegroom, who, apparently, is expected to be so free from the exciting emotions of his new estate as to be able to hold forth for an hour upon some controversial theological topic. The importance attached to the discourse (*Derashah*) of the groom is significantly shown in the fact that a wedding-present is called a *Derashah-Geschenk* (a

Hebrew-German hybrid). Intellectual fare of a lighter kind is provided by fiddlers (*Klesmer*), who form an almost indispensable element at a party in Eastern Europe. One of their number is a jester (*Badhan* or *Marschalik*) who improvises songs and japes, moving his audience to uproarious laughter, and who then, addressing the bride, assumes a serious vein—sometimes mock-serious—and reduces her to tears by depicting the trials and tribulations that await the virtuous housewife in Israel. In Western countries a dinner and ball are considered in the middle classes the requisite features of a fashionable celebration, and in each locality there is a recognized code or ritual that is scrupulously observed—lest critical neighbours make carping comment. The style of invitation cards, the splendour of the carriages, the richness of the dresses, the gorgeousness of the repast, the excellence of the orchestra, the number and nature of the speeches—all these are factors that distinguish a Jewish wedding in the West, even among the most orthodox, from a similar event in the East, and they are largely copied from the prevalent fashion. On the Continent, particularly in Germany, it is customary to perform an amateur play dealing with the foibles of the young couple and their families. The institution of the honeymoon, which is unknown in Eastern Jewry, is sedulously cultivated throughout the West by all whose means allow them to indulge in the luxury. In the case of conforming families, the honeymoon is postponed until after the Sabbath following the wedding, as a domestic celebration, known as the "Seven Blessings," is observed on the day of rest. But this custom, too, is falling into decay among the modernized class, with whom the honeymoon is begun a few hours after the religious rite has been solemnized in the synagogue.

No marriage is considered blessed that has no issue; no family is considered complete without children. The maternal instinct of the Jewess is not only a natural emotion but a traditional ideal. She finds her historic prototype in Hannah, who, in her longing for a child, vowed that if it were a son she would

dedicate him all his days to the service of the Lord. The simple yet essential conditions of domestic bliss are picturesquely phrased by the Psalmist: "Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine, in the innermost parts of thine house; thy children like olive plants round about thy table." Such stress is laid upon the function of maternity that a husband is entitled to a divorce after ten years if the marriage has been childless, and hence among the poor pious classes in Eastern Europe a childless wife will perform all manner of virtuous deeds to secure the Divine favour of motherhood. In her anxiety to gaze into the future she will consult a seer who is known as a "Good Jew," a man learned in Cabbalistic lore, who is reputed to have inherited the wisdom if not the piety of the "Baal Shem," the founder of Chassidism in the eighteenth century. Combined with her naturally deep love for children, engendered by the hereditary ideal of domestic affection, there is also a religious element in her yearning for motherhood. It consists in the wish for at least one son, who will honour his parents' memory after death by reciting a special prayer, to which profound—and almost superstitious—importance is attached. The prayer is known as the *Kaddish* (sanctification), and the name of the prayer is popularly transferred to an only son. The desire for children is generally gratified, often in an abundant measure, though large families are not so prevalent in the West as in the East. In modern countries Jews display a susceptibility to the local spirit in restricting the growth of their families, and thus applying a prudential check that was unknown to their forefathers and which is still unfamiliar to their brethren living in the East or impregnated with the Eastern spirit.

The birth of a child is attended by a number of customs, partly religious, and partly superstitious, though the latter are confined mostly to communities in Eastern Europe and the Orient. In centres of Ghetto life its advent is heralded some months before, thanks to the gossip of the local midwife, who is almost as important a character as the *Shadchan*. In ignorant families there still prevails a belief in the power of Lilith over

new-born babes, and her sinister influence is exorcized by a display of charms and amulets on the walls of the sick-chamber. These charms are mostly in the form of printed leaflets in Hebrew, bearing Psalm verses (Ps. xx.) and an invocation to the guardian angels—Sannui, Sansannui, and Samangaluf—which are hung near the door or window. During the first eight days of its life—and in some places even for the first thirty days—the child is protected from *benemmerin* (pixies) by a group of young school-children who recite the evening prayers in the lying-in chamber, under the supervision of a teacher. In such cities as Warsaw and Cracow one may often see a troop of dark-eyed infants, with pale cheeks and curling ear-locks, straggling after a lean dilapidated youth, in a long coat and peaked hat, on their way to or from their spiritual ministrations. In parts of Germany, in Roumania, in the Caucasus, and in the lands still more deeply steeped in the spirit of the Orient there are other peculiar customs for the protection of mother and child, most of which owe their origin to that classic home of magic, ancient Babylon.

The birth of a boy is invariably greeted with greater joy than that of a girl. The reasons are partly social, partly religious, and partly economic. The Oriental view of the superiority of man to woman still largely colours the philosophy of Eastern Jewry. The religious pre-eminence of man consists in his being able to perform so many more commandments, Scriptural and Rabbinical, than the woman. And his economic advantage, which affords a "touch of nature" that makes the whole world kin, is particularly enhanced in a community in which the arrival of every daughter involves the saving up of a dowry. The principal custom connected with the birth of a male child is the "Covenant of the Circumcision," which takes place on the eighth day, or later if it is not strong enough for the ordeal. The ceremony as a rule is carried out at home; but on such solemn days as the New Year and the Fast of Atonement, it is occasionally held in the synagogue, particularly in congregations attached to orthodoxy. The operation, to be efficiently performed, requires expert surgical knowledge; and

hence there is a tendency in Western countries to engage a Jewish doctor for the rite in preference to a *Mohel* or practitioner who only possesses an ecclesiastical licence. The initiation of the child into the covenant of Abraham is made the occasion of a festive family reunion, at which, for religious reasons, the presence of at least ten male adults is necessary. The infant is borne from its mother's room by its godmother, who places it on the lap of its godfather, and the latter holds it while the operation is performed. The special prayers pertaining to the rite, including the conferment of a name, are recited either by the *Mohel*, or, if he be a doctor, by a minister or Rabbi. The squealing protests of the babe against the ordeal are neither so vehement nor so prolonged as one would presume, as surgical science has devised effective means for soothing the pain. The celebration in orthodox families takes the form of a breakfast, and the health of the parents and child is drunk in whisky or brandy, the favourite liquors for toasting a health in the Ghetto, whether in Eastern or Western Europe. In pious circles the speeches take the form of Talmudical discourses, to which the guests listen patiently and attentively, cheerfully sacrificing a few hours of the business day to this "banquet of religious merit." A firstborn son is liable to a further ceremony, on the thirty-first day after his birth (Exod. xiii. 12, 13; Num. xviii. 16), the "Redemption of the Son," which is still religiously observed in all orthodox centres. This rite consists in redeeming the child from a hypothetical sanctification to God by the payment of five *selaim*, or silver coins (reckoned at fifteen shillings), by the father to a Cohen or priest, a descendant of the ancient Aaronic family, and it is also made the occasion of a happy gathering, generally in the evening. The money received by the Cohen is usually devoted to some charity. In comparison with these sacred and elaborate customs, the formal reception of a female child into the congregation of Israel is simplicity itself. It consists in an announcement in the synagogue of her birth and her Hebrew name in the morning service of the Sabbath following her birth. But owing to the general

indifference to ceremonialism that is spreading in Western Jewry, and the lax attendance at synagogue, there is an increasing disregard even for this simple function, and the registration of the birth at the office of the civil authority is frequently deemed sufficient.

In certain parts of Germany, however, there is a curious ceremony of naming girls, known as "Holle Kreish." On the Sabbath when the mother of the child attends the synagogue for the first time after her confinement, a number of young children are invited to the house for a festivity, where they form a circle around the cradle in which the infant lies. They lift the cradle three times, crying: "Holle! Holle! What shall the child's name be?" whereupon the child's common (non-Hebrew) name is called out in a loud voice, while the father recites the first verse of Leviticus. This custom probably originated in Germany, where Holle, like the Babylonian and Jewish Lilith, was regarded as a demon eager to carry off infants; and in order to protect the child from injury a circle was drawn around it and a name given under forms intended to ward off the power of Holle.

There is still another family celebration, which is not connected either with birth, betrothal, or marriage, but which occupies quite a unique place in Jewish life. It is the ceremony known as the *Bar Mitzvah* ("Son of the Commandment"), wherein a boy, on completing his thirteenth year, publicly assumes full religious responsibility as a member of the congregation of Israel. The rite, known in Western countries as "Confirmation," is of an essentially religious character, but its domestic celebration enjoys at least equal importance throughout Jewry, and in some communities even greater importance. On the Sabbath after his thirteenth birthday the boy is called up to the reading of the Law in the synagogue, and cantillates a portion in the traditional melody, while his father offers up a benediction for being exempted from future responsibility for the lad's religious conformity. The festivity at home takes the form mostly of a breakfast after the service, at which a series o

speeches are delivered, including one by the boy himself. In particularly orthodox families, especially in Eastern Europe, the boy's speech consists of a Talmudical discourse, which is keenly followed by a critical assembly, and by which a reputation for precocious scholarship is often achieved, a distinction that is borne in mind by a far-seeing *Shadchan*. In Western countries, where the domestic factor in the rite predominates over the spiritual factor, the traditional breakfast has given way to an afternoon reception, at which the boy's presents are displayed. Orthodoxy knows of no counterpart to this ceremony in the case of a girl, but the Reform community has instituted special confirmation services for girls. There is a domestic factor in these celebrations, too, for the girl to be confirmed is dressed in a white frock, and in some countries also in a bridal wreath and train, a festive attire that preludes a family party and a shower of gifts from affectionate relations and admiring friends.