

## May a Reception Following a Halakhically Unacceptable Wedding be Held in a Synagogue?

*A woman has not received a get from her first husband. May the wedding party following her second marriage take place in a traditional synagogue?*

The meal following the wedding ceremony is a *se'udat mitzvah*, a festive meal linked to and part of the performance of the mitzvah (See *Ketubot* 8a). In fact, the Talmud (*Ketubot* 2a) tells us that in earlier times the rabbis insisted that previously unmarried women celebrated their weddings on Wednesday so that three full days would elapse from the previous Shabbat, during which the meal could be prepared. It is during this meal that the seven nuptial blessings which were recited under the *huppah*, are again recited following *Birkat Hamazon* (the prayer of thanks for the food eaten). All this teaches that the wedding reception is no ordinary meal but a significant part of the religious service.

Traditionally, the wedding service and the reception that followed would be in the same location, which in recent times has meant the synagogue. Today, this is no longer absolute. While many couples still choose this traditional model, others arrange to be married in the synagogue and then go elsewhere for the reception. Other couples marry elsewhere and then book the reception in the synagogue. No matter where the reception is held, however, it is still a continuation and a reflection of the religious service that preceded it.

There are undoubtedly many valid reasons for marrying elsewhere and then booking the reception in the synagogue, reasons about which we need not speculate. Nevertheless, because the wedding reception is a *se'udat mitzvah* and reflective of the wedding ceremony that preceded it, the synagogue ought to be cautious. There

are families or couples who, realizing that the marriage was halakhically invalid, as in this case where a woman without a *get* is nevertheless married to a man by a rabbi who consented to perform the ceremony, want to authenticate or validate the “Jewishness” of the marriage by holding the wedding reception in the synagogue. From the family’s perspective this may be emotionally satisfying but from the synagogue’s perspective booking such a reception would imply tacit approval.

The Talmud (*Avodah Zarah* 8a) tells us the following:

An idolater who prepares a wedding reception for his son and invites all the Jews in his city, even though the Jews eat their own food and beverage and are served by their own waiter, they are considered by Scripture as if they have eaten forbidden meat. As it is said: ‘They will invite you and you will eat of their sacrifices’ (Exodus 34:15).

While the Jews who “marry” elsewhere and hold the reception in the synagogue are not idolaters, the implication of this passage still applies. The very fact that Jews were present at the meal described by the Talmud makes them unwitting approbates, no matter the precautions taken. Similarly, the very booking of a wedding reception for such an halakhically invalid marriage makes the synagogue an unwitting endorser of such “marriages”.

The potential loss of catering revenue should not dissuade the synagogue from standing firm on this principle.

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