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## Moïseï Berlin, ethnographer of Jewish wedding customs in Russia (1861)

Claire LE FOLL

Popular customs carried out during a wedding take place as follows. On the Shabbat preceding the wedding day, the betrothed bridegroom-to-be is called upon to read the Torah at the synagogue (*aufrufen*) in the morning. When he returns from the synagogue, he receives the good wishes and congratulations of his male friends, and treats them to a delicious meal, according to his means. On the evening of this same Shabbat, the married women and unmarried girls gather at the home of the bride-to-be. Music is played, there are well-known songs (*zemirots*), and the jester (*badchen*) who entertains at Jewish weddings improvises verses aloud in Yiddish, the Jewish vernacular language. Each woman dances with the betrothed girl, then other dances and festivities follow. On the evening before the wedding, the women closest to the fiancée accompany her in her ritual bathing, which involves washing herself in a hot bath (*mikvel*). They teach her the rules of this purification, which she must carry out almost monthly, seven days after the end of her monthly purification. If she does not do so, her husband should not be permitted to touch her.

On the wedding day itself, the women gather in the fiancée's home and take turns to dance with her, to the same music and the same verses played on the evening of the preceding Shabbat. However, this time, verses with moral implications are added in order to prepare the fiancée for separation from her family, for her wifely duties, and so forth. This usually moves the women to tears. The bride-to-be then sits in the centre of the room and begins to wait for her fiancé, who himself has received a visit from the men while, to musical accompaniment, the jester has brought him presents from the bride. The gifts consist of: a) a woollen shawl with blue stripes (*talit*), which Jews wear during morning prayers; and b) a funeral shirt (*keitel*) which is only worn on the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) and at Passover, and is used for wrapping the dead in when they are buried. While handing over these gifts, the jester declaims his moral verses in a lively tone and then the

fiancé moves with his guests towards his bride's home. When he arrives there, to find her sitting in the centre of the room, he covers her head with a white cloth. The old people present sprinkle the couple with a handful of hops or oats while saying "may you grow into thousands of myriads."

The bridegroom's witnesses (**Note 1**) or his best man slip the *kittel* on him and light two torches. The jester calls on the parents and the oldest family members on both sides to pronounce the blessing. Each guest lays his hands on the couple's heads and blesses them according to an accepted form of words. Then everyone goes to the place where the wedding is to be conducted (**Note 2**). The betrothed couple, who have been fasting since the morning, then eat a fortifying broth, known as a "golden soup," from the same dish. A feast is offered to the guests, and at the end of it each person brings a gift to the young married couple. The master of ceremonies announces each gift with an abundance of witty remarks and jokes.

After the banquet, the seven blessings (*sheva brakhs*) are repeated: these have previously been proclaimed, during the marriage ceremony, over the cup of wine from which the couple have drunk. The bride then sits in the centre of the room and the guests of honour each take a turn to dance with her (this custom is called "the kosher dance" because it is only performed if the bride is pure; however, if she is menstruating and has not been able to carry out the purification rite, then the dance does not take place because, according to the law of Moses, her fiancé is not authorized to touch her before purification has taken place). The bride's female friends then take her to the bridal chamber while the husband remains with the guests, who dance and declaim passages from the Holy Scriptures while waiting for the bride's friends to return. Then the best man and the husband are accompanied to the bridal chamber (**Note 3**). It is important to note that, according to Jewish custom, the women do not dance with the men, but each sex dances separately. However, this oriental custom is gradually disappearing, and I am speaking of the mass, not the exceptions.

The following day, the women shave the bride's head, according to the fashion of married women who have now lost the status of unmarried girls. Then the feasting and dancing begin again. On the first Shabbat following the wedding, her women friends gather at the bride's house and accompany her to the synagogue for the first time (since unmarried girls do not go to the synagogue, even when they become adult); they congratulate her once more and, on their return to the house, the feasting recommences. Only if the man has married a virgin is this the way things are done. In the case of marriage with a divorcee or a widow, no ceremony takes place except for the legal act itself and the marriage passes off without any music.

**Note 1:** A maximum of two couples are appointed as witnesses to the marriage (*Unterfürher*) and it is essential that these have only been married once. The husbands act as best men and their wives as matrons of honour.

**Note 2:** The marriage itself takes place as follows: the fiancé stands under a canopy (*kebuba*), placed in the open air near the synagogue. The bride's parents accompany her, together with the best men, and they all walk seven times around the bridegroom. While they are walking, the cantor intones ancient hymns. Next, the rabbi reads a prayer, holding a cup of wine (honey-beer or -wine) which he brings to the couple's lips. The bridegroom puts the wedding ring on the index finger of his fiancée's right hand, saying the words "with this ring, you become my wife, according to the law of Moses and Israel." The rabbi reads the marriage contract (*kesuba*), written in the Chaldean language, aloud, and then gives seven blessings, while holding the cup in his hands, and the couple drink from it once again. Then they break the cup, to remember that we are all made of dust. The reading of the prayer prior to the marriage, and the registration (*siddur kedushin*) and blessings which follow it (*sheva brakhs*) may be done by someone other than the rabbi, but always in the presence of ten adult Jews (Rus, IV, 2).

**Note 3:** It should be noted that young Jewish girls who have not kept their virginity (*besulim*) are extremely rare, since chastity is one of their most highly prized moral qualities. Moreover, older women who are close to the bride make careful efforts to check this after the couple first come together on their wedding night. If, on a particular occasion, the girl or young woman is struck by a disease of the uterus, or else injures herself, falls, jumps or has a fright, then it is reported to the rabbi who marks it in a special register (*pinkes*), specifying the date, the circumstances, the person concerned and the facts of the case (*mukas-ets*) so that her behaviour may be above suspicion in the event of loss of virginity. The smallest doubt in the matter would condemn the woman to eternal shame.

Extract from Moïseï Berlin,  
*Ethnographic study of the Jewish population in Russia*  
(published in Russian, 1861)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The text was translated from Russian into French by the author of this article. Both in the French version and the English translation, the original Jewish terms reflect Berlin's transliterations, based on the Ashkenazi pronunciation of words used in Eastern Europe at this period (for example *zemiros* rather than *zemirot*). It should be noted that in the original text Berlin transliterated these words into Cyrillic characters, with the exception of the words "aufrufen" and "unterfürher" which appear as they were originally, in Latin characters.

This text is an extract from the *Ethnographic study of the Jewish population in Russia*, published in Russian in 1861 by Moïseï Berlin, under the auspices of the Russian Imperial Geographical Society.<sup>2</sup> It was the first ethnographic study devoted to the Jews of the Russian Empire, more than fifty years in advance of the first ethnographic expeditions led by Sh. An-sky, who is generally considered to be the first ethnographer of Russian Jews.<sup>3</sup> This study is based on the knowledge and observations of its author, rather than on the results of a one-off expedition, a question to which I shall return. Moïseï Berlin may be considered as a fairly typical example of an enlightened Jew (*maskil*), in possession of a dual culture. He was heir to the intellectual rabbinic tradition (*mitnaged*)<sup>4</sup> but he also received a secular European education and had severed relations with the Jewish community. Like many mid-nineteenth century *maskilim*, he offered his services to the Russian state and played a part in implementing the reforms of Jewish society initiated by Tsar Nicholas I.<sup>5</sup> After his studies in Germany, Berlin became a primary teacher in a Jewish state school, then in 1853 was appointed “learned Jew” or expert in Jewish affairs (*utsbenyi evrei/uchenyi evrei*) to the governor-general of the provinces of Vitebsk, Mogilev and Smolensk. He remained in this post until 1856. It was during his office as “learned Jew” that Berlin had the opportunity to observe the customs of his fellow Jews. The role of “learned Jew” was intended both to spread the good word of the government to a population which was largely reticent and suspicious of reform, but also to provide the authorities

<sup>2</sup> M. Berlin, *Otsberk etnografii evreiskogo narodonaseleniia v Rossii* [Ethnographic study of the Jewish population in Russia], Saint Petersburg, in *Zapiski imperatorskogo russkogo geografitsbeskogo obshtshestva*, vol. 1, 1861: 24–27. The text has never before been translated.

<sup>3</sup> On Berlin’s ethnographic study, as well as his influence and place in the history of Jewish and Russian ethnography, see Le Foll 2014.

<sup>4</sup> *Mitnaged*, plural *mitnagdim*. This is a Hebrew word meaning “opponent” and refers to the adversaries of Hassidism, a movement for spiritual renewal started in the eighteenth century and considered to be a sect by rabbinic Jews.

<sup>5</sup> The government of Nicholas I wanted to bring Jews “closer together” with non-Jewish society by abolishing the *kahal* (1844), creating Jewish state schools (1844), taxing the wearing of traditional clothing and creating a rabbinic commission intended to bring order into the religious and family life of Jews. See Stanislawski 1983, Freeze 2002, Avrutin 2010.

with specific information and explanations of the lives and religious practices of Jews. The “learned Jews” were asked to produce statistics on the numbers of synagogues, schools and rabbis, but also to explain the “strange” habits of Jews and signal any manifestation of “Jewish fanaticism.”<sup>6</sup> Berlin was therefore not only an expert on Judaism in general but also possessed sound knowledge of the daily practices and popular rituals of the Jews of Belorussia [now Belarus], his region of origin and his place of work. Traces of his standpoint as a reforming Jew, anxious to help Jews gain better acceptance in Russian society, can be detected throughout his ethnographic study. I shall return to this question later.

Berlin responded to the appeal put out by the Russian Geographical Society in 1848, and repeated in 1853, to study the Russian people, together with all the peoples living in the Empire. This survey was part of a wider state undertaking whose purpose was to gain better knowledge with a view to more effectively governing the Empire in all its cultural, linguistic and confessional diversity.<sup>7</sup> Berlin more or less followed the format of the questionnaire issued by the Society, with the aim of guiding volunteers in collecting information, but he had his own reasons to do so. In a context of lively debate over the Jewish question, he was attempting to prove through his survey that the Jews of Russia were a respectable people, and by doing this to refute the most anti-Semitic received ideas. He aimed to show they were a people endowed with an ancient history and sophisticated social structures, but also with fully-fledged Russian nationality and gifted with qualities that made them capable of reform and of becoming part of a Russian Empire in the process of modernization. When describing marriage and the most traditional aspects of Jews’ daily lives, Berlin depicted them as normal and

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<sup>6</sup> In the view of the Russian authorities, this fanaticism expressed itself in *kasbrut*, the observance of Shabbat and of religious feasts, the practice of certain rituals like praying to the new moon and even ritual murder. The more exuberant religious practices of the *Hassidim* (dances, songs, collection of gifts) were particularly disquieting to local authorities and symbolized the “Jewish isolation” which needed to be combated. See Le Foll 2017 (forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> On the Geographical Society and this appeal, see Knight 1998 and 2009; Berelowitch 1990.

honorable, laying stress on their religious and moral values, as much as on the ancient nature of these practices. His study gave a scientific basis to the recognition of separate Jewish identity and it aimed to make the Jews less alarming to a Russian people and government who were used to ubiquitous denunciation of so-called Jewish fanaticism and isolation.

Women occupy quite an important place in Berlin's ethnographic study, both in the sections on clothing and cooking and in those dealing with social organization, economic activities, education and popular medicine. Unlike members of the Jewish intellectual elite of the time who – whether they were religious or modern – often ignored women in their writing, Berlin made clear the important role played by women in the religious, economic and cultural life of East European Jews.<sup>8</sup> When describing the marriage rite, Berlin gave equal attention to the respective experiences of the man and the woman during the days preceding the ceremony (call to read the Torah – *oyfrufenish* in Yiddish – for the man; ritual purification through the *mikveh* for the woman), during the celebration (veiling of the fiancée – *bedeken* – and ceremony of the *huppa*, along with the blessings, wedding meal and “kosher dancing”) and after the wedding (wedding night, shaving of the woman's head and first prayer of the young bride at the synagogue).

The rituals he describes are generally confirmed, with a few nuances, by other descriptions. Although matrimonial policies, the age of marriage, and relationships between spouses evolved considerably over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the way betrothal and marriage ceremonies were carried out remained practically unchanged.<sup>9</sup> One has only to read the accounts of other writers of memoirs, ethnographers or authors to appreciate the continuity and uniformity of these rites, which underwent only slight regional variations despite the rapid transformation of Jewish society.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This has also been observed by Nathaniel Deutsch who, in addition, emphasizes the still more important contribution of Sh. An-sky to research on the particular experience of Jewish women (Deutsch 2006).

<sup>9</sup> On the historical development and the social, legal and cultural aspects of marriage, see Stampfer 2010: 26-55 and Freeze 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Pauline Wengeroff describes in detail the marriage of her sister Chaveh in her memoirs published in German in Berlin in 1913 and 1919 (Wengeroff 2000: 96-

The encyclopaedic questionnaire (the “Jewish ethnographic programme”), published by An-sky in 1914 as a guide for volunteers who wished to document and register the smallest details of daily and religious life in the small towns and villages, confirms that modernization brought very little change to nuptial rites.<sup>11</sup>

Berlin, like many other ethnographers after him, described with precision and fascination this religious ritual so specific to the Jews. A rite of passage for young men, as well as a moment of religious piety and intense shared fellowship, it allowed two individuals to be united in marriage, but it also enabled all levels of an increasingly fractured society to gather together and participate: rich and poor, erudite and uneducated, old and young, parents and parents-in-law, *Hassidim* and *mitnagdim*, men and women.<sup>12</sup> Each of their roles was clearly defined. The women of the community, whether they were poor or rich, close relatives or not, celebrated and danced with the bride-to-be (“Each woman dances with the fiancée, then follow dances and merrymaking”). According to Berlin, all the women, or the closest friends, initiated her into the purification rite of the *mikveh*. In the same way, the men of the community accompanied the betrothed young man to the synagogue at the solemn moment when he was called upon to read the Torah, helping him to dress and feasting with him. The wedding jester would entertain each one of the couple in turn, accompanied by musicians. The pivotal moments of the wedding would take place with the whole community present.

Aside from this symmetry between men and women in the religious ritual, marriage was for the woman, even more than for the man, a moment of major importance. Like him, she was becoming a sexually active and responsible adult, but she also henceforth had to observe the rules of *niddah* [purity], adopt the custom of married

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104). See also the study by the Ukrainian ethnographer Pavel Chubinski 1872; or the 1952 description, tinged with nostalgia, by Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog (Zborowski & Herzog 1952).

<sup>11</sup> Published and translated by Deutsch 2006: 210-233.

<sup>12</sup> For an analysis of the Jewish marriage rite in Eastern Europe, see Freeze 2002: 44-50. For examples of marriages between *Hassidim* and *mitnagdim*, one need only consult the memoirs of Pauline Wengeroff and Yekhezkel Kotik (Wengeroff 2000; Kotik 2002).

women by shaving her head and wearing a wig or headscarf, and take on religious duties. Her reputation and her future life therefore depended on this moment and on the confirmation of her virginity. The stakes were much higher than in other societies. Berlin underscored the specifically Jewish nature of this by stressing the commitment to chastity and the importance of purity and religious observance. From this point of view, the fact that the bride offers her husband a *talit* and a *kitel*, clothes associated with religious acts carried out by men, could be interpreted as the woman's recognition of the man's religious duties and her contribution to their enactment. Unlike other ethnographers after him, Berlin paid little attention in his description to the celebration of the marriage itself, which is described only in a note. Popular beliefs and folk motifs which were later associated with Jewish weddings – such as visiting the cemetery and deceased relatives, or the good omen represented by a meeting with a watercarrier – had no place in Berlin's work. The anatomical, scientific, dispassionate description of one of the most moving moments in Jewish life reveals Berlin's wish to neutralize all the folkloric, irrational and retrograde aspects of Jewish culture. It comes as no surprise that he virtually apologizes for the bad habit, which he calls "oriental," preserved by the "mass" of Jews, of separating men and women during dances.

Berlin instead emphasized the piety of individuals and of the Jewish community; their respect for moral codes and the collective supervision exercised over spouses and over women in particular. Contrary to Christians, who married later and often had a more disorderly pre-marital and marital life because of alcohol abuse, more frequent cases of adultery and uncontrolled births despite the community's disapproval,<sup>13</sup> the extremely codified nuptial rite which had been institutionalized by the Jews gave an assurance of morality, order and control over sex drives, both male and female. Women played a crucial role in this normalization of the conjugal and sex lives of Jews. Berlin's long note on the virginity of Jewish women is significant. Its aim was to demonstrate the sophistication of the

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<sup>13</sup> See the ethnographic observations of O.S. Tian-Shanskaia on the sexual life of Russian villages (Tian-Shanskaia 1993). See also Engel 1990.

community's social organization and respect for religious rituals. It was indeed through women that the solidity of the marriage institution, the morality of Jewish society and the community's continuity were assured.

*Translated by Rosemary Rodwell*

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