

What's the Truth About ...

Sheva Berachot?



Misconception: A newly married bride and groom are required to participate in *sheva berachot* (festive meals) each day for seven days.

Fact: There is no obligation to have festive meals during the week following a wedding celebration. However, if the *chatan* (groom) and *kallah* (bride) participate in a festive meal made in their honor in which certain conditions are satisfied, *sheva berachot*, seven blessings, should be recited.

Background: The first seven days¹ after a wedding are considered a private *yom tov* for the *chatan* and *kallah*.^{2,3} Thus, there are various laws that apply during this week. These laws include the following: The *chatan* and *kallah* should eat their meals together (SA, EH 64:1; KSA 149:12), they should wear nice clothing (AH, EH 64:3; Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, end of chap. 16) and they are prohibited from doing work (Rema, EH 64:1; Rambam, Ishut 10:12; see the strict opinion of Tzitz Eliezer 11:85 regarding the definition of work; see Shu"t Maharsham 3:206 and Yam shel Shlomo, Ketubot,

chap. 1:12 regarding the *kallah* not working). They should not get haircuts (this is similar to the laws of Chol Hamoed—see Pachad Yitzchak, s.v. “*chatan v’kallah*,” p. 61a; others disagree: see Nitei Gavriel, Nissuin 57:11-12) and they should, in general, rejoice as on a holiday (SA, YD 342:1). If either the *chatan* or *kallah* is present at a minyan, Tachanun is not recited (SA, OC 131:4; Nitei Gavriel, Nissuin 63:14). They are exempt from tearing *keriyah* when visiting the Kotel, as on a holiday (Hanissuin Kehilchatam 15:66), and a *chatan* who is a Kohen may not become *tamei* for a first-degree relative. If a *chatan* or *kallah* has to sit *shivah* during this week, he or she does not tear *keriyah* or engage in the public aspects of mourning (Nitei Gavriel, Nissuin 112:1, 5, 7). According to many opinions, a *chatan* and *kallah* are exempt from fasting on Ta’anit Esther (Hanissuin Kehilchatam 15:53) and on a parent’s *yahrtzeit* (Nitei Gavriel, Nissuin 79:6). In ancient times, a Kohen would not examine a suspected case of *tzara’at* on a *chatan* or *kallah* lest he or she be rendered impure during the week of celebration (Moed Kattan 7b; Negaim 3:2).

During these seven days, others are required to make the new couple happy (SA, EH 65:1).^{4,5} In order to ful-

fill this requirement, family and friends usually arrange daily *sheva berachot* meals,⁶ at which the new couple is regaled by guests who have not yet celebrated with them. Because these meals are considered “*seudot mitzvah*” (Aishel Avraham, OC 38:7), and include the element of *simchah*, it is preferable that they include meat and wine (Shu”t Maharam Shick 89). However, *sheva berachot* should be recited at these meals, even if meat is not served (Otzar Haposekim, EH 62:5:3). At the end of a *sheva berachot* meal, the *zimmun* recited prior to Birkat Hamazon is introduced with a poem entitled “*Devai Haser*” (“Banish pain ...”), and the phrase “*She’hasimchah bem’ono*” (“The celebration is in His dwelling”) is added. Birkat Hamazon is then followed by *sheva berachot*, the seven blessings.

The practice of making *sheva berachot* is so widespread that it is now widely assumed to be an obligation. However, there is no obligation to make these meals. One is only required to recite the *sheva berachot* blessings at a meal in which all the following requirements are fulfilled: the *chatan* and *kallah* participate; at least ten men (a minyan) are present, seven of whom have eaten bread, and there must be at least one new face (“*panim*

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chadashot”), i.e., a person who has not yet participated in the wedding celebrations, whether at the wedding or at any other meal (*Ketubot* 8a; *SA, EH* 62:7; many Sephardim and Yemenites require two *panim chadashot*—see *Yabia Omer* 3: *EH*:11:12). According to some authorities, the meal must be arranged specifically in the couple’s honor (*Orchot Chaim*, *Birkat Hamazon* 11; *Taz, EH* 62:7); that is, if a *chatan* and *kallah* are at a meal coincidentally, *sheva berachot* blessings would not be recited. On Shabbat and *yom tov*, there is no requirement to have *panim chadashot* because the day itself fulfills that role (*SA, EH* 62:8).⁷

Tosafot (*Sukkah* 25b, s.v. “*ein*”), many other Rishonim and the *Shulchan Aruch* (*EH* 62:10) rule that *sheva berachot* are recited only “*b’veit chatan*” (lit., “in the house of the *chatan*,” but the term also refers to a wedding hall). Nowadays, it is common for *sheva berachot* to be held in different locations. Noting why it is acceptable in contemporary times to have the meals at a location other than the *beit chatan*, Rabbi Sarya Duvlitsky (*Sova Semachot*, chap. 1, n. 85) states, based on the *Aruch Hashuchan* (*EH* 62:36; cf. *Taz, EH* 62:7), that in olden times the custom was to host a wedding at a “wedding hostel” (or a *beit chatan*) where the couple and their guests would spend the week. Because this is no longer the case, the *sheva berachot* meals can be held anywhere, and this is the practice of most Ashkenazim⁸ and some Sephardim, such as Moroccans.⁹ However many other Sephardim still only recite *sheva berachot* blessings *beveit chatan*.¹⁰

The Gemara (*Ketubot* 7b-8a) clearly states that there is no obligation to host daily *sheva berachot* meals. On the first day of the week of celebration, all seven *berachot* are said; on the other days, if there are *panim chadashot*, all are said, and if not (or if there is no minyan present), then only “*She’hasimchah bem’ono*” is added in the introduction to the *zimmun* and the *berachah* “*Asher Barah*” is recited over the same cup of wine used for *Birkat Hamazon*.¹¹

Many authorities, while not commenting on the actual obligation (or lack of one), discuss how *sheva berachot* was practiced in their day. Rashi (*Ketubot* 8a, s.v. “*samayach t’samach*”) states that in his experience, often either a minyan, or *panim chadashot*, or both were lacking, and thus a *sheva berachot* meal was not held every day. The Maharil (d. 1427; *Hilchot Nissuin*) records that in the Rhineland the custom was to recite *sheva berachot* only on Shabbat, but not on other days due to the lack of *panim chadashot*. The Levush (d. 1612; *OC, Minhagim*, in the back, sec. 30) says that apart from the wedding day, in his day, *sheva berachot* were recited on Shabbat, and during the rest of the week only if there was *panim chadashot*. The Maharshah (d. 1574; *Yam shel Shlomo, Ketubot*, chap. 1: 12), one of the leading *posekim* of his time, states that in Poland and Lithuania seven days of *simchah* were not observed due to the difficulties of life in *galut*, exile. Indeed, many authorities who lived during particularly dark periods in Jewish history indicate that *sheva berachot* were not recited in their day because of a general lack of *simchah* that prevailed. Thus, Rabbi Eliezer of Germaiza (Roke’ach 354; d. 1238) states that *sheva berachot* meals were not celebrated in Germany because “there is no real *simchah* nowadays in exile,” and the *Pitchei Teshuvah* (*CM* 7:13) cites the *Tumim* as saying that because of the lack of *simchah*, the custom was to have a festive meal only on the first day. The Chatam Sofer (d. 1839; *Shu”t EH* 1:122) men-

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tions the long-standing practice in Krakow, Poland, of minimizing the celebration due to a lack of *simchah* and notes that in Frankfurt am Main he never witnessed *sheva berachot* meals past the second night. He goes on to say that once someone in Frankfurt am Main recited *sheva berachot* on Shabbat, but that it created quite a stir in the community since this was not the local custom. The Gra (*EH* 55:11) explains that one of the reasons weddings were commonly held on Fridays was to allow more time for the community to celebrate with the couple in light of the fact that the custom of celebrating for seven days was not generally observed.¹² The *Aruch Hashulchan* (*OC* 640:14) notes that in his time (late nineteenth century, Lithuania) meals were not prepared on all seven days.

Some authorities explicitly address the question of whether or not there is an obligation to have daily *sheva berachot*. The Ben Ish Chai (*Shu"t Rav Pe'alim* 4: *EH*:6) notes that if the *chatan* cannot afford daily *sheva berachot*, there is no obligation to have them. Similarly, *Shu"t Kinyan Torah* (2:107) writes that one does not need to make an effort to fulfill the conditions necessary for *sheva berachot* to be recited.

Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky maintains that there is no obligation to host daily *sheva berachot* meals.¹³ Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (*Halichot Shlomo*, p. 325, n. 17) frequently stated that one should not go to undue lengths to make daily *sheva berachot* if doing so poses a hardship in any way, because in previous generations this was not done. And in *Meged Giv'ot Olam* (Yerushalayim, 5765, p. 72), Rabbi Michel Shurkin relates that in early 1992 he was at a *sheva berachot* for Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach's grandson when Rabbi Shlomo Zalman bemoaned the fact that the contemporary practice is to make these daily meals, and that this was a burden on him as an attendee.

Even though making daily *sheva berachot* is not obligatory, halachah does not endorse the secular custom of a honeymoon either.¹⁴ Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef (*Yabia Omer* 3:*EH*:11:11) strenuously objects to such a practice and views it as indicative that the couple "is not interested in the *berachot*."¹⁵ On the topic of the honeymoon, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan (*Made in Heaven: A Jewish Wedding Guide* [New York, 1983]) writes:

It is not the Jewish practice for the bride and groom to "escape" on a honeymoon right after the wedding. Rather, they remain in their home community. They are beginning their married life, not separated from the community but as an integral part of it (p. 230).

While there is no halachic obligation to create the conditions for a *sheva berachot* meal, if a meal is hosted at which all the necessary conditions are fulfilled, there is a halachic obligation to recite *sheva berachot*. Indeed, some halachic authorities encourage daily *sheva berachot* even though there is no obligation. Rabbi Duvlitzki¹⁶ (*Sova Semachot*, chap. 1, n. 5*) says that the medieval custom of only keeping one or two days of *sheva berachot* has changed and that nowadays it's worthwhile to try to have them daily. *Shu"t Zivchei Tzedek* (new: 95) says it is praiseworthy to have *sheva berachot* twice a day for seven days (see also *Otzar Haposekim*, vol. 17, p. 7) and that this is implied in *Mesechet Sofrim* (19:11; cited in *Taz*, *EH* 62:3). It further says that such was indeed the custom in Bagdad for those who could afford it; others made *sheva berachot* at least once a day.¹⁷ *Rav Pe'alim* (*EH* 4:6) concludes the discussion on this topic by noting that although there is no obligation to make daily *sheva berachot*, if one does, "it is a *mitzvah gedolah*."¹⁸ So, too, Rabbi Yitzchak Yosef (*Yalkut Yosef*, *Sova Semachot*, p. 297) refers to having daily *sheva berachot* as a "*mitzvah min hamuvchar*."

Despite the benefits of having daily *sheva berachot*, there are possible drawbacks: Having to attend daily *sheva berachot* can be stressful for the new couple. For that reason, many feel it is advisable that the couple eat a few evening meals by themselves or only with members of the immediate family during that first week. As the *Sova Semachot* (1, n. 7, cited in *Sefer Hanisuin Kehilchatam*, p. 470, n. 15) concludes, "...if it appears that organizing daily *sheva berachot* [meals] is a burden on the *chatan* and *kallah*, they should conduct themselves [in a way] that it does not become burdensome to them." If having daily meals is affordable, both financially and emotionally, and it does not present any undue hardships to the couple, it is a commendable custom; if it is not, then it is unnecessary.

Irrespective of whether or not one has daily *sheva bera-chot*, the beauty of the tradition and its message should be valued: As a new home is created, the Jewish community welcomes the young *chatan* and *kallah*, drawing them into the community. This message is in sharp contrast to that of the secular honeymoon, which implies independence and self-sufficiency. *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* (end of chap. 17) relates that when King Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem, he constructed a special gate through which grooms entered. On Shabbat, people would sit near the gate and bless an approaching groom, saying, "May the One who dwells in this house gladden you with sons and daughters."¹⁹ In the Jewish community, a *chatan* and *kallah* begin a new life together not away from the community but as an integral part of it. As a new home is formed, the role of the community is to bring the new couple happiness,²⁰ for in Jewish life, the community is with one at all times—times of sadness as well as times of joy. ■

Notes

1. These days are not counted "*me'it l'eit*," that is, seven complete twenty-four-hour periods. Rather, they are calendar days. Thus, if a wedding takes place in the afternoon, at sundown of that day, the first day is over and day two commences.

2. At a second marriage for both participants, *sheva bera-chot* are only recited at the first meal on the day of the wedding. There are three days of *simchah*, celebration, for a second marriage, not seven. According to some opinions, during these days, only the blessing of "*Asher Bara*" may be recited at meals (SA, EH 62:6, 64:2; Beit Shmuel, EH 62:5, 17; Chachmat Adam 129:4; KSA 149:4). See sources in *Yalkut Yosef*, pp. 299-301, and *Hanissuin Kehilchatam* 17:30-43.

This seven-day period (known as "*zayin yemei hamishteh*," from *Negaim* 3:2) is an early custom, as evidenced by the seven-day period referred to after Yaakov married Leah (see Rashi and Ramban on Genesis 29:27; *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 16) and after Shimshon's marriage (*Judges* 14:12, 17).

3. See *Yerushalmi Ketubot* 1:1 (where this seven-day period is attributed to Moshe); Rambam, *Hilchot Ishut* 10:12; *Hilchot Avel* 1:1. Some view the practice as being Biblical (*Korban HaEdah* on *Ketubot* 1:1; *Shu"t Mishkenot Yaakov*, YD 78), others as rabbinic (*Taz*, YD 342:1). Still others differentiate between the first day and the other six (*Rosh*, *Ketubot* 1:5). C.f. *Tosafot*, *Berachot* 47b, s.v. "mitzvah."

4. There is a separate mitzvah for the *chatan* to make his wife happy the entire first year of marriage (see *Yeraim* 190; *Sefer Hachinuch* 582; c.f. AH, EH 64:4). Rashi (*Deuteronomy* 24:5, s.v. "*v'samayach*") emphasizes that the verse requires that he specifically cause *her* to be happy.

5. *Tanna Devei Eliyahu*, chap. 23, implies that the Jews in Egypt observed these seven days. *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer*, chap. 16, uses Shimshon's seven days as a paradigm, and draws a comparison between a *chatan* and a king that yields some of the above cited rules. (Note that in a similar vein, rabbinic scholars are compared to a king [*Gittin* 62a].) In other contexts the *chatan* is compared to a Kohen (*Moed Kattan* 28b) or a *Kohen Gadol* (Rashi and Targum to *Isaiah* 61:10). Regarding the obligation to make the couple happy at the wedding, see Tur, EH 65, and Meiri to *Ketubot* 17a.

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Statement of Ownership, Management and Circulation

Publication Title: Jewish Action. 2. Publication No. 005-239. 3. Filing Date: October 1, 2008. 4. Issue Frequency: Quarterly. 5. No. of Issues Published Annually: Five. 6. Annual Subscription Price: \$16.00. 7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication: Orthodox Union, 11 Broadway, NY, NY, 10004. 8. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher: Same. 9. Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publisher, Editor and Managing Editor: Publisher: Orthodox Union, 11 Broadway, NY, NY, 10004. Editor: Nechama Carmel, 11 Broadway, NY, NY, 10004. Managing Editor: Eliezer Edelman, 11 Broadway, NY, NY, 10004. 10. Owner: Orthodox Union, 11 Broadway, NY, NY, 10004. 11. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds: None. 12. Tax Status (For completion by nonprofit organizations authorized to mail at nonprofit rates): The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income purposes has not changed during the preceding 12 months. 13. Publication Title: Jewish Action. 14. Issue Date for Circulation Data Below: November 20, 2008.

15. Extent and nature of circulation:	Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months	No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date
a. Total No. Copies (Net Press Run)	35,084	33,839
b. Paid and/or Requested Circulation		
(1) Paid/Requested Outside-Country		
Mail Subscriptions Stated on Form 3541	16,405	15,871
(2) Paid In-Country Subscriptions Stated on Form 3541	0	0
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c. Total Paid and/or Requested Circulation [Sum of 15b. (1), (2), (3), and (4)]	17,705	17,093
d. Free Distribution by Mail		
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e. Total Free Distribution [Sum of 15d (1), (2), (3) and (4)]	3,150	2,967
f. Total Distribution [Sum of 15c. and 15e.]	20,855	20,060
g. Copies Not Distributed	14,229	13,779
h. Total [Sum of 15f. and g.]	35,084	33,839
i. Percent Paid [15c. divided by 15f. times 100]	85	85

16. Publication of Statement of Ownership required. Will be printed in the Winter '08 issue of this publication. 17. Signature and Title of Editor, Publisher, Business Manager, or Owner: Anthony Lugo, Production Manager. Date: October 1, 2008.

That one should sing the couple's praises, see SA, EH 65:1. See also Rabbi Gavriel Zinner, *The Jewish Wedding* (translated and excerpted from *Nitei Gavriel, Nissuin*), 1993, p. 95, n. 33 on the merit of a wedding *badchan* (jester), who is guaranteed *olam haba* (see also *Meam Loez*, Genesis 29:27).

6. Note that there is a position found in many Rishonim, based on *Soferim* 19:11, that *sheva berachot* may be said at any celebratory gathering for the *chatan* and *kallah*, even in the absence of a meal. See *Nitei Gavriel, Nissuin* 83, n. 25.

7. Some authorities require *panim chadashot* at *seudah shelishit*, while others do not say *sheva berachot* at *seudah shelishit*.

8. There are some Ashkenazim who prefer to be strict. See Rabbi Yochanan Sofer, *Aperyon Chatanim* (Jerusalem, 5750), p. 21.

9. Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, *Rayim Ahuvim*, 5765, pp. 165-167, rules that Sephardim may say *sheva berachot* anywhere.

10. Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef is emphatic about this point. See the long footnote in *Yalkut Yosef*, pp. 301-304. He emphasizes that even the *chatan's* parent's house is insufficient (*ibid.*, pp. 316-317).

11. SA, EH 62:4-7; Rema 62:7; c.f. KSA 149:3.

12. It should be noted that in Europe, the practice was to celebrate one or two days; in Yemen, they seemed to have celebrated all seven. See *Halichot Teiman*, pp. 153-154.

13. Rabbi Nissan Shlomo Kaplan, *Kuntres Birkat Chatanim* (Jerusalem, 5764), 93.

14. Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, pp. 167-169, is in the minority when he says he sees no problem with a honeymoon and that couples should do as they please.

15. He also raises the difficulty of *dam betulim*.

16. See *Kuntres Birkat Chatanim*, chap. 21, which connects the requirement to have *sheva berachot* all seven days with the rationale behind *panim chadashot*.

17. Note that if on the seventh day the meal ends after sunset, *sheva berachot* are not recited. See *Pitchei Teshuvah*, EH 62:12 citing, and questioning, *Sha'arei Teshuvah*, OC 188. Rabbi Shmuel HaLevi Vosner (*Shevet HaLevi* 1:39) rules that it is straightforward: If the meal on the last day continues into the night, *sheva berachot* are not recited. However, if it is a Saturday night, they may still be recited. Others disagree. Some sources rule that on the seventh day *sheva berachot* should not be recited at sunset even if some of the *berachot* have already been said. Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef permits reciting them during twilight as well (see *Yalkut Yosef*, chap. 17, n. 13-14).

18. Making daily *sheva berachot* can be a *chumra* (stringency) that leads to a *kullah* (leniency). There is a possibility that in the attempt to make so many festive meals, there may not be true *panim chadashot* at all of them and the blessings will be *berachot levatalah* (said in vain).

19. See Tur, YD 393.

20. It is considered a great mitzvah to rejoice with a *chatan* and *kallah* (Rambam, *Hilchot Aveil* 14:1; Tur, EH 65), to the extent that a *talmid chacham* dancing in front of them may act in ways that would otherwise be viewed as beneath his dignity (see *Ketubot* 17a; Rema, EH 65:1; and *Chavot Yair* 205). Eating at a wedding feast and not rejoicing with a couple is viewed unfavorably by Chazal, while rejoicing with a new couple is seen as praiseworthy and equated with rebuilding destroyed buildings in Jerusalem (*Berachot* 6b).



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