

What's the Truth about ... a Chatan and Kallah Not Seeing Each Other before the Wedding?

By Ari Z. Zivotofsky

Misconception: A bride and groom may not see each other during the week preceding their wedding.

Fact: This is a widespread Ashkenazic practice with little basis in traditional sources.

Background: In Ashkenazic¹ circles, often a bride and groom do not see each other for a full week before their wedding, although they do speak by phone and communicate in other ways (e.g., e-mail). This practice has no basis in Talmudic or medieval writings, and the absence of early literature suggests that it is of recent vintage.

There is, however, early evidence of even stricter practices. For example, *Nisuin Kehilchat²* mentions the custom of a bride and groom not seeing each other from the conclusion of the *shidduch* (engagement) until the wedding.³ His sources (see footnote 254) include *Shu"t Maharshdam* (31; as a *minhag Ashkenaz*), *Pele Yoetz* (*Erech Kallah*, as a Turkish *minhag*) and *Elah Hamitzvot* (552; as an Israeli custom). The custom of not seeing each other after the engagement seems to have existed in many communities dating as far back as 1228 but was introduced in Yerushalayim in 1730.⁴

Commenting on the Biblical episode in which Rivkah covers herself

after glimpsing Yitzchak, Radak (Bereishit 24:64) notes that the Torah is teaching a lesson in *derech erez* and *tzeniut*. He further states that it is proper for a woman to be modest in the presence of her betrothed and not to be seen by him until they are married.

Even today there are those who recommend that couples limit their contact during the period between the engagement and the wedding. Rav Elazar Menachem Man Shach is quoted⁵ as stating that couples should limit their contact during this period to once every three or four weeks. He maintains that too much contact during this period often leads to strife. Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch (*Teshuvot Vehanhagot* 3, *EH* 390, p. 450) makes a similar suggestion. (Of course this should be taken in context—he also recommends limiting the number of dates before the engagement to two or three.)⁶

Despite the lack of early sources, this practice of not seeing each other the week before the wedding has found its way into a small number of contemporary works, some of which attempt to give reasons for it. *Sefer Minhagim: The Book of Chabad-Lubavitch Customs* ([Brooklyn, 1994], p. 174) states: “For a week before their wedding the bride and groom refrain from meeting, even by day.” The footnote simply states that the custom is based on letters and talks by the Rebbe.⁷ In a footnote, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan (*Made in Heaven*,

[New York, 1983], p. 67) cites two other works that mention the custom, and then states that the source for the custom may be *YD* 192:1, the section that deals with *dam chimud*. Rabbi Binyomin Forst⁸ states: “The custom has developed that a *chasan* and *kallah* do not see each other during the week preceding the wedding.” The reason the custom is not referred to in earlier halachic literature, he speculates, is simply because in earlier times, a *chatan* and *kallah* only met one another briefly before the wedding.⁹

Rabbis Kaplan and Forst both suggest that the rationale for the custom relates to the *halachah* of *dam chimud*—concern that meeting the *chatan* may cause the *kallah* to have a discharge that could invalidate the *shivah nekiyim* (seven clean days before going to the mikvah). However, the logic here is flawed. *Chazal* (*Niddah* 66a; *YD* 192:1-3) require that upon accepting a marriage proposal or setting a wedding date, a woman has to observe seven “clean days,” due to the concern that she may discharge some blood as a result of the excitement. However, this *halachah* only applies to her *initial* acceptance of a marriage proposal. Even if a woman accepts a marriage proposal without ever seeing her intended, upon seeing him, she need not be concerned about *dam chimud*.¹⁰ Thus, the link between the *halachah* of *dam chimud* and the need to separate the week before the wed-

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ding seems weak at best.¹¹ Even Rabbi Forst, who cites *dam chimud* as a basis for the practice, concedes in a footnote: “Nevertheless, the hypothesis that the custom is based upon the chance of *dam chimud* is difficult to accept.” He concludes by stating: “The purpose of these lines is merely to show that the custom of not meeting one another has no basis in the *halachah* of *dam chimud*, not to belittle the custom.” Ironically, *dam chimud* might be a reason that they should see each other, because according to the Talmud (*Niddah* 20b), a woman who pines for her absent husband will experience *dam chimud*.

Rabbi Forst concludes the section on this topic with the following:

Although this custom is not halachah, and has no early source in the poskim, it is a good custom because it gives the chasan and kallah an opportunity to be alone and to reflect upon the profound changes that are about to take place in their lives.

Rabbi Forst’s view is similar to other psychologically oriented opinions that have been offered. For example, some claim that the forced separation heightens the excitement. While this is undoubtedly true, it can also intensify the tension. Others claim it is designed to prevent the couple from fighting during this period of heightened anxiety. One could argue, however, that if the purpose is to avoid further tension, the couple should not communicate at all during that week. Indeed, Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv is quoted as ruling that during the seven days before the wedding the bride and groom should neither see each other nor speak on the telephone. He is also opposed to the “new custom” of the groom sending the bride a letter via a messenger on the day of the wedding.¹²

Another popular suggestion is that the practice is designed to prevent premarital relations. (This is less of a concern earlier in the engagement period because of the social ramifications of having a baby seven or eight months after the wedding.) Premarital relations

is also more of a concern at this point since the bride and groom are much more comfortable with each other (cf. Rema, *EH* 55:1). Moreover, immediately prior to the wedding, the bride is the most “permissible” she has ever been—being neither a married woman nor a *niddah*.¹³ Furthermore, many brides go to the mikvah several days before the wedding (preferably not more than four; Rema, *EH* 192:2). However, if this is really the concern, the couple should be permitted to see each other, but they should not be allowed to be alone.

Rabbi Ephraim Greenblatt,¹⁴ a close student of Rav Moshe Feinstein, reports that a few days before his oldest son was to be married, he went with his wife, the *chatan* and the *kallah*’s parents to see Rav Moshe. The *rav* gave them his blessing and asked about the whereabouts of the *kallah*. Rabbi Greenblatt responded that since it was during the week before the wedding, the *chatan* and *kallah* were not seeing each other, to which Rav Moshe responded that there is no basis for such a custom. Rav Moshe told Rabbi Greenblatt that when his other children are about to be married, he should bring the couples to visit as well, which is exactly what Rabbi Greenblatt did. Similarly, Rabbi Ari Kahn reports¹⁵ that when he was engaged, his *rebbe*, Rav Yosef Dov HaLevi Soloveitchik, told him that although there is a custom for the bride and groom not to see each other the week before the wedding, that is not “our custom.” And when Rabbi Kahn’s *kallah* asked about attending his *aufruf*, which was to take place two days before the wedding, Rav Soloveitchik responded that it was not a problem. Even Rabbi Kaplan, who cites the custom, concludes by stating:

Of course, if it is necessary for the wedding preparations or for other reasons, it is permitted [for the couple to see each other]. In some circles, the custom is merely for them not to see each other on the day of the wedding.

Nitei Gavriel, a recent, comprehensive source of customs, does not

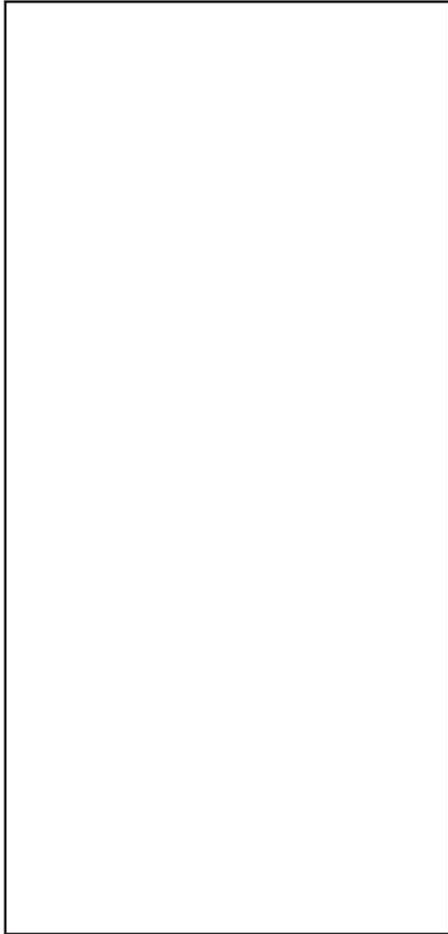
mention this practice, but records that around one hundred years ago, there was a custom in Jerusalem of the bride and groom going together to famous rabbis to get their blessings during the week before the wedding (*Hilchot Nisuin*, p. 55, in the name of Sdei Chemed, *Ma’arechet Chatan Vekallah*, 22).

It has been suggested that this custom of not seeing each other a week before the wedding is based on superstition and was widespread among Anglo-Saxons and other medieval peoples. They had arranged weddings, which were often called off when the couples saw each other before the nuptials. And so it became bad luck for a couple to see each other before the wedding. Of course *halachah* requires that the *chatan* and *kallah* see each other before the wedding (*Kiddushin* 41a; *Shulchan Aruch*, *EH* 35:1),¹⁶ but that apparently did not prevent this custom from infiltrating the Jewish world. To this day the tradition among many non-Jewish Britons and Australians is that the bride and groom do not see each other on the day of the wedding since supposedly it brings bad luck. The 1938 Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Our Town*, by Thornton Wilder, refers to the secular custom.

Interestingly, some *posekim* of the previous generation did recognize the practice of a *chatan* and *kallah* not seeing one another during the week before the wedding. For example, the three children of Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky, with whom I spoke, did not see their future spouses the week before the wedding. And a fourth child, Rav Avraham Kamenetsky, reported that when he asked his father about speaking to his *kallah* on the phone during the week before his wedding, he was advised against it.

Nevertheless Rav Moshe saw no reason why the custom should inconvenience people. In particular, he believed that it should not prevent the bride and groom from taking pictures together before the wedding.¹⁷

A student of Rav Ahron



4. A. Freeman, “*Takanot Yerushalayim*” [Hebrew], *Sefer Dinaburg*, ed. Baer, Gutman and Shuva (1949), 206-214. On page 213 the author demonstrates that this practice existed in many other communities. On pages 208-209, he cites a list of twenty enactments promulgated in Jerusalem in 1730. Number 10b was that the bride and groom not see each other until the wedding night.

5. *Mevakshei Torah*, vol. 27 (Iyar, 5762): 30.

6. Rabbi Pesach Eliyahu Falk dedicates a significant portion of his book *Choson and Kallah During their Engagement* (Jerusalem, 2001) to the topic of limiting contact which includes talking, communicating via letters, et cetera.

7. This would seem to be at odds with the fact that Rav Yisrael Shurin of Efrat told me that when his brother married the daughter of the prominent Lubavitcher Rabbi Rivkin in 1944, the then *rebbe* Rabbi Yoseph Yitzchak Schneersohn summoned the bride and groom to come together to him during the week before the wedding.

8. *The Laws of Niddah 2* (Brooklyn, 2002), 458-459.

9. Alternatively, I would suggest that it is not mentioned in earlier sources because the practice did not exist until modern times.

10. See *Pitchei Teshuvah* 192:1, 3; Chatam Sofer *YD* 184 and *Badei Hashulchan* 192:8.

11. A possible basis for the application of *dam chimud* to this custom is as follows: In the period leading up to the wedding, small squabbles invariably occur (“There is no marriage contract that does not contain a quarrel,” *Shabbat* 130a), some of which may cause the bride to “call off” the wedding in her heart. When she makes the decision to go ahead with the wedding, it is comparable to accepting a new proposal, thereby necessitating a new period of seven clean days (because of the possibility of *dam chimud*). Indeed, if a wedding is truly rescheduled for whatever reason, there is a new requirement of seven clean days (*SA, EH* 192:3; see discussion in *Divrei Chamudot* 21 to Rosh, *Niddah* 10:4). While I have heard this explanation as a basis for the custom, I know of no halachic source that would require seven clean days in the case where a woman “mentally cancels” her wedding, and *Chachmat Adom* 115:5 indicates that such

a cancellation would not require an additional seven clean days.

12. *Mevakshei Torah*, vol. 25 (Sivan, 5759): 280 and vol. 27 (Iyar, 5762): 48, cites a responsum of Rav Elyashiv. As a source for Rav Elyashiv’s decision, the journal refers the reader to *SA, YD* 192:1.

13. Assuming, of course, that it is not a *chuppat niddah*. See *Shu”t Bnei Banim* 1, 37:1, p. 118.

14. Letter to the author, 9 April 2002.

15. Telephone conversation with the author, 11 March 2005.

16. See the fascinating responsum of Rashban (Rabbi Shlomo Tzvi ben Natan Schick; student of his first cousin the Maharam Schick [*OC* 49]), where he opines that the Talmudic statement “*Asur lo leadam lekaddaish isha ad sheyirenah*,” as well as all instances where the Talmud uses the term “*asur le*,” are not strict laws, but *minhag chassidut*.

In general it is prohibited for a man to gaze upon a woman. It is, however, permitted for a husband to look at his wife, and it is proper for a single man to look at a prospective wife (Rambam, *Isurei Biah* 21:3-4; *SA, EH* 21:3). Ra’avad (ibid.) disagrees and holds that a *talmid chacham* should not gaze at a prospective wife. Rambam (*Perush Hamishnayot, Avot* 5:17; *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:49) and Rashi (Genesis 12:11) stress that Avraham never gazed at Sarah. *Simlah Letzvi on Shulchan Haezer* (pt. 2, p. 25a) notes that while it is permitted to look at the jewelry of a bride so as to endear her to her new husband (Rema, *EH* 65), her face needs to be covered (*badekin*) to prevent people from staring at it. See also Rema, *EH* 31:2 and *SA* and Rema, *EH* 65:2. These *halachot* may be the source for the custom under discussion. It may be that once the decision to get married is finalized, there is no longer any justification for the groom to gaze at his intended. Perhaps that is why in some circles, the bride and groom do not see each other during the period between the engagement and the wedding. It is further possible that not seeing each other during the final week, when the preparations are essentially done, is a concession to this basic *halachah*.

17. Rabbi Chaim Wasserman discussing his 1959 wedding; telephone conversation with the author, March 2005.

18. Rabbi Chaim Soloveichik, Rav Ahron Soloveichik’s son, telephone conversation with the author, 6 March 2005.

Soloveichik was once at a loss since there was no one to drive his bride to their wedding. Rav Ahron told the student that he, the *chatan*, should drive her.¹⁸ **IA**

Notes

1. Among Sephardim there is no such practice.

2. Rabbi Binyomin Adler, 1 (Yerushalayim, 5744), ch. 3, sec. 93, p. 115.

3. This custom sometimes had negative consequences. Rav Baruch Ber Leibowitz arranged for his daughter to be engaged to one of the better students in the yeshivah. The day after the engagement Rav Baruch Ber suggested that it was improper for his future son-in-law to remain in the same town as the bride. The groom thus packed up and went to the famous yeshivah in Volozhin. While there, he found himself a pretty, wealthy bride. He broke the engagement, returned the gifts to his former *rosh yeshivah*, and then asked Rav Baruch Ber for a letter of recommendation. (Nathan Kamenetsky, *Making of a Godol* [Jerusalem, 2002], 524.)