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 Ashkenazic 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 Kehilchato mentions the custom of a bride and groom not seeing each other from the conclusion of the shidduch (engagement) until the wedding. His sources (see footnote 254) include Shu’t M aharshdam (31; as a minhag Ashkenaz), Pe’E Yoetz (Erech Kallah; as a Turkish minhag) and Elah H amitzvot (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.

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 eretz 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 M enachem M an Shach is quoted 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 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.)

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. 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 Forst 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 chasan and kallah only met one another briefly before the wedding.

Rabbi Kaplan and Forst both suggest that the rationale for the custom relates to the halachah of the halachah of dam chimud—concern that meeting the chasan 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. Thus, the link between the halachah of dam chimud and the need to separate the week before the wed-
ding seems weak at best. Even Rabbi Forst, who cites dam chimud as a basis for the practice, concedes in a footnote: “N evertheless, 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 not see each other, but they should not be allowed to be alone.

Rabbi Ephraim Greenblatt, 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 reports that when he was engaged, his rebbe, Rav Yosef Dov Halavi 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 Kaplun, who cited 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.

Nita 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 (Hillichot Nisuin, p. 55, in the name of Sdei Chemed, Ma’arechet Chatan Yekallah, 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), 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 poskim 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.

A student of Rav Ahron
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

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 Lebowitz 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.)

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.


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 Joseph Yitzchak Schneersohn summoned the bride and groom to come together to him during the week before the wedding.


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), and 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 in 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. Mesukhei 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 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.


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

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 Biyah 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 Haamishnayot, Avot 5:17; Moreh Nevuchim 3:49) and Rashi (Genesis 12:11) stress that Avraham never gazed at Sarah. Simlah Letzvi on Shulchan Hazee (pt. 2, p. 25a) notes that while it is permitted to look at the jewelry of a bride so as to endeear 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.


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