

JUDAISM 101: THE KETUBAH



Ketubah (pl. *ketuvot*) literally means “written” and refers to the marriage contract signed and read, in whole or part, during the traditional Jewish wedding ceremony. Most scholars date the earliest *ketuvot* to at least the 3rd century BCE as the standard legal document of Jewish marriage. The form of the document was set by Jewish law (*halacha*) and was written in Aramaic, the common language of the Jewish community in early rabbinic times. Every bride received a *ketubah* from her groom as a legal document which protected her rights. The contract specified the groom’s financial obligations, including a minimum settlement in the event of divorce, as well as a minimum inheritance in case of the husband’s death. The traditional *ketubah* specified the woman’s right to food, clothing and conjugal rights as well as the husband’s responsibility to “care for her, provide for her, and cherish her.” In many respects this document represented a major step forward in protecting the rights of women in marriage. In a world in which women were often viewed as property, Judaism affirmed that every bride was to be accorded dignity and security in the marriage relationship.

While *ketuvot* may be printed on inexpensive paper and filled out as any other legal document, the tradition soon arose to commission a scribe to write the *ketubah* on parchment and to illuminate the words with brilliant colors and designs. The *ketubah* thus emerged as a unique Jewish art form. Each Jewish culture would design *ketuvot* for its region. In Persia, animals and Lions of Judah are prominent; in Italy, cherubs and clouds; in North Africa, geometrical designs. There are many collections of illuminated *ketuvot* ranging over many centuries and many locales.

Today, no less than our forebears, do brides and grooms desire the lovely tradition of a *ketubah*. Whether the couple engages a local artist or orders from one of the several online companies representing a variety of artists, it is relatively easy to commission a *ketubah* for the wedding. And while some couples prefer the classical, traditional text, the Reform movement offers several alternative texts, which emphasize the equality of men and women and stress the emotional commitments of marriage more than the legal stipulations of the traditional text.

For more information, here are a few websites: <http://www.feldman-hill.com> and <http://www.ketubah.com>.