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## Traditional parties bless newlyweds

**JENNIFER GOLDBERG**  
Staff Writer  
[EMAIL](#)

After their wedding, many couples opt for a getaway honeymoon, a vacation to a special place where the newlyweds spend their first days as husband and wife.

Jewish tradition, however, suggests an alternative. The sheva brachos (seven blessings) is a party or series of parties given by family and friends for the new couple. Rather than leaving town to celebrate the marriage, the bride and groom stay with their community and are themselves celebrated by the people who know and love them. The tradition is widely celebrated in observant communities.

Esther Bronsteyn, wife of Rabbi Yakov Bronsteyn of the Phoenix Community Kollel, explains that the tradition is derived from the wedding of Jacob and Leah, and that it is Jewish law that if a minyan is assembled in honor of the bride and groom within seven days of the wedding, the seven blessings given to the couple under the chuppah must be recited again. Also, a new member of the community who did not attend the wedding must be added at every sheva brachos, to signify that all Jews are welcome at the happy occasion.

The purpose of the sheva brachos is "to make the bride and groom happy and help them on their way," says Shira Goldman of the Kollel. "The wedding is a source of blessing for the couple, and that source of blessing can be extended for seven days afterwards, when we can have these opportunities for the community to get together and bless them."

A typical modern-day sheva brachos will include singing and dancing, a meal, and speeches about marriage and about the good qualities of the bride and groom.

Bronsteyn says, "We talk about all their great qualities and just treat them like a king and a queen, to enhance every part of the beginning of their marriage."

She remembers her sheva brachos in 1994 as something that made her even happier about being married.



Jackie, center, and Gabe Glazer, right, drink from kiddish cups at their sheva brachos.

Photo courtesy of Marvin Glazer

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Judaism important to  
'lost generation'

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"It felt so good to hear all the good things that people were saying about my husband," she recalls. "Also, hearing the speeches about marriage made me very excited to build my home. For that first week, you see what your potential can be in a marriage. Then you strive a little bit toward it, and you have many years together.

"Hearing them say things to him about me felt good, too," she laughs.

The look and feel of a sheva brachos varies: they can be casual or formal, light-hearted or serious. The Kollel, however, has a fun and exciting way of hosting a sheva brachos: the personalized theme.

Goldman, who does much of the decorating for the Kollel sheva brachos, explains that while it takes about two weeks to put together one of the events, brainstorming for a themed party can begin long before.

"We kind of grow as we keep doing more," she says. "We just think of more ideas and ways to incorporate the theme into the party."

When the Kollel held a sheva brachos for a couple who always wanted to get married on a beach, but didn't, a Hawaiian theme was in order.

The bride and groom drank punch served in coconuts and sat in a sandbox as one of the Kollel rabbis played a harmonica. The ladies wore flowers in their hair, while the rabbis wore hula skirts over their clothes and did a hula dance. Little houses and palm trees made out of food were the centerpieces, and pineapple chicken was the main course.

Bronsteyn says that the food is usually incorporated into the theme, and that the meal is usually meat rather than dairy and that multiple courses are served.

A sheva brachos in which the groom was a nurse was given a medical theme. Guests received a hospital bracelet with their table number on it, and pillboxes filled with candies decorated the tables. The rabbis wore scrubs, and the guests found the menu on clipboards on their chairs. The first course was a pudding-like item designed to simulate hospital food.

At a Western-themed sheva brachos given by the Kollel, the centerpieces were colorful baskets filled with bandanas, bottles of Mexican beer, and stuffed cacti wearing sombreros. The rabbis wore Western wear (complete with cigars and toy guns), and barbecued food was served.

Whatever the theme, the point is just for the bride and groom to celebrate and be embraced by the community.

"You have to add a little bit of excitement," Bronsteyn says. "It's just a fun way to get people to enjoy themselves."

Goldman says a themed sheva brachos "makes it more personal and more fun for (the bride and groom)."

While the modern-day honeymoon is something that a couple can still have after the sheva brachos, Bronsteyn says that she thinks the old tradition is the best way to begin a marriage.

"Honeymoons are allowed, it's just that right after the wedding, we don't want to forget what our main focus is. Our main focus is getting married and building a home and a foundation.

"You have many years together, you're going to have so many opportunities to run off on a honeymoon, but this is starting a very important time in your life ... Getting together and having these parties makes (the couple's) adjustment in the community and building their home easier."

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