

Of Weddings, *Halachah* and Epistemology

By Emanuel Feldman



beneath the open sky, the *berachot* were all recited, valid witnesses signed the *ketubah* which was duly read, the glass was broken, the requisite *yichud* took place. All the elements of a proper religious wedding were present.

One component, however, was missing: the photographer and the videographer forgot to show up. Thus, there are no pictures of the wedding.

The question asked of me was this: If there are no pictures of the wedding, can the couple be considered properly married according to Jewish law, or must another wedding be arranged?

Below is my halachic response:

The issue you raise is a critical one, since it deals with the very integrity of the Jewish family. It represents a major challenge to those of us who are dedicated to upholding Jewish law. I have researched the entire gamut of responsa literature on this subject and am amazed to discover that among the thousands of *teshuvot* dealing with weddings, not a single one deals with the question you raise.

Upon careful analysis, it is evident that your question raises two distinct halachic problems:

1. To celebrate a wedding without a

photographer is a clear departure from Jewish tradition. Consider, for example, the numerous essential components of a *frum* wedding that are missing in such circumstances: no cameraman jostling everyone under the *chuppah* to get a better angle, no ubiquitous stepladder, no telescopic lens on top of the ring as the groom says: “*Harei at mekudeshet*,” no video camera placed against the *chatan’s* mouth as he sips the wine, no shifting floodlights and frantic gesticulations from one photographer to another. Without these time-honored elements of a Jewish wedding, we are left with only a few mumbled blessings, which no one hears, the giving of the ring, which no one sees, and the reading of the *ketubah*, which no one understands. Thus, it is obvious that the absence of a photographer is more than the absence of one person; it represents an unfortunate break with generations of Jewish practice.

It is therefore a crucial halachic issue as to whether Jewish law can countenance such a wedding. To give it a stamp of approval would only encourage others to have picture-less weddings, with consequences that would inevitably have deleterious effects on the sanctity of Jewish marriage rites. Indeed, if Jewish law were to sanction

weddings, can picture-less Bar Mitzvahs and picture-less Brit Milah be far behind? The implications are staggering.

2. The second, subtler issue raised by your inquiry is the epistemological question: How do we know that the wedding actually took place? Perhaps it exists only in the minds of those who claim to have been present. How do you know that there was, in fact, a wedding? You claim that this was a fully traditional affair, that all the guests ate a full smorgasbord and then a ten-course meal, and they danced vigorously, and there was a very loud band, and guests suffered from bellyaches all night and hangovers the next morning. Granted, these are the *sine qua non* components of a *frum*

this, the next thing to be discarded would be the premarital smorgasbord, followed by the uprooting of the hallowed custom of costly flower arrangements. Once these essentials are eliminated by the deviationist forces among us, there is no end to the downhill slide that will surely ensue. Before long, hard rock and gangsta-rap music at weddings will be dropped, and it will be only a matter of time before we see the demise of Viennese tables and fully stocked bars. The slippery slope, once entered, has no bottom. If we permit picture-less

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chatunah, but I ask you, what solid evidence is there to substantiate all this? There are no pictures to prove it; and without pictures, we have only hearsay and the recollections of ordinary mortals with faulty memories and febrile imaginations. Jewish law is very strict about hearsay evidence. Clear proof is required that significant life-cycle events have occurred. This is precisely why Jews insist on having a variety of photographers at weddings, for only with pictures can we be certain that sacred events are not merely virtual, but actual.

Nevertheless, although I am tempted to do so, I am not inclined to recommend a re-enactment of the wedding. *Bediavad*, I would rule—albeit reluctantly, and only if two other decisors go along with me—that the wedding can be considered *halachically* valid, and that no new ceremony is required.

However, one should be sure to arrange for reserve photographers for future life-cycle events. There is ample precedent for this in Jewish law. For example, according to one opinion in *Mishnah Yoma* 1:1, on Yom Kippur, the *Kohen Gadol*, who must be a married man, was provided with a second wife in reserve in the event that his current wife should unexpectedly die. Similarly, it must become established practice in the contemporary Jewish community to provide reserve photographers and videographers just in case the cameraman should die.

Finally, in order to avoid any possible negative repercussions from this distressing lapse in Jewish practice, it is my halachic opinion that you must bring the new couple—dressed in their wedding outfits—back to the wedding hall immediately, purchase a wedding cake, and have a photographer take their picture while they cut the cake together. To ensure that things do not go awry this time, I further suggest that you arrange for a reserve photographer plus two videographers to record the event. By following this procedure, our hallowed traditions will at least be partially preserved.

Signed, “For the greater glory of the Jewish people—may we be saved from further errors.” JA

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