

THE שְׂמֵרָה

The שְׂמֵרָה (heb., Lit. “her writing”) is the Jewish marriage contract required from the groom and read aloud during the marriage ceremony. This one-sided contract was not an illusory obligation but a document prepared, according to the legal enactments of the Jewish sages, by the husband, detailing the responsibilities that he would have to his wife during their wedded life together (see ex. 21:10; lev. 18–21; deut. 24:5). The rabbis extended the explicit old testament requirements of food, clothing, and conjugal rights to include the demand that a husband respect his wife and not make her cry. He must deny himself to provide for her needs. One groom wrote, “be to me as wife according to the law of Moses and Israel, and I will serve, honor, support, sustain, and clothe thee according to the customs of the Jewish husbands.” The traditional order to these verbs expressing responsibility, beginning with “serve,” indicates the spirit of the document. The wife has always had the happy responsibility of preserving this document!

Examples of the שְׂמֵרָה have been found dating to the third century B.C. The use of the שְׂמֵרָה began in an historical setting in which women were considered mere chattel in many societies, making the protection of the right of a wife even more significant. For the Jewish community and for all the world, the שְׂמֵרָה stands as a monumental example of the protection of the rights of women. God’s plan for the woman in marriage is manifested beautifully in this very one-sided document in which the groom makes his commitments to his bride. His signature, together with those who witness the document, is required. The bride is not required to sign because she receives his commitment.

Marriage (Heb. קַדְשׁוֹת, lit. “sanctification”) has always been greatly honored in the Jewish community. This holy ceremony sets apart one man and one woman from all others to accomplish the purposes for which they were created. In general terms, this could be understood as including companionship with one another, fellowship with the Creator, and continuation of the generations (see Gen. 2, God’s Plan for Marriage; The Creation of the Woman).

The שְׂמֵרָה was designed primarily for women and often decorated in an aesthetically beautiful way. Jewish artists and scribes or calligraphers used their creativity and skill to create artistic masterpieces on high quality paper or parchment. The contract is still written in Aramaic, and popular artistic techniques include: micrography, the minuscule Hebrew writing painstakingly executed to shape interesting ornamental designs (usually with floral or geometric motif); paper cutting; figurative art depicting the bride and groom or biblical couples; and even signs of the zodiac, conveying wishes for good luck. A suitable biblical quotation is often included. The documents are carefully preserved for their historical as well as artistic worth. Though required in the marriage ceremony, a commemorative שְׂמֵרָה is also a favorite anniversary gift.

For Jewish families, if either father is a Cohen or Levi, this should be indicated. The location of the wedding ceremony, including the city, state, and country and sometimes even the closest waterway (river, sea, lake) for a more exact location, is necessary. The date of the wedding ceremony is also important. In the Jewish tradition, the new day begins at sunset. If the wedding is on Friday night, Saturday’s date would be used. The

month and year are according to the Jewish sacred calendar (see chart, The Jewish Sacred Calendar).

The responsibilities of the bridegroom are carefully listed. The brideprice and the dowry, which is brought to the marriage and received by the bridegroom as a loan—to be repaid to the bride if the marriage is dissolved—are included (see 1 Kin. 9, Dowry). A customized *שְׂמֵחַ לְבָבָא* would include hobbies, professional occupations, family background, and personal interests. The document is then signed by the groom and witnesses who observed the solemn commitment ceremony.¹

¹Dorothy Kelley Patterson, general editor; Rhonda Harrington Kelley, managing editor, *Woman's study Bible [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995.