

Thoughts at a wedding

More than a quarter of a century ago, my wife made a positive choice to encircle me seven times at our wedding, since it was not then an established custom. Today, it has almost become an obligatory part of the ceremony.

And that's a good thing. Not only because of its beautiful halachic and mystical symbolism; or even because it's so cute. But because it extends by a few minutes what must be one of the most poignant and emotional moments of one's life.

I have been blessed to escort two sons to their respective Chuppot in the space of eight days. The events were more joyous than I could have imagined; the dancing, when we dance for no reason other than our own happiness and the desire to share that with the couple; catching up with old friends and appreciating the effort that they made to join in the simcha; even the food was wonderful when we had snatched opportunities to enjoy it.

But eclipsing all these joys was the short time spent, standing next to each son, as his bride approaches. His nervous excitement disappears as he glimpses the majestic figure, garbed in white, slowly being led towards him on her parents' arms.

I could only guess at his thoughts at that instant, but my own were a such a variety of emotions that I needed the time that all seven bridal circuits afforded me to feel each one.

There was boundless joy as a Jew, that a new home was to be established amongst our people. That another link in the chain that stretched back to Sinai and forward to eternity was being forged – the most powerful expression of Jewish continuity that there can be. And there was the joy as a father that I shared with my son, that he and the wonderful woman who in a few minutes would be his wife, would be the ones to build it, and to be part of the redemptive process that enables us to hear the prophetic words “may there be heard in the streets of Jerusalem and in the Judean hills. . . the voice of the bride and groom” sung at a wedding, in Jerusalem and overlooking the hills themselves.

And there was pride. Pride in a son's achievements, in the choices that he has made and the path in which he has decided to walk, in the person that he has made himself into. And a little pride in the part that we, his parents, have played in that process, from the moment that we held his arms helping him take his first steps, to this moment when we hold his arms as he takes such significant new steps, trying always to give him the values and understanding that would inform his choices, with the freedom and independence for him to make them by himself.

A little trepidation came into the mix. What would be the future of this new couple? Would they be blessed with happiness and health, with a family that would bring them pride and joy as ours had to us? For two couples each resolved to build their homes in Israel, what sort of country and society would they see

around them? How would the world change over the years in which they grow together?

The natural response to such questions was prayer. To the One who has blessed them to reach this moment, that He should bless them in the future. That they always be building and growing, planting and reaping. May the lofty ideals that they have set for themselves be attained, and may they always aspire to goodness and greatness just beyond their own level.

And there were the emotions that could not be categorized or articulated. The primeval feeling that can only be expressed through tears, that express all of the above and more.

As the bride continued her revolutions around my son, a quiet voice could be heard of one entrusted with the essential counting. He whispered "six", then "seven"; all too soon the beautiful moment had concluded.

And in a blur, it was all over. Our son, who had ascended to the chuppah with his parents, descended with his bride, leaving us behind. And that was exactly how it should be. Our task was over. We had done our best to help our son become the man who he is. That job was far from finished, but now we were handing over responsibility to his bride to continue the work, in her way, just as he would be there to help her grow, as the two transform into one. Our role was not finished, but it had changed, from authoritative parent to advisor and guide.

Under the chuppah we hugged and cried with our new family and old friends, and the couple headed towards their moment of seclusion and disappeared from view. For each of us, a new phase of life had begun.