

A Marriage Proposal: Ring Exchanges in Halacha

Adapted from the writings of Dayan Yitzhak Grossman

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In secular American society, it has been the norm since the twentieth century for men, as well as women, to receive and wear wedding rings. But engagement rings have remained, even in those circles, unilateral: a gift that a man gives a woman. According to a recent BBC report, however, exchanging engagement rings is becoming common in several countries.[1] Many recent and contemporary halachic authorities have been adamantly opposed to “double-ring wedding ceremonies,” in which each party gives the other a ring. R’ Moshe Feinstein, in a 5729 (1969) *teshuvah*, ruled that such a ceremony is certainly valid *ex post facto*, but it is prohibited *ab initio* on several grounds:

- If this is a non-Jewish practice, it is certainly forbidden under the Torah prohibition against adopting non-Jewish customs.[2]
- Even if it is not a non-Jewish practice, it is still forbidden, because it could engender a misconception about the nature of the marriage ceremony (*kidushin*). It could cause people to believe that a woman can effect *kidushin* by giving a man a ring, and that a woman who did so is married, when she actually isn’t.
- Fundamentally, there is a “great prohibition” to exchange rings, because it will cause many people to forget the halacha of *kidushin*, and causing the forgetting of halacha is prohibited even where it will not cause practical harm.[3]

In a subsequent *teshuvah* dated 5740 (1979), R’ Moshe suggests that such marriages may not even be valid *ex post facto*, because it is not clear that the parties are intending to execute a proper halachic *kidushin*, which must be performed by the man. He concludes that “this is a matter of great doubt to me, for which I have not yet found a proof.”[4]

Yavo hakasuv hashlishi veyachria beineihem: In yet a third *teshuvah* dated 5741 (1980), R’ Moshe clarified that there is no contradiction between his two earlier responsa. In the first one, he was discussing a wedding at which a legitimate (*kasher*) rabbi officiated, and in that case, the groom’s giving of the ring constitutes valid *kidushin*. The fact that the rabbi subsequently permitted the bride to perform “a mere nonsensical act” does not invalidate the proper *kidushin* that already occurred, whereas in the second, he was discussing a Reform[5] rabbi who touted the double-ring ceremony as essential to *kidushin*.

R’ Asher Weiss also maintains that a double-ring ceremony is invalid, at least if it serves as an indication that the spouses are embracing “the entire concept of marriage of the modern world, according to which there is merely mutual connection and obligations, and equality,” as opposed to the Torah perspective, in which a man is *koneh* a woman. If this is indeed their intention, then the marriage is not valid.[6] (He is discussing marriages at which Reform and Conservative rabbis officiated and does not discuss the status of such a marriage with an Orthodox officiant.)

R' Chaim Jachter cites a dissenting view:

Both Rav Zalman Nechemia Goldberg and Rav Hershel Schachter expressed their opinions to this author that once the groom gives the bride a ring, they are married. Whatever happens after the delivery of the ring is irrelevant in their view. (This does not mean that they endorse the practice, only that it does not invalidate the marriage.)[7]

In R' Moshe's 5740 *teshuvah*, he provides guidance about how to handle a ring exchange when absolutely necessary:

When a particular rabbi finds himself at some wedding, and they are compelling him, and he is forced by the need to maintain his livelihood to perform the kidushin specifically in such a manner that the bride will also give a ring to the groom, he must inform them, and the witnesses as well, that it is only the groom's giving of the ring to the bride that constitutes the *kinyan* (act of solemnization) of the kidushin, and the bride's gift to the groom has no connection to the kidushin at all, but is a mere gift. And her statement (when giving the ring) should utilize language indicating that this is a gift of love and affection now that he is already her husband.

R' Asher, too, adds a caveat to his view that double-ring ceremonies are presumptively invalid: If it is possible that the officiating rabbi explained to the couple that it is actually the man who performs the kidushin, but the woman chose to emulate the non-Jewish custom and give the man a ring nonetheless, then the fact that a double-ring ceremony was performed cannot completely vitiate the validity of the marriage, so a get would be required.[8]

R' Moshe's 5729 *teshuvah* is titled, "If one is permitted to let the bride as well give a ring to the groom *under the chupah*." And in his 5741 *teshuvah*, he allows a husband to wear a wedding ring that was given to him subsequent to the kidushin, because the wearing of the ring after the wedding is "for adornment, and perhaps also as an indication that he is married" and does not imply that the marriage ceremony involved exchanging rings. He concludes that "although this (practice) is perhaps ugly (*mechu'ar*) to those who fear Hashem, there would seem to be no basis to prohibit it."

R' Chaim Dovid Halevi responded as follows to a correspondent who had been told that men should not wear wedding rings:

The truth is that I have never heard of such a prohibition, or even a pious custom to refrain from wearing wedding rings. On the contrary, from the halacha it is clear that there is no prohibition at all in this matter...

He concludes by suggesting that if there are indeed those who refrain from wearing wedding rings, their rationale may be that since some authorities prohibit wearing rings outdoors on Shabbos, they have adopted a stringency to avoid wearing rings even during the week, lest they forget and wear them outdoors on Shabbos.[9]

[1] Brennan Doherty. More men are wearing engagement rings. The market is figuring it out. BBC.

[2]See our discussion of this prohibition in Playing with Fire: Adopting *Chukos Hagoyim*. Bais HaVaad Halacha Journal. Mar. 2, 2023.

[3]Shu"t Igros Moshe E.H. *cheilek* 3 *siman* 18.

[4]Ibid. *cheilek* 4 end of *siman* 13 *os* 4. Cf. Shu"t Lev Aryeh (Grossnass) *siman* 31 *os* 6.

[5]R' Moshe actually refers there to Conservative rabbis, but he may be using the terms Reform and Conservative interchangeably.

[6]Shu"t Minchas Asher *cheilek* 1 *siman* 72 *os* 1 p. 212 s.v. *Ha'echad*.

[7]R' Chaim Jachter, Invalidating Non-Orthodox Wedding Ceremonies-Rav Asher Weiss's Novel Approach, Kol Torah Volume 23 Halachah (also in The Halachic Status of Non-Orthodox Marriages-Part III, Kol Torah Volume 7 Halachah). Cf. Rav Jachter's article in Techumin 18 pp. 84-91 (I do not currently have access to this article.)

[8]Shu"t Minchas Asher *cheilek* 3 end of *siman* 98 p. 333 s.v. *Uvemah shenasnu hechassan vehakallah taba'as zeh lazeh*.

[9]Shu"t Asei Lecha Rav *cheilek* 5 *siman* 94 p. 386.