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Christians Embrace a Jewish Wedding Tradition

By SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN

In a San Antonio chapel last August, after reciting their wedding vows and exchanging their rings, Sally and Mark Austin prepared to receive communion for the first time as husband and wife. Just before they did, their minister asked them to sign a document. It was a ketubah, a traditional Jewish marriage contract.

The Austins' was not an interfaith marriage. Nor was their ceremony some sort of multicultural mashup. Both Sally and Mark are evangelical Christians, members of Oak Hills Church, a nationally known megachurch. They were using the ketubah as a way of affirming the Jewish roots of their faith.

In so doing, the Austins are part of a growing phenomenon of non-Jews incorporating the ketubah, a document with millennia-old origins and a rich artistic history, into their weddings. Mrs. Austin, in fact, first learned about the ketubah from her older sister, also an evangelical Christian, who had been married five years earlier with not only a ketubah but the Judaic wedding canopy, the huppah.

"Embracing this Jewish tradition just brings a richness that we miss out on sometimes as Christians when we don't know the history," said Mrs. Austin, 28, a business manager for AT&T. "Jesus was Jewish, and we appreciate his culture, where he came from."

Beyond its specific basis in Judaism, the ketubah represented to the Austins a broader concept of holiness, of consecration. "We wanted a permanent reminder of the covenant we made with God," Mrs. Austin said. "We see this document superseding the marriage license of a state or a court."

Such sentiments have been reshaping the market for ketubot (the plural in Hebrew) in the past decade. Michael Shapiro, an observant Jew from Toronto who sells artistic ketubot through the Web site ketubah.com, said he had seen the non-Jewish share of his customers rise from zero to about 10 percent. He is forming a spinoff site, artvows.com, that concentrates on non-Jewish consumers.

While evangelical Christians like the Austins make up part of that niche, Mr. Shapiro said, the concept of marital sanctity they expressed is one he hears from many gentile buyers.

"There's an idea of this being significant and lasting, a nod to something greater at work in a couple having come together," he said in a telephone interview. "For some, it's about God and faith. For others, it's almost a sense of a miracle. In Jewish terms, we have the Yiddish word bashert, for 'meant to be, intended for each other.' "

The decade of non-Jews discovering the ketubah coincides with three relevant social trends: the rise of Christian Zionism, the growth of interfaith marriage, and the mainstreaming of the New Age movement with its search for spirituality in multiple faith traditions. As a result, an increasing number of gentiles

have taken up Judaic practices: holding a Passover Seder, eating kosher food and studying kabbalah, the Jewish mystical movement.

“A lot of these things are grass-rootsy,” said Prof. Jenna Weissman Joselit, a historian at George Washington University, who has written extensively on Jewish popular culture. “They have to do with the growing popularity of intermarriage — openness, pluralism, cultural improvisation. And for those who are more religiously literate, they add another level of authenticity or legitimacy.”

What makes the ketubah boom among non-Jews more striking is that even for Jews the present concept of a ketubah — simultaneously a work of fine art and a religious document — took centuries to develop and spread.

The earliest known version of a Jewish marriage contract dates to the fifth century B.C. in Egypt. Roughly 1,000 years later, during the Talmudic period in Palestine and Babylon, a formally codified version of the ketubah emerged.

And in its original form, far from declaring marriage as an everlasting bond, the ketubah largely served to protect a wife’s right to financial support in the event of a divorce, which under traditional Jewish law is entirely a husband’s decision. To this day, the standard Orthodox ketubah still contains language requiring a divorced man to pay his ex-wife “200 silver zuz.”

Sephardic Jews, though, wrote ketubot with specific provisions for each marriage. And, of more enduring aesthetic importance, they began to illustrate the documents elaborately with images and calligraphy. With the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, refugees carried that artistic tradition to Italy, Germany and Holland, where the decorative ketubah began to seep into Ashkenazi culture.

But the style never reached into the Eastern European heartland of Jewry — which itself was the source of most of America’s Jewish immigrants — and by the mid-20th century the ketubah was back to where it had started as a document of religious law to be signed and stowed away.

All that suddenly changed with the “Jewish counterculture” of the 1960s, a movement by young Jews to participate in worship actively rather than just follow a rabbi, and to create their own prayers, liturgies, ceremonies and ritual objects, very much including ketubot.

By now, the ketubah is such a standard part of American Jewish life that even the new National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia exhibits and sells them. Next month the Jewish Museum in New York will mount a major show of ketubot.

“You have an interest in a beautifying ritual and you have disposable income,” said Sharon Liberman Mintz of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, who is curating the Jewish Museum exhibit.

“There’s both the wherewithal and the interest. Now you’d hang your ketubah on the wall. In the past, you’d just keep it in a safe or something like that.”

As for Sally and Mark Austin, they Googled their way to ketubah.com, selected a version with the image

of a flowing river, and chose one of several texts from the Reform Jewish movement. After their wedding day, they hung it over their bed.

“One of the characteristics of a covenant,” as Mrs. Austin put it, “is a tangible sign. And this piece of paper, this beautiful piece of art, is the sign of our covenant.”