SHUSHBINIM: When your friends paid for the wedding

Everyone knows what a wedding costs. And everyone knows a young couple who pushed off the date because the numbers did not work. It turns out our Sages thought about this, and the solution they built is one of the most ingenious institutions in Judaism. It is called *shushbinut*, and it survives today shrunk down into something much smaller: the best man.

SHIMSHON'S THIRTY

The word *shushbin* already appears in Tanakh. When Shimshon married, thirty young men were brought to be the close members of his wedding party (Shofetim 14:11). In Talmudic times the wedding feast was held as a communal meal, and those who took part were called *shushbinim*.

So far this sounds like an old word for "the groom's friends." It was not.

A COMMON FUND AMONG FRIENDS

Maimonides describes it plainly in the Mishne Torah, in the laws of Zekhiya uMatana. The custom in every land, he writes, is that when a man marries, his friends and acquaintances send him money to help him cover the expenses of the wedding. Those same friends who sent the gift then have the right to come and eat and drink with the groom during the week of celebrations. Those who sent the money are called *shushbinim*.

And here is what changes everything. That money was not a gift. It was a loan with a very particular due date: **the day the friend himself would marry.**

The groom who received the money is legally obligated to return the same sum when each of his friends' turn comes. And

“legally” means legally: the Talmud (Bava Batra 145a) establishes that *shushbinut* is a debt collectible in Bet Din. If the friend does not pay up, he can be sued. And there is more: it is one of the few debts the Shemita year does not cancel, because it has not yet come due.

In other words: a group of young friends, none of whom can afford a wedding on his own, builds a revolving fund together. The first to marry receives from everyone. Then he pays back, one at a time, as each of the others marries. Nobody is left out, and nobody has to pay it all at once.

THE RULES OF THE GAME

The Talmud works out the details with a seriousness that is surprising. Rav Kahana lays down the general rule: if the man who owed the shushbinut was in town when his friend married, he should have come. If he was nearby and heard the sound of the drum announcing the wedding, he should have come. If he was far away and did not hear it, the groom should have notified him; and if he did not, the friend has a legitimate grievance… but he still has to pay.

There is one legal consequence of all this that says a great deal. The Mishna (Sanhedrin 3:5) rules that a *shushbin* is disqualified from testifying in a case involving the groom. Why? Because the relationship is too close. Being someone’s shushbin was a public declaration of deep friendship, with consequences in a court of law.

WHAT IS LEFT OF ALL THIS

Today we have far more than thirty guests at a wedding, and the word *shushbin* has narrowed down to a single person: the one who stands at the groom’s or the bride’s side, takes care of their needs on the day, announces the honors at the ceremony, and makes sure everything runs smoothly. A brother, a cousin, the closest friend. What in English is called the

best man.

What got lost along the way is the most interesting part: that being a shushbin was not a decorative honor but a financial commitment, and that the community had a binding, enforceable mechanism to make sure no couple had to give up on marrying for lack of money.

Sometimes it is worth looking at what our grandparents did before deciding we already know everything.

Rabbi Yosef Bitton