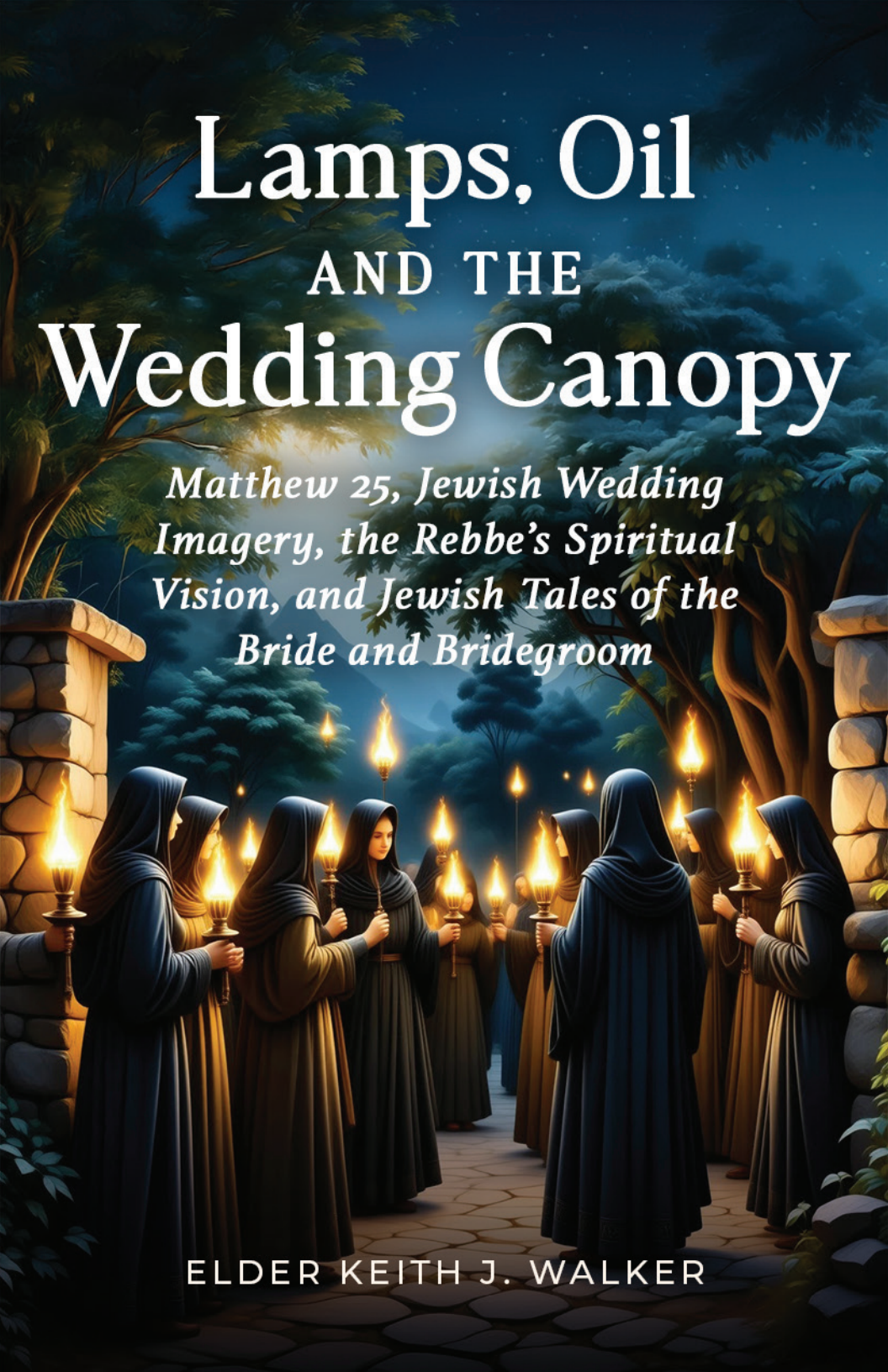
Lamps, Oil AND THE Wedding Canopy

Matthew 25, Jewish Wedding Imagery, the Rebbe's Spiritual Vision, and Jewish Tales of the Bride and Bridegroom



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LAMPS, OIL & THE WEDDING CANOPY

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Preface

My booklet explores the wedding image as a theological and practical symbol across Jewish and Christian traditions. It centers on Matthew 25:1–13 (the parable of the ten virgins), reads that parable against first-century Jewish nuptial practice, sets it beside Jewish halacha and midrashic motifs (bridegroom = Jehovah - Jesus /Messiah; bride = Israel), and offers a Chassidic — specifically Rebbe-style — application emphasizing inner "oil" (sustaining devotion) and outward "lamp" (observable mitzvot). It closes with a selection of Jewish fables and tales that deepen the metaphorical meaning of bride and bridegroom.

Short Answer Up Front

The Rebbe did not publish a commentary on Matthew 25 itself. However, his teachings often address the parable's central themes: wedding as covenant, inner spiritual fuel versus outward observance (oil vs. lamp), community readiness for redemption, sanctifying the home, joy in service, and active waiting. The treatment below is a Jewish/Chassidic exposition in that spirit, combined with historical, legal and narrative material.

Contents

Here are the main kinds of lamps and lamp images in Bible times and what the oil (or the lamp itself) commonly symbolizes in Scripture. For each I give the biblical references and a short symbolic meaning. Interpretations vary by tradition, but the following are

the most frequent biblical/theological associations.

1. Household oil lamp (everyday clay/metal lamp)
• References: common throughout the Gospels (e.g., Luke 12:35–40; Matthew 25:1–13).
• Symbolism: personal watchfulness, readiness, the believer's inner life. In the Parable of the Ten Virgins lamps + oil = preparedness for Christ's coming; lack of oil = unpreparedness.

2. The golden lampstand / menorah (tabernacle and temple)
• References: Exodus 25:31–40 (design); Exodus 27:20; Leviticus 24:2–4; 1 Samuel 3:3.
• Symbolism: God's continual presence and illumination among His people; the nation/temple as witness. The perpetual lighting (pure olive oil) points to holiness and divine light abiding in the sanctuary.

3. The seven-branched lampstands in Revelation
• References: Revelation 1:12–13; 1:20 ("seven golden lampstands are the seven churches").
• Symbolism: the churches as witnesses/ light-bearers in the world; Christ walking among the lampstands (His care and authority over the churches).

4. Olive oil for lamps (explicitly commanded)
• References: Exodus 27:20–21; Leviticus 24:2.

• Symbolism: purity, consecration, and—frequently—God's Spirit or divine grace. The command to use "pure olive oil" associates the oil with what is holy and life-giving.

5. The lamp as God's Word
• Reference: Psalm 119:105 ("Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path").
• Symbolism: guidance, moral/ spiritual direction; Scripture enlightens the believer's road.

6. The lamp as Christ / Light of the world
• References: John 8:12; Matthew 5:14–16 (you are the light of the world).
• Symbolism: Christ as the true light; believers called to reflect that light. Lamps point to Jesus' illuminating and saving role.

7. Lamp and eye / lamp of the body
• Reference: Matthew 6:22–23 ("The light of the body is the eye…").
• Symbolism: inward perception, moral vision, the condition of the inner life determining spiritual light or darkness.

8. Lamp as the human spirit / conscience
• Reference: Proverbs 20:27 ("The spirit of man is the lamp of the LORD").
• Symbolism: the inner spirit as a lamp through

which God discerns and engages a person; conscience and divine witness within.

9. Oil as the Spirit / anointing (connected idea)
• References: Zechariah 4:1–6 (lampstands and vessels of oil); Acts 10:38; Exodus 30:22–33 (anointing oil).
• Symbolism: oil often represents the Holy Spirit, empowerment, consecration for God's service. Zechariah's vision explicitly connects the oil flow with Spirit-enabled ministry ("Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit").

10. Lamps in parables teaching spiritual truth (e.g., lamp under a bushel)
• References: Luke 8:16; Mark 4:21; Luke 11:33.
• Symbolism: the responsibility to display spiritual light (truth), not hide it; authenticity in witness.

11. Lamps and forgiveness/atonement context (God "in" Christ as light)
• References: 2 Corinthians 5:19; passages showing God acting through Christ's person (John 14:9–11).
• Symbolism: the lamp imagery supports the theme that God's saving, reconciling presence is manifested in Christ—divine action that enlightens and restores.

Brief note on meaning: "Oil" is a flexible biblical symbol. In lamp imagery it most commonly denotes

what fuels spiritual light—often understood as the Holy Spirit, inner spiritual life (faith, watchfulness, good works), sanctifying grace, or purity (hence the command for pure olive oil). The lamp itself (or lampstand) is used of God's presence, Scripture, Christ, the church, or the believer's conscience/vision depending on context.

• Summary: Ten virgins wait for the bridegroom; five wise bring extra oil, five foolish do not. The groom is delayed; midnight cry announces him; the foolish ask for oil but are refused; while they go to buy oil the bridegroom comes and the foolish are shut out. Jesus: "Watch, for you know neither the day nor the hour."
• Central thrust: readiness and vigilance — inward spiritual preparedness that endures delay and crisis.

1. Jewish nuptial background (first-century practice and the parable's concrete setting)

• Weddings often took place at night; lamps and torches were used in escorting the groom and leading the bridal procession to the groom's house. Bridesmaids/attendants (virgins) commonly accompanied the bride and could be responsible for carrying lamps.
• The groom might delay because he was completing preparations in his home or because of customary timing of processions. This real social practice gives

literal sense to Jesus' parable.
• The parable therefore used a living Jewish custom to teach a spiritual lesson; the imagery would have been immediately intelligible to Jesus' audience.

1. Halachic and biblical matrix: Torah, Leviticus and rabbinic practice

• Levitical and Torah concerns (purity, sexual conduct, family life) form the background for later rabbinic regulations: niddah, mikveh, and other purity practices that influenced bridal preparation.
• Rabbinic institutions (kiddushin, ketubah, chuppah, yichud) codify legal and social aspects of marriage. The ketubah protects the wife financially; the chuppah symbolizes the couple's new household; kiddushin establishes the bond; yichud marks the couple's first private moment.
• These legal structures reflect the Torah's emphasis on covenant, dignity, and social order in marriage: marriage is both personal and communal, private and public.

1. A Rebbe-style reading — lamp, oil, bridegroom and bride
(Note: the Rebbe did not write a line-by-line commentary on Matthew 25; this is a Chassidic reading in his spirit.)

Core distinctions and spiritual principle

• Lamp = outward observance, ritual practice, visible mitzvot and communal identity. It is necessary and guides others.
• Oil = the inner spiritual vitality that fuels observance: Torah internalized, sincere intention (kavvanah), love of God (ahavat Hashem), teshuvah, joy in serving, sustained faith.
• The Rebbe emphasized that the world needs both: strong institutions and warm inner life. Without oil, ritual becomes a brittle form that can fail in crisis; without lamps, inner devotion cannot be effectively expressed in the world.

Bridegroom and bride, in Rebbe-style terms

• Bridegroom: God (and eschatologically Mashiach) — one who comes to consummate redemption and dwell in the world; he "prepares a house" by which the world becomes fit for Divine indwelling.
• Bride: Israel / the faithful community / sanctified home — the place where the Divine presence is welcomed and the covenant realized.
• The wedding is not mere contract but covenantal mission: the couple's home becomes a "mikdash me'at" (mini-sanctuary), a focus of sanctification.

Pastoral emphasis from the Rebbe's approach

• Active waiting: periods of delay are times to intensify study, observance, joy, and outreach. Waiting is not passive.
• Accumulating oil: daily practice of Torah, prayer, charity, and joy builds lasting reserves for decisive moments.
• Community responsibility: bridesmaids (the community) help one another keep lamps lit; outreach and education extend oil to others.

1. Typology: the ten virgins and the bridegroom — detailed mapping
Five "Wise" Virgins (have oil; inner readiness)
2. Preparedness — steady Torah study and prayer that fuels life.
3. Sincerity — inner kavvanah in mitzvot; religion experienced from within.
4. Perseverance — endurance in long seasons of waiting.
5. Joyful devotion — service animated by inner joy.
6. Active generosity — spiritual life expressed as outreach and teaching.

Five "Foolish" Virgins (appear but lack oil; vulnerable)

1. Formalism — ritual without internal meaning.
2. Complacency — deferring inner work until "later."

3. Externalism — style over substance.
4. Weak endurance — faith that wanes under delay.
5. Self-absorption — inward emptiness that undermines giving.

The Bridegroom — typology

• Jewish reading: God / Mashiach, the Divine suitor who will consummate the covenant and perfect the world. The groom's delay corresponds to the process of spiritual and world preparation required for redemption.
• Christian typology: Bridegroom = Jesus (Messiah) and Bride = the Church. Oil is interpreted by many Christian commentators as the Spirit, sanctifying grace, or inner righteousness.

1. Christian typology and Jewish contrast

• Christian reading commonly identifies the bridegroom as Christ, the bride as the Church, and the oil with the indwelling Spirit or sanctifying grace; the parable warns the faithful to be watchful for Christ's return.
• Jewish tradition maintains the prophetic metaphor of God as bridegroom and Israel as bride and reads the parable in ways that urge personal and national readiness for redemption (geulah) through mitzvot, teshuvah and sanctifying the home.

• Both traditions converge on the importance of inner transformation and covenantal seriousness while differing on the identity of the bridegroom and the institutional expression of the bride.

1. Jewish fables, midrashim and Hasidic tales on bridegroom/bride — selected paraphrases and meanings

The following selections are short paraphrases and interpretive summaries of themes found in biblical narratives, midrashic exegesis, and Hasidic literature. They are offered to deepen the metaphorical meaning of bride and bridegroom.

A. Hosea's marriage to Gomer — fidelity amid unfaithfulness (biblical paradigm)

• The prophet Hosea is commanded to marry Gomer, a woman who is unfaithful; Je covenantal love for Israel is pictured in the prophet's steadfastness despite betrayal.
• Meaning: Jehovah as faithful bridegroom who pursues and restores a wayward bride — a paradigm of covenant love that survives and repairs breach. The moral is about mercy, return (teshuvah), and restoration.

B. Song of Songs and Shir HaShirim Rabbah — love

as covenant and the nation's intimate relationship with Jehovah

• The Song of Songs was read by Rabbis like Akiva as an allegory of the love between Jehovah and Israel. Shir HaShirim Rabbah develops this into a series of wedding and betrothal images, celebrating the unique intimacy of the covenant.
• Meaning: The erotic and tender language becomes a model for closeness to God; religious service is presented as mutual delight (ahavah) not only duty.

C. Midrashic wedding of Zion (prophetic nuptials) — Isaiah and Jeremiah motifs

• Prophetic books often picture Zion or Jerusalem as the bride who will be wedded to the Divine in the age to come (e.g., Isaiah's promises of restoration).
• Meaning: National redemption is cast as nuptial consummation — a relational, joyful, covenantal transformation.

D. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov — "The Lost Princess" and the soul's bridal search (Hasidic tale)

• In Rabbi Nachman's well-known tale of the Lost Princess, a king's daughter is abducted into darkness; the prince must search through hardship to restore her. The story is symbolic of the soul's exile and the

ongoing mission of restoration.
• Meaning: The bride (soul or Israel) is in exile and must be found and restored; the bridegroom (redemptive force) is on a quest. It emphasizes perseverance, storytelling as spiritual aid, and hope.

E. Hasidic motif — every Jew as a bride awaiting Mashiach (Baal Shem Tov / later rebbes)

• Hasidic masters often taught that each Jew is like a bride or part of the bride: the Divine desires relationship, and every act of joy, charity and study prepares the marriage canopy under which the Divine presence will be revealed.
• Meaning: The daily life of joy and service is bridal preparation; small acts contribute to the final wedding banquet (the Messianic era).

F. A folktale motif (anonymous Jewish folk tale) — "The Lamps at the Gate"

• Paraphrase: At a town gate, ten attendants await the royal wedding. Five have tended lamps with care; five have polished but never filled them. When the trumpet sounds at night, the empty lamps sputter out and those attendants miss the procession. The moral: maintenance of inner reserves matters more than appearance.
• Meaning: Folktales like these rework the biblical

parable into moral teaching about discipline, sincerity, and communal help.

G. Midrash on divine courtship and reconciliation

• In various midrashim, Jehovah is described as wooing Israel: petitions, reproaches, forgiveness — the narrative is full of courtship images culminating in reconciliation and renewed covenant.
• Meaning:

Jehovah relational methods teach how covenantal love withstands failure and invokes returning.
NOTE on usage: These tales and midrashic themes are not literal histories but moral and spiritual narratives that shape Jewish imagination. Hasidic tales add psychological and mystical nuance; midrash often provides poetic reinterpretation of biblical text for ethical and spiritual instruction.

1. Practical applications for couples, communities and spiritual seekers

For couples preparing for marriage

• Build oil reservoirs: habitual Torah study, shared prayer, acts of kindness and mutual spiritual practices.
• Prepare the home as a chuppah in miniature:

Shabbat rituals, mezuzah, family study time, hospitality.
• Use premarital counseling and halachic guidance: ketubah, mikveh preparation, agreements on finances and values.

For communities

• Teach and model inner devotion as well as ritual competence.
• Support bridesmaids metaphorically: create networks of mentoring, learning, and mutual aid so neighbors help each other "keep oil."
• Make waiting active: programs of learning, outreach, joy, and community-building during long seasons without obvious redemption.

For personal spiritual life

• Cultivate both lamp and oil: visible practice and private interiority; neither alone suffices.
• Persevere in delay with joy: increase song, gratitude and study; transform waiting into a time of growth.
• See your life as part of a covenantal wedding: ordinary acts become sanctifying when done for God's sake.

1. Conclusion and offers to expand

Below I give (A) Chassidic/Rebbe-style insight into the "lamps at the gate" motif and its metaphorical meaning; (B) Jewish fables and midrashic/Hasidic tales that use the bride/bridegroom and lamp/oil imagery; (C) the history and practice of the Jewish bride's purification (mikveh) before marriage, with the halachic and cultural reasons behind it; and (D) a comparative typology showing how some Christian traditions read the parable in terms of baptism and the Holy Spirit (including Pentecostal emphasis on "fire" and speaking in tongues), and how Jewish meaning differs. I will mark where I am offering Rebbe-style application (the Rebbe himself did not comment directly on Matthew 25) and where I summarize other traditions.

A. Lamps at the Gate — Rebbe-style insight and metaphorical meaning

Core symbolism

• Gate/threshold: the liminal moment, a doorway between one state and another (single life → married life; exile → redemption). A gate is a public threshold that marks communal entrance to a sacred space.
• Lamp: visible practice and expression — ritual observance, mitzvot, outward behaviors that light the way for others. Lamps show direction; they are public.

• Oil: inner life and sustaining power — Torah internalized, kavvanah (intention), ahavat Hashem (love of God), teshuvah (return), joy in service and real spiritual vitality. Oil is the hidden fuel; without it the visible light will go out.
• Bridegroom: the approaching Divine Presence or Redeemer (in Jewish reading, God/Mashiach); his coming consummates the covenant and reveals the Divine in a new way.
• Bride: Israel/the soul/the sanctified household — the one to be joined in covenantal relationship.

Rebbe-style emphases (in spirit)
• Outward ritual alone (lamp without oil) is fragile. The Rebbe repeatedly taught that mitzvot must be invested with inner intentionality and joy so they become life-giving and redemptive. Visible Judaism (synagogue, Shabbat, ritual) must be animated by inner devotion to be enduring.
• Waiting is active: periods of apparent delay are the time to build reservoirs of "oil" — daily Torah study, lovingkindness, communal outreach, and joyful service. The Rebbe framed the work of preparing the Jewish soul and home as practical, communal, and persistent effort toward geulah (redemption).
• The community as bridesmaids: in Chassidic thought the community does not merely look on; it sustains, instructs, and helps prepare others. Those who appear "wise" keep lamps lit and teach others

how to have oil; the ideal is not exclusion but mutual strengthening.
• Mikdash me'at: the home is a small sanctuary; every household prepared and sanctified becomes part of the bride's preparation for the Divine Bridegroom's coming.

Relational/ethical corollary

• The Rebbe stressed dignity, mutual respect and the sanctity of relationships in marriage. The lamps and oil metaphors become ethical guidance: don't let ritual be a pretext for coldness; cultivate warmth, humility and generosity.

B. Jewish tales, midrashim and Hasidic stories that use the bride/bridegroom and lamp/oil imagery
Selected themes and paraphrased tales

1. Hosea as the archetypal bridegroom story

• Hosea's marriage to Gomer (Biblical narrative) = prophetic drama of steadfast Divine love for an unfaithful bride. Message: covenantal patience, call to teshuvah, restoration. Often read as the prototype of bridegroom imagery.

1. Song of Songs — the nuptial allegory

• Shir HaShirim and its midrashim present love between God and Israel in erotic/nuptial imagery; lamps and light appear as images of intimacy and presence. Rabbis interpret the poem as the spiritual union of God and Israel.

1. “The Lost Princess” (Rabbi Nachman of Breslov)

• Parable of a king’s daughter lost in exile and the prince seeking her. The bride is reclaimed through perseverance, spiritual searching and the telling of stories. The light/return motifs echo the lamps-of-waiting metaphor.
1. Hasidic folktale variant of “The Lamps at the Gate”

• A Rebbe tells of a town whose attendants forgot to bring oil; the Rebbe uses the tale to exhort disciples to prepare inner life and to teach others. Often the “foolish” are later rehabilitated into teachers — a theme of redemptive repair.

1. Midrashic wedding of Zion/Jerusalem

• Prophetic midrashim speak of Zion as bride waiting for the Divine, lamps and songs at her gates; the imagery ties national redemption to festive nuptial imagery. Light there symbolizes presence and revelation.

1. Folk moral tale — “The Lamp Tender”

• A simple folk tale about a lamp tender who keeps every lamp filled and so can guide every traveler at night. Moral: sustained service and preparedness saves others.

C. History and practice of the Jewish bride’s purification before marriage — mikveh and related customs
Overview: origins and development

• Biblical & Second Temple roots: The Torah contains many purity laws (e.g., tum’ah and taharah, rules for bodily discharges, childbirth — Leviticus 12 and 15). Second Temple literature and archaeological findings show that ritual baths (miqva’ot) existed and were used for purity rites.
• Rabbinic codification: The Mishnah and later Talmudic tractates (esp. Niddah, Yevamot, Ketubot) and later halachic codifiers (Tur, Shulchan Aruch Even HaEzer, Yoreh De’ah) discuss immersion for various statuses including niddah and other purification rituals. While the precise pre-wedding immersion practice evolved, by rabbinic times immersion before marriage had become common in many communities.

Common elements of bridal preparation historically

and halachically

1. Taharah (ritual purity/immersion)

• Many brides historically immersed in a mikveh before the wedding day—this immersion was associated with entering a new domestic, intimate covenant. The mikveh symbolizes spiritual renewal and ritual readiness. In communities that observe family purity laws, the bride's immersion signals the beginning of marital intimacy at an appropriate halachic time.
• Timing and practice varied: some communities immersed on the day of the chuppah; others on the night after the wedding; some had seclusion and immersion as part of pre-wedding rites.

1. Ablutions, anointing and beautification

• The bride would be bathed, anointed with oils or perfumes, dressed in festive garments — acts of physical preparation that also have spiritual resonance (like anointing for a holy role). Anointing recalls priestly and royal imagery and was part of celebrating the transformation into marriage.

1. Seclusion and instruction

• In many traditions the bride had a period of

seclusion with women attendants during which she received instruction, blessings and songs; these were moments of spiritual and emotional preparation. In some communities older women gave guidance about marital duties and the spiritual life.

1. Ketubah, vows and legal protections

• The ketubah (marriage contract) was arranged and often signed prior to or during the ceremony, affirming legal responsibilities of the groom and protecting the bride's status.

1. Bedeken (veiling)

• In Ashkenazic and other customs, the groom veils the bride (bedeken) before the chuppah. This has multiple interpretations: ensuring the correct bride, symbolizing modesty, and a ritual of covering preceding the marital union. It also can recall Rebecca at the well — a prelude to covenantal marriage.

Meanings of mikveh (ritual bath) for the bride

• Ritual purity: compliance with the system of taharah in Jewish life.
• Spiritual transition: immersion marks passage from single to married life, a kind of spiritual "rebirth."

• Community recognition: the mikveh ritual is public in the sense of communal norms — it situates the bride within covenantal life.
• Sanctity of intimacy: by entering marriage with proper ritual status, the marital union is framed as sanctified.

D. Comparative typology: mikveh vs. Christian baptism; oil vs. Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues Christian Pentecostal reading (typical elements)

• Many Christian interpreters (especially Pentecostal/charismatic traditions) read the oil in Matthew 25 typologically as the Holy Spirit; readiness is equated with being filled with the Spirit (Acts 2 imagery). Baptism in the Holy Spirit (and evidence such as speaking in tongues) is in some streams considered the mark of Spirit-baptism and thus spiritual readiness/revelation. The bride = the Church; the bridegroom = Christ.
• In this reading: mikveh (Jewish ritual immersion) is seen as a type/foreshadowing of Christian baptism — a symbolic parallel where immersion marks new status in relation to God. The "taking the name" idea (bride taking bridegroom's name) appears in some Christian traditions as the bride "bearing Christ's name" through union. Some Christians interpret Jesus' name as the Divine Name (YHWH) revealed — this is theological particularity of Christian belief, not

Jewish acceptance.

Jewish perspective on typology and difference

• Judaism sees mikveh and marital immersions as ritual-legal acts grounded in Torah and rabbinic law; they are not understood as sacramental conferring of the Holy Spirit or as identifying the bride with a specific divine human name. Mikveh effects ritual readiness and sanctity within Jewish covenantal life.
• Jews do not accept Christian claims about Jesus as Divine Name or the sacramental necessity of speaking in tongues for redemption. From a Jewish theological standpoint, "redemption" and the role of Mashiach are understood differently, and spiritual preparedness is cultivated through Torah, mitzvot and teshuvah rather than baptism in Jesus' name.
• Nevertheless, historically and typologically there are resonances: both ritual immersion and Christian baptism mark transition and reorientation toward God; both traditions use nuptial imagery (bride/bridegroom) to speak of covenantal relationship.

Careful theological note

• Comparative typologies are useful for dialogue but must be treated as theological interpretations rather than historical identifications. Jewish mikveh and Christian baptism share formal similarity (immersion

in water) and symbolic features (purification, new status) but differ in doctrinal meaning and communal function. Claims that the Jewish bride "must take the bridegroom name Jesus" or that "without baptism in Holy Ghost and tongues you have no light/revelation/redemption" express a specific Christian doctrinal stance which Judaism does not share.

E. Bringing it together — pastoral and interfaith reflections

- Shared image: Both faiths find in the wedding image a powerful model of relationship with the Divine. Lamps and oil, bathing and immersion, veils and feasts serve as metaphors for inner life and communal covenant.
- Distinctives: The Jewish Rebbe-style emphasis highlights sanctifying the home, inner kavvanah, communal preparation and practical mitzvot as the oil that keeps lamps burning. Pentecostal readings emphasize the indwelling Spirit and charismatic evidence as the sustaining power. Each tradition frames "readiness" within its own theological vocabulary.
- Mutual respect: In interfaith discussion it helps to distinguish between typological parallels and doctrinal claims; one can acknowledge symbolic resonance while respecting religious boundaries.

F. Suggested sources and next steps
If you'd like, I can:

• Provide primary Jewish sources on mikveh and bridal preparation (Mishnah/Talmud references: Niddah, Ketubot; Shulchan Aruch Even HaEzer; classical Midrashim on Song of Songs and Hosea).
• Compile Rebbe talks and letters that address the wedding metaphor, sanctifying the home (mikdash me'at), and the "oil" of the soul — with citations (note: the Rebbe did not comment on Matthew 25 directly, but spoke often about geulah and inner service).
• Provide Christian Pentecostal sources that interpret Matthew 25 in terms of Spirit-baptism and charismatic evidence for balanced comparative study.
• Draft a short teaching handout or sermon that uses "The Lamps at the Gate" tale, plus mikveh history and a respectful comparative reflection for an interfaith audience.

• The parable of the ten virgins is rooted in Jewish wedding life and uses that context to teach enduring spiritual truths: vigilance, inward preparation and covenantal fidelity. The Rebbe's spiritual program (sanctifying the home, building Torah study and outreach, joy and teshuvah) resonates strongly with the parable's message: accumulate oil now; keep your lamp lit; help others do the same.

• Jewish fables, midrash and Hasidic tales amplify the metaphor — portraying God as bridegroom who redeems, Israel (or the soul) as bride who must be found and prepared, and communal life as the network of attendants that sustain the bride's light. Below is a polished Jewish folk-tale retelling of "The Lamps at the Gate," followed by a short note on its symbolism, two brief variant versions (one Hasidic, one for children), and a few discussion questions you can use for teaching or study.

The Lamps at the Gate — a Jewish folk tale

Once, in a town tucked between river and wood, there was to be a wedding unlike any in living memory. The lord of the town had promised his daughter to a noble prince from the capital, and the whole place prepared for a night of music and light.

Custom said that when the prince rode up to the gate, the bride's attendants would meet him and, with torches and lamps, lead the procession from the gate to the bride's house. Ten young women from the village were chosen to wait at the gate and welcome the prince when he arrived. They dressed for the happy night, each bearing a lamp whether of tin or clay.

Five of them—Rivka, Sarah, Tamar, Leah and Chaya—

were careful women. They not only cleaned their lamps and polished their wicks, they brought flasks of oil and kept the flasks nearby. When they tended the fire, they whispered prayers and songs; they filled their lamps and tested the flames to be sure no breeze would snuff them. “The prince may come at any hour,” Rivka said. “A lamp that goes out cannot be mended in a moment.”

The other five—Miriam, Dina, Esther, Rachel and Naamah—liked the idea of waiting but were busy with other things. They dressed brightly and lovingly adorned their lamps. They polished the metal until it gleamed and braided ribbons to hang from the handles. But they had no extra oil. “Why carry flasks?” they laughed. “We will only be here a little while. If the lamps gutter, someone will lend us oil; the market is open; what could go wrong?”

So they waited at the gate, ten lamps bright against the dark, and the town slept, and music drifted from the houses, and midnight was slow in coming.

At last there came a cry from the road: a herald calling, “The prince! The prince approaches!” The attendants lifted their lamps high and pressed together. The five careful women moved closer, topping their lamps with oil so the flames would burn larger, while the other five reached for their

wicks and found, with a start, that some were already sputtering. A wind blew across the gate and a lamp guttered, and then another.

“Give us oil!” the five foolish cried to the wise. “Share with us a drop so our lamps will shine.”

But the five wise answered, “There is not enough in our flasks to pour and still keep our own flames sure for the procession. If we give, all will burn low and none will lead the way. You must go to the oil-seller in the market and buy what you need.”

So the foolish ran to the market. By the time they were bargaining with the vendor and paying the coins and returning with their flasks, the sound of trumpets rose: the procession had already set out from the prince’s carriage. The five who had kept their lamps full stepped forward and, with the town rejoicing, led the way to the bride’s house. The gates were thrown wide and the wedding began.

When the five foolish women came panting to the gate, their lamps bright again, they found the gates closed. The doors were bolted, the music poured out through the windows, and the servants said, “It is no longer the hour. The bride has been brought in. The prince’s party has gone to the banquet.”

They beat upon the gate and called, but the gate stayed closed. When the elder of the town came and saw them, he shook his head and said in pity, "You stood tonight with lamps in your hands—but without the oil that keeps the fire alive. You shone for a little, but you were not ready when the hour came."

From that night forward, those five wise ones were given tasks of instruction. They taught the children how to tend lamps and how to keep flasks of oil for festivals and for the cold dark nights ahead. And as for the other five, they learned—bit by bittering mistake—that polish without fuel is only an illusion of light.

Symbol and meaning (brief)

- The gate and the procession: the threshold of a sacred encounter—marriage, redemption, or a decisive spiritual moment.
- Lamps: outward practice, ritual acts, visible mitzvot that guide and illuminate.
- Oil: the inner spiritual supply—sincere intent (kavvanah), Torah internalized, joy in service, teshuvah—that fuels lasting devotion.
- The refusal to share oil: a caution that true readiness cannot be hurried at the last minute; inner work is cumulative. (Some tellers emphasize that the wise refuse because sharing would jeopardize the

whole procession; others soothe this, saying the wise help in other ways.)

Two short variants

1. A Hasidic telling (moral emphasis on joy and action)

The prince is called “Mashiach” and the gate is the world. The five wise women are those who study Torah with joy and bring others near; they keep “oil” because their joy renews them. The five foolish are outwardly pious but lack love. The Rebbe in this tale sends the five foolish to the market—then seats them as teachers so that their mistake becomes the seed of repair. Emphasis: waiting with joy and outreach repairs the world.

2. A children’s version (simplified)

Ten friends wait with lanterns for a surprise guest. Five remembered to bring extra oil and banded together. Five forgot. When the guest came at night, the five who were ready lit the path. The others missed the party. Lesson for kids: do small, steady things every day—don’t leave them to the last minute.

Discussion questions and uses

• Ask learners: In the story, could the five wise have shared oil without risk? What does that say about communal responsibility?
• What are modern “lamps” and what is our “oil”? (Examples: synagogue attendance vs. private prayer; study vs. charity.)
• How might the story be used in premarital classes, youth groups, or sermons about readiness and inner life?
• How does the story balance personal preparation with communal support?