

What is a Levirate Marriage?

A levirate marriage is a custom where a man must marry his dead brother's widow if the brother died without leaving children. The word comes from the Latin word *levir*, meaning "husband's brother". This practice aimed to provide an heir, protect the widow, and keep property within the family line.

Core Purposes and History

- **Carrying on the Name:** The first son born from this new union was legally viewed as the child of the deceased brother to keep his lineage alive.
- **Protecting the Widow:** In ancient times, widows without sons had no social standing or financial support. Marriage to a brother-in-law secured her home and livelihood.
- **Ancient Traditions:** This practice existed in various ancient cultures with tight clan networks, including the ancient Israelites (where it is known as *Yibbum* in Hebrew), Hittites, and other societies around the world.

Exceptions and Release Ceremonies

- **The Right to Refuse:** If the surviving brother or the widow did not want to marry, they did not have to.
- **The Halitzah Ceremony:** In biblical law, a formal release ritual called *halitzah* took place if the brother refused to marry her. The widow would publicly remove the brother-in-law's shoe or sandal to show he gave up his duty and family claim.
- **Modern Status:** The practice is mostly historical today and is rarely or never practiced in modern mainstream cultures or religions.