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Did you ever wonder where Jewish wedding traditions originated — or how they have evolved over the centuries and across the world?

BY MARISSA STERN

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Elizabeth Johns

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Dressing for a special occasion is exactly that, special! Often, perusing the racks of department stores won't provide the selection and fit you're looking for. When working with special occasions salons, designers will construct gown's using your exact measurements, ensuring a more custom fit. Special occasion dressing requires a specialty store with personalized styling, attentive customer service, and outstanding alterations.

- AVOID THE STRESS, SHOP EARLY -

Don't wait until the last minute to start shopping! That only leaves you stressed with fewer options. Start doing research around where you would like to shop and styles you would like to try on six months before the event and plan on making your selection no more than four months before the big day!

- RED CARPET INSPIRATION -

Taking note of celebrity red carpet styles and silhouettes as inspiration will help women grasp a sense of what is both in fashion, fashion forward and age appropriate.

- SMILE FOR THE CAMERA-

Consider the photography for the event and opt for a color that will complement the bride's chosen color palette for her wedding party.



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SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW, SOMETHING BORROWED,

Everything Jewish

MARISSA STERN | JE STAFF

When you go to a Jewish wedding, you can expect a few standard customs: breaking a glass, signing a ketubah, watching the future spouses drink some wine, a family member saying or doing something extremely embarrassing — just to name a few.

Have you ever wondered how that changes when you go to, say, India? Or how those traditions have changed over time?

Since the days when the OG couples of our biblical past started getting hitched, Jews have adopted certain customs. Veils, for instance, have a history that goes way back when — thanks to Leah, the original “catfish” in that whole Jacob and Rachel situation.

These customs have stuck around for thousands of years, but obviously, times change — and sometimes brides may borrow something old and something new to fit their wedding taste.

The Modern Wedding

Many wedding traditions have been slightly modified to fit the times of the more modern bride.

Marlena Thompson wrote in an article about how wedding traditions have changed on the Jewish Federations of North America website that veils are now no longer a requirement.

“Some modern women reject it because of its similarity to the *purdah* — the requisite face covering worn by married Middle East-

ern women — an emblem of modesty to some and of oppression to others,” she wrote.

A few modifications of these older traditions might not be as newly popular as you think. Wedding rings, for instance, now are pretty much a universal staple at wedding ceremonies, but this tradition has truly ancient roots.

Jewish marriage requires *kinyan*, Thompson continued in her findings, which she defined as an act requiring “that the bride be given — and that she accept — something of nominal value from the groom.”

In ancient times, an act of *kinyan* was symbolized by a coin given to the bride. While that custom still has roots in present-day Sephardic traditions, nowadays a ring is much more immediately recognized in fulfilling that requirement. Plus, if a groom hands you a coin when you say “I do,” it might look a little weird.

The notion of a bride and groom each exchanging a ring is more modern concept, Thompson noted, and has faced its share of scrutiny.

“The double ring ceremony popular today is a relatively recent custom, and one that raises some objections among traditional Jews,” she explained. “Some think that an exchange of rings invalidates *kinyan*” — the formal acquisition of a thing of value by the bride.

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Everything

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“However, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis find no legal objection to the double-ring ceremony.”

Inscriptions on the inside of the wedding bands is also a more recent concept. She cited the growing trend to inscribe Hebrew phrases, including the popular gender-neutral phrase “*Ani L’Dodi V’Dodi Li* (I Belong to My Beloved and My Beloved Belongs to Me).”

Sign Me Up

Perhaps one of the biggest changes to customary Jewish marriage traditions is the signing of the ketubah — more specifically, the terms laid out in the document.

“Spelling out a husband’s obligations to his wife, the ketubah was a radical document in its day because it provided women with legal status and rights in marriage,” Thompson wrote. “Up until recently, the text for ketubot has remained virtually unchanged. But many couples that consider the traditional ketubah to be out of touch with contemporary views on relationships are creating new ones.”

The writing itself has even become more inclusive and egalitarian.

“Many ketubot now include parallel declarations of commitment made by both bride and groom with a joint declaration of faith in God and a connection to the Jewish people,” Thompson wrote.

Further, whereas the ketubah was written in Aramaic in the past, many couples now choose “English text that describes the home they want to build together or the nature of the love they share,” according to an article by Valerie S. Thaler on MyJewishLearning.com observing the changes in today’s Jewish wedding ceremonies.

“Still other couples do away with the Aramaic entirely,” Thaler wrote. “These couples may compose their own ketubot in English and Hebrew

in accordance with the values they want to govern their marriage.”

But the most interesting shift with the signing of the ketubah is how popular it has become among those who aren’t even Jewish.

With interfaith marriages becoming more common — a 2015 Pew Research Center study showed that “that almost four in 10 Americans (39 percent) who have married since 2010 have a spouse who is in a different religious group” — people are seeing the ketubah as a means of consecrating their marriage, even if they aren’t Jewish.

An article in *The New York Times* stated that “such sentiments have been reshaping the market for ketubot in the past decade.”

The author of the article, Samuel G. Freedman, a professor at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism, shared how Michael Shapiro, who sells artistic ketubot through his website ketubah.com, had seen “the non-Jewish share of his customers rise from zero to about 10 percent.”

As a result, Shapiro started ArtVows.com, a new site focused on selling ketubot for non-Jewish customers.

Ketubot have also become more of an artistic statement than just a signed document that gets stashed away for safekeeping. Many businesses like Shapiro’s offer decorative ketubot that people can frame and display in their homes after their wedding — even the National Museum of American Jewish History offers more than 500 ketubah choices through their online store.

Global Traditions

Jewish weddings often carry over the same customs and traditions, but in many countries, Jews sprinkle in elements of their culture as well.

In India, for example, a henna tattoo carries cultural significance that marries itself (sorry) into a Jewish wedding ceremony.

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Everything

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The biggest Indian element at a Jewish wedding is the *mehndi* ceremony, in which the bride's hands are adorned with designs in henna, according to an article about one Indian Jewish couple's wedding in the Times of Israel.

The article also lists local wedding rituals, including "wearing a garland strung from jasmine flowers and smearing a yellow paste of turmeric on both the bride and the groom's faces."

The turmeric smearing is said to bless the couple with fortune and prosperity, according to a source in the article.

Ring exchanges are not focused on as heavily in Indian-Jewish weddings as they are in Western culture. The article explained that "instead, they've adopted the Indian practice of tying the mangalsutra — a gold and black bead necklace which symbolically keeps the couple safe from harm."

Indian Jewish weddings also abide by laws of kashrut — with their own twist.

The article focused on one couple's wedding, whose culinary fare included fiery mutton curries and the popular chicken biryani, a "rice dish with pan-Indian appeal." The article mentions that all meals were cooked with kosher meat but with their own cultural zest.

"With its strong spices and condiments, the biryani is made in over 30 different ways in various parts of the country. Indian Jews, not to be outdone, have their own recipe," said the bride in the story.

Other wedding traditions in other countries also have a lot to do with food — but then again, as Jews, food is important.

According to **WeddingTraditions.com**, Japanese Jewish couples and western Russian Jewish brides and grooms have

their own sets of customs.

"Immediately after the religious ceremony," the article stated, "the newly wedded Japanese Jewish couple jumps three times over a large platter filled with fresh fish, or over a vessel containing live fish, or step seven times backwards and forwards over a fish. The ceremony is expounded to be the symbol of prayer for children."

In other parts of the world, prayers for fertility are taken to eggs-traordinary lengths.

A tradition in Jewish wedding culture in western Russia was to "set a raw egg in front of the bride as a symbol of fruitfulness, and that she may bear as easily as a hen lays an egg."

In his book *Marriage Customs of the World: An Encyclopedia of Dating Customs and Wedding Traditions*, George P. Monger wrote: "Another Jewish wedding tradition is to throw a raw egg toward a bride to express the wish that she may have an easy and joyful childbirth."

(No, thanks.)

Something Blue

As they saying goes, there are four components that constitute good luck for brides: something old, something new, something borrowed and something blue.

Brides in ancient Israel used to wear a blue ribbon to denote modesty, fidelity and love.

Nowadays, brides can find much more subtle ways to incorporate the color into their otherwise all-white getup. From nail polish, to garters, to even the bouquet, websites offer immeasurable advice for modern brides to incorporate this ancient tradition.

But no matter where in the world the wedding takes place, modifying ancient traditions to keep up with modern trends will continue to marry the old and the new for Jewish couples. ●

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New Options for Your Big Event in 2016

JON MARKS | JE STAFF



Days of the quaint family reception in a corner of the synagogue following the ceremony have become the exception rather than the rule these days when it comes to planning big events in the Philadelphia Jewish community. While cutting costs certainly matter, it seems doing something fun and innovative has become more important.

So, good news! There's plenty to choose from locally that will not only make your occasion, but maybe even have folks talking about it.

"The trend in events is unique venues," said Judy Moore, associate vice president of sales and marketing at Garces Events, which will work to accommodate any client's needs, even providing kosher food. "It's no longer hosting the party in a ballroom. We're seeing people want unique alternatives. But there are a few places we cater to we can work into that."

When it comes to Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, she says Spruce Street Harbor Park is becoming an "in" place, allowing kids to either ice skate in the winter or roller skate in the spring and summer.

Distrito — with locations in West Philadelphia as well as Moorestown, N.J. — is another popular spot. "One of the trends in mitzvahs is restaurant space," explained Moore. "That way, they don't have to bring in a lot of décor and don't break the bank on rental furniture."

"I get a lot of people asking what's new and trendy and hasn't been done a thousand times. People are not interested in a square room anymore. Kids walk in and love the look of it. Parents walk and in know they'll get amazing food from Jose Garces."

Or not, if they prefer keeping kosher. While Garces is not a kosher caterer, he'll bring one in if the client chooses for as many guests as needed. They'll also order kosher wine.

That kind of flexibility is a necessity these days to attract business. Even at the new Logan Hotel, which has been completely renovated from the old Four Seasons, you can choose your kosher



Top: The National Museum of American Jewish History's fifth-floor event space makes for a memorable event. Above: The fifth-floor balcony overlooks Independence Mall.

caterer among Six Points, Barclay Caterers and Betty the Caterer.

Make no mistake, though: Regardless of the quality, folks aren't celebrating their occasions here because of the food. "We blend sophistication with modern luxury," said Sandy Heydt, director of sales and marketing at the Logan, which just opened in December. "We've modernized the way the hotel feels. We wanted the Logan to be a place where people won't feel intimidated. It has an exciting, youthful vibe. But modern doesn't mean more expensive. It's more avant garde."

Among the attractions at the Logan are the various ballrooms, all of which are adorned by some piece of Philadelphia history, including an extensive art collection and a spectacular glass enclosed steel sculpture entitled "Crew" in honor of Philadelphia's rowing tradition. That's among the 100 or so pieces in the hotel created by local artists.

"The Stenton Ballroom, which is named for James Logan's summer estate, has a large window overlooking the Parkway," explained Heydt.

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Options

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"And the wall and ceiling were built from reclaimed Pennsylvania farm wood. The Grand Ballroom, which can hold 500, has refinished railroad ties made into tables, which give it a rustic look. We're finding a lot of people like using them as natural tables and putting a flower arrangement on it. It's the most interesting ballroom in Philadelphia."

The Logan will also offer a group rate for guests, encouraging them to make a weekend of it, where they can also take advantage of its elegant fitness center and spa.

That's just one advantage of hosting your Jewish event in what some might see as the perfect place: the National Museum for American Jewish History. Since opening in 2010, the NMAJH has become a hot spot for hosting events.

While the exhibition floors are generally closed during your party, they will permit guests to arrive early and see the place. They also work with a number of hotels and parking garages to make things as convenient as possible.

"I work with the client from the moment they book the place until they leave to make sure everything on site is perfect," said Ellen Weiss, NMAJH facilities rental and event planning manager. "It's up to the customer if they want to keep the exhibit open they can do that. Normally, during social events, we don't keep it open. But if people are in for the weekend and want to come in, we can make arrangements."

Once you book the museum — which could range from around \$3,500 to \$5,000, depending on how much space is needed — what you do with it is pretty much up to you. "Normally, the customer will bring in lighting and their own vendors," said Weiss. "We work with the vendors. They can set up as early as they want. It depends



The new Logan Hotel ballroom, set for an elegant reception

how big the event is."

The same goes for the food — and drink. "We have a list of approved caterers," she continued. "Barclay, Betty, Essen and Prestige — and seven non-kosher caterers."

"And in terms of alcohol it's BYO — they can bring in their own, which is a nice cost saving. We'll work with the customer about what they should buy."

The bottom line, though, is that the NMAJH is a unique place to host your special event. "There are so many museums in the city," acknowledged Weiss. "But we like to think we're competitive when it comes to hosting special events and we have a fabulous outdoor terrace that overlooks the city, which we keep open year-round."

Those are just a few of the many new venue options for 2016.

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The Logan's Stenton ballroom features reclaimed wood tables.

Garces also recommends the Cira Centre near 30th Street, where it hosts a wedding just about every weekend. The Starr Catering Group is getting regular bookings at the Horticulture Center in Fairmount Park and the New Liberty Distillery.

But once the event gets underway, once the bar is open and the hors d'oeuvres have been served, what about the party itself?

Sally Mitlas, who's been performing spectacularly at Jewish weddings and Bar and Bat Mitzvahs for over 20 years, has some ideas how to add an extra touch.

"We're doing something special in video production for our clients," said Mitlas, whose documentary, *A Hero From Heaven*, on Philadelphia native Michael Levin who was killed in battle in Lebanon, has won numerous awards. "Personal messages shown at the affair — very cre-

ative videos with scripting and green-screen production.

"I get to know the client very well and create a one-of-a-kind cinema production, which is shown at the affair. I also work with the musicians and vocalist and redo lyrics of a song to tailor it to the bride and groom or the Bar or Bat Mitzvah."

It's an intricate process where she applies the personal touch, being involved from the start. That's apart from the entertainment itself, which includes ranging from a DJ, to novelty performers and character actors, to the band — which can be as large or small as you like.

"With music, what people love about what we do is that I want to stay true to the music forms and don't want to change," she explained. "It's not terribly new, but I don't think anybody does it like us. With the videos, they come to our studio and I show them different videos, because no two are alike. I produce and direct every one of them. We can do one in four weeks, four months or four years. If they want us to spend a day in New York with them, I'm overseeing it. I have a camera crew, audio crew and editors — six people involved from beginning to end."

Ultimately, whether you spare no expense like that or are just doing something simple, the show will go on. Whether you book the Logan Hotel or the NMAJH, have it catered by Jose Garces or Stephen Starr or simply have it at the synagogue like old times, there's only one thing that truly matters: That you're happy with the end result. ●

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What the Bar Mitzvah Boy Really Learned

BY MELISSA JACOBS



Ben Ross

Ben Ross doesn't believe in God. He doesn't like the violence in the Bible, nor does he think that its stories actually happened. And if God really is the Almighty, how can Ben explain what happened to his father?

In September 2014, Dr. Michael Ross was diagnosed with Stage IV of a rare kind of colon cancer. "Michael's case was so off-the-books that we didn't have a standard of care to follow," explains his oncologist, Dr. Ursina Teitelbaum of Penn Medicine's Abramson Cancer Center. Five-year survival rates for colon cancer hover at around 6 percent. So at about the same time that Ben started studying for his Bar Mitzvah, his father started fighting for his life.

It's a good life. Michael is a sports medicine physician and the founder and director of the Rothman Institute's Performance Lab. He designed the lab to improve athletes' performances by diagnosing and treating their often-unseen physical obstacles. His wife is Dr. Wendy Ross, an autism expert and the founder of Autism Inclusion Resources. Wendy believes that, with the proper support, people with autism can visit museums, attend sporting events and travel on airplanes without becoming overwhelmed and agitated. For her work, she was nominated as a 2014 CNN Hero.

If this sounds familiar, it's because the Rosses were public about Michael's diagnosis and treatment, chronicling it on Facebook and in the media. Their goals were to increase awareness about colon cancer and raise money for research for cures. The Rosses are can-

do people who, when faced with cancer, were determined to kick its tush.

But the disease was a formidable opponent. It eluded imaging, playing a lethal form of peek-a-boo as it hid in the tunnels of Michael's intestines. "It's hard to fight what you can't see, let alone excise," Teitelbaum says. Following her advice and that of Dr. Daniel Labow, chief of surgical oncology at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York, Michael decided to have cutting-edge surgery and hot chemo, a new and nasty-sounding treatment that pumps the medication directly into his abdominal cavity. It worked. Michael's status is now NED: There is no evidence of disease in his body. The cancer is gone.

So, it was time to party. Two weeks before Ben's March 5 Bar Mitzvah at Congregation Beth Am Israel, the Rosses sat at the kitchen table in their Wynnewood home to discuss the father-son celebration. As his mitzvah project, Ben created websites that raised more than \$7,000 for Teitelbaum and Labow's discretionary funds. The Rosses also raised money by selling blue T-shirts with yellow semi-colons that reference Michael's now partial (or semi) colon. Michael thinks the T-shirts are not only empowering, but hysterical. There's a saying that God has a strange sense of humor, and if that's true, God would love the Rosses. "When life gives you cancer, you make cancer jokes," Michael says. He's full of them, and Ben slings zinger after zinger. Wendy mostly rolls her eyes and sighs, clearly having given up on censoring her husband or son.

This is what everyone says about the Rosses: that their unflagging optimism and infectious positivity is not only admirable, but downright heroic. Teitelbaum, a mother of three, says that Ben is a role model for other kids whose parents are going through illnesses. Labow even wrote Ben a letter bursting with praise.

Ben scoffs at the idea that he's the poster boy for parents with

cancer. Ben is quite a handful and he knows it. “So cancer turned me into a saint? Give me a break,” he says. “It didn’t change my dad, either. He was a warrior before cancer and he’s a warrior still. Cancer isn’t magic, certainly not the good kind. It’s a disease. Nothing positive comes from disease. It only does one thing: It sucks.”

That’s the truth, as plain and simple as it is refreshing. All of the community support was amazing, Ben says, but in some ways, it was camouflage for the really scary parts of last year. Ben’s parents wouldn’t tell him the survival rates for colon cancer because, they say, Michael’s form of it was rare. Ben went online and learned the sobering facts for himself. “I wish they’d just given it to me straight,” he says. “If I’m supposed to talk to my parents about everything, then that includes the stuff that’s really hard — and that includes the fact that Dad might have died. Like, let’s just be honest and talk about it.”

They did. And Ben’s right. “It did suck,” Michael admits as his eyes water with tears. “God, this is really hard to talk about. It sucked. No doubt.”

And it wasn’t fair. Michael dedicated his life to healing other people. He exercises religiously and is a vegan master of clean living. Michael did everything right but still got a rare, very deadly cancer at a young age. “No, it’s not fair,” Michael agrees as a few tears ease down his visage. “I haven’t put thoughts to this because it’s easier to dwell on the positive.”

But Ben has put thought to this, aided by his Bar Mitzvah tutor, Rabbi Yitzhak Nates of Derech HaLev, a havurah in Lower Merion Township and Jenkintown. Nates says that, whether he realizes it or not, Ben’s questioning God is quintessentially Jewish. “With Ben more than the average student, we’ve been talking about ways to live life, what’s important and how we want to spend our days,” Nates says. “He’s gravitated to larger religious questions, probably because he’s dealing with large issues.”

Truth is, Ben didn’t need to read the Bible or memorize a Haftorah to become a Jewish adult. He learned Jewish values like family, community, *tikkun olam* and courage by watching his parents, especially his father.

Back at the Ross’s kitchen table, Michael wishes that Ben could’ve learned those life lessons without cancer. The worst part of last year,



Ben Ross (left) and his father, Dr. Michael Ross, share a moment together before Ben’s Bar Mitzvah.

Michael says, was the uncertainty over whether he would live or die. Watching Ben and his younger brother, Jacob, deal with his cancer was more painful than anything Michael experienced physically. As he thinks about it, Michael’s eyes fill with tears again.

“Oh, Dad,” Ben gently scolds his father as Michael lets the tears flow. Ben circles the table to where Michael sits and wraps his father in a big hug. They stay like that for a while, in what seems like a familiar embrace. Ben comforts his father with pats on the back, having no problem displaying affection. He’s proud of their bond and understands that, although Michael’s warrior status is uncontested, Ben himself is a source of his father’s strength. It seems that Ben has plenty to share. Clearly, the boy has become a man. ●



A team of Michael Ross’ supporters ran the Philadelphia Marathon wearing “semi-colon” shirts in a show of solidarity. facebook

HOW DO YOU SAY YES TO THE DRESS IN HEBREW?

BY HILARY DANAILOVA

More and more Philadelphia brides are importing their beshert — from Israel.

But they're not trolling Israeli dating websites or joining Holy Land singles tours. The yentas are Instagram and Pinterest — and the intendeds are one-of-a-kind wedding gowns, handmade in Tel Aviv.

Out of the ateliers of Israel's fashion capital comes a parade of bridal looks that draw gasps: plunging necklines, bare midribs, second-skin silhouettes and sheer-illusion fabric that suggests entirely bare backs ... and more. Fashion-forward women are falling hard for these gowns by Inbal Dror, Berta, Zahavit Tshuba, Mira Zwillinger and Flora; long-married Beyoncé even wore an Inbal Dror wedding dress to the 2016 Grammys. Bride after bride describes finding her dress in language more commonly used for romance novels.

"I just knew the second I put it on," gushed Simona Levithan, a 27-year-old nurse who wore Berta to her April nuptials at the Atrium at Curtis Center. "I knew, 'This is the one.' " Another newlywed, Marisa Awad, 29, said she knew her dress was "the one" when she spied it on the rack at The Wedding Shoppe in Wayne, buying the sample then and there. And Bilon Geiger, a 33-year-old Berta bride who was married in November at the Fairmount Park Horticulture Center, found her beshert while surfing around Pinterest and never looked back: "I was in love. I was like, 'Yes, this is the one.' "

That degree of ardor is what inspired Kathy Hart Bado, a longtime wedding planner with "zero intention of selling dresses, ever," to spontaneously open a shop ... selling Israeli dresses. After being introduced to the Berta line by her daughter, Hart Bado went to a trade show in New York and came back smitten.

"They were so gorgeous, so different from anything I'd ever seen," recalled Hart Bado. "I looked at my sister and said, 'This is what we

A Berta gown



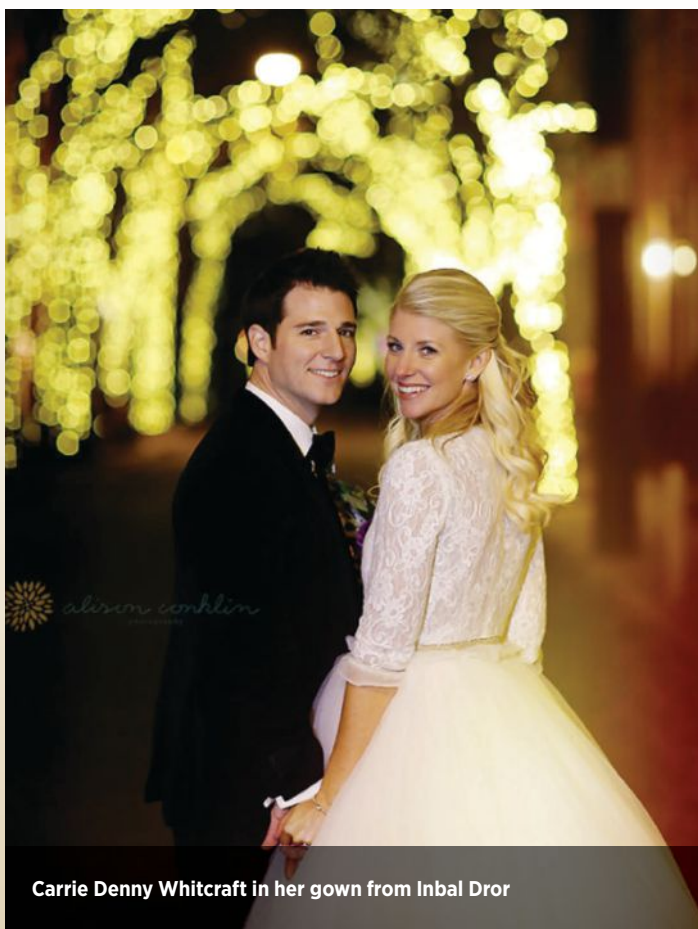
have to do.’” Two years ago, Hart Bado and her sister and business partner, Stacey Veeraraj, opened The Wedding Factor in Center City, a boutique that carries exclusively Berta gowns — the designer’s only Philadelphia-area outlet.

So what is it about these Israeli confections of lace and tulle that inspires the kind of love-at-first-sight, *coup de foudre* passion usually reserved for ... ahem ... the groom himself?

The same qualities women look for in that groom, according to bridal wear experts: sex appeal, high finance and attractiveness. The new Tel Aviv couture is strikingly sexier than traditional bridal wear: Ethereal lace, sparkling embellishments and appliques captivate the eye in a way that satin does not. This bespoke detail translates into very costly gowns, with price tags in the high four and five digits.

The new Israeli lines “are all really very striking in different ways,” said Carrie Denny Whitcraft, the editor of *Philadelphia Wedding* magazine, who was married last New Year’s Eve in an Inbal Dror she fell in love with during a photo shoot. “With these designers, every single dress, you’re like, ‘Ooh, look at that sleeve! Ooh, look at that embellishment! Ooh, look at that back!’” — a departure, she said, from the usual lineup of refined homogeneity.

“The Israeli designers are very, very high-end, very sexy, very couture,” noted Pattie Lamantia, owner of The Wedding Shoppe in Wayne, the only local outlet for both Inbal Dror and Flora. “All-



Carrie Denny Whitcraft in her gown from Inbal Dror



A Bilon Johnson gown

nude linings, very sexy low backs. Even when they’re in long sleeves, they’re slit up the thigh.”

Which brings up another intriguing element of the Tel Aviv look: These gowns cover a lot of skin, yet reveal the body to a far greater degree than the flowing, romantic looks favored by U.S. designers. Long sleeves are common; so are long skirts, prompting many observers to parse the influence of traditional Jewish modesty. There is more than a little irony inherent in a white wedding dress that covers the elbows yet bares the navel, draping demurely over the ankles yet hugging the *derrière*.

In short, they’re a tease — sometimes literally, as when a line of buttons appears to climb up a bare back that, on closer inspection, is covered by a sheer nude netting. Illusion is essential to the Tel Aviv aesthetic, achieved through diaphanous fabrics and appliquéd flowers and jewels that appear to float alongside the bride.

It was a look that intoxicated Allie Wildstein, a 25-year-old social media and marketing manager who chose a Berta gown for her upcoming wedding at The Bellevue. Berta “strikes a balance — even though her dresses are heavily embroidered or embellished, the silhouettes are clean and fitted so that the dresses are ornate, but still very modern and chic,” Wildstein said.

The bride who wears Israeli is knowledgeable about fashion and financially able to make her couture dream a reality, said Denny

See Dress, Page 20



Simona Levi turned heads in her form-fitting Berta gown.

Dress

Continued from Page 19

Whitcraft, who is also the author of *The Bride's Instruction Manual: How to Survive and Possibly Even Enjoy the Biggest Day of Your Life*. "This bride wants something that's different," said Denny Whitcraft, "something that's not the strapless A-line all her friends wore."

"Different" was the guiding principle for Simona Levithan, whose form-fitting lace Berta dress featured a neckline that snaked down to her navel and a sheer-illusion back whose transparency extended, well, about as far as was legal in public. "I wanted everyone's jaws to drop," said Levithan. "Especially my husband's. I wanted to hear gasps." (She did.)

The person most shocked by Denny Whitcraft's own dress might actually have been the bride herself. A jaded observer of bridal wear and a fashion sophisticate, Denny Whitcraft had always pictured herself in a fitted lace sheath — until she saw a nude-colored party dress from Inbal Dror's 2015 line, part of a lineup for the fall-winter magazine spread.

"I was just obsessed with it," recalled the editor. "I shot it for the cover. And as it happened, the next week I got engaged."

Denny Whitcraft headed to The Wedding Shoppe to try the dress on "just for fun," never thinking she'd go for a poufy tulle skirt — or a gown the color of tea. "Five hundred million layers of tulle, it's kind of like, not me," she said with a laugh. "And I knew I wanted to wear a white dress. But then Pattie was like, 'It comes in ivory...'" And just like that, the way a cowgirl sometimes falls in love with an investment banker, Denny Whitcraft ordered a poufy white party dress — sight unseen, all the way from Tel Aviv.

That kind of gamble — shipping prepaid items from the turmoil-prone Middle East — initially gave Pattie Lamantia pause as well. Like many of her stateside colleagues, Lamantia was wary of working with Tel Aviv couturiers, many of whom demand up-front deposits for the custom-sewn garments. The designers also require an exhaustive list of custom measurements, "all in centimeters," said

Lamantia. "I asked myself, 'Why am I taking a measurement of her neck and biceps for a strapless dress?' But they say it gives them a sense of her silhouette." The process is a departure from American lines, which produce gowns in standard sizes for the bride to alter.

Another critical difference: price. "These lines are not in everybody's budget," allowed Lamantia diplomatically. Inbal Dror dresses start at about \$8,500 and can exceed twice that figure; The Wedding Shoppe added a second Israeli line, Flora, to give brides a more affordable alternative, with "simpler sexy" designs retailing for \$5,000 to \$8,000. The high price tags have not deterred couture-focused brides, Lamantia noted, adding that her gamble has paid off in brisk orders, crowded trunk shows — and brides driving from as far away as Canada to try on the exclusive styles. "Some say it's not a Main Line look, but don't kid yourself," Lamantia said. "It's amazing the hold that these dresses have over people."

Berta gowns range from \$7,500 to \$12,000, making them out of reach for "nine out of 10 brides who are interested," said Hart Bado, who added that sales are nonetheless robust enough to support a thriving business — on just one line. Another Israeli couturier, Mira Zwillinger, is carried exclusively in the Philadelphia area at the Elizabeth Johns boutiques in Ardmore and Morristown, N.J.; dresses start at \$8,000.

Price tags like that are why most local shops don't carry Israeli lines, according to Abby McGrath, bridal manager at Van Cleve Wedding Pavilion in Paoli. "I've looked at some of them, but it's cost prohibitive," said McGrath, who said the average dress at her shop sells for \$2,000 to \$3,000. "For us to invest in a bunch of dresses that are at the top end doesn't really make sense."

Couture connoisseurs understand that Tel Aviv prices reflect a fastidious craftsmanship that simply does not come cheap, according to the experts. "The quality of the construction really stands apart," said Hart Bado of Israeli bridal wear, noting the degree of labor involved in hand-appliquing hundreds of tiny rosettes, or crafting a garment to as many as 40 separate measurements. Custom-tailored clothing is more of a tradition in Israel, according to industry experts, whereas the lower cost of American lines reflects our mass-market culture.



A Mira Zwillinger gown

But retailers of Israeli bridal wear say the cost doesn't dissuade diehard fashionistas. Caitlin Ohle, director of communications at Elizabeth Johns, said the store started carrying the Mira Zwillinger line last year to give couture-loving brides a high-end option — and customers have opened their wallets gladly. "Brides just love it," said Ohle of the Zwillinger line, which features a dreamier, more romantic take on the Israeli look. "It's a showstopper. They fall in love."

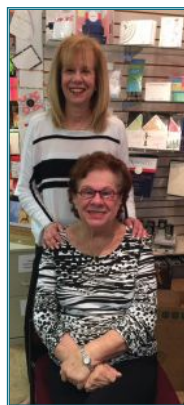
If the tulle inspires the passion, Instagram and Pinterest are the sartorial Tinders that match gowns with girls. Retailers and brides alike confirm that social media ignites the spark of bridal interest; phones were ringing off hooks at wedding salons everywhere the day after Beyoncé wore her long-sleeved, floor-length Inbal Dror at the Grammys, a look that instantly went viral online. It certainly caught the eye of Marisa Awad, whose social-media browsing had led her to a long-sleeved, intricately detailed gown by the same designer.

"I knew I wanted something couture, and I knew I wanted to go the Tel Aviv route," said Awad, a professional wedding photographer based in Philadelphia. In addition to falling in love with the aesthetic — fuller coverage, she said, looks more interesting in pictures — Awad, like other Jewish brides, was pleased that the gowns are made in Israel. As she and her mother browsed fashion from

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A Marisa Awad gown

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Dress

Continued from Page 20

the Jewish state, Awad recalled, “we just kept referencing how much Bubbe would have loved this.”

Simona Levithan said her family had a similar reaction. “When I told her it was handmade in Israel, what my Jewish mother said was, ‘OK, we’re sending money to the right place,’” Levithan recalled.

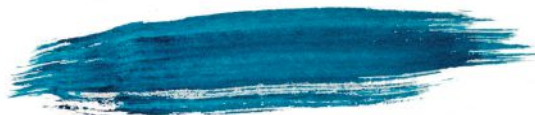
Other brides are surprised that such daring fashions come from a region better known for covered heads than bared midriffs. Bilon Geiger, whose gown featured a lace-framed bare back and a plunging neckline, had an image of Israeli fashion as somewhat conservative — an impression her family shared, until they all paid a visit to The Wedding Factor. “When I first came out of the dressing room, my sister’s jaw dropped,” Geiger recalled. “She was like, ‘Are you really going to show that much on your wedding day?’”

Geiger was; she was deeply, truly in love. “I was like, ‘Yes, this is going to be my gown,’” said the Philadelphia-bred bride. “And that’s one thing about my wedding I feel extremely confident about. I looked amazing.” ●



A BAR MITZVAH PROJECT PUTS ITS BEST FACE FORWARD

JASON COHEN | JE STAFF



Children born with facial deformities often face numerous sociological and physical challenges throughout life. In an attempt to brighten their lives and really get to know these children, the Craniofacial Program at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) began the Craniofacial Program Portrait Project in 2008, the first of its kind in the United States.

Artists at Studio Incamminati, School for Contemporary Realist Art, in partnership with the Craniofacial Program at CHOP and the Edwin and Fannie Gray Hall Center for Human Appearance at the University of Pennsylvania, paint portraits of children and adolescents with craniofacial conditions to help them see themselves in a different light.

On Jan. 31, Ethan Sarwer, 13, the son of Dr. David Sarwer, associate dean for research of the College of Public Health at Temple University, who helped start the project, displayed the spirit of *chesed* and *tikkun olam* as he held his Bar Mitzvah project at Tiferet Bet Israel in Blue Bell, where he raised money and awareness for the project.

"It really touched me and I thought it would be a really special project to help these individuals," Ethan said.

The first eight portraits were exhibited in 2010 in the Colket Translational Research Building at CHOP, and in November 2013, four additional ones were unveiled, along with a documentary video about the project.

Hillary Waller, the program director at TBI, praised Ethan for his efforts and said the shul always encourages young adults to think

outside the box when it comes to their Bar or Bat Mitzvah projects.

"I think Ethan is really an exceptional kid," Waller said. "We just feel lucky to be able to represent their work at TBI. This is such a special program."

The project was funded by a grant from the Edwin and Fannie Gray Hall Center for Human Appearance at the University of Pennsylvania.

It was developed by Linton Whitaker, founder of the Craniofacial Program, professor of plastic surgery at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, and founder and director of the Center for Human Appearance; Scott Bartlett, chief of the Division of Plastic Surgery and director of CHOP's Craniofacial Program; Canice Crerand, former psychologist with the Division of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery at CHOP; and Sarwer.

Sarwer said their goals were to build on the friendship of Whitaker and Nelson Shanks, who started the Studio Incamminati School in 2002, and bring the organizations together to help children.

"It took a very thoughtful approach to putting it together," Dr. Sarwer said.

He explained there are hundreds of patients with craniofacial deformities, but they needed the kids to understand the project and know the families could commit to it.

"We also wanted to make sure we weren't doing any emotional

See Project, Page 24

Project

Continued from Page 23

harm to them,” Sarwer said. “This was the first time these kids were being looked at in a non-clinical way. We also wanted to make sure that we had artists that captured the spirit of the project. We’re selective in identifying families.”

“Many of the families who have participated, have found it to be an incredibly important experience, not only for the children, but also the family,” he added.

Sarwer, who only sees the children once a year, remarked how the kids undergo countless procedures and are often looked at in a negative light.

“Just because someone looks different on the outside, doesn’t mean they are a fundamentally different person on the inside,” Sarwer said.

Each of the artists underwent extensive screening before being selected to participate in the program. They include Alisyn Blake, Joseph Dolderer, Stephen Early, Robin Dawn Frey, Kerry Dunn, Debbie Schafer and Leona Shanks.

Frey, a Studio Incamminati graduate and instructor, painted Avery Lytle, 15.

“I thought it was a fabulous idea from the start,” Frey exclaimed. “That’s the kind of thing I like doing, helping others.”

While she has been painting since she was a child, this was different,



The paintings seen on these pages are a small sampling from the Craniofacial Program Portrait Project at CHOP.

she noted. She admitted having a child sit still for long periods of time is a challenge, but Avery was a good sport and the two of them bonded.

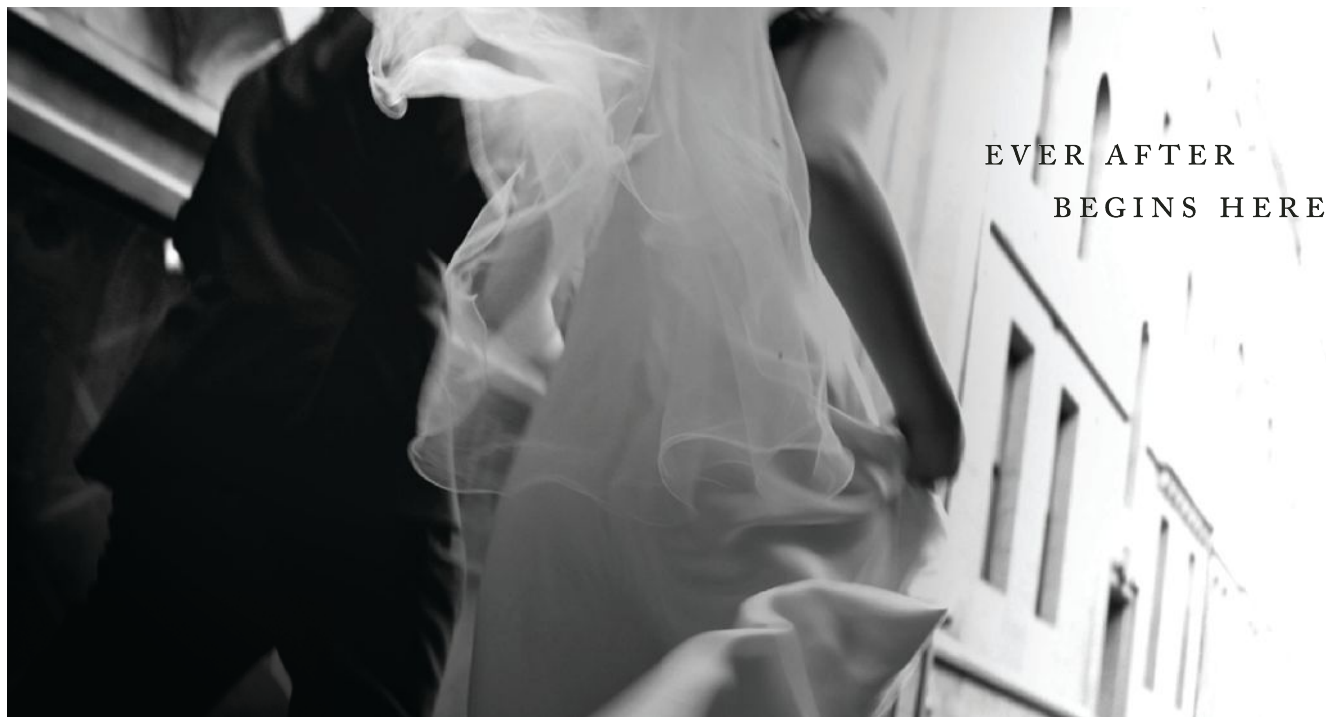
Avery’s parents, Robert and Molly, were helpful and gave Frey information about Crouzon syndrome, so it was easier for her to understand what Avery was going through.

“She was a delightful child,” Frey said. “First of all, whenever anyone sits for a portrait, they always come away saying that it was much more enjoyable than they thought it would be.”

In addition to Avery, she also painted a young girl named Gracie. She feels the program impacted them both and still keeps in touch with both families.

“It gives them a feeling of pride in themselves that they haven’t had before,” she said.

Since it started, 12 children between the ages of 7 and 25 have been paired with artists. The portraits, which took six months to a year to finish, were completed over multiple sittings, which enabled each patient, artist and the patients’ family to develop a unique relationship. Patients were able to choose clothes that expressed themselves and to pick out the pose that felt most comfortable to them. Each participant



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received a framed print of his or her completed portrait.

Lytle, of Pennington, N.J., spoke about his daughter and the project. At 6 months old, Avery was diagnosed with Crouzon syndrome, which causes plates in the skull to fuse prematurely and also affects growth of bones in the mid-face. This results in a sunken mid-face and bulky eyes.

Avery has undergone 20 operations, including a few as an infant, one that removed the back of the skull and several to move the mid-face forward.

"Those surgeries made a big difference for my daughter," he said.

Lytle said when he and Molly heard about this project, they knew it was perfect for her.

"We thought that it would be a great idea because the doctors are wonderful," Lytle said. "I think the portrait project was really motivated by the way the doctors began treating the emotional scars."

While Avery was a bit nervous at first, once she got comfortable with Frey, her mind was at ease, he said. Avery and the other kids aren't popular in school and are often bullied, but for once, are being shown special attention.

"[Frey] really made this effort to include Avery in the project,"



Lytle said. "These kids really become an integral part of the process.

"They are really doing God's work in trying to address the psychological impact that this condition has on the children," he added. "I wish there was more funding for it. Our family has been lucky to be a part of it." •

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RACHEL KURLAND | JE STAFF



After she slipped it on and it fit just right, Blair Manus finally said “yes.”

Yes to the dress, that is.

Of course, she also recently tied the knot, but her heart said “yes” a long time ago to her now-husband, Jason.

The two are starring in an episode of TLC’s 14th season of *Say Yes to the Dress*, which aired on March 25, and are featured in a new show joining the network, *Say Yes to the Address*, which — judging by the name alone — is like a TLC-infused *House Hunters*.

“I’m a huge fan of *Say Yes to the Dress* and just TLC in general,” Blair said. “I’m always watching TLC in my spare time.”

Say Yes to the Dress films women while they embark on one of the most daunting and important tasks: wedding dress shopping. But at Kleinfeld Bridal in Manhattan, they’re not looking for any ordinary dress.

These designer gowns — tulle Alita Grahams, lacey, bareback Lazaros, diamond-encrusted Pnina Tornais — are sprawled across the store and generously accompanied by charismatic employees.

Blair applied for her dress decision-making to be recorded, and TLC chose to film her first and second fittings, another crucial step in the sometimes-overwhelming process.

For her first fitting, Blair’s mother, Nancy, grandmother, Mona, and matron of honor, Marla, tagged along, and her fashion-savvy friend Erica joined for the second round of stitchings.

The fitting was the first time her grandmother saw the dress, and Blair said she was pleasantly surprised.

“Both of them” — her mother and grandmother — “were really nervous. The way I dress is pretty sexy, and I have one of those typical Jewish mothers and typical Jewish grandmothers who’s always like, ‘Can you cover up? Why do your boobs always have to be out?’ ” Blair joked.

“But the reactions that I got from everybody that I brought to my fitting was literally, ‘This dress was made for you.’ ”

And it really was. Blair chose a Pnina Tornai gown that Israeli designer Tornai herself actually customized for her after meeting at Kleinfeld.

The silky white fabric forms a tight bodice with subtle lace detailing and straps and a sexy see-through button-up back, accompanied by a modestly bedazzled veil.

“My favorite part of the experience was just the attention that you get when you shop at Kleinfeld,” Blair said. “Everybody treats you like it’s the best day of your life. Everybody was very caring as far as how my dress fit, and if it wasn’t perfect, they were actually more of a perfectionist than I was.”

Blair, who grew up in Lafayette Hill, and Jason, a Bucks County native, were married on Nov. 21, 2015 at the Sofitel in Center City.

The two go way back, but Jason doesn’t exactly remember it that way. In the small Jewish community within Philadelphia, Blair, who at the time was Blair Aaron, said, “everybody knows everybody.”

She went to a bar one night — Opa in Center City — and, by the luck of Jewish geography, ran into two friends from summer camp,

along with Jason.

"I noticed her as soon as she came into the bar," Jason admitted, "but I would have never said anything. I was too nervous to talk to her."

"She actually approached me," he recounted of their meet-cute. "I had no idea who she was. I'd never seen her a day before in my life. But I kind of just went with it."

But Blair knew him. She remembered seeing him around town and down the shore for the past decade.

"I said, 'I've seen you around for about 10 years, I guess it's time we finally had a conversation,'" Blair recalled. "Jason claims he's never seen me a day in his life, but he acted like an Academy Award-winning actor and was like, 'Yeah, I was thinking the same thing, have a seat.' And we ended up talking for an hour, and immediately, we both knew that was it for us."

(Surprisingly — maybe Blair forgot this part — Jason said she turned him down the first time.)

That was almost four years ago.

Maybe she turned him down the first time because she couldn't believe her prayers had been answered — literally.

Three weeks prior, she was driving around town for work and randomly stopped in a cash-for-gold store because she heard the



Blair's happy response to seeing herself in her wedding dress in the Kleinfeld dressing room.

owner was an Israeli Jew. Out of curiosity, they struck up a casual conversation.

From one Jew to another, the saleswoman asked Blair what she had planned for the upcoming High Holidays.

"I said, 'Just going to my mom's house for dinner. Typical High Holiday thing,'" Blair replied. "She was like, 'Wait a minute, you're not going to synagogue?' And at that time, I really stopped going to synagogue after my Bat Mitzvah."

She wasn't planning on going, but the woman told her, "If you don't go to synagogue and hear the shofar being blown, it's literally like not showing up to your own court date."

Out of Jewish guilt and a fear of bad karma, Blair asked her mother if she could tag along, but of course, the tickets were sold out.

So she asked Aunt Estelle, the Jewish matriarch of the family, who recommended she go with cousin Patsy to an open synagogue in Rittenhouse Square, Levv Ha-Ir ~ Heart of the City.

"Maybe I'll find my soul mate if I go," Blair remembers thinking. "And the whole time I was in there, I was literally praying, 'I'm ready for my soul mate. Please send me my soul mate. Please. Enough is

See TV, Page 28

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enough. I'm 30 years old.' And sure enough, three weeks after that, I met Jason."

Rabbi Julie Greenberg of Leyv Ha-Ir married them, and Blair has attended High Holiday services there every year since.

And after the love story comes the reality: Where are we going to live?

Which is where TLC's new soon-to-be fan favorite comes in. The couple worked with realtor Reid Rosenthal through *Say Yes to the Address*, who helped them narrow their choices down to a house in the 'burbs and a place in Point Breeze before they made their ultimate decision to move into the Belgravia on Chestnut Street.

"That whole scenario was just about if we were ready to move into the suburbs and start a family," Blair said, "or do we want to enjoy being married now and live in the city still, and that's ultimately what we chose."

Although Jason wasn't as big a part of the dress shopping — the most he contributed was the 30-second application video clip, with help from the maid of honor, Gianna — he at least had a say in their new condo.

"They followed us through our search to buy our condo," he said. "The whole show was equally with the two of us looking at three different places and picking one."

TLC filmed for three full days. After both experiences, Jason said he misses having the cameras around. Fortunately, some of the camera crew joined them at their viewing party of the episodes on March 25 at the Center City nightclub Coda.

On their *Say Yes to the Dress* episode, viewers will also get a

glimpse of their wedding day.

Blair also admired — nay, obsessed about — the love shared between the big screen's favorite vampires oozing with affection, Bella and Edward from the *Twilight* series.

In that regard, the theme of their wedding focused on the immense love she and Jason had for each other, and she even walked down the aisle to the fourth movie's hit soundtrack song, "A Thousand Years" by local musician Christina Perri.

The rest of the wedding followed that "sexy and sophisticated" atmosphere, with pink lighting, white and pale pink roses, and dozens of candles and crystals — nothing too gaudy, but it still sparkled.

"I literally couldn't stop crying from the moment I saw Jason until the end of the night because I was just so overwhelmed with emotion," Blair remembered.

Their chupah was made of Plexiglas, with pink uplighting and orchids draping down, again paralleling the *Twilight* idea.


They really took the movie theme to heart and wanted to surprise their guests with a choreographed number, and nothing says romance like re-enacting Patrick Swayze and Jennifer Grey's *Dirty Dancing* finale.

They took lessons, of course, but Jason backed out at the last minute.

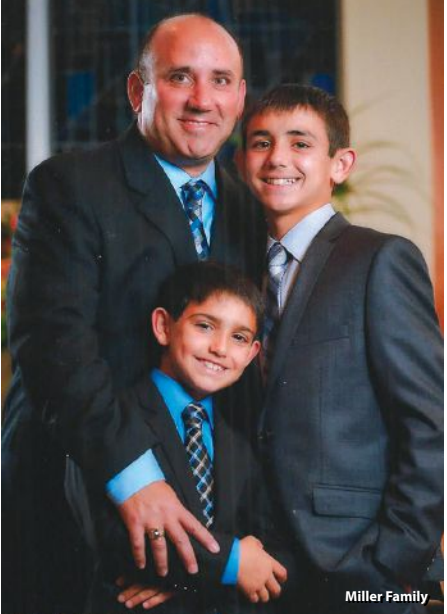
But after a few wedding cocktails, he gained the confidence to shake it like Swayze — and they nailed it.

Of all the celebrations this past year, Blair said they are just fortunate that they will be able to relive it whenever they want.

"To have our wedding and our love and our story documented on TLC," she continued, "and being able to watch that over and over again — having my mom and grandmom be a part of it, to be able to watch her look at me in my dress for the first time, and having her be so much a part of that with me — knowing that I'll have that forever is pretty amazing and special." ●



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For These Couples, Second Time's the Charm



BY HILARY DANAILOVA

Alison Haimes wore white to her first wedding — and black to her second. Marrying again at age 60, the Manhattan neuroradiologist tried on a white gown “and felt kind of ridiculous, frankly,” she recalled. “Also, I didn’t feel like I’d be able to wear it again.” So the chic divorcée, who is originally from Philadelphia, wore a black party dress when she married Walter Cook in January.

If Haimes’ second wedding gown hardly resembled her first, the rest of the affair looked pretty different, too. The couple’s adult children held up a family tallis as a chupah; their beaming ex-spouses made toasts to a party of just 70. “And our parents didn’t pay this time around,” added Haimes.

Fashion to family to finance, the Haimes-Cook affair typified the myriad ways in which second (or third, or seventh) weddings tend to diverge from those of first-time spouses. Remarrying Jews may opt for a big white wedding — and doing so would hardly scandalize in an era of relaxed mores — but they are more likely, observers say, to have an intimate ceremony on the lawn than a grand event in the sanctuary.

“Second weddings tend to be more personal,” noted Lisa Marie Chimento, a principal planner at Wayne-based Kaleidoscope Wedding Planners. “They’re for the bride and groom, not the parents or the parents’ friends. And the parties are more of an honest good time, not a show you’re putting on to compete.” Contrast that with the typical 20-something wedding, Chimento said, which often features bachelor and bachelorette parties, bridal showers, and legions of identically dressed attendants — planned largely by Mom, then judged by Facebook.

Seasoned brides and grooms have “been there, done that already,” confirmed Rabbi Robert Leib of Old York Road Temple-Beth Am in Abington, who has performed his share of second weddings over the decades. “Time and time again, what I’ve come across is the desire to reject formalities — to make it as sweet but simple and inclusive as possible.”



Alison Haimes married Walter Cook in January.

Sweet and simple is how widower Ralph Bloch, 89, describes his wedding to Anita, an 86-year-old widow he met in 2008 through JDate. With a collective 109 years of first-time marriage behind them, the pair was wed last year at Rydal Park, the senior living community in Jenkintown where they now reside.

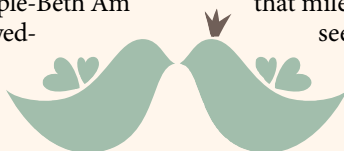
Rabbi Leib performed the Reform ceremony for just 30 guests — the couple’s children, grandchildren and a handful of friends. “We didn’t have videotapes! Of course, we didn’t have videotapes when I got married the first time either,” noted Bloch with a chuckle. But for his initial foray into matrimony, “there were 150 people in a hotel, the whole schmear, cameras and all that nonsense.”

Dispensing with all that nonsense, as more than one second-timer put it, is one of the oft-acknowledged pleasures of a second wedding. As Phyllis Jablonowski, the longtime owner of Queen of Hearts Wedding Consultants in Glenside, explained: “The first time around, if the bride’s shade of nail polish doesn’t exactly match the colors on the program, there’s a national meltdown. The second time, you want to walk down the aisle naked? Great. Nobody cares.”

Perhaps that’s because there is less pressure to get married to begin with. While 20- and 30-somethings are frequently nudged toward the altar, either by one partner or by parents impatient for grandchildren, society has no particular interest in the formal joining of divorcés — especially those who, like the Blochs, are well past the childbearing years.

That dynamic explains the lengthy courtship of couples like Haimes and Cook, who met 15 years ago and lived on separate coasts for much of that time, all the while raising children with friendly ex-spouses. “We didn’t feel that we needed to be married,” reflected Haimes. “And then we turned 60, and there was something about that milestone. We really do feel like a family now, and it just seemed like the right time.”

Family often takes on a new emphasis in remarriage — with children, in-laws, grandchildren and remarried ex-spouses all common presences under the chupah.



See Second Time, Page 30



Marla Rosenthol (above and right) entered into her second wedding in 2006.

Second Time

Continued from Page 29

“What I love about these second weddings is the intimacy,” said Rabbi Leib. “They are quite literally surrounded by their loved ones. There are fewer people, but they’ve all known each other longer.”

Smaller gatherings are a matter of custom and taste rather than Jewish ritual, according to Rabbi Yonah Gross of the Orthodox Congregation Beth Hamedrosh in Wynnewood. But second weddings do not call for the seven days of halachically mandated celebration, known as the *sheva b’racha*, that are observed after first-time nuptials, the rabbi noted. “It may be a shorter period if one person has been previously married,” Rabbi Gross explained. “I think it recognizes that it’s more of a subdued moment; it’s not the youthful exuberance of a wedding the first time around.”

Subdued or exuberant, second weddings often celebrate triumph over the kinds of challenges most 20-somethings never consider. When Marla Rosenthol married five years after surviving breast cancer — a diagnosis she received three months into her relationship with Leonard, a computer scientist — “we had a lot to celebrate,” said the Huntingdon Valley mother of three, now 53. The couple, who met as divorced parents in 2001, were also formalizing what Rosenthol calls a “mixed marriage,” a thoughtfully negotiated lifestyle that combined her Reform values and his Orthodox practice.

Their 2006 wedding, at which both Rabbi Leib and Rabbi Menachem Schmidt of Lubavitch of Philadelphia participated in the ceremony, in-



cluded an English-language ketubah reading, separate-sex dancing and a host of traditional Jewish rituals for which Rosenthol has newfound appreciation. “We were celebrating what we got from each other,” she explained. “He got a more balanced life from me, and I got more *Yiddishkeit*, more deeper meaning about our religion from him.”

When Robin Gabel marries Dr. Gary Gilman this spring, it’ll be enough to finally get each other. The Gulph Mills couple in their 50s, who met on JDate nine years ago, endured lengthy, complicated divorces — both Jewish and civil — and now want to wed as quickly as possible. So Rabbi Eric Yanoff will officiate for about 15 guests at Congregation Adath Israel in Merion Station; a larger crowd will gather for a reception in November.

“There’s a lot of joy in this, because we’ve waited so long,” said Gabel, who works in biotech sales. “And we went through an awful lot to get here.” No pun intended: A Jewish divorce, called a *get*, is required for remarriage in the Conservative and Orthodox movements and can be particularly fraught for a woman, who,





under Jewish law, requires her husband's consent to divorce.

Gabel is on excellent terms with her ex and had nothing but praise for Rabbi Yanoff's guidance. But the divorce experience, she explained, made her uncomfortably aware of the struggle of many less-fortunate Jewish women to obtain a freedom that is automatically granted to men. "It was more involved than I thought," said Gabel, recalling a hectic gathering of witness rabbis to finalize the *get* — and their raised eyebrows when her fiancé and her freshly divorced ex-husband hugged warmly in the corridor.

While Reform rabbis take a lenient stance toward the *get*, Jewish divorce is "a cornerstone" for the Conservative movement, said Rabbi Yanoff. "We want to make sure that people are either clearly married or clearly not married according to Jewish law," he explained. "We don't want any questions about it. We believe this is helping people." The Jewish teaching on love — "*ahava*" in Hebrew — is in fact based on treaty language, said Rabbi Yanoff, noting that marriage is "a deep, loyal, legal commitment."

In addition to second-time legal considerations, there are sartorial ones as well. While few brides today feel bound by conventional dictates, said Jablonowski, many still opt for the traditional ivory rather than white. Alice Bloch wore sugar-pink lace; Robin Gabel, who felt white "just didn't seem to be appropriate," will don a champagne-hued dress with a blue jeweled sash for her April nuptials.

More modest, less explicitly bridal attire may reflect a desire to be practical above all, noted Chimento. With college bills and retirement looming, "they don't want to spend a lot of money," said the wedding

planner. "Also, they remember how uncomfortable their gorgeous dress was the first time around."

Nothing is more comfortable than a sundress — the attire of choice for an increasing number of second-time brides who choose a destination wedding. Getting hitched on a far-away beach or a cruise ship "gets around the guest-list issue, there are plenty of things to do for the kids, and it's totally different in feel from the first time around," explained Jablonowski. She added that those who marry far away will often host a casual celebration back home, allowing a larger crowd to celebrate without the expense or gift expectations of a formal wedding.

And what exactly are those expectations? Gifts are a sensitive topic, given how lavishly some may have fêted the bride or groom the first time around — and how irrelevant service for 12 may be to the typical midlife couple. These factors explain why gift registries are uncommon for second-timers, with any wish list more likely to include Tahiti than tableware.

To relieve guests of obligation, some couples ask guests for a charitable contribution in lieu of presents; others specify "no gifts" on the invitation, as Haimes and Cook did. Liberated from the registry, many of their well-wishers gave the kinds of treats first-timers could only wish for, Haimes reported: high-quality alcohol, gift certificates for dinners on the European honeymoon, spa getaways.

"Truly, second weddings are much more open," said Jablonowski. "The first time, everyone had a million opinions — you have to have this band, that centerpiece, wear this kind of dress. But the second time, everyone is just genuinely happy for your happiness. Second weddings are a very freeing place to be." •

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Breaking THE Rules OF Engagement

RACHEL KURLAND | JE STAFF

To say I see a new engagement, marriage or baby announcement in my Facebook news feed almost every day is, amazingly enough, not hyperbole.

I asked a friend about this, and by the time she responded to my message, I had already scrolled through two new postings — one for a new baby bump, the other displaying a diamond ring.

I'm only 23 years old, but a fairly large majority of people I knew in high school and college are already engaged or married — and they did it fast.

And they did it contra established trendlines. Across the country, the median age of men marrying is 29.2; for women, it is 27.1, according to the United States Census Bureau — those numbers are the highest ever reported.

Maybe it's a Southern thing, maybe it's based on religions and traditions, or maybe the Florida heat just got to everybody's heads one summer, but I think I missed the boat with this current craze.

A lot of these engagements occurred over relatively short periods of time — after several months of dating — or roughly the same span it took to make up my mind about a cardigan I bought last year.

I am currently single — happily and by choice, I might add — but *should* I be in more similar situations as my peers?

I think comedian/actor Aziz Ansari says it best in his standup — hear me out, it's really good — when he mocks how some people are willing to commit to another for the rest of their lives after knowing them for only a few months.

I honestly watch this standup special all the time because not only is it hysterical and easily accessible from my current boyfriend — he doesn't want me to use his real name, but it kinda rhymes with “pet flicks” — but I truly believe in the meaning behind Ansari's jokes.

Even in the Jewish realm, dating and weddings come and go in a flash. This is more traditional, especially when it comes to Orthodox dating/courting, but scary fast nonetheless.

For most of my young life, as I'm sure many other young Jewish men and women can attest to, I have been the recipient of endless guilt — subliminal and otherwise — by my mother to marry a nice Jewish boy (i.e. doctor) and also eventually put her in a nice retirement home (irrelevant for this particular story but relevant to push the point of Jewish guilt).

This doesn't sound like a bad life to me, but what's the rush? Is it really important to embed this idea into the psyche of a 6-year-old?

Now this isn't a dig at my mom — mostly because she'll be reading this — but more of a question directed at Jewish society.

According to the oft-cited 2013 survey from Pew Research Center, *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*, 44 percent of married Jews who were surveyed — and 58 percent of those who have married since 2005

— said they have a non-Jewish spouse.

I've dated my fair share of non-Jews, but I do believe in "marrying Jewish" for the purposes of strengthening and continuing Judaism for future generations. (Also, you can't beat an NJB.)

But is my success only determined by finding this nice Jewish doctor? I've joked a lot about Jewish dating before, but mostly with my personal, preconceived notion that I truly don't need a significant other to be happy or successful. Sure, it'd be nice one day, but on a day when I'm old enough and ready and able to understand how to do my own taxes.

I don't want to sound pessimistic. I still love weddings.

I follow wedding dress designers on Instagram. I love flipping through friends' wedding pictures and seeing how happy and pretty everyone looks. I've probably seen every episode of *Say Yes to the Dress*, and I even got to brush by a Pnina Tornai gown when I bombarded the Kleinfeld Bridal store in New York City last year with friends (yes, this actually happened, and no, I didn't meet Randy).

Marriage is a beautiful thing — for those who can commit to it.

I don't know where my negative view of marriage came from. My parents have been together for 39 years and both sets of grandparents for 56 and 62 years, respectively. No one else in my immediate family has been divorced.

To those who got married right out of high school or college, I truly wish them happiness and hope it works for them. But the statistics don't lie: According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, of the more than 2 million people married in 2014, more than 800,000 got divorced.



I think my negative view of marriage comes from a fear of the unknown. Will I get married? Will I be successful? Will GrubHub ever deliver my food on time? All impossible questions to answer right now.

But honestly, I think my negative view comes from a fear of the unknown. Will I get married? Will I be successful? Will GrubHub ever deliver my food on time? All impossible questions to answer right now.

In my core group of five friends, none of us are married, or even in relationships at the moment. That's probably why we get along so well. We're jet-setters who like to explore and live life — whatever that may mean — and don't want the idea of marriage or commitment to hold us back from our current dreams or life goals.

So why is there so much pressure to get married in a time when the divorce rate has peaked in recent years?

Is my success only measured by finding another successful person to promise to put the toilet seat down and watch *Gilmore Girls* reruns with me for the rest of my life?

Compared to a few other 23-year-olds I know, I think I'm doing pretty well. I have a new job, an apartment, tons of insurance paperwork that I was able to fill out by myself (which I consider a personal goal, of course with help from Dad), an active Dunkin' Donuts membership card *and* my own Netflix account — just kidding, I'll mooch off of that until the day I die.

But I've gained even more independence than I thought possible in recent months, so why do I need a spouse to validate the status of that success?

Do I want to be married one day? Sure. Is it necessary? Only for tax purposes. ●

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