

AND THE BRIDE WORE GREEN

Can your wedding reflect your eco-values?

BY SHAYLA GUNTER-GOLDSTEIN

Her granddaughter is getting married. The grandmother readies her guest list. What? An Evite? No reply card? No meat on the menu? Forest moss as a centerpiece? Once all about tradition, today's weddings are much more about the values and desires of the bride and groom—or the bride and bride, or the groom and groom. Green is the new white, and green weddings are being embraced—and in many locales spearheaded—by Jews.

In shtetl times, weddings were actually eco-conscious in a way that's coming back into fashion and is extremely important to ecologically aware couples today. Many are marrying later than in previous generations, know what they want, and may themselves be paying for a large portion of their wedding celebration. In our grandparents' (or great-grandparents') time, ceremonies were simple. Receptions included food and pastries prepared by friends and relatives, decorations were from your garden and household. The chuppah was Ur-Bubbe's yom tov tablecloth fastened to four branches from the woods, and far-away guests mailed a letter of congratulations to the couple. Brides simply wouldn't dream of buying a new dress when 10 other girls in the village had perfectly lovely dresses to lend.

Jewish couples are getting back to such basics. As "millennials" are getting engaged, these young people in their late 20s and early 30s who've grown up with environmental awareness as an integral part of their education are finding ways to incorporate their green consciousness into this special day. Gen-Xers (35-45) are embracing the movement too, according to Gabrielle Kaplan-Mayer, author of *The Creative Jewish Wedding Book* and a wedding officiant with Journeys of the Heart in Philadelphia.

Mayer says, "Couples are making choices intuitive to people who are ecologically aware. They're also looking at the root of the traditions of Jewish wedding celebrations and asking themselves how they can evolve, grow and adapt to truly reflect modern times and the couples' own beliefs."

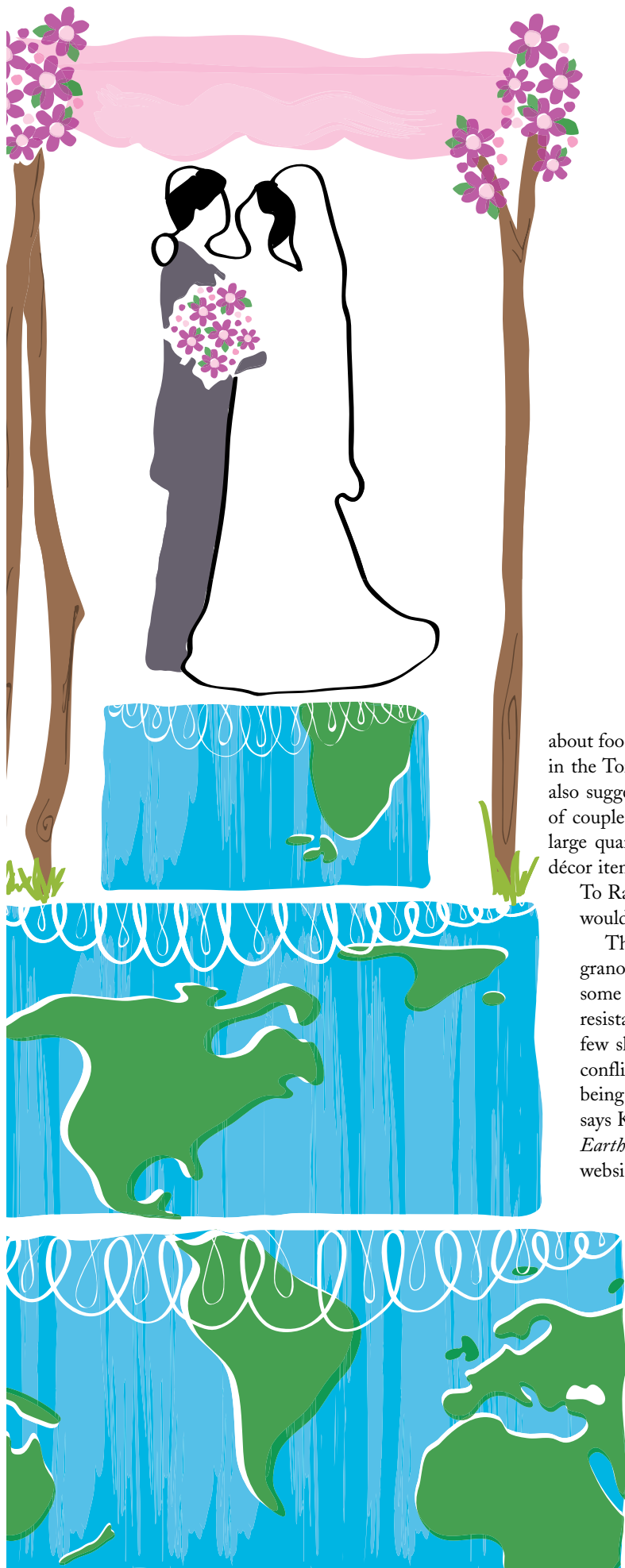
This kind of thinking wasn't on my radar when I got married eight years ago. I am one of those people who regrets not having done a more eco-conscious wedding. If I had to do it again, I'd be doing things much differently. I would definitely consider local seasonal flowers and local organic produce if I could.

In discussing food and wine for the wedding, Kaplan-Mayer notes a new eco-kashrut: "How can the meaning of kosher evolve? Eco-conscious couples want to connect their ideals and concerns about where food comes from into their wedding planning process. The whole discussion about food and ethics is steeped in Jewish traditions."

For some, that means kosher organic meat, for others it means vegetarian or vegan, and for many, it means purchasing local and/or organic foods whose harvest and production did not oppress workers. According to Cleveland-area Reconstructionist Rabbi Shawn Zevit, "Kashrut isn't just

ILLUSTRATION BY SUSAN PICKOVER





about food; it's about ethical practice. The word *kosher* is actually translated in the Torah to mean an appropriate and successful course of action." He also suggests that synagogues consider offering bulk discounts for groups of couples wishing to go green for *simchas*. A synagogue could purchase large quantities of compostable plates and cutlery, organic produce, even décor items, and the caterer can work with families to plan green *simchas*.

To Rabbi Zevit's knowledge, this idea is not yet being practiced, but it would increase the sense of community in a congregation.

The idea that an eco-conscious wedding might be a tree-hugging, granola-eating event with a backyard barbecue feel is one reason that some families may be hesitant to take the plunge. Is there any other resistance, or criticism of green wedding plans? While there were a few skeptics on guest lists, few couples I spoke with had experienced conflict with family over their decisions. "The idea of *tzedakah* and being true to the earth are such Jewish ideals and are so natural for us," says Kate Harrison, author of *The Green Bride Guide: How to Create an Earth-Friendly Wedding on Any Budget* and creator of its companion website (www.greenbrideguide.com). Of her own wedding she says, "There were very few objections."

However, Tikka Smiley of Toronto, a vegan for 20 years, said that the completely vegan menu for her 2002 wedding was challenging for her future in-laws, who were not vegetarian. They worried about guests' reactions. Tikka admits the menu was met with some trepidation, and two complaints were voiced during the evening, but mostly she heard compliments from guests who were pleasantly surprised that Tofu Wellington could be so tasty.

Menus are often the main source of tension. Couples may want to go vegetarian or use local and organic caterers, but have difficulty finding a kosher option. Eco- and budget-conscious couples can keep their menu simpler, limiting appetiz-



ers or choosing more inexpensive, earth-friendly options such as sustainable fish, poultry and vegetable proteins. Parents often need convincing, and if parents are paying, they may feel they should have more of a say in the matter. Couples paying for a large portion of the wedding themselves still want to keep *shalom bayit*, peace in the home, make sure they include parents in some of the decision-making.

Walter Vaz of Zuchter-Berk Catering, one of Toronto's largest kosher catering companies, says parents also fear that going green may make the wedding seem inferior, and weddings, for many, are still about image. Vaz worked recently with a Toronto couple that took myriad steps to have an eco-friendly wedding. The décor included 100 percent recycled items and natural décor taken from a forest floor, with nothing live. "The parents were skeptical about the menu, but then we did a tasting and showed them what we could do with organic, local and sustainable. They were thrilled beyond belief."

Julisse Levy, a wedding planner with A Bride's Nature in Tampa, Florida, has encountered some hesitation on the part of grandparents. "They don't believe going green will make a difference or it will take too long to plan... perhaps they're afraid they won't be around for the simcha." One couple helped quell their grandparents' fears by getting them involved. They asked older guests—aunts, uncles, grandparents—to bring framed tabletop photos of their own weddings, which were then used to decorate the room. "It was a beautiful way to incorporate family history into the wedding."

"Couples want to personalize their weddings, and going green sparks their creativity," explained Mireya Navarro, a New

Ask older guests — aunts, uncles, grandparents — to bring framed tabletop photos of their own weddings. Use them to decorate the room.

York Times environment writer and author of *Green Wedding: Planning Your Eco-Friendly Celebration*. In some cases, couples have to compromise to help ease tensions. For example, they might send Evites to their own friends, and send simple printed invitations on recycled paper to guests who aren't comfortable with email. "Couples are very mindful of the opinions of the older generations. They don't want to insult anyone."

On the larger scale of wedding planning, the eco-movement is most noticeable so far in more liberal Jewish congregations, such as Reconstructionist and Reform. Orthodox communi-

IT'S FINALLY EASY BEING GREEN!

- **Wedding planning often starts with the dress.** www.greenbrideguide.com suggests donating your dress after the wedding, or opting for an eco-chic dress from the start.
- **Register green, register union!** Use Jewish National Fund's Go Neutral Calendar to have guests register to offset their travel carbon-footprints.
- **The Jews United for Justice *Green and Just Celebration Guide* thinks you should hire an employment-program caterer, or serve locally grown organic delicacies. Then donate leftovers to a food bank to help the larger community.**
- **Get in touch with your local guests to see if they can host a few out-of-towners, to save on money and resources. Or host your guests at a hotel where workers have a strong voice.**
- **Bring Jewish holidays into your celebrations by timing your wedding with the Jewish calendar. For example, on Tu B'Shvat the seven species can be used for centerpieces, or incorporated into the menu; Autumn's harvest offers a bounty of menu ideas for a Sukkot wedding. Guests' Hanukkiah's can create stunning centerpieces.**
- **If you have many people who would need to travel to attend our wedding, consider a "road show" celebration, where only local guests come to your main ceremony, then you travel to the few towns where other guests live and host smaller celebrations such as a havdalah ceremony and dessert reception, or a dinner party or a brunch. The cost of one couple traveling in this way is much less than asking dozens of people to travel.**

— CLARA ROTTER-LAITMAN AND SONIA ISARD

ties however, have been incorporating green aspects into their simchas for decades. In several cities, there's a communal lending resource; a *Gemach* (the acronym for *gemilut chasadim*, or acts of kindness) lends, among other things, wedding dresses, headpieces and décor items. The gemach was once a mainstay of traditional Jewish life in European communities. Canfei Nesharim (www.canfeinesharim.org) is leading the environmental education movement in the Orthodox world.

Going green at your wedding, say those in the forefront of the movement, starts with thinking about your own ideals and what's important to you as a couple. Rabbi Zevit suggests that couples "do a values audit and ask themselves what's really necessary. Then they can make a conscious decision." The Washington-based Jews United for Justice (www.jufj.org) has produced a guide to *Green and Just Celebrations* for all simchas and life-cycle events, and sees each as "a precious opportunity to grow more mindful of the ways that everyday choices can both connect us with our tradition and help us live our values."

Tikka Smiley says "It has always been important to me, when having simchas, to make as little of an environmental impact as possible. Why should future generations suffer for our joyous events today?" Her wedding, held before going green was fash-

ionable, included no live flowers, a one-page recycled-paper invitation, floating soy candle centerpieces, and homemade recycled keepsake boxes as giveaways. Her gown, made by a seamstress, has since become part of her work costume, and the groom's shirt and kippah were made out of excess material from the dress.

Kate Harrison took dozens of steps to make sure her own 2007 wedding left as small a carbon footprint as possible, but also incorporated her Jewish roots. Kate and her husband Barry Muchnick—both with backgrounds in environmental studies—wanted to create a wedding that was about who they were and what they believed in. “Because you have to make all of the choices anyway, we kept the environmental impact of each decision in mind and tried to do our best to pick eco-friendly options.” They hosted the event where a majority of their guests lived in order to reduce travel; served local, organic food; chose seasonal, local, organic flowers, and recycled papers for anything that was being printed for the wedding. Using heirloom pieces during the ceremony also allowed them to continue family traditions. Their kiddush cup was engraved with their parent's and grandparent's names, and their poles holding up the heirloom-tablecloth chuppah were branches that had been engraved with the initials of the many family members who'd used them previously.

On her own wedding website, Harrison invites couples to share their own green wedding stories. “I think it's wonderful how truly committed couples are,” she says. “What's exciting, though, is that you can demonstrate to the people you love that you can make eco-friendly choices without sacrificing style, fun, beliefs or values. It can be an incredible opportunity for environmental education in a really positive moment.”

Is going green a more expensive option for a festivity that usually already costs a staggering sum? Costs for going green can add an extra three to eight percent to a wedding budget, especially if you're planning on organic meat. However, eco-friendly weddings can, in fact, end up costing less than traditional wed-

dings, if a couple is creative and eco-savvy. A borrowed or vintage gown obviously can save a tremendous amount of money. Evites, décor, local produce, having smaller, simpler affairs, serving homemade desserts. These small individual decisions add up to large impact.

Green-wedding experts agree it's important to educate family, friends and even suppliers during the wedding planning process.

“Learning about environmental values is much more fun through a wedding than through a lecture by Al Gore.”

A wedding program or website is an excellent way to explain why you're taking steps to go green. It's also a great way to challenge guests to take action themselves. This is especially potent when you have friends who may also be planning weddings. Mireya Navarro commented that “learning about environmentally green products and values is much more fun through a wedding celebration than through a lecture by Al Gore.”

Rabbi Cheryl Weiner helped produce the Los Angeles Progressive Jewish Alliance version of *Green and Just Celebrations*. When a couple decides to have an eco-conscious wedding, she explains, they're “changing the consciousness of what a wedding could be, would be and should be. They're also altering the consciousness of their guests.” Joelle Novey, was involved in the research for the original *Green and Just Guide*, said that in preparing the guide they asked, “do we just encourage people to undertake more green options of traditional practices... or can we help people think critically and rethink the scale and opulence of Jewish weddings? That is the most challenging idea to our culture.”

Novey's own 2008 wedding was a good example. From the one-page 100% recycled paper invitations, to using friend-made flower pots with living plants as centerpieces, to registering with an alternative registry, her wedding to Ethan Merlin was an extension of their life philosophy. “We embraced the opportunity to make green choices as a way of sharing the ways we hope to live life as a family going forward.”

“You have to be kind of brave,” Novey says, “to do something different for your wedding. There's a strong sense that everyone knows what to expect, so anytime you see people doing something differently, you become more confident to do something different yourself. Each couple that is brave enough to do something publicly in a different way helps embolden others and can have an impact on helping to eventually change the culture.” ■

Shayla Gunter-Goldstein is a Toronto-based writer, a part-time event planner, and a full-time mother of two young boys.

HERE'S HOW ONE CREATIVE COUPLE DID IT:

Ethan Merlin and Joelle Novey were married at Gann Academy in Waltham, Massachusetts in 2008. Joelle notes, “By getting married at a school we knew that our rental fees were helping to support a worthy non-profit.” She continues, “Our first green choice was to have a vegetarian meal. We're both vegetarians, and we thought our guests wouldn't mind, especially if the food was good! We decided early on to forego cut flowers, which are often grown under poor labor conditions with toxic pesticides, and which cost a lot but last only a short time. Instead, we decorated the wedding canopy with satin ribbon.” For the ceremony, Joelle wore a wine-colored dress she could wear again and a white robe. “Traditionally, Jewish men wear a white kittel on their wedding day, and we adapted this idea to create a white robe for me to wear as well.”

adapted from greenbrideguide.com

