

# BEYOND BELLY JOY: Weddings For The Socially Responsible

by Shoshana Jedwab

centerpieces from P'tach, an organization which raises funds to help keep learning disabled students mainstreamed at yeshivas (4612 13th Ave., Brooklyn, NY 11219; 718-854-8600).

In point of fact, the true moral breadth of our "good deeds" equation included the thorny issue of compromise. Bob would have chosen to have a "very small wedding in a friend's backyard!" My parents, on the other hand, had their own wedding fantasies to fulfill. My mother had lived through the American Depression, my father through the Holocaust. Their joy in their ability to provide me with a lavish wedding was, I slowly and painfully came to realize, their own tzedakah (charity) to me. For both Bob and me, sensitivity to our parents' wishes became part of the ethical equation.

Finally, I reminded myself that tzedakah applies to oneself as well as to others. I have always loved the Talmudic concept of bal tashchit (not wasting finite resources). The poetic wording of this Biblical injunction not to be un-ecological is, "When you besiege a city in war, do not destroy its trees ... for is a tree a person that it should be besieged by you?" [Deuteronomy 20:19].

Since the sheer waste of food at weddings has always offended me, the first thing I did was to mandate that complimentary monogrammed matchbooks were taboo. (He hated smoke!) When all was said and done, we could have given a lot more. Mazon is an organization that combats hunger across the U.S. and suggests that Jews tit themselves three percent of their income (celebration) expenses (2940 Westwood Blvd., Suite 4, Los Angeles, CA 90064; 213-470-7769). N'shei Ahavas Chesed Borough Park rents bridal gowns at priced costs and donates the proceeds to charity (1625 46th Street, Brooklyn, NY 11204, 718-871-6656). And I wish we had a city-wide outreach program to the home-bound or lonely Jewish elderly (236 W. 23rd St., New York, NY 10011, 212-645-9726), and West Side Campaign Against Hunger, a general pantry for the poor in Manhattan (263 W. 86th St., New York, NY 10024, 212-362-3662).

Besides the obvious gain of providing practical help to a few needy people, blending tzedakah into our wedding allowed Bob and me to begin our marriage on a thoughtful footing. We started the intimate process of working out our spiritual goals with each other, and with the world around us.

It was a good beginning. Shoshana Jedwab is educational director of The Jewish Center on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

Several months before my wedding, I was struck with an odd, sudden sense of loss. Beyond the hundreds of strands of detail deciding on flowers, designing invitations, choosing a photographer, searching for a gown—something was missing. I phoned my father in Brooklyn. "Dad! I said, "What were weddings like in Drob- nin [Poland] when you were a boy?"

He described weddings in which the entire town participated, parades down the main street of Drobnin, mothers-of-the-bride — in the midst of the crowds — dancing with fat, round challahs and candles.

"But Shoshana!" he said to me seriously, "really, the most important thing about weddings was that the poor people got fed! Lots of children carrying pushkes (charity boxes) circulated through the crowds collecting money for yeshivas and settlements in Palestine, for poor brides' funds, for soup kitchen, tomchai shabbat (Sabbath food funds) and for the burial society. "Three quarters of our town was so poor they didn't have what to put on the bread" as my father phrased it.

Since the whole town (400 families) was always invited to every wedding, dozens of poor people (whose general fare was potatoes, sauerkraut and beans) had a chance to "eat elegantly" feasting on chicken, goose, wine, tzimmes, lukshen, cake and beautiful challah. According to my father, the non-poor arrived at weddings with their pockets filled with money, knowing they would fulfill their Jewish responsibility to give charity to the poor.

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