

# What to Do About a Costly 'I Do'

**Simchas become more modest affairs as everyone crunches the numbers**

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When Tracy Bodoff's fiance asked her to marry him last spring after more than a decade together, the answer was clear. Less clear was what sort of wedding to have and how to pay for it.

"We have a budget, and we've been very good," Bodoff said, adding: "I think we're going to be able to do this for around \$6,000."

Bodoff, 35, and Yoni Greenbaum, 39, are keeping their November wedding small.

They're not planning a honeymoon, they're skipping the rehearsal dinner -- "we'll just get everybody up to speed two hours before and hope it works out OK," said Bodoff -- and they've shaved their guest list down to about 60 people.

"It was hard, picking and choosing who to invite, knowing that we wanted to keep it small," said Bodoff, who work as an administrative assistant at Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel in Elkins Park, where the wedding is being held.

For each person on the potential invite list, it came down to this: "If I haven't talked to this person in at least a decade," they were off.

## Vendors Feel the Pinch

According to [www.TheWeddingReport.com](http://www.TheWeddingReport.com), a Web site tracking nuptial trends and statistics, the average wedding in 2008 ran more than \$21,000.

The average cost in the Philadelphia area, however, which includes Camden, N.J., and Wilmington, Del., was more than \$30,000.

With money tight, unemployment high and the country mired in a recession, many people planning weddings, B'nai Mitzvot and other simchas have scaled back.

The shift has hit the vendors who make their living from such celebrations particularly hard.

Ambler-based videographer Matt Harnick lamented that "my business is probably half of what it was two years ago."

He said that calls have picked up recently, but he attributed that more to the upcoming fall wedding season than improving economic conditions.

While many vendors are feeling the squeeze, those on the planning end are reaping the benefits, making deals and finding creative ways to fashion a wedding, or Bar or Bat Mitzvah, at a discount.

"Just like it's a good time to buy a house, it's a good time to plan a wedding," said Barbara-Jo Saler, a Wynnewood-based event planner. "Everyone's willing to negotiate right now for your business. No one's giving anything away, but I think you're going to get more for your money this year than you did last year, across the industry."



*Yoni Greenbaum and Tracy Bodoff consult a book on Jewish wedding planning at their Elkins Park home. The pair are is of many trying to forge a less expensive wedding.*

Photo by Greg Bezanis

Harnick added that with more and more people out of work, many amateur photographers and videographers are trying their hand at the wedding circuit to make an extra buck.

Bodoff, for one, is opting to have a friend shoot the photos, rather than hiring a professional.

For those who do still rely on the pros, many are choosing smaller packages.

"Most people still feel that photographs are probably the most important keepsake," said Jordan Cassway, a photographer who frequently shoots for the Jewish Exponent and is a regular on the simcha scene.

### **History Says: Don't Go Overboard!**

According to the Encyclopaedia Judaica, as far back as the 13th century, European Jewish communities established sumptuary laws meant to curb ostentation during weddings and circumcisions.

While those laws might be heartily ignored during more flush economic times, their spirit is alive and well amid the recession.

Instead of going through a traditional bridal store to purchase her wedding gown, Bodoff went a simpler route.

"The thought of spending thousands on a dress -- it drove me crazy," she acknowledged. "So I got something at Nordstrom's, and it was a couple hundred instead of \$1,500."

Others, like Elyssa Goodman, 32, are trying on dresses at upscale stores, but buying them secondhand. Goodman got her dress at Sabrina Ann, a wedding consignment shop in Ardmore, which sells nearly new bridal wear at a fraction of the retail cost.

Owner Sabrina Sigler pointed out that people like Goodman have been coming to the shop in droves, and that business is up nearly 30 percent since last summer.

It's not a wedding without rings, and many are relying on friends and family in the traditionally Jewish jewelry industry to help with price breaks on engagement and wedding bands. Others use family heirlooms, both for sentimental reasons and to save money.

Because Bodoff suffers from allergies, there won't be any flowers at her ceremony -- a major savings.

TheWedding Report.com, for example, lists the average cost of flowers at more than \$1,200.

Rather, Bodoff said that she may decorate with fresh fruits and vegetables picked up at a farmer's market shortly before the big day.

Goodman, on the other hand, said that she will probably avoid florist fees by buying seasonal flowers direct from wholesale markets just before her December wedding.

One cost that's harder to avoid is food. Catering is one of the major expenses at such events, especially if the food needs to be kosher.

Bodoff's reception will be catered by Max & David's, the kosher meat restaurant in Elkins Park, though she said that she briefly toyed with the idea of cooking all the food herself to save money.

For those that don't want to shell out big bucks for professional caterers or restaurants, nontraditional vendors are becoming increasingly popular.

The Men's Club at Temple Sinai in Dresher operates its own kosher catering service, Men in the Kitchen.

According to former Men's Club president Alan Budman, the recession has meant booming business for the group, which is able to keep its costs down mainly thanks to low overhead, including volunteer labor and cheaply renting out space in the synagogue.

Although the group has temporarily closed for the summer, Budman said that they served more than 7,000 meals last year. They even had to turn down a few jobs because of overload.

"We're a great alternative for people, because we're frankly a lot less expensive," said Budman. "Many people have said to us that they wouldn't have been able to afford an event but for us doing it."

Weddings have long been notorious for lavish, large-scale celebrations, but the recession is also being felt on the B'nai Mitzvah circuit.

Yet the idea of ostentatious Bar or Bat Mitzvahs is largely an American Jewish construct -- a product of growing affluence in the second half of the last century.

Prior to that, Bar Mitzvahs tended to be more modest celebrations, especially in very religious circles -- a trend that may be returning.

Amy Warmflash, a professional party planner who runs Parties With Purpose in Elkins Park, said that families are definitely scaling back, and it's often a wake-up call for the kids.

"I find that 13-year-old girls have very specific ideas of what they want, and my job is to work with them, keeping their parents' pocket books in mind," said Warmflash.

She approaches it "from my personal philosophy: 'More mitzvah, less bar.' "

Marsha Heit kept down the cost of her daughter Elizabeth's recent Bat Mitzvah by opting for buffet dining stations rather than a traditional sit-down meal -- a decision that she said shaved off close to 20 percent of the cost.

### **'Always Going to Be Business'**

When Marcie Ziskind began planning her youngest son, Lev's, Bar Mitzvah in the spring, she was mindful of the cost for two reasons.

First, the Center City-based wine-storage business she runs with her husband, Scot, has been slow. Second, they believed that a Bar Mitzvah should be more reserved anyway.

So they opted for a low-key luncheon after the service at Society Hill Synagogue.

The family also saved by decorating with homemade centerpieces, and even relied on desserts baked by Lev's grandmother -- more than 1,000 items in all, including such treats as cookies and lemon bars.

And rather than buying new suits, the Ziskind men wore clothing they already owned.

For all these so-called concessions, Ziskind said that the family agreed to buy Lev a laptop computer in lieu of a big shindig -- a deal that she said he was more than happy to accept.

While no one knows if or when such affairs will revert back to their former state once the economy recovers, both simcha planners and vendors are just trying to get through these rough waters.

And they are trying to look on the bright side.

Recession or no, said Barbara-Jo Saler, "there's always going to be business -- people are still going to get married; there will still be Bar and Bat Mitzvahs."