

SIMCHA GUIDELINES

Preamble

These are extraordinary times that truly compel us to examine our way of life, to establish priorities, and to take crucial steps in improving our spiritual and emotional status.

One of the most stressful events in the Jewish lifecycle is in essence one of the most joyous; perhaps the most joyous: bringing a child to the *chupa*. The founding of a new *bayis ne'eman beYisroel*, the extending of our sacred heritage to reach yet one more generation, is a time of personal and national celebration. Yet the standard wedding has come to include so many costly - and wasteful - expenses that even those who could easily afford them find themselves viewing many of them as burdensome and unnecessary. People of limited means, especially those who have recently suffered setbacks in their family income, see the prospect of a wedding threatening, overwhelming...

While many people are decrying the situation, heads of families and community leaders are joining us - *Rabbonim*, *Roshei Yeshiva* and *Admorim* - in calling for taking definitive steps to bring sanity and financial stability to a situation that cries for both.

In response to this call, we, the *Rabbonim*, *Admorim* and *Roshei Yeshiva*, with the help of the lay leadership in the broader community, have prepared guidelines for scaling down the size and lavishness of *simchas*. More than suggestions, these represent a commitment on the part of all signatories to adhere to these rules. That is, those who will be hosting a *simcha* will honor each and every point, as listed. And we, the rabbinical signatories will not attend - even as a guest - any aspect of a celebration if any detail of the guidelines is not honored.

We feel it is in place to emphasize that these guidelines are built on compassion and responsibility. They will save the Torah community many millions of dollars every year, they will restore sanity and *tznius* to an area that cries for it, relieve parents and other *baalei simcha* of unmanageable financial burdens, and free badly needed funds for urgent personal and *klal* causes that are begging for life sustaining support. Above all, these guidelines reflect a necessary measure of restraint and moderation in the character of a committed Jew.

In reviewing these points, please note that the number of guests and the amounts to be spent on various aspects of the *simcha* are not offered as norms. They are only meant as ceilings; in some cases, they are accommodations to special needs.

The guidelines only cover some of the items relating to *chasunas*, but they address a phenomenon that has affected many more aspects of the wedding celebration than these, as well as other life milestones. It is our hope that the underlying message will be absorbed, and applied broadly.

Guidelines

The celebration of a marriage usually begins with the announcement of the couple's engagement to be married. Traditionally, a modest-scaled, intimate gathering including immediate family and close friends of the *chassan* and *kalla* would take place and those present would wish the couple and one another "*L'chaim!*" This has currently been embellished (but not superseded) by the *Vort* - a lavish, superfluous celebration, inconveniencing all concerned for no justifiable purpose.

As a prudent and sensible measure, the *Vort* must simply be abolished. The *L'chaim* (held on the night that the engagement is announced) should also not turn into a *Vort*. Hence, a *L'chaim* should preferably be held in the *kalla's* home with close family and a small number of close friends invited, without the services of a party planner or professional musicians, accompanied with neither hot dishes nor flower treatments. In other words, it will simply be a joyful *L'chaim*.

THE WEDDING

The most expensive and taxing part of the marriage celebration is, of course, the wedding itself. The grand scale and grandiose embellishments are not only dispensable, they are a hindrance to earning *Hashem's* unconditional blessings. The sought-after aura of *tzenius* is not solely a function of clothing measurements. It is a matter of attitude, restraint and privacy. This element of *tzenius*, compounded with a genuine outpouring of *simcha*, and tempered by good sense were the hallmark of *Yiddische simchas* here in the past. They are the way *chasunos* are generally still celebrated in Eretz Yisroel, Europe, and many communities across America. It is our hope to recapture this by recognizing that the most important part of the *chasuna* is to join in celebrating this new *Bayis Ne'eman beYisroel* with *rekida* and *negina* - singing and dancing with joy. The highlight of the *chasuna* should therefore be the *Simchas Chassan V'Kalla*. The actual *seuda* should be meant for the intimate circle of close family and friends.

With this in mind, there is a ceiling of 400 invited guests seated at the *chasuna seuda*. Even this figure should be viewed as an accommodation of extraordinary circumstances. The aspired-for norm is meant to be appreciably less. This number includes relatives, friends (including the friends of the *chassan* and *kalla*), and business acquaintances. Children under 16 years of age are not included in this figure.

The *Kabbolas Purim* / smorgasbord for both the *chassan* and *kalla* is to be limited to simple cakes, fruit platters, a modest cold buffet, and no more than two standard hot dishes. Waiters offering hors d'oeuvres would be considered one of the two hot dishes.

The menu for the *seuda* is limited to a plain appetizer, soup and chicken or fish main course with two standard side dishes followed by a simple dessert (i.e. ices, cookies, or a slice of cake).

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AGUDATH ISRAEL

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There is to be no Viennese table and no bar. Beverages, of course, can be served on each table, with wine and liquors on the men's tables.

BAND

A one-piece band is strongly recommended, with a limit of no more than four musicians. A vocalist may be added.

FLOWERS, CENTERPIECES, FRUIT BASKETS AND CHUPA DECORATIONS

Every effort should be made to keep these at a minimum. The total cost of these items for the entire wedding shall not exceed \$1,800. This, as mentioned above, should be viewed as a ceiling, not the norm. Centerpieces are to be limited to the women's tables. It is strongly recommended that centerpieces and *chupah* decorations be rented from a *G'mach*.

SIMCHAS CHASSAN V'KALLAH

The primary celebration at the *chasuna* should take place after the entire meal is served without undue interruption, at which point more guests can be invited to join in the *simcha*. A modest assortment of plain cake, fruit, drinks and hot kugels (no meat or fish dishes) may be served to these additional guests.

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These guidelines are only meant as a beginning. The same sense of restraint, modesty and concomitant focus on inner values should be evident in all aspects of the *chasuna*, beginning with the *Aufruf*, through the various *Sheva Brachos*, as well as the types of gifts exchanged between the *chassan* and *kalla*, which have continued to escalate until they have reached unheard-of-heights.

Special mention must be made of exorbitant sums spent on clothing for the *mechutanim* and immediate family, some of which are purchased, or made to order for only one wearing.

This call for re-evaluation of how we celebrate our *chasunos* should apply to all joyous occasions. *Shalom zachar* celebration, *nach-nachts*, *brissen*, and *bar mitzvas* should also be informed by restraint and a focusing on the *p'nim* - the Torah value system by which we live.

Moreover, it would be very much in place to reexamine the general emphasis; we have been putting on extravagance, opulence and elegance. We reject these excesses not only because they overburden *baalei simcha* financially, exert unbearable peer pressure and generally are a misappropriation of our community's resources. Primarily, we should reject them because they simply detract from the ultimate purpose of our existence.

There is room for us to experience growth and expansion - in the spiritual core of our lives, in the Jewish essence of all that we do. It should become evident in the way we furnish and decorate our homes, and how we comport ourselves in general. Our beginning place, however, is our *simchos*.

If we begin by making the *neshama* of our *simchos* the area of our greatest concern and the target of our supreme efforts, we can then hope that the *Ribono shel Olam* will respond by granting us many, many more similar occasions for celebrations, and hopefully the direction of the rest of our lives will follow suit.

Summary of Simcha Guidelines

- No *vort*
- Limitation on smorgasbord
- Ceiling of 400 guests seated at the *chasuna*
- Limitation on menu and dessert
- No bar
- No Viennese table
- One-piece band recommended; no more than four musicians
- Limitation on centerpieces, chupa decorations and flowers
- Expanded *simchas chosson v'kallah* with limited snacks