

Weddings. The Mesila Approach.

In a recent article in Mishpacha, R' Shia Markowitz, a personal friend and a friend of Mesila, was interviewed regarding the "wedding guidelines" that were proposed by him two decades ago, but were subsequently shelved. The guidelines were directed towards people who could afford luxury weddings, in the hope that it would get them to tone down their affairs, and that this trend would trickle down to the "masses." R' Shia hoped that this was an idea whose time had now come, due to changes that have taken place in our communities in the interim, and that people today would be more receptive to uniform wedding guidelines.

The idea of *takanos* for wedding expenses in modern times is not new. It was introduced about forty years ago by the Gerrer Rebbe, the Lev Simcha. The approach was paternalistic; the Rebbe decided and the community followed his decisions. The *takanos* went into great detail, specifying who could be invited for the wedding dinner, where parents could buy children an apartment (the norm then in Eretz Yisrael) and how large it may be. The *takanos* were intended for rich and poor. The story goes that someone came to the Rebbe and said, "But I can afford it," and the reply was, "So buy yourself a different rebbe." Tremendous benefit came to Klal Yisrael at the time from these *takanos*. Until then, parents struggled to buy apartments in Yerushalayim and Bnei Brak. Thanks to the Rebbe's vision, which seeped out to other communities as well, the movement to settle in peripheral areas was spearheaded. A whole generation was saved with this approach.

However, over time, as the community grew and the desired effect of populating outlying areas was accomplished, the whole concept evaporated. Today, those who can afford it buy in the major centers and those who cannot, go further out. The later rebbes intentionally allowed the *takanos* to lapse, perhaps because the system was not only unnecessary, but was not suited to the times, as I will explain below.

I know how much R' Shia cares about the painful subject of wedding overspending that brings so many families into crisis, and I fully agree that something has to change, but I feel that I must express my disagreement with the "Guidelines" approach.

I believe that the reason the guidelines didn't make it then and wouldn't accomplish the purpose now is because people don't want to be told what to do, even via the indirect tool of across-the-board *takanos*, or, as defined more softly — "guidelines." By calling it "guidelines," the implication is that we are not imposing

takanos, but rather, urging people to adopt them. But even if the name is more elegant, the principle is the same: It is trying to make a change from **the top down**, while we believe that the change must come from **the bottom up**.

The only true solution is to give people in our communities the deep-seated motivation to live with financial stability — without loans and without charity — for their own sake. When they realize what they stand to gain by leading a financially stable lifestyle — the serenity and quality of life — they will choose to keep the bar lower of their own accord.

When people are motivated to take charge of their quality of life, they are able to take effective steps to lower wedding spending. And, more often than not, when people "compromise" on perceived standards, they gain in the quality of the wedding. The spotlight is taken off of the external trimmings and swings to the essence of the event.

The answer must come from within, not — or, at least, not only — from externally imposed limitations. Because some things will never change. There will always be the drive to "live up to the Joneses." And there will always be the struggle between "A wedding is once in a lifetime; splash out as much as you can!" and "It's just one night; what for?" But when this is outbalanced by the powerful attraction of living a life of serenity and true values, people will more easily resist societal pressures and allow the voice of reason to prevail.

The answer is not to limit, but **to empower**. To open people's eyes to what they are sacrificing on the altar of "societal norms" and give them the inner stamina to choose lasting serenity over short-lived, perceived benefit. To provide our children with the strength of character to resist negative social influences and reach for genuine quality of life — because only if the young couple also wants this does it stand a chance of happening.

Mesila is working towards this goal by educating children in schools and young adults in yeshivas and seminaries, and by reaching the community through coaching, workshops, and lectures. **Our mission is to motivate people to live a financially secure life, not because anyone is telling them they must, but because that is what they genuinely want, and because this is truly for their long-term benefit.**

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