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I’m somebody who prides herself on knowing who I am and what I want, but when I got engaged, I surprised myself with how overwhelmed I was. There was going to be a wedding, and I would have to plan it. Some of the advice I received pointed to an easy choice: the package wedding.

The basic premise of a package wedding is that you don’t have to make any decisions. It comes with a photographer, floral arrangements, a pre-set menu and a venue. Even the linens are pre-selected. I’ve attended a couple such weddings over the last few years, and they are always tasteful and lovely. They are also identical.

Anyone who knows me knows that I march to the beat of my own drum. Even my engagement ring, with a deep green emerald stone, is a good indicator that a cookie-cutter wedding just was not for me. Then, my fiancé and I decided to get married in my hometown of Edmonton, which as you might imagine, does not have Jewish wedding packages, and so I set off to select vendors the old-fashioned way.

I will say that a package wedding would have saved a lot of time. Planning a wedding from scratch, especially remotely, is not a hassle-free undertaking, but it was also rewarding and meaningful to make choices based on what spoke to me as a person and not as just another summer simcha.

One of my favourite memories from the entire process was sitting down with my prospective photographer and having a conversation about what she would need to pay particular attention to at a Jewish wedding. I had already spent hours poring over this and that portfolio from various photographers, and I had settled on hers.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

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Her photos were quirky and unique, and they had a voice to which I related. When we sat down, she confided in me that this would be her first Jewish wedding. This might have made some anxious, but I felt excited by the prospect. As I sat there across from my future wedding photographer and explained the bedeken (veiling ceremony), the encircling and the breaking of the glass, she took feverish notes, and I knew she would be able to capture my ceremony with a fresh perspective and a healthy dose of wonder.

It went on like that. My future husband and I (but mostly me), selected vendors we felt connected to, and at every stop, I would explain how a Jewish wedding would differ and how the services they would be providing would need to be different, too. We were the first Jewish wedding for so many of our vendors, and every time they were excited to be a part of it. I was also excited to include a group of talented vendors with an idiosyncratic outlook in my wedding to make the whole event feel like a true reflection of my personality.

The morning of the big day, I stopped by the florist to pick up my bouquet. She had me close my eyes in front of a mirror while she placed the flowers in my hands. When I opened my eyes, I couldn’t hold back the tears that sprang up in the corners of my eyes. The florists had been excited by my idea for an origami bouquet made of book pages from a novel that my husband and I had read together. I clutched it lovingly as I walked down the aisle in a tea length dress.

My wedding was far from perfect. There were hiccups along the way, but I can hardly remember them now. All I remember is the warm, glowing feeling of being surrounded by everyone I most loved at a wedding that looked and felt like all the best parts of me.
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When it comes to choosing vendors and a venue for a Jewish wedding, there’s one rule to keep in mind: it’s your first (or second) time, it shouldn’t be theirs.

A Jewish wedding is more than just a ceremony and a party – at least in its initial stages. So while you’re going to want to ensure the hall has all the usual amenities and the photographer, videographer and caterer are apprised of your style and taste preferences, you’ll want to hire specialists – wedding professionals who regularly service the Jewish community and know what to expect.

There are enough items to check off your list without having to take extra time to explain to the uninitiated the importance of capturing certain moments, like the breaking of a plate or glass, the signing of the ketubbah or the accompanying of the bride and groom from the huppah to the yichud room for their first private moments as husband and wife.

Additionally, venues that frequently host traditional Jewish weddings will be aware of the space requirements for the various parts of the event and will have designated areas for the welcoming of guests at the (mostly) gender-segregated chossen’s tish and hakhnasat kallah, followed by the huppah and reception.

In terms of photography, professionals who are used to handling large or extended families are likely better equipped to efficiently arrange and take all the shots you’re expecting them to get, within the abbreviated period before the first dance begins. In fact, they may even have you prepare a list of relatives and ensure they don’t stray too far afield so everything continues at a steady pace.

As well, Jewish wedding specialists will be aware of what to expect in certain situations, like the tightly packed circles of the hora, and won’t be shy to press their way through to capture your precious moments. After all, there are few things as disappointing as reviewing your wedding photos, searching for specific memorable instances, only to wonder how the photographer could have gone so wrong.

Of course, you could be in for an unpleasant surprise well before that point if you pick an unsuitable wedding band or DJ. While there is a wide array of genres to choose from, you probably have something in mind, and may well be left mortified, shaking your head or looking for a place to hide if you’re anticipating Hasidic tunes and are instead greeted by the uber-traditional Havah Nagilah or popular Israeli tunes.

And then there are the miscellaneous items that a synagogue or wedding venue with Jewish clientele would have, such as a kosher kitchen for the caterer; candlesticks, which are usually carried by those walking the bride and groom down the aisle; washing stations for guests to use before ha-Motzi; a mechitzah (dividing wall) for gender-segregated dancing; and a supply of bentschers (Grace After Meals pamphlets) to pass around after enjoying the food.

Sure, the wedding party could find solutions to these issues or arrange to provide all of these things, but why add more obstacles to an event that already requires a fair share of detail-oriented planning?

While hiring vendors who don’t normally cater to the Jewish community might provide a degree of uniqueness to your wedding – a venue your guests may not have attended before, or a different photographic style in your pictures – the decision carries the risk of a major letdown. While the people you chose may have opportunities to improve, you don’t want to act as their trial run – after all, you’re presumably hoping not to have to engage the services of wedding vendors for a second (or third) time.

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