

A New Home for special brides

• By ARIELLA ROSEN

One could easily say that Shoshanah Shear started life with the decks stacked against her.

Orphaned at a young age, she later found herself a penniless university student who, as a result of an illness, spent all her work earnings on tuition and healthcare. Still later, she made aliya as a young, single woman with barely \$600 to her name. With one disheartening experience after another, she could understandably have thrown up her hands and given up.

Instead, she decided to take her own negative experience by the horns and make it into something positive for others.

Shear recalls her wedding as a simple affair – because as an orphan, there was no one to help her out. As a result, she was determined to assist other brides who had nowhere else to turn.

Her first idea was to help with mikve expenses, and she set her sights on preparing special packages of ritual bath items for new brides. But as she puts it, divine providence guided her down a different path.

“The very first donation we were offered for our mikve packages – NIS 20 – was so exciting for me that I ran right over to the woman’s house to collect it. However, I accidentally knocked on a neighbor’s door instead. When he answered, after realizing my mistake, I told him about our project to help brides. He said, ‘I don’t have any money to give you, but I do have a new set of dishes that I’m not using. Would you like to give them to a needy bride?’”

And thus, Bayit Chadash (A New Home) was born.

Now over five years old, the project has gone through several incarnations since it first began. What began as a *gemah* (free lending society) that collected items to distribute to needy, orphaned brides and help them set up their new homes – such as linens, dishes, pots and pans – has morphed into an organization that provides for a couple’s wedding needs as well, maintaining a list of wedding service providers that offer a steep discount. Shear is now working on expanding its scope to include job training for the couple so they can start their future together with the prospect of earning a respectable income.

Shear, warm and sincere in conversation, gets particularly spirited when describing what distinguishes her *gemah* from other organizations that support needy brides.

“Two things,” she says. “First, the population we serve. And second, the fact that we approach each *hatan* and *kalla* [groom and bride] holistically, looking at the entire person and their needs as a couple.”

Bayit Chadash focuses on couples who come from disadvantaged backgrounds for various reasons. While orphans are naturally close to Shear’s heart, she also helps couples with disabilities, and couples who are “living orphans” – those whose parents are alive, but are unable or unwilling to help their children.

Due to their special circumstances,



Wedding dresses awaiting their brides.
(Shoshanah Shear)

these couples often need a lot more than just financial support – and that’s where Shear’s holistic approach comes in.

“We have a special needs-assessment interview session with each couple that approaches us for help, in which we try to assess what their real needs are, what help they are already receiving and what will help them to be independent once married – and then work to provide this.”

As an example, she recounts that a bride and groom who were both converts approached her for help. Due to their situation, they had no family support – financial or otherwise. Shear immediately offered to provide them with items to set them up in their new home, but she didn’t stop there. When they came to her, four days before their wedding, she discovered that only the venue and food had been arranged, and that they had no funds to take care of the rest of their wedding needs.

“We gave the *hatan* shoes and a gift to give his *kalla*. We also found the bride someone to do her hair and makeup free of charge,” she relates.

She got someone to donate flowers, which she arranged herself in beautiful bouquets. Someone else donated plastic tableware, and Shear set the tables herself, prepared the bride’s decorative chair and sewed her veil. The organization also did the photography and arranged for some women to come and dance with the bride, who only knew about 10 women in Israel. Shear and her husband even stood in place of the absent parents, walking the couple down to the *huppa*.

An occupational therapist by profession, Shear also has the necessary skills and sensitivity to help people with special needs. She recently helped out a couple in which the groom was legally blind and the bride, born with cerebral palsy, had mobility issues. The bride insisted that

she did not want to walk down to her *huppa* with her walker. So Shear arranged for her to walk down leaning on her grandmother’s and mother-in-law’s arms, with Shear following discreetly behind them, carrying the walker in case she needed it.

This sensitivity is the outstanding feature of her work. She relays a conversation she had with a particular groom, who was orphaned at a young age but was resistant to accepting assistance.

“He didn’t want to feel like a *nebbech* [pity case],” she says. “After hearing about his case, I called him up and told him, I know how you’re feeling – I’m an orphan myself. But you should know that, first of all, every new couple traditionally receives gifts to start off their new lives. Why should you lose out because you’re an orphan?”

And then she added, “Just because you’re on the taking end now, doesn’t mean you can’t be on the giving end in the future. Look at me.”

It was exactly what the young groom needed to hear.

Altogether, the *gemah* has assisted 26 couples since opening its doors, and each couple has their own story. But it’s not just the recipients who feel the blessing of this charity, she stresses; she has plenty of stories of people who, after donating to the organization, experienced positive results in their own lives.

One orphan bride, she details, had no money to buy her fiancé the customary tallit. Shear approached someone who agreed to sponsor it in the hope that the merit of the act would help his own daughter find her match. Ten days after he donated the tallit, his daughter met her future husband.

To help fund the *gemah*, Shear and her husband offer paid services to the community, including photography,

private occupational therapy sessions, online Torah study options, and premarital classes for the bride and groom. They also create and sell original gift items.

Not content with current successes, Shear has big plans for the future, including opening a wheelchair-accessible facility where she can use her occupational therapist background to provide job-skills training to orphans and enable them to rise beyond minimum wage jobs.

But she also has a more immediate goal. Recently, a regular supporter told her about a bridal-gown store going out of business, and that the proprietress was selling the gowns for a mere NIS 100 apiece. This supporter offered to sponsor 20 gowns in memory of her late husband, and also lent her the money for the additional 40 that Shear had selected as appropriate for her *gemah*. Once she had the gowns, she just needed to raise the funds, and she turned to social media to do so. The response was positive, and she soon had a sponsor for each gown.

Now she aims to get them cleaned, and to rent out a Jerusalem-area location spacious enough to store and display them, including clothing racks, full-length mirrors and mannequins. To get the money for this venture, she has created a crowdfunding campaign which will run until July 29. She’s excited about the prospect of moving her *gemah* to larger quarters and has big plans for this center, including a seamstress-training program for her brides that will enable them to alter wedding gowns, as part of the larger job-training program she is developing.

Big plans, and a big heart. That’s what Shear’s *gemah* – and her life – are all about.

To contact (for assistance, donations, or to volunteer): 052-767-7074, chessedveemet@gmail.com or www.lovingkindness.co