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Mazel tov!

By Sally Pollak
Free Press Staff Writer

On the day she was married, Chani Raskin had her hair styled and her nails manicured. She set aside time for her make-up.

But most of Tuesday, her wedding day, was spent in prayer. Hours and hours devoted to silent recitation of the psalms and other prayers as part of her traditional Hasidic wedding. She and her fiance were to unite after a day of atonement -- a kind of private Yom Kippur.

Chani did not eat or drink at the reception in the hour before her sundown wedding to Shneur Zalman Wilhelm. Around her, women and girls nibbled on cake, embraced and called "mazel tov." Her sisters, in ivory and teal satin dresses, greeted friends and hugged cousins. Chani sat on a dais, fasting and praying.

The wedding of Chani Raskin, 20, of Burlington, to Shneur Zalman Wilhelm, 24, of Brooklyn, N.Y., was thought to be the first traditional Hasidic wedding in Burlington in many generations. Shneur is named for the Hasidic scholar and rabbi, or Rebbe, Shneur Zalman (1745-1813), a Russian from Belarus who founded the Lubavitch movement as a branch of Orthodox Judaism.

The Raskins, a large family headed by Rabbi Yitzchak Raskin, 44, and his wife, Zeesy, 42, settled in Burlington 21 years ago. Chani, their second child, was born their first summer here, half a year after the Raskins relocated from New York City. They had come because two local families contacted the Lubavitch leaders in Brooklyn, a Hasidic center that is home to about 5,000 Lubavitch families, looking for a teacher to enrich and expand their children's Jewish identity and education.

"I don't believe in titles, in Reform or Conservative," Rabbi Raskin said the day before the wedding. "To me it is only one thing: More observant or not yet observant."

As the symbols and customs of the occasion suggest, the wedding of Chani and Shneur was most observant.

Chani entered into marriage with a veil over her face, a covering that was placed on her by her groom before the ceremony. The veil, which covered Chani for about an hour and a half, symbolizes modesty and dignity and makes plain that the bride can not be approached by other men. It helps ensure a level of deep privacy and internal focus as a woman marries and -- according to her religion -- half a soul unites with another to become a whole and complete one.

For Chani, the veil heightened her spiritual experience, allowing her to be alone and fully focused on her thoughts, she said.

"It felt very holy," Chani said, a day later. "It felt very good."

When her mother lifted Chani's veil after the ceremony and her own wedding came into view, Chani turned not to her husband but to her mother. She kissed her.

"That second we were married, it was great," Chani said. "So I gave my mother a big hug."

At the moment of marriage Shneur also turned the other way, away from his wife and toward his father. He embraced his father and the other men who stood with him under the chupah -- the canopy that represents the couple's new home and is the sacred space under which they married.

Zeesy Raskin called it a "very, very special" moment. "To see your child getting married," she said, "this is the most joyous thing that could ever be."

The wedding at the Wyndham Burlington Hotel brought together 400 people of the more than 1,000 who were invited: family and friends from Morocco and Israel; neighbors who remember buying lemonade from the Raskin kids' stand; families who many years ago picked up their challah for Sabbath at the Raskins. The wedding, steeped in the history and ritual of Hasidism, was a festive gathering of the Jewish community of Vermont and beyond. It was a celebration of the piece of that community the Raskins have built and share here.

"I was touched by how warm and welcoming the people were to us outsiders," said Gary Chassman, a neighborhood friend. "I felt surrounded by their love."

The marriage joins two Lubavitch families through the union of a young man and young woman who have known each other three months. They met through a family connection, a distant cousin of Rabbi Raskin who suggested the match, the bride's parents said.

During the time they dated, Chani, who is a teacher, and Shneur, a rabbinical student, saw each other only in public places. They were never alone together in a room. They never held hands or kissed. They talked.

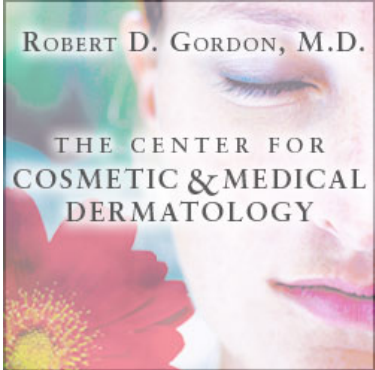
They talked about the past and about the future, Chani said. About life experiences, "anything and everything," she said. The purpose of this focused dating is to marry. There's no reason to wait.

"I wouldn't call it 100-percent arranged," Rabbi Raskin said of the marriage. "You're not meeting a total stranger. You already have some sharing of a lot of things together: the values are the same; what you believe is the same; what you want to do is the same."

In keeping with Lubavitch tradition, the ceremony took place outside. The outdoor ceremony is meant to recall God's blessing to Abraham "that his seed be as numerous as the stars," according to a wedding booklet that explains the traditions.

Chani and Shneur were married on a terrace in front of the Wyndham, the sun sinking behind the mountains, the night sneaking in. It was the only time during the wedding that men and women gathered in the same place, though they sat or stood on opposite sides of the terrace. The men were mostly dressed in black; flashes of colors filtered through the gray-purple sky where the women watched.

Here, under the chupah, Shneur, in a long black coat and flat black hat, waited for his bride. Her big hoop gown was adorned with lace flowers; an off-white stole warmed her in the evening chill. Chani, who could not



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see, was led to the chupah by her mother and Shneur's mother. They carried candles believed to symbolize the fire that occurred with the union of God and Israel.

The Tuesday evening ceremony included reading letters from the longtime leader of the Lubavitch, the late Rebbe Menachem Schneerson, that were written to the parents of Chani and Shneur upon their births. The children should be raised in great bounty, he wrote, with adherence to the Torah, and toward a life of marriage and good deeds.

Chani's maternal grandfather, Shmuel Isaac Popack, a Hasidic Jew who was born in Barre and lives in Brooklyn, recited a prayer in song -- a Hebrew blessing asking that the joy and gladness of the new couple, as it touches them, be extended to Jerusalem.

The couple broke their fast with a sip of wine under the chupah. The groom smashed the empty wine glass with his foot.

"To see such a vibrant Hasidic wedding right here in Burlington, Vermont, is an unbelievable experience," said Rabbi Leibel Korf, 32, of Los Angeles. "We see the fruits of the Rebbe's letters right here under the chupah."

After the ceremony, the couple walked indoors, never touching, to a private room to eat their first meal of the day, sharing a dinner of salmon, fruit, salad and cake.

It was exciting, Chani said. They hadn't seen each other in a week.

Even as a married couple, they are not to hold hands or kiss in public, according to custom. This is "beautiful," Chani said, and will give special meaning to their most private moments as they establish their home and life in Brooklyn.

With the wedding couple enjoying time together, the guests moved inside to the reception, a party of eating and dancing and talking that was separated by gender. Women gathered in one room, men in another, a divider between them.

Boys in yarmulkes and girls in fancy dresses ran about and played in the hallways. Many of the children belonged to extended family: 48 first cousins on the Raskin side of Chani's family, according to a group of cousins who calculated the figure.

In the reception rooms, wedding guests, separated from spouses, ate hors d'oeuvres and struck up conversations with the other women and men at their tables.

The wedding food, a kosher meal, was prepared in Montreal and trucked to Burlington. It was served on disposable dishes.

Loaves of challah were set out on the tables: mini loaves on the women's side; muffin-shaped challahs for the men. Women had salad of iceberg lettuce; the men had coleslaw. Plates of olives and eggplant dip were cross-gender fare.

Hasidic guests couldn't explain why certain foods varied across the gender breach. A few men from Crown Heights in Brooklyn, a Lubavitch neighborhood, said they've noticed a bias over the years. "In New York," said Tzvi Bronchtein, "the women get better food."

The men enjoyed a wedding treat that didn't appear to be available on the women's side: shots of vodka in plastic shot glasses, poured and passed around by the bride's father.

To electrify, traditional Hasidic music, guests started to dance before the main course of chicken, roast vegetables, sweet potatoes and spinach pastry, was served at about 10 p.m.

The men, with hands on each other's shoulders, danced in a circle around the groom. Small boys wearing big black hats swayed on their father's shoulders. Men in long gray beards and handsome schoolboys danced together.

In the women's room, the dancing was happy and spirited. When Chani joined the party, women and girls formed a line and she moved joyfully through it to the dance floor. There, she gave her mother a big kiss and shared a celebratory dance with her.

"It's not our typical Tuesday night," said Della Hertzberg, a manager at the Wyndham.

The Raskins' third child and second daughter, Rochel Leah, 19, studies in Israel. She returned home for the wedding and Passover. In coming years, she, too, will be married beneath a veil, under the evening sky.

The Raskins haven't started looking for a suitable man.

"When she decides she's ready to get married," Zeesy Raskin said, "we'll ask around."

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