

CONTINUED

a Katrina kind of love

WEDDING, from C-1

"They were shopping at Whole Food," said Nechama Kaufmann, Rachel's mother. "She says to Bluma, 'I'm looking for a wonderful girl for my wonderful son.' Bluma says she knows a wonderful girl from New Orleans, Rachel Kaufmann."

That casual exchange, made while stocking up on kosher food at a grocery store, would lead to one of the most sacred and joyful days in Rachel and Mendy's lives: their wedding day.

But before this match made possible by Katrina could be finalized, Kaufmann and Traxler would face a more rigorous matchmaking process designed to erase any doubt as to whether each was compatible with the other.

In Hebrew, the matchmaking process is called *shidduch*, and it is a very carefully prepared arrangement designed to bring a man and a woman together for the sole purpose of finding a marital partner.

"Before a couple goes out, the parents will contact friends, teachers, principals, camp directors to find out about their character, what kind of people they are," Nechama said. "There is a whole list of criteria. We take it very seriously. And if we feel our children are compatible, we tell our children about the person to see if they want to go out."

There is no flirting, no physical contact, no partying. Contrary to popular myth, it is not a forced marriage.

"We see what we like about each other," Rachel said. "If we don't like each other, we don't have to continue going out."

David and Nechama Kaufmann admired Mendy's work ethic, sense of humor and respect he showed toward his parents. Nechama called him a *mensch* — a Yiddish term for a kind, decent and honorable person.

Moishe and Shoshana Traxler liked Rachel's warmth, intelligence, devotion to Jewish studies, family background and willingness to give of herself to help those in need.

Both Mendy and Rachel tested negative for Tay Sachs and other predominantly Jewish genetic diseases, another step in the matchmaking process.

Pleased with the results of their research, the Traxlers and Kaufmanns went back to their children and suggested a meeting. Both agreed to give it a try.

On the day they met, Mendy spent several hours delivering sukkahs — outdoor huts used in the harvest celebration of Sukkot — to hurricane victims. By the time he was done, he had less than an hour to get ready.

"I literally had a half-hour before we went out," Mendy said. "I jumped in the shower, got dressed and picked her up."

As is customary under Hasidic tradition, the two met in a public place — in the parking lot of a strip shopping center in one of Houston's most populous Hasidic neighborhoods. From there, they went to the lounge of the InterContinental hotel, where they spent the evening talking.

"I introduced myself as 'nervous, and you are?'" Mendy said, laughing. "It was the first time I sat down in three days af-

ter doing all that heavy labor. I figured she must have been looking at me wondering, 'Why is this guy coming here so tired?' We talked for a couple of hours — about our backgrounds, our families, things we were interested in. I was very interested in what she had to say, so we went out again."

"The first date was short," Rachel said. "We talked about our goals, our likes and dislikes. I thought, 'OK. He's nice. I'll go out with him again.'"

And she did — again and again and again, growing fonder with each date.

"Everything clicked," Mendy said. "We share the same goals as to how we want our kids to be brought up. We share the same opinion on many topics. We felt like we were very compatible."

Within three weeks of their first date, Mendy asked Rachel to marry him. It was a simple proposal in a hotel lobby — no ring hidden in a fortune cookie or banner flying through the air.

"I didn't want to get caught up in all the fluff," Mendy said.

Without hesitation, Rachel accepted. "I liked everything about him," she said. "He's a real person and very smart. We're a good balance."

As is customary in Hasidic tradition, they flew to New York, where they formalized their engagement with a visit to the grave of Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the one-time leader of the Lubavitch movement. It was there that they asked for his blessing as they began their new lives as one.

In planning the wedding, the Traxlers and Kaufmanns considered several locales but settled on New Orleans after all involved agreed that the city's Jewish community needed something to celebrate.

"We needed a happy occasion and a reason to be together again," said Rachel's grandmother, Phyllis Kaufmann, who lost her home in eastern New Orleans.

They set Feb. 7 as the wedding date and Touro Synagogue on St. Charles Avenue as the venue. In announcing the news in an e-mail titled "Katrina the Matchmaker," Rachel's father, David Kaufmann, wrote:

"Divine Providence was definitely navigating their way. Little did they know that their stay in Houston would provide one of the most wonderful changes in their lives. This union between the two families is symbolic of the connection that has been forged between New Orleans and Houston and our respective communities."

In the Hasidic tradition, a wedding is considered as sacred and solemn as Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Couples neither see nor speak to each other for a week before the ceremony, and they spend most of their wedding day fasting and in prayer and spiritual reflection.

"It's an expression of the holiness of the occasion," David Kaufmann said.

Guests began pouring into Touro Synagogue an hour before the ceremony. Among them were contingents of Hasidic Jews from Houston and Crown Heights, a largely Hasidic community in Brooklyn, N.Y. Many brought cameras with them so they could snap pictures of Rachel — considered royalty on this day — as she sat and prayed in a throne-like chair.

In a separate room, Mendy,



STAFF PHOTOS BY KATHY ANDERSON

Mendy Traxler celebrates his marriage to Rachel Kaufmann with a tabletop dance at Touro Synagogue.



Mendy is flanked by his future father-in-law David Kaufmann, left, and his father, Rabbi Moishe Traxler, during a prayer before his wedding.



Rachel Kaufmann works her way through the crowd of guests at her wedding, which the family held in New Orleans because "we needed a happy occasion and a reason to be together again," the bride's grandmother said.



Wedding guests balance a drink cup and a bottle of whiskey atop their heads as the celebration kicks into high gear.

flanked by his father and future father-in-law, recited traditional Hasidic discourse on the significance of marriage. Nechama Kaufmann and Shoshana

Traxler performed the symbolic breaking of a plate, signifying that just as a broken plate is irreversible, so too should Mendy and Rachel's union.

"Mazel Tov! Mazel Tov!" the nearly two dozen men who were gathered in the room shouted at the sound of the shattering plate.

With the marriage ceremony just a few minutes away, Mendy prepared to see his bride-to-be for the first time in a week. With friends and family members singing a sacred 18th century melody called "The Alter Rebbe's Nigun," Mendy slowly approached his bride-to-be, and in a ritual called the *bedeken*, placed the veil over Rachel's face.

A few moments later, Mendy was standing under the chuppah — symbolic of the couple's home — awaiting Rachel's arrival. With nearly 300 guests packing the Touro Synagogue courtyard, many had to stand to get a glimpse of Rachel as she walked toward her groom. Clad in a modest yet elegant raw silk gown and carrying a bouquet of white roses, she circled Mendy seven times, another ritual symbolic of the seven days of creation and the continuing circle of life.

The tradition-steeped ceremony concluded just as all Jewish weddings conclude: with the groom stomping on a glass followed by the guests' jubilant cries of "Mazel Tov!"

As their friends and relatives moved into the social hall, Mendy and Rachel were escorted to a private room for *yichud*, a chance for the newly married couple to break their fast and have time to themselves before joining their guests for the wedding feast.

But when they entered the hall, which was divided into sections for men and women, eating wasn't nearly as much on their minds as dancing. On the women's side, Rachel ran through a human archway, stopped momentarily to greet her guests and then headed straight for the dance floor to partake in traditional circle dancing.

On the men's side, the festivities also included circle dancing, only rowdier and faster. As the wine flowed, so did the merriment, with one guest attempting to dance on his hands and others balancing cups of water — and in one case a bottle of whiskey — atop their heads. Mendy danced on a table as his friends lifted it in the air.

As the meal was being served, the fathers of the bride and groom took time to welcome their guests and remark on the significance of the day.

"The level of destruction (from Katrina) was such that no one could live here," Rabbi Traxler said. "There was such a degree of destruction and demoralization here that people of New Orleans didn't know if there would be a tomorrow here."

"But out of misery comes amazing light," he said, referring to the joyful times that often come out of tragedy. "And tonight is the culmination of an amazing thing."

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