

Get Off On The Right Foot

Dance lessons can put a proper spin on the wedding couple's first dance.



Danielle and Bruce Shapiro share their first dance.

Elizabeth Levy Malis
Special to the Jewish Times

Besides the *horah*, another dance tradition reigns supreme at modern Jewish weddings: the first dance.

But forget hip-gyrating freestyle. Forget disco. Forget senior prom-style slow dance. Increasingly, many couples opt for ballroom dancing moves that fall just short of an experience on "Dancing With The Stars."

Embellished with spins and dips, the fox trot remains the most common dance chosen for a first dance since its tempo works well with popular love songs. Salsa, swing dance and merengue to techno music count among top nuptial favorites, too. Even cha-cha, rumba, mambo and tango make the grade. Yet despite their popularity, few bridal couples know such dance moves when they start planning a wedding.

But they do know that all eyes lock onto a newlywed couple entering the room for their first dance as husband and wife. Photographers click away and video cameras zoom in to record the moment for posterity. Some couples just wing it. But many sign up for wedding dance lessons before the big event to ensure the dance of a lifetime.

Some bridal couples desire full choreography; others seek basic

Elizabeth Levy Malis is a local free-lance writer.

technique. Some prefer group lessons; others want private instruction. Oftentimes only bride and groom take lessons; other times lessons expand to members of the bridal party.

For all such needs, local professional dancers stand ready in the wings to lend a hand.

Inspired by her own wedding experience, Debra Joy Block launched her specialized firm, The Wedding Dance Specialists (theweddingdancespecialists.com) five years ago. "I learned a lot as a bride. It empowered me to set up my company to help brides navigate the pitfalls," she says.

Her own first dance remains the inspiration. "We chose a dance that neither of us knew so that we could learn something new together. Our first dance was an exquisite experience," recalls Ms. Block, who, with her husband, Brian, danced an Argentine tango at their 2001 wedding in Oxen Hill.

"The first dance is like a kickoff to the marriage — a lifetime of partnership as a team. The first dance is the physical manifestation of the unity of the couple in a public area. It's so profound," says Ms. Block. Words can't do it justice. That's where the fancy footwork takes over.

Yet there's more to it than meets the eye.

"Dance lessons before your wedding are sort of a secret form of premarital counseling," says



Ms. Block, whose company offers instruction throughout the mid-Atlantic, including in the Baltimore area. Her Web site and e-newsletter, entitled "Wedding Dance 411," educate on the importance of the first dance. "The modern bride is Internet savvy," she says. "We cater to the modern, high-tech, busy person whose time is valuable."

Ms. Block offers further insight on her clients. "They will come in for lessons saying 'I don't want to look stupid,' but deep down I think they want that fairytale feeling of Cinderella and Prince Charming. Romance and sentimentality are the beauty of the first dance."

The trend for prenuptial dance lessons continues, says Ms. Block, because "couples can outsource the entire wedding by hiring others. But the one thing that can't be outsourced is that first dance." They need to be there — in body and spirit.

Importantly, wedding dance lessons require more than footwork. "It's less about technique than getting along on the dance floor," says Owings Mills resident Valery Viner, who teaches pair dancing to brides and grooms at Wedding Dance Specialists' Baltimore locations.

Others in the field agree. "The rumba and fox trot can be learned even if you have two left feet," says instructor Naomi Joy, associate director at Gaithersburg-based Two Left Feet Dance. That's where Rachael and

"The one thing that can't be outsourced is that first dance."

— Debra Joy Block

Ryan Spiegel took five lessons before their October 2007 wedding in front of 250 guests at the Grand Lodge in Hunt Valley.

"It's something I'd always wanted to do. It's a great skill to have," says Rachael Golden Spiegel, who works as a free-lance photographer. "A lot of people our age don't know how to [couples] dance. Now, when I go to other people's weddings or events, it's nice to be able to dance with Ryan."

While learning pair dancing for their own wedding, "Rachael and Ryan caught on quickly and had fun. They were such a cute couple," praises Ms. Joy. "They learned together — not just separately. They had the ability to work well together."

The Spiegels picked for their first dance an uncommon wedding song in "Be Mine" by David Gray. A modified rumba blended best with their music. "We both fancy ourselves good dancers," says Rachael, "but we joke that we hear different beats in the music. We went to lessons to learn how to dance to that song ... to flow, to look natural. We didn't want to look like we had lessons."

They mastered steps including turning box, underarm turn, forward and back seven, crossovers and back rocks. They added aesthetics with arm styling. But that's just the surface of the experience.

"We spent quality time together,"

see *First Dance* on page 16

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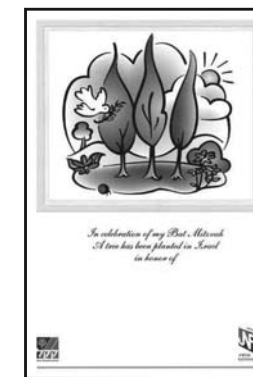


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