

BASIC GUIDELINES TO PLANNING A WEDDING

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The grace of Allah (s.w.t) shines upon our community once again this summer and countless families prepare to unite with the sacred bond of *nikah*, the highly recommended *sunnah* of our prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.w.). Our community continues to grow at a fast pace and hosting any event at the Jaffari Islamic Centre brings with it a myriad of organizational and practical considerations. Amplify these undertakings with the spiritual and mental preparation that weddings require and the task at hand can become quite daunting. As an informative magazine that strives to tackle issues pertinent to our community, *Jaffari News* presents an investigative report on the subject of weddings. Based on a culmination of interviews with community members, jamaat executives and reporter research, our aim is to inform the reader, explore relevant issues and generate discussion. Over the next few pages, you will find valuable anecdotes, tips, personal and professional opinions and a great deal of advice. Basic information and an itemized list of resources are also included to help our readers plan a wedding and generate business within the community. It is our sincere hope that these brief, preliminary discussions of various issues surrounding weddings will give occasion for our readers to pause, reflect and ultimately create solutions so that we can all improve as Muslims and as true followers of the Ahlu Bait (a.s.).

Planning a wedding involves a great deal of hard work, attention to detail and tremendous preparation, just ask former chair-lady Sikinabai Baker Mehdi who has helped over 50 couples plan their special day. "Few people realize that one of the responsibilities of executive committee members is the supervision and management of each and every wedding that takes place at the mosque", says Sikinabai. "As chairlady, this means meeting with prospective couples and their families and working out every detail with them ranging from menu, caterers, timings, guest seatings, decorations, hall cleanings, disposal of leftovers etc. etc. Our volunteers selflessly devote their time and energy at these private weddings and stay until the very end", she says.

Former chair-lady Shirinbai Sumar, who has also served the commu-

nity for many years knows these facts all too well. "The majority of the weddings take place in the summer and this means that travelling or spending time with your family is almost out of the question. Once I had to leave for Dar es Salaam in the month of August and the biggest concern was how the ladies' committee would manage with the upcoming weddings."

The challenges faced by the executive committee can be further exacerbated if prospective couples and their families become inflexible or too demanding. "I think that we need to remind ourselves that this is a mosque, run by volunteers and rules. It is not a banquet hall", says Shirin Sumar. The etiquette that governs a mosque means that one should not only be humble and obey the volunteers but also that one should be thinking of their fellow Muslims.

"I think that our community is very lucky to have access to such a beautiful hall," says Sikinabai. "Where can you get such a *paak* atmosphere, nominal fees for hall rental and services and no time limit? When you are being given the privilege of having your *nikah* take place at the mosque, you have to appreciate that. Treat the place with respect and don't treat the volunteers badly. Also, I don't see why we have to go overboard in decorating the area surrounding the bride. First, think of the other bridal party who may not be able to afford that and second, it is a mosque, what more decoration is needed than that? Do as many decorations as you want at home, but at the mosque keep it simple. I think that we as a community really need to assess our priorities. I mean, do we really need to say long, tearful goodbyes outside our mosque? The bride is in the open in all her finery and all the people are watching such private moments between her and her family. Say goodbye at home and respect the dress codes of the mosque area."

When asked about solutions to problems such as overcrowding, heat, long greeting lines facing the bride and groom etc., Sikinabai felt that once we keep in mind the *hurma*t of the mosque as a place of worship it would have a chain reaction in solving all the issues. "When making your guest list, consider the capacity of the mosque and demands placed

on it due to overcrowding. Think of the carpet and the washrooms. We cause long delays by keeping the bride occupied in greeting lines; think of how that will affect the length of the program and interfere with prayer times. When standing in line for your biryani, remember that it is a mosque and don't push people or complain about the food. Remember that the volunteers are being paid nothing and they are serving Allah (s.w.t)."

The problems associated with multiple weddings range from large crowds, parking issues, serving food efficiently and even misplaced gifts, however, both chair-ladies interviewed felt that the biggest challenge that they faced was one that few people know about: weddings are booked on a first-come-first-served basis which means that any subsequent wedding parties have to get permission from the booked party to use the premises. "What this means," explains Shirin Sumar, "is that if someone wants to be the 'only bride' they can prevent you from having your *nikah* recited at the mosque at the same event. The mosque should be a place available to anyone if they want to have their *nikah* recited but somehow, our constitution has overlooked this and allows people to treat the mosque as a rented hall. We actually have had to deny people certain dates simply because people didn't want to share the mosque with them. This must stop. We need to bring this up at our general meetings and vote on this to prevent this problem. Sharing the mosque not only gives fair rights to everyone but it also cuts down on costs for all parties concerned and has the practical benefit of people not having to attend a wedding every weekend and at different times during the day".

Sikinabai agrees wholeheartedly and suggests that the rule should not allow full discretion to the first booked party but give equal access to up to 4 weddings (which the mosque can handle) and that the 5th wedding should be asked to find another date. "We have done many things to improve the wedding services that we provide to the community," says Sikinabai. "Mohamedhusseinbhai Lakha and I compiled a form for all wedding parties to fill out to make planning the wedding easier. The form took into account menu, names of caterers, colour of mattress, number of

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guests etc. etc. I arranged for a cleaning lady to be required at every wedding (with nominal fees paid by wedding parties) to help our volunteers. We established rules and guidelines and tried various solutions. For example, we tried using burners to keep food warm at tables but were later advised not to do so by our insurance company. We have established line-up systems for greeting the bride and around food tables but so much of this requires co-operation of the wedding guests. Unfortunately, our community is resistant to obeying volunteers or following rules. It makes our work that much harder". Shirin Sumar agrees and suggests that we follow the examples of other large communities such as Dar-es-Salaam jamaat who have special wedding sub-committees set up to make the chair-lady's responsibilities more manageable.

The key to planning a stress free wedding, according to Sikinabai, is to deal with things in a patient manner and to always think of the other person/s involved. It goes without saying that when you make an effort to be flexible, understanding and grateful, you create an environment that makes everyone comfortable. "When you think of the other person, you pay attention to simple things like making sure that the videographer knows to only focus on the bride and not on the *hijab* practicing guests who deserve freedom inside the mosque. And when you are a wedding guest, it means taking your crying baby outside so that you don't disrupt someone's special moments." Sikinabai Mehdi, with her years of experience in managing weddings, has worked with *Jaffari News* to come up with the following tips to planning a wedding.

Become a member: Your membership pays for important services and the ongoing costs of the mosque. Both you and your prospective spouse need to be members in order for your engagement to be announced, to book halls and to have your *nikah* recited at the mosque. Paying your dues keeps you in good standing and sets a precedent for you to continue to be a member now that you have your own family.

Make an appointment with the mukhi and chairlady: At this time, let them know what kind of wedding you want, the number of guests expected, the menu, name of the caterers etc. Your

mukhi and chairlady have experience with planning weddings and may be in a position to advise you about menu suitability, time constraints and other considerations.

It is important to accurately estimate the number of guests expected: This not only saves you from unnecessary embarrassment if the food runs out but also prevents large quantities of food being wasted. "We have had cases where we had to drop off food at the food banks ourselves because the wedding party left without doing anything about it," says Sikinabai. "Also, remember that the upstairs hall can only seat 600 guests. If you are expecting more people, you need to book and pay for the hall in advance so that it can be cleaned and prepared."

Try to keep the number of guests to a manageable number: Large crowds at the mosque mean parking problems, heat, lack of seating space and can also create fire hazards. Multiple weddings mean more guests so keep that in mind when making your guest list. If possible, try to synchronize guest lists with the other wedding parties.

Consider alternative menus: Multiple weddings every weekend means a lot of biryani and jalebi. Not only does this become unhealthy but it can also feel repetitious for the guests.

Pick 3 possible dates and consult with an Aalim for the best one. There are some dates (like eclipses) that are not advisable for the recitation of the *nikah*. Also, having 3 possible dates keeps your options open as the hall tends to get booked heavily and is currently on a first-come-first-served basis.

Always check the namaaz time when setting the program: Allow time for the bride/groom to dress and pray before they leave the home. Know when the next prayer time begins so that you can complete all ceremonies accordingly. If it becomes prayer time, stop all activities until prayers have been offered.

Decorations: When booking, make sure you specify which colour mattress you prefer. The choices are pink or beige! Keep your decorations around the mattress to a minimum as a consideration to the other wedding parties who may not be able to afford the fancy flower receptacles and lights. Allow the mosque to be a place where everyone can feel

comfortable.

Punctuality: Start within 15 minutes of the time stated on the invitation card. Always keep the comfort of your guests in mind. It is never "fashionable" to be late to your own wedding! Keep the speeches brief and complete the whole program (*nikah*, *qasida*, *ziyarat*) under one hour. The summer heat, formal clothes, hunger and large crowds can amount to irritable guests!

Do the *ikraar naama* at an earlier date: It is impractical and difficult to co-ordinate this at the mosque when guests are already seated and waiting. It can be inconvenient to get the Maulana and bride on 2 sides of the partition amidst the noise and confusion.

Aalim: Remember to book your *qazi*, most have busy itineraries and are sometimes out of town.

Visitors: Appoint family members to tend to outside guests. Non-Muslims or out-of-town guests may feel lost and alienated. Make sure you advise non-Muslims about dress codes and mosque etiquette.

Label the gift table and if possible appoint someone to tend it: Multiple weddings run the risk of misplaced presents. The appointed person can ensure that all gifts are labelled both with the names of the couple as well as the sender. Arrange for a car and people to load all presents at the end of the program. Consider wedding registry at affordable department stores to prevent receiving mismatched and duplicated wedding gifts.

Leftovers: Each wedding party should have two family members to dispose of the food. Extra food should be divided and taken from the premises promptly. This not only prevents *asraaf* (wastage) but also allows the cleaning staff to complete their tasks.

Appreciate the work of the volunteers: All jamaat volunteers should be given individual cards and phone calls. Ensure that the wedding program ends promptly so that the volunteers can be free to go home. If you are also holding a private reception the next day, you may consider inviting volunteers as a token of your appreciation. It would be quite considerate to send a thank you card afterwards or hold a thank you dinner. As Sikinabai says, "without the volunteers, our jamaat can't function and we would be handicapped."