

## Crafting keepsake ketubot

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**Y**ou've chosen the hall, the caterer, the music... now how about a ketubah? Once, the rabbi might have simply provided a standardized marriage document. But today's couples are seeking ketubot that reflect their values as well as artistic taste.

"I've always been really drawn to nature," Moira Sherman said. When it came time to choose a ketubah for her wedding earlier this year, she turned to Michelle Cohen of Ketubah Garden (416-653-9972; website: www.theketubahgarden.com). Sherman began by visiting Cohen's website and choosing an image that appealed to her love of trees and natural imagery.

Cohen said, "The people who find me say, 'This really spoke to me.'"

For Sherman, the experience went far beyond just choosing a template and filling in the blanks; the ketubah's basic design was just the beginning. Sherman and her fiancé worked with Cohen, who has a degree in religious studies and teaches art at Toronto's Heschel School, on creating a suitable text for the ketubah.

While the traditional Aramaic text has remained more or less standard since the time of the Talmud, liberal rabbis, secular officiants and even the couple themselves are putting more thought into the words they hope will carry their marriage into eternity.

The traditional ketubah text is essentially a contract in which the groom promises to provide his wife with all her needs. Within the Reform and Conservative movements, a ketubah's text might reflect commitments made by both husband and wife; a secular text might affirm cultural over religious ties. An Aramaic or Hebrew version or translation may or may not be included.

Even in more traditional circles, a new form of the traditional text is occasionally used that makes provision for a Jewish divorce, in the event that the marriage doesn't last.

Couples will need to consult with their officiant about the text and possibly the artistic design of the ketubah, Cohen said. Many have strict rules about what must be included, and they can also help spot-check for errors.

"You don't want to know on the day of the wedding that there's a mistake."

Beyond the text, Sherman wanted a ketubah that she could display proudly in the home she and her husband share, and didn't hesitate to work with Cohen to get what she

wanted. "I told her, 'Here are the colours in our bedroom,'" Sherman said. Based on that, Cohen recommended colour choices for the text, along with gold illumination to highlight the image.

With the text and colours finalized, Cohen sent an e-mail proof to Sherman, who loved what she saw. But even then, she was unprepared for how much she'd

love the finished ketubah when she saw it in person: "It was just stunning – it was absolutely beautiful. It almost had a Celtic, whimsical feel to it," Sherman said.

Though much of Cohen's business is now international, thanks to her website (which is being revamped to make it even easier to buy online), her favourite part of the ketubah business may still be the moment when local clients come over to see what they've created together. "One couple saw it, [and said], 'It's really happening – we're really getting married,'" she said.

Beyond the standard templates on her website, Cohen can customize ketubot to incorporate meaningful graphics and even pho-

tographs: a picture of the couple or a symbol they want to weave into the image.

Weddings aren't the only thing keeping her busy. Anniversary ketubot are a particularly thoughtful gift, often from a couple's children, for a couple who may have been married for 40 or 50 years with only a standard synagogue-issue ketubah.

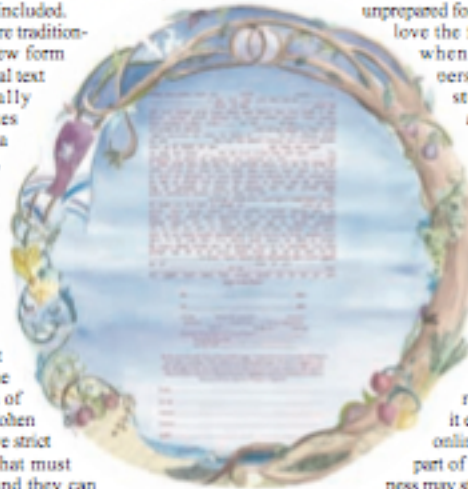
An anniversary ketubah can include meaningful artistic touches and text that acknowledges the couple's long-lasting commitment and the family they have created together, even sometimes incorporating the names of their children and grandchildren in flowing, natural designs.

The giclée print process Cohen uses is a modern innovation over the traditional lithography method. While lithography requires large print runs to make it affordable, giclée gives Cohen the flexibility to create an individual high-quality ketubah print using fade-resistant, archival-grade inks and papers.

"It's truly a piece of art," Sherman said. And despite the fact that most of her interactions with Cohen were online, it was never just about filling in a form. "There was a lot of care put into the process," Sherman added.

With hundreds of ketubah artists worldwide, there's no shortage of websites to turn to. But as Sherman discovered, what counts is not so much the number of predefined choices but rather the ability to make the experience personal.

Working with an artist to craft a custom ketubah that will reflect the couple's unique spiritual values and esthetic can become one of the more meaningful preparations for a lasting marriage.



Different designs by Michelle Cohen of Ketubah Garden.

