

**JWA interview with wedding planner Meg Keene,
conducted by Justine Orlovsky-Schnitzler,
May 2020**

Orlovsky-Schnitzler: So the story is—we got engaged February 20, and we were like, “Okay, we’re looking to get married next May—May 2021—because I’ll be graduating with my master’s and my partner is still in his Phd program, but we figured it was the right time. We had it all set, we started to look at venues, we started to book things... and then like two weeks into that was when things started kind of going sideways. And the friend of mine who had given me your book and the planning guide as a gift said, “Hey, I’m going to cancel my August wedding, and quite honestly, I don’t know if you look at the stuff Meg Keene posts and some of the folks in the industry who I think are being really honest, I don’t think things are gonna be exactly the way they were before the pandemic came next year.” And I was like, you know, that sounds right. And we switched things up, and we’re lucky because we were right at the beginning of the process. But I would imagine for other couples who are just getting engaged...

Keene: I think people don’t know where to start!

Orlovsky-Schnitzler: Oh, totally. And so we ended up going with a very flexible plan, which is: whenever we are able to do something, we’re hoping to have it in the backyard. But I’m in, like, a bridal group on Facebook, where folks are posting that they have already put down 12,000 or 15,000 dollars in deposits. I feel very lucky that *A Practical Wedding* in particular was very, very honest. And I think that’s the best thing you can be for couples right now.

Keene: That’s so good, because we’ve taken some heat from the industry. It’s good to know that it’s helpful because the industry is just in denial, right? When your livelihood depends on it...I’ve been on calls with people in New York who are like, “Well, if Cuomo extends this another two weeks...” and I’m like, “another two weeks?”

Orlovsky-Schnitzler: Right!

Keene: There’s still this idea that you’re going to have a small wedding and then you’re going to have the big wedding later. First of all, I was in this industry during the Great Recession. So it’s interesting to go through it as my second time at this ball game, because that’s when APW started. But most people who had small weddings in 2008, 2009 did not come back and have a big wedding, because life moves on.

Orlovsky-Schnitzler: Right.

Keene: And I feel like as a culture we are being called to sacrifice...in a way that we haven’t been called as a culture for a long time. And I think it’s not part of the culture in the same way right now. If my grandmother were alive, she would tell me, “this is just what you do.” Don’t complain. Move on. And my grandparents on my dad’s side—my grandfather was a prisoner of

war in Japan for two and a half years, and it was a miracle that he survived. Nobody survived that long. So he was released from Japan, sent to the naval hospital here in Oakland, and my grandmother had been waiting for him the entire war. She was in Alabama and she took the train across the country, and then was kicked off because they needed it for soldiers and then took a taxi the rest of the way. And they got married at the Naval Hospital Chapel. Everyone in their wedding was people they didn't know. All the bridesmaids were nurses. And that was just part of their story. They didn't go back and have another wedding later.

And I think that we are moving into a very different world than the one that we've lived in. One that is going to look far more like the Great Depression. And we're just not going to be in a position, I think, as people, but also as a culture to go back and have these lavish celebrations that folks were originally planning, two years from now.

It's not like when a parent dies under normal circumstances. That's an individual tragedy. But this is a mass tragedy. So it's not like we'll be able to do three years' worth of weddings, and people will be able to afford to travel to them.

I have been thinking a lot about people that are doing these rushed weddings and saying, "We're saving the fun stuff for the *real* wedding." They're saying they don't want to get a dress, or they don't want to have a photographer, or flowers. And my point is not about spending money—you should do whatever you'd like in that regard. But I'm worried that people aren't coming to terms with the possibility that their "actual wedding" is going to be when they went to City Hall or when they had something on Zoom. Because life is going to move on. So I just have concern about people rushing through it because they don't want to make it special, not realizing that this is in fact going to be part of their story.

Orlovsky-Schnitzler: Anecdotally, I'm twenty four. A lot of my friends are engaged, and so I got added to this bridal group on Facebook that I think I mentioned earlier that I'm in—and it's got around sixteen thousand members. I've gotten some legitimately good advice on it, so I stick around. But for every post that I think is very coherent, where folks are attempting to pivot and do what you're talking about—like leaning into their Zoom wedding or their micro-wedding and saying, 'yes, this is my celebration, this is what we're going to do' there are one hundred and fifty posts from folks that are just desperate to get the fairy tale.

Keene: And it makes sense! Especially if you're spent a long time being engaged. I remember what it felt like—my husband and I had a long engagement because he was in law school and so we were waiting for the next summer. And so we had 18 months of being engaged. And if a month out the whole thing had been called off—it would have been devastating! Of course you're going to want that back. How could your brain comprehend that this event you spent 18 months and G-d-knows how much money planning isn't going to happen, period?

Orlovsky-Schnitzler: I think there couples are in two categories: one is, folks who have already spent a ton of time—at least a year, if not more—planning this. They're, really justifiably,

mourning what they're losing. They're trying to figure out if they're going to pivot. But the second category is those, like my fiancé and I, who just engaged, and have the option to make decisions now without sinking money. I had to step away from the bridal group on Facebook because I felt like I was spending hours each day trying to convince people posting about booking vendors not to do it! So many folks are sharing that they, for example, haven't picked a venue for 2021, and want to know if they should put money down, or do nonrefundable deposits. And every time I saw a post like that, I'd comment, "PLEASE don't do that!"

Keene: You can go to the courthouse and wear a nice dress and have flowers and make it mean something. And then if a miracle occurs, also have a nice wedding next year! They're not mutually incompatible.

Orlovsky-Schnitzler: That's what my fiancé and I are aiming for. We're planning on the courthouse wedding happening next year no matter what, because we want to be legally married in 2021 for a myriad of reasons. And that'll happen whether it's a very small group or if some miracle happens—though, honestly, I wouldn't call it a miracle. I think the situation in which we're having 120 guests next May is if there's been mass calamity and there's herd immunity or what have you, because of these staggering incompetence of our government. But that's not good! Ideally we'd have a vaccine or a treatment, but I'm not confident.

Keene: That's a tragedy, right? I mean, we started thinking about writing about this at *A Practical Wedding*—there's a real difference for cultures where having a big wedding or the communal element is key. One of my coworkers—her best friend is Indian, and had this 400 person Indian wedding. And she pointed out that in some cultures micro-weddings are not even a thing. The rituals can't even be conceptualized in a micro-wedding setting. And I've just been thinking about this in terms of the Jewish community.

Orlovsky-Schnitzler: This actually takes us perfectly to one of my pre-written questions—which is, 'how are Jewish weddings uniquely being affected by this crisis?' And it is certainly dependent on affiliation to some degree, especially in terms of looking at what sized community you're incorporating into your celebration.

Keene: Right—like for many Orthodox Jews, 200 people would be a small wedding.

Orlovsky-Schnitzler: This gets me thinking about the horrible situation with de Blasio a few weeks ago—that was in relation to a funeral. But I saw an article linked on Facebook that I thought was very profound about the condemnation of mass gatherings during this lockdown. And to be very clear—I'm not Orthodox, and of course it was a public health hazard for these folks to gather in a massive group. But the article raised an interesting question about how Orthodox Jews live their faith and express their membership in their community—a faith and community that we all, as Jews, regardless of our level of observance, claim to be a part of. For those folks in Brooklyn who had this mass funeral gathering, there simply doesn't exist another way to mark that life cycle event. It's inconceivable.

Keene: I've been thinking and talking a lot about this idea—even before the pandemic—that Judaism is really about the Talmud more than it's about the Torah in some really profound ways, especially rabbinic Judaism. The Talmud is a series of laws. And even as a conservative-leaning reform Jew, I feel like I have a responsibility to engage with those laws even if I choose not to follow them. Judaism is not a religion that's easy. Judaism is not there to make you more comfortable or approve of you. It's demanding and rigorous. And so I feel like I have to be in relationship to those laws. As my rabbi taught me to say, I don't keep kosher—yet.

Orlovsky-Schnitzler: That's very good.

Keene: I have to engage with that choice! So I've been thinking about this a lot. For there to be a Jewish community, you have to have a synagogue, you have to have a mikveh, but you also have to have a burial society. Those are the bare minimum, necessary things. But you need a burial society because there's a very specific way that a body has to be handled in Judaism, which involves having physical Jewish hands on the body. So how do you manage that?

Orlovsky-Schnitzler: My fiancé and I attended a Zoom funeral this past week for his great uncle who passed away. I think a Zoom funeral for any faith or denomination is challenging. I mean, none of this feels normal at all. But to have a funeral devoid of community rituals feels so hollow. We weren't sitting *shiva* in a group, we weren't gathering to mourn together. We couldn't share a meal together, or break bread.

Keene: Yeah, I lost my dad last year. And we lost my husband's dad two years before that. So we've been really in it, and just the idea of trying to conduct funeral rituals right now is terrifying to me. And thinking physically, the body has to be cleaned by Jewish people, and we know that bodies are contagious. So I've been wondering a lot how the Orthodox community is managing this.

But to flip back to weddings, the community is an internal part of the Jewish wedding. And I just don't know how having a Jewish wedding on Zoom would work. I just keep coming back to that question, because even the symbolism of the *chuppah* is bound up in demonstrating openness to the community. All the symbolism, all of the activities. Bringing joy to the couple, having witnesses for your *ketubah*. The rituals are not built with the idea that they could be done in a solitary way. And so how do you manage that?

Orlovsky-Schnitzler: When I got engaged in February, the guiding questions my fiancé and I had immediately were all related to just *how* Jewish our wedding was going to be. We thought about who we wanted have marry us, what kind of *chuppah* we wanted, what rituals were wanted to toss out...and now, there's this entire added layer of how we are going to pull off a Jewish wedding that feels authentic and meaningful to us in the midst of a likely still-ongoing pandemic. And so in figuring out our pivot—and I know I've seen you use the word 'pivot' a lot—it's not just that we're going to do a civil ceremony no matter what. We're going to have to

have a *chuppah* at some point, even if it's in 2022, because it's really meaningful for us, and we wouldn't feel married otherwise.

Keene: I don't think my husband and I would have felt married if we didn't have a Jewish wedding. In California—and I assume in other places as well—you're supposed to sign your marriage license after the ceremony takes place. That's a legal requirement. But we ended up signing the legal document first, before the ceremony, because to us, as observant reform Jews, the religious ceremony and the *ketubah* is what married us. So to us it was just government paperwork.

Orlovsky-Schnitzler: *Exactly.* I'd think ideally, the hope for my fiancé and I, that we are able to have the legal and the Jewish weddings close together, but if they have to be separated by months or a year because of COVID, that's built into our plan. And on the topic of COVID, again—something that I've found has been a positive for us, and I suspect has been a positive for other couples, is that now we feel totally unbound to having a wedding we didn't really want. My fiancé and I were never people who thought we were gonna have a really big wedding. We dreamed about the people we could have surrounding us, for sure. And that's still very important. But we're both extremely left-leaning grad students. We weren't excited by any of the really gendered, very quote-unquote “traditional” aspects of a wedding. I didn't dream about my wedding as a little girl. I was excited about a marriage, but not about a wedding. And so when we got engaged, we immediately started having to contend with different people's ideas of what a wedding could be or should be. And then the pandemic happened, and we were very honest with family members and said, we don't feel comfortable putting down a lot of money for this venue or this coordinator or any of these, you know, things we thought were non-negotiables. And we're very lucky, because our families were very responsive, and said that they didn't mind what we did as long as they were a part of it in some way.

Keene: And it is devastating for the industry. I mean, this is my livelihood. It's not like I'm blasé about it! But the amount of money people personally are going to save? It's wild.

Orlovsky-Schnitzler: Right. And that goes along with a widespread adjustment of expectations. It's freeing for some folks and for others, it feels like a loss. And I do think it's important. And I think that the language *A Practical Wedding* employs on the site has been very kind. Your site makes it clear that it's okay to be sad about wedding plans shifting. I've observed a lot of guilt in friends of mine who were planning 2020 weddings, but it's okay to honor the sadness you feel that what you pictured won't be happening. *A Practical Wedding* is very clearly making space for the whole spectrum of emotions around the shifting industry.

Keene: It's okay to be sad!!! There is not—and I firmly believe this having gone through some really awful stuff—a hierarchy to grief. When my dad died, people would be like, 'I'm sad about X. But it's nothing compared to your loss.' And I kept saying: those are not related! You being sad because you lost your job has nothing to do with the fact that my dad just died. It was so nonsensical to me. Of course, you're sad that you lost your job!

Orlovsky-Schnitzler: We contain multitudes! And sometimes the little things—they're not *little* per se—

Keene: Oh, yeah. The little things are what break you. And so that's the other thing—the scope of trauma that's going on right now means that emotions are all over the place. The one complete meltdown I had during all this was when my husband left the breakfast table five minutes early to start to work at home five minutes early. And I fell apart. I was crying so hard. But it's because your brain can handle that. Your brain doesn't know how to handle 100,000+ Americans dead. That's too abstract, so we focus on the personal.

Orlovsky-Schnitzler: I can say from my own situation—my mother is going through treatment for breast cancer right now. She had breast cancer before coronavirus picked up, and so that was already something I was dealing with and thinking about a lot. Last week she was able to have her necessary surgery that was pushed back from early March because of COVID. For a lot of the last month, I've been thinking about her surgery, and the timeline for recovery, and when it was going to happen—and not so much about the daily COVID toll. Because that was the issue I could wrap my head around. I think a lot of people are probably dealing with that. And to bring it back to weddings—between my fiancé's family and mine, we've been dealing with personal tragedies. And so everyone's like, well, thank G-d we have a wedding to look forward to!

Keene: *Right.* I just turned 40, and I lost a parent in the pre-pandemic world, at 38. And my husband's dad died when David was 34. There's only a handful of people that have been through losing a parent in our age demographic, because we're still on the younger side of things. It makes you this weird sort of grief pioneer. So we feel like we have this ability to like see what's coming for people in a way that they can't for themselves. And we're only at the beginning. People are going to die. People *are* dying. And I don't want people to postpone weddings because they have an unrealistic dream of something that's not going to happen, and in the meantime—they could lose a parent. And COVID-19 in particular is totally unlike cancer. We published a wedding on the site from folks who got married in the backyard and planned it in 10 days. They were told that the groom's mom had three months to live. With cancer, you generally have that ability. But with COVID-19, you can't be there. This is what I remind my mom, when she takes dumb risks. When someone gets really sick with this, they go to the hospital, and you never see them again. You're not going to be able to just do a Zoom wedding. I can't see that being the way people want to do that. And that isn't to say that it's not extremely hard for someone to plan a backyard wedding because of cancer—that's traumatic. It's just that you have this timeline, and usually still get to be involved with the person who is sick.

Orlovsky-Schnitzler: You know, Max and I have talked about this in the context of age, too. For couples that are saying that they will have a big wedding in two years or three years or four years, however long it takes—I don't know if our grandparents have three, four or five years. We

can't kick it down to the curb that far just because we're committed to the idea of having passed hors'd'oeuvres, you know?

Keene: And I would never tell someone—get married sooner because your parents might be dead. Stuff happens, you have to live your life. But it's happened so quickly. There has been no way for us to absorb every change coming down the pipe. The unemployment numbers came out today, and it's something like twenty percent, right? We're not even fully feeling that yet. We're not able to internalize it.

Orlovsky-Schnitzler: I've seen a lot of conversation online in wedding-planning groups and spaces about the stages of re-opening, and a lot of folks are extremely frustrated because each and every state plan is different. Some states are boldly declaring they expect to be totally reopened in the fall, and others are capping attendance at 50, or 100 people until there's a vaccine, which could take years. People are really freaked out about the idea that there might be people wearing masks in their wedding photos, because they're still planning on 290 people in August in Maine. And I feel terrible, but those weddings are just not going to happen. And if they do—it'll be a disaster. For me, I'd rather know as early as possible that plans need to change. I would not want to be waiting until mid-July to see if my August wedding is possible. And weddings are, usually, something you plan for a while—sometimes over a year. This pandemic has taken the ability to plan meaningfully, at least for the short term, away from us. My fiancé and I feel comfortable planning to get married legally next year, but that's about it. We aren't putting down nonrefundable deposits. This is a good spot for a segue, though—I know we talked about this a little already, but are there any silver linings you can see this pandemic bringing to the wedding industry? Is this a chance to remake certain aspects of it? I know this is a hard question—it's hard to think of positives to a pandemic.

Keene: I'm hesitant about how to phrase this, because I never want to be like, "this is an opportunity!"

Orlovsky-Schnitzler: Right.

Keene: The science behind resilience is that you have to find the good stuff. *The Cut* had an amazing article, [which was an interview with a Holocaust survivor](#). He talked about how you have to manage your mind. You have to be able to say—there is a future, and it's not this. That's how you get through it. And I think everything we know about trauma shows that people who are able to do that, get through in the best shape. So with that said, the good things that I'm seeing come out of this are that the hustle and bustle of life has stopped and we've returned to a simpler existence. And obviously that's not without pain, without massive unemployment. I'm not discounting any of that, in any way. But, you know, suddenly we're planning our own vegetables—at least my family is. Because it's hard to get vegetables at the store. And I think the same is true of weddings, insofar as, we are figuring out what the most important components of them are and why we love them and continue to have them. You know, family members who got married during WWII or after WWII never really felt like it was sad. They felt

like, “we did what we could in a hard time.” And I think as we really fully move into this moment, we are focusing on what truly makes weddings important. And yeah, people are going to save a lot of money!

Orlovsky-Schnitzler: So I'm a grad student studying folklore. And as you can imagine, I think a lot about tradition, and what it means contextually for different people at different moments in their lives. There's the colloquial definition of tradition and then there's the living tradition that we grapple with, especially in a Jewish way, that means something different for everybody. And with that all of that in mind—when you think of a Jewish wedding, what are the elements that, to you, make it Jewish? What is traditional for you? And I recognize, again, that it's different for every affiliation, and background—much of considered traditional is pretty Ashkenazi-centric.

Keene: I think broadly speaking, I would think, the breaking of the glass, and the seven blessings. I can't remember, which is silly of me, but I can't remember when during my ceremony the glasses of wine were drunk. It seems critical! But anyway, the two glasses of wine, and we signed a *ketubah*. We did not do a *bedecken*. We did one for our ten year anniversary. We did this huge, over-the-top 10 year anniversary party. And we did that, largely, because we had just been through all of these funerals. And we needed a positive way to get people together. Now, I am so glad we had that celebration. But yeah, the wine and the glass and the *chuppah* and the *ketubah* were the key elements for me. And then, of course, the community. How do you do any of things without community?

Orlovsky-Schnitzler: Absolutely. The final question I have is about some of the quasi-gendered aspects of the American wedding, and how they might be affected by this pandemic. I'm thinking about concepts like the bridal party, which doesn't necessarily fall neatly into the “gendered tradition” category. But I wondered if there were things like that, that you expect might fall by the wayside post-COVID. I mean, for years there have been think pieces about how crazy it is that culturally we got to the point where people were spending a thousand dollars to be in a bridal party was considered *average*. How could you ask that of your friends now?

Keene: I mean, it just doesn't make any sense. Practically speaking, the bridal party isn't going to happen for a long time because right now it can't. You can't have those people sharing space with you. If you're having a virtual wedding, or a wedding with ten people, maybe you'll have a maid of honor and a best man. I also think bachelorette parties are done for a while—they're all about getting together with your girlfriends, having a fun weekend, drinking and going out. Doesn't really translate well on Zoom. If you're going to do something virtually, the bridal shower at least translates a bit—presents can be mailed, and opened live for folks. So yeah, I think bachelorette parties are going to disappear for at least for a while. Bachelor parties along with them...and in terms of bridal parties, I worry about what will happen to the industry if they aren't happening for months and months in any meaningful way. And there are so many amazing women out there who have spent years fighting through all of the sexism to build really

successful businesses that are around like bridesmaids dresses. What happens if that totally disappears?

Orlovsky-Schnitzler: I think that's really important for this question overall, because it's very easy to paint things with a broad brush and say, 'it's not feminist to have bridesmaids,' but it's more nuanced than that.

Keene: The other side of this is that it is largely women and women-identified people running these businesses and remaking these spaces. That's been the push in the last 10 years. I think aside from organizations like *The Knot*, you know, the really big guns, the wedding industry is almost entirely small, women owned businesses. And a lot of them are women of color.

Almost no business can withstand money stopping. And that's basically what's happening in the wedding industry right now, and parts of it will disappear entirely.

Orlovsky-Schnitzler: I have my own Jewish guilt because I happened to get engaged right before things went sideways. I feel very lucky because now I have time to make flexible decisions and process it in ways that other people have not. My hope is that people who are getting engaged after me, or who are already engaged but are in the early stages of planning benefit from this conversation. At the end of the day, I think people want to be married because they love their partner, hopefully—and the goal is to get people married in a way that makes sense, given the current circumstances. This has been the ultimate test of flexibility and patience.

Keene: I am very grateful in that I *like* my spouse. What I have learned in doing this for 13 years, and also just through living my life, is that a lot of people don't like their spouses. They may love them, but they don't like them.

Orlovsky-Schnitzler: Right. I hope every engaged couple quarantining right now is having their choice affirmed daily. I know I am.