

Jewish Marriage Contracts More Than Art

Exhibit in Foster City sheds light on ketubah tradition

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FOSTER CITY — When Karen Alexander and Ross Weiner married eight years ago, they promised to love, honor, cherish and support each other in "faithfulness and truth." Every day since, the San Mateo couple have been reminded of their vows every time they looked at their living room wall. On display was their ketubah, or Jewish marriage contract, lovingly created by artist Tamar Fishman. Symbols special to the couple surround the ornate text, where each promise is written in Hebrew and English.

Observers will find the couple's grandparents' Hebrew names etched on the roots of tree trunks. In the right-hand corner they'll see the skyline of Washington D.C., the place where the couple first met. They'll also see the symbols of Yale University and the University of Virginia — Alexander's and Weiner's alma maters.

"Every bit of it reflects us and our family," Alexander said. "I tell people that when you get married, the day goes by so fast. The ketubah is a reminder of the optimism and joy of the wedding day."

The personal artwork is on loan to the Peninsula Jewish Community Center in Foster City for its "Artistic Ketubot" exhibit. Twenty-three marriage contracts from community members line the walls with styles ranging from traditional to contemporary. The exhibit ends on Feb. 28. Alexander, 36, said she visits her ketubah whenever she can, because she misses it. "The (living room) wall definitely looks lonely without it" she said. She became aware it was a sacred document when meeting with Fishman in Maryland. "It was a labor of love for her," Alexander said. "She said, 'This is a sacred document. And if you get divorced, I want it back.' I had to agree."

A ketubah is a legal document notarized by two witnesses, and sometimes by the rabbi and the couple, before the wedding ceremony.

It's a tradition started hundreds of years ago, when Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews started decorating the documents. Rabbis wanted to make sure that no changes were made after they had been signed, so they filled the empty spaces with ornamentation, said Rachel Brodie of Jewish Milestones. Historically, a ketubah acts as a disincentive to prevent a husband from divorcing his wife, said Rabbi Adam Rosenthal of the Peninsula Sinai Congregation in Foster City. "A ketubah recognized that marriage is more than a relationship based on love and affection," Rosenthal said. "It's a relationship between two people depending on each other financially and economically. It's there to protect the woman against a not-so-nice husband." These days, many view a ketubah as largely symbolic. It can be created by artists, family members and friends. Rosenthal and his wife Sarah had a ketubah made in 2004. The text is in Hebrew and surrounded by pressed flowers. Lisa Rauchwerger of San Jose is a ketubah artist and works at Bob and Bob

Judaica in Los Altos. She said a couple committing to make their contract is similar to therapy. "It helps create the marriage you want to build," Rauchwerger said. "You decide what's important, and it helps clarify what your home is going to be like. If couples can get through that process, they can get through the marriage." Robert and Linda Kiss of San Mateo had their ketubah designed based on mathematical entities called Julia set fractals. The two engineers met at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Mass., during graduate school, Robert Kiss said. "We've been married 18 glorious years," he said. Their design came from a book that had pictures of the fractals, which are fragmented geometric shapes. "At the time, we wanted something more than a piece of paper, something that would always have to remind us of the commitment of marriage," Kiss said. "We wanted to do it in a way that we would like looking at it and would be attracted to it — and go look at it." Staff writer Christine Morente covers faith, families and North County. She can be reached at 650-348-4333 or at cmorente@bayareanewsgroup.com.