

The MatzoBall Is the Season's Hottest Not-Christmas Party

'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house, all the chosen were dancing—and looking for a spouse ...

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Photographer: Josh Dickinson for Bloomberg Businessweek

God's callings are mysterious. Sometimes he asks you to free your people from slavery and walk through a sea. Sometimes he commands you to kill your son. Sometimes he tells you to gather your people in a darkly lit club, pump up the jams, and get them wasted.

"I'm in the business of making Jewish babies," says Andy Rudnick, founder of the MatzoBall, a series of Christmas Eve parties for Jewish singles. "I'm a key factor in stopping the assimilation effect." The first MatzoBall was held in 1987 in Boston. This year there will be 18 parties across the country, with a total of about 25,000 people paying \$30 to \$50 at the door. Rudnick says that once he started throwing parties, he never went home alone on a Christmas Eve. "Never. Never. That would be like owning a restaurant and not eating." Now 51, he met his wife, Catherine, at a MatzoBall in 1997.

There had long been gatherings for the People Chosen to Have Nothing to Do on Christmas Eve, but they typically involved name tags, bar mitzvah bands, and synagogue community rooms. Rudnick figured that cool clubs would be happy to give him their space on a night they were closed. "I said, 'Let's deliver the hottest nightclub in a given city that happens to be all Jews,'" he explains. He was ruthless about keeping out "nebs," or nebbishy guys he feared would kill the vibe, and still keeps older folks away by creating "MatzoBall Plus" events for people older than 35. The parties have been such a success that about 20 percent of the clubgoers aren't Jewish. In Boston last year, Rudnick set up a private room for New England Patriot and famous Jewish sports legend Julian Edelman. The wide receiver was joined by regular MatzoBall attendee Rob Gronkowski, a gentile teammate. "He just loves the Jewish girls," Rudnick says.

The party's success begat imitators, leading to the great MatzoBall wars of the mid-'90s. Promoting became Rudnick's full-time job, supplanting his earlier career in real estate. He battled other Jewish get-togethers by giving out free tickets while chasing away rival promoters who would hand out fliers to people in line for his events. He called himself the Jew Who Stole Christmas, taking on competing parties such as Washington's Gefilte Fish Gala, Chicago's Rockmitzvah, Seattle's Latkepalooza, Tampa's Vodka Latke, and the multicity Heebonism, which, at one gathering in Palm Springs, Calif., featured Jewish porn stars and strip dreidel.

Rudnick expanded to a monthly schedule, including a June Schmooze Cruise, which had a Clio-winning print ad: Moses stands in front of the Red Sea holding a staff and says, "This time, we have a boat." He had a quarterly magazine, the *Jewish Professional*. (His girlfriend at the time was often the cover model.) Rudnick even started a video dating service—1-900-36-YENTA. He scaled back the business in 1997, when he started making more money selling the now-banned diet drug fen-phen, which led him to open a chain of nine plastic surgery centers. He had to sell his Sleek Medical Spas in 2012 when he found himself overleveraged.

He's still in the medical business—Rudnick sells a health-care credit card—but he's back to expanding MatzoBall and working to bring Jews together throughout the year. He's about to release a dating app to compete with JDate, called MatzoMatch. Instead of using Facebook profiles, the app will connect to LinkedIn accounts and allow users to sort potential dates by college or industry. There will also be a matchmaking service for a fee, just like in the old country.

Rudnick is also starting a series of Jewish after-work networking events around the country, called MatzoMingles, and organizing a group trip to Israel next year. And for the second year, he's selling a block of 200 rooms at Miami's Fontainebleau hotel for a package that includes a Christmas Eve party at the nightclub LIV and a pool party the next day. Some of the attendees, he was surprised to learn last year, were the children of couples who met at MatzoBalls. Including, to his even greater surprise, his 16-year-old, 5-foot-8-inch identical twin daughters, who'd somehow sneaked into the club. "I didn't know until I saw pictures of the MatzoBall," he says. "They shouldn't have been there."