

Do You Believe In Magic (Michael)? (02/07/2007)

*Wearing both balloons and tzitzit, 'humor therapist' **Michael Tulkoff** heals, or at least cheers, Israel's sick children.*

Sarah Bronson - Special To The Jewish Week



Were it not for the harmonica, mismatched high-top sneakers, and coin tricks, one could easily mistake **Michael (Meir) Tulkoff** for a physical therapist. He moves from child to child in a sunny rehabilitation room at Jerusalem's Alyn Pediatric and Adolescent Rehabilitation Center, encouraging the young patients to move in ways that will help them heal.

A 3-year-old girl who must learn to balance on her own lets go of her walker to help "Magic Michael" put stickers on a "mommy and baby" he created out of balloons; a preteen boy with Down Syndrome who refuses to walk gets out of his wheelchair, entranced by the bubbles, balloons and harmonica tunes Tulkoff generates, and follows him for over 30 feet.

An immigrant of five years from Baltimore, Tulkoff, 43, worked in sales and manufacturing in the States, and is past president of the Baltimore Chapter of the Society of American Magicians. When his search for a job in Israel's business sector failed, Tulkoff became what he calls a "humor therapist" or "medical magician." Supported by directed donations, he both entertains and provides therapeutic activities for patients at Alyn, at the Dana Children's Hospital of the Tel Aviv Sourasky Medical Center, and at Tel Hashomer's Safra Children's Hospital of the Sheba Medical Center.

A documentary film about Tulkoff's work for Jewish, Muslim and Christian children has won six awards, including a 2005 Houston Film Festival Bronze award and an honorable mention from the 2005 Accolade Competition. Directed by Tulkoff's filmmaker high school buddy Todd Felderstein, the film, "MAGIC(S)," has been invited to screen in June at the prestigious 25th anniversary celebration of David Copperfield's Project Magic program.

After appearances on two Israeli talk shows, Tulkoff is a minor local celebrity, recognized on the street — especially when he's caught creating a balloon animal. His work has drawn the attention of other hospitals and medical organizations here, which have hired him to train their staff to improve their bedside manners.

With both balloons and tzitzit hanging from his belt, Tulkoff indeed exudes a special bedside aura, a mix of jubilant jokery and sensitivity for patients' pain — and that of their parents. Recently Tulkoff visited a 2-year-old boy who had just received a heart transplant and had a long incision down his small chest. The child was alone and looked sad. In an effort to cheer the boy, Tulkoff tooted his harmonica and kazoo, to no avail. Bubbles elicited a small response.

By now the child's understandably stressed mother had returned. Tulkoff created balloon swans and bears, hung them above the boy's bed and squirted them with air to make them "jump." The boy laughed out loud. But what Tulkoff noted afterward was that "[the] mother was thrilled."

A few hours on rounds with him makes it clear that Tulkoff sees his role not just as an

entertainer, nor just as part of the rehab team — his official position at Alyn — but as a healing presence for patients' entire families.

The families are often surprised to encounter Tulkoff "out of uniform," since clowning and magic jar most Israelis' stereotypes of Jews who wear black hats and suit jackets. Tulkoff said that often his religiosity "sets me way apart for the good," since clients have no fear that he will make crude jokes. And anyone with negative images of Jews who wear tzitzit is immediately put at ease: Tulkoff, like most medical providers in Israel, does his work equally well, with equally corny jokes, for all patients, regardless of nationality or beliefs. He performs in rudimentary Arabic and Russian as well as English, Hebrew and Spanish.

A few months ago, a 7-year-old Palestinian girl was paralyzed while traveling with her family after the IDF destroyed a car full of terrorists traveling nearby. Hospitalized in Israel, the girl was surprised to encounter a Jewish magician jabbering at her in Arabic. Tulkoff decorated her cubicle with balloon critters and gave each an Arabic name. When she was transferred to another hospital, she was delighted to find that Tulkoff worked there, too. He now visits her weekly and has befriended her family; meanwhile, she has learned to drive her own wheelchair by pressing her chin on a joystick.

Tulkoff's mixture of medicine and magic is not limited to hospital wards. In the tradition of educational theme shows he used to perform in Baltimore-area community centers, schools and libraries about recycling, fire safety, and nutrition, he now does a special road safety program, which he plans to promote in nursery and elementary schools all over Israel.

"In the rehabilitation hospitals, I work with far too many victims of preventable accidents," he said, "and I painfully see the ravages firsthand. Israel is a world leader in pedestrian traffic injuries and, sadly, death. The program teaches kids how to buckle up and check the roads carefully as pedestrians. It gives me great pleasure to be back more on stage."

Unlike many entertainers, Tulkoff does not use his humor as a personal coping mechanism all the time. Once the vest decorated with froggies comes off, he is surprisingly serious, speaking with obvious sadness about the many children with whom he works, who face daunting physical challenges. In fact, his humor seems to be a tool he can pull out or put away at will, like the kazoo. One minute he is walking toward a train station with a reporter, talking sadly about children with serious burns; the next he is joking with, and creating a small red balloon apple for, the train station's security guard, who calls Tulkoff "rabbi" and smiles broadly at the gift.

Sometimes, the fun and the sadness are offered together. Two weeks ago, Tulkoff reported, the 2-year-old heart transplant patient was lying unresponsive in an ICU with his mother beside him. "She was so happy to see me," he said, "she talked and talked and talked about her faith, about how we see from the Book of Psalms that King David accepted his troubles and did not have an easy life. She spoke of what God wishes for her son is what is best, and I stood with my hands clasped, listening and being an ear for her.

"Her son batted his eyes and she excitedly said to me 'Look, look, he hears you!' I stepped up quietly and played my harmonica a few riffs. He opened his eyes and smiled and then closed them, falling back to sleep. She almost cried, and so did I. She blessed me, I blessed her son, and we parted."

To support Tulkoff's work in hospitals, readers may send tax-deductible donations to American Friends of Chaiyanu (earmarked for the "Magic Michael Tulkoff Program"), c/o Rabbi Y. Pinsky, Chaiyanu Director, 41 Yirmiyahu Street, Center One, Jerusalem 94467, Israel.

Support in promoting the Road Safety program may be directed to P.E.F. Israel Endowment Fund (earmarked for the "Magic Michael Tulkoff Safety Program"), Metunah Organization for Road Safety, PO Box 7007, Netanya 42120, Israel. Information about screening "MAGIC(S)" is at www.MagicsDocumentary.com

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