

## Baltimore Jewish Times - Cover Story



# Healing Magic

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Jerusalem

In a sun-soaked rehabilitation room at Jerusalem's Alyn Pediatric and Adolescent Rehabilitation Center, a physical therapist is struggling to persuade a small girl named Faigie, about 4 years old, to perform a new exercise. The child, wearing a purple hat and tiny gold earrings, listens attentively but makes no moves to comply. Then Magic Michael pops in.

"Can you guess what I'm making for you?" the broadly smiling man with the beard and colorful waistcoat asks, pulling an air pump and orange balloon from his stash of supplies while kneeling down to Faigie's eye-level.

"Oh, it's a mommy and baby!" Faigie squeals, reaching out with one hand, obviously delighted with her new toy.

The physical therapist turns to the Baltimore native who has just transformed the room's atmosphere. "We want her to let go of her walker and stand by herself," she says.

"Well, Faigie, where does this go?" Magic Michael asks the girl, offering her a smiley-face sticker.

Suddenly, Faigie reaches with her other hand to take the sticker, and with great concentration gives her balloon "mommy" a face. The next sticker is placed on the baby and soon, without realizing it, Faigie has been standing on her own for several seconds, using her hands to play with Magic Michael's balloons.



### MAGIC(S) Baltimore Debut

"MAGIC(S)" will make its Baltimore debut Thursday, Nov. 10, for students at the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation Day School. Additional dates in the area are being negotiated. Also, this week the documentary was selected for the 2006 Delray Beach Film Festival.

(Photo Provided)

The man who motivated her to let go of her child-sized walker is Michael "Meir" Tulkoff, 42. The Pikesville High School graduate, and past president of the Baltimore Chapter of the Society of American Magicians, moved to Rehovot, Israel, four years ago with his wife, Debbie, and their then-five children. In Israel, when his search for a job in the business sector failed, Mr. Tulkoff became what he calls a "humor therapist." To others, he is a "medical magician" and "Patch Adams mitzvah maker," a reference to the hit 1998 Robin Williams film that portrays the real story of an American doctor who uses humor to help heal.

But whatever he is called, Mr. Tulkoff is a practitioner of "magic with a purpose" at three medical facilities in Israel. In addition to Alyn, he can be found roaming through and brightening the rooms at Tel Aviv's Dana Children's Hospital and at Tel HaShomer's Safra Children's Hospital at the Sheba Medical Center.

In many cases, particularly at Alyn, he does not simply entertain the children though the psychological value of his humor is obviously important. Rather, he encourages them to move their bodies in ways that help them heal. Doctors and others notice, and not just because of the laughter and smiles that they see Magic Michael spreading around.

"He is as much a part of the rehabilitation team as the physical and speech therapists," says Dr. Eliezer Be'eri, head of Alyn's Respiratory Rehabilitation Unit.

"He's like the pied piper, kids just follow him," says Todd Felderstein, an award-winning documentary maker and fellow Pikesville High School class of 1981 graduate. He just finished a film about Mr. Tulkoff's work, which recently had its North American premiere out in Los Angeles. He is working on screening sites in the Baltimore area.

Mr. Tulkoff's work has drawn the attention of other hospitals and medical organizations as well, and they have hired him to train their staff to improve their bedside manners. Magic Michael also performs at non-medical venues. He's been spotted at the Church of Scotland's Tabeetha School in Jaffa, the chief rabbinate in Rehovot and an Orthodox girls' school in Tel Zion.

These days, he's also trying to gain support for the Magic Michael Tulkoff Road Safety theme shows. Promoted by Metunah, which seeks to lower Israel's disturbingly high traffic death rate, the program parallels some work Mr. Tulkoff did in Baltimore. Aimed at teaching kids how to buckle up, check the roads carefully as pedestrians and more, it hopes to go national throughout Israel's nursery and elementary schools.

Meanwhile, Mr. Tulkoff's lectures on kesem b'kesher "magic in the connection" have been heard by nursing students, social workers and child psychologists. Through him, they have learned how to use humor, rudimentary clowning and magic skills to develop a strong rapport with their clients.

They may indeed be grateful for the help, but it's unlikely that they will soon adopt his eye-catching attire. On this day, he is wearing a vest and matching hat covered in frogs and smiley faces made by a Sinai Hospital nurse from his days entertaining children in the Baltimore area. Then there's one yellow and one turquoise high-top

sneaker ("They are not mismatched, "he insists. "They came in two boxes, special. I have another pair like it at home."). He also has donned a metal tie. Hanging from his neck is a harmonica, strapped on for hands-free access.

Mr. Tulkoff bounds from room to room, patient to patient, tzitzit and several limp balloons streaming from his belt waving with his movements. Using a combination of toys, cards, coins and corny jokes, he distracts children from painful procedures, encourages them to use fine motor skills, provides sensory input and lights up faces. He might do a 20-minute show in a waiting room and then leave to help a patient strengthen her lungs by blowing bubbles.

Health care professionals know if he's been around. It's hard to miss the menagerie of colorful balloon animals hanging from doorposts and clutched by dimpled hands.

An important aspect of Mr. Tulkoff's work is that he gladly indeed, quite giddily works with patients and families of all ethnicities and religions.



A few feet away from Faigie is an Arab boy, Musa, around 8 years old, whose hands had been badly burned in a house accident. It was important for him to reach out with his arms in

order to work the muscles and skin, but doing so was painful and he resisted treatment.

Mr. Tulkoff blows bubbles just beyond Musa's grasp. With the therapist holding Musa gently in place, the boy eagerly reaches for the bubbles, laughing.

But the highlight of Mr. Tulkoff's day is yet to come. An aide pushes into the rehabilitation room the wheelchair of a heavy-set 12-year-old boy with Down syndrome. The boy is refusing to walk despite his physical ability to do so. Using his harmonica to keep the boys' attention focused on him, Mr. Tulkoff motivates the boy to leave his chair and walk all the way down the hall, enticed by the musical instrument, balloons and bubbles. Halfway down the hall, the boy's therapists let go of his arms and the boy begins walking independently. The therapists cheer, telling the boy that he is "the king of the hallway."

At Dana and at Safra, which are not Mr. Tulkoff's prime venues, he is not considered as much a part of the medical team as at Alyn, but staff quickly praise his interaction with the patients.

"Ten minutes [with a patient] can do wonders," says Elinor Domb, a social worker at Dana's Intensive Care Unit. "A child who is depressed and refusing to eat might eat after Michael leaves. The ICU is a very depressing place, and it's so important for the children to have interactions with someone who is not one of the doctors or nurses who they associate with being in the hospital."

And Mr. Tulkoff's presence is a boon to grown-ups, too, Mrs. Domb said. "When he makes us a balloon, we carry it all day," she says of the ICU staff. Then she adds, "I asked him to recommend a rabbi for my wedding."

Dr. Joseph Ben Ari, head of the Dana hospital ICU, notices it all. "You see how that girl he is with is smiling?" he says. "She was crying a few minutes ago. She is in a depression because her leg is broken. Michael is much better than any medication I can give her. All the children wait for him. It's not just the children, but the parents and staff. Everyone smiles when he is around."

Now over in Dana's Pediatric Oncology Department, Mr. Tulkoff whispers quietly to a little boy. Liav, 7, is recovering from cancer of the spine. Mr. Tulkoff turns a tomato into a toy rabbit and plays a kazoo. With Liav's parents standing nearby, the boy winces as a nurse changes his infusion.

"Hey, Liav, what do you call someone who speaks three languages?" Mr. Tulkoff asks in Hebrew.

Liav does not know, but his father, with his arms crossed, says "tri-lingual."

"Right!" Mr. Tulkoff says. "And what do you call someone who speaks two languages?"

"Bi-lingual?" the father answers, visibly relaxing.

"Right again!" says Mr. Tulkoff. "And what do you call someone who speaks one language?"

There is a pause while Mr. Tulkoff checks that Liav is still paying attention. The father is stymied.

"An American!" Toot! Toot! blares Magic Michael's kazoo.

Liav is in pain and a bit confused by the joke but at least distracted from his own situation, but his father gets it and laughs heartily, perhaps the first time he has laughed while visiting his very ill son.

After checking with the father that Liav is not allergic to latex, Mr. Tulkoff produces a balloon animal and leaves to check on the Ethiopian girl next door. On the way out, he tells Liav's mother "Take care of the boy, your husband, I mean." Toot! Toot!

Mr. Tulkoff, a grandson of the founders of Baltimore's renowned Tulkoff Horseradish Products Co. (and brother of its current president, Phil), first encountered magic at age 11 when a performer came to his elementary school. He quickly went to the library and read every available book on the subject.

Soon, in a prescient move, he was volunteering at local hospitals, putting on little shows. He set his hobby aside in high school and college, pursuing a degree in business administration. Over the next several years he worked in sales, insurance, the

food industry and manufacturing. At 23, he spent eight months in Spain teaching English. In the late 1990s, he owned a medical supply business.

(He never joined the family horseradish business, he says, because "that line of work is a real grind" and "I didn't want to have to cry for my money Put those jokes in and everyone will know you really talked to a Tulkoff.")

Around 15 years ago, Mr. Tulkoff began offering 45-minute magic shows for kids with themes such as nutrition, fire safety and recycling. ([www.KidsMagician.com](http://www.KidsMagician.com)) He performed hundreds of shows a year at schools, libraries, community centers and civic organizations all over Maryland. Baltimore Magazine named him Best Kids' Entertainer in 1996; two years later the same publication labeled him Baltimore's Best Magician.

In 1994, Mr. Tulkoff performed a show at Johns Hopkins Hospital. The performance was so successful that the administration asked him to come back to visit children individually in their rooms. Mr. Tulkoff gladly did so on a volunteer basis. Though he never would have guessed it back then, his work at Johns Hopkins would form the basis for his professional career in Israel.

The Tulkoff family; his wife, Debbie, is a special education teacher and the couple now has six children ages 17 months to 16 years; made aliyah in the summer of 2001. They chose to settle in Rehovot for its proximity to Tel Aviv and the presence of a Bais Yaakov school for girls.



"I figured I'd continue with magic a little in hospitals on the side, but use my business degree to help Israeli companies go into the Western marketplace," Mr. Tulkoff recalls. "I sent out loads of resumes, but got very few calls. Nothing was looking promising."

Meanwhile, Mr. Tulkoff continues, "I was volunteering weekly at Kaplan [Hospital in Rehovot]. People heard about me, and gave designated donations to other hospitals to hire me, and thank God this is what I do now. It was min hashamayim [orchestrated by heaven]. I feel this was HaShem's way of saying, This is what you were meant to do."

Mr. Tulkoff noted that with more designated donations, the hospitals could hire him for several more hours per week, though there is a limit to how much medical magic he can do each day, due to the physically demanding nature of the work.

Mr. Tulkoff's decision to bring his skills to the hospital setting does not surprise Fallston's Eddie Robinette, one of Mr. Tulkoff's mentors from the local chapter of the Society of American Magicians.

"He's a very sincere and thoughtful and dedicated individual, wanting to use his magic to help others," Mr. Robinette says. "It's something he does well, and I think he's dedicated to that. He's a hard worker."

Mr. Robinette recalled that Mr. Tulkoff's performance style has always involved lots of audience interaction and good clean fun.

"He's not David Copperfield or Siegfried and Roy," Mr. Robinette says, referring to the profession's mega-stars, "But I've seen the faces of the kids and the enjoyment they get out of it. They love to help, and he involves them. I don't know that he's doing anything unusual magic-wise, but his entertainment skills are unique to him."

Mr. Felderstein, the L.A.-based documentary maker, has known Mr. Tulkoff since they both played on Pikesville Junior High School's football team in eighth grade. Two years ago, Mr. Felderstein took his first trip to Israel and stayed in Mr. Tulkoff's home for two weeks. While there, he began filming "MAGIC(S)," a 91-minute film on Mr. Tulkoff's work and his lifestyle. ([www.MagicsDcoumentary.com](http://www.MagicsDcoumentary.com)) The piece already has been a 2005 bronze winner at the Houston Film Festival, and garnered an honorable mention from the 2005 Accolade Competition. Mr. Felderstein hopes that the movie soon will be picked for distribution and promises that it will come out on DVD.

The film focuses on Mr. Tulkoff's ability to transcend cultures. In fact, he speaks Hebrew, English and Spanish to patients. These days, he's using his newly acquired rudimentary Arabic, Amharic, Georgian and Russian as well.

"He's able to cross cultural lines purely through magic and humor, and that really excited me," Mr. Felderstein explains. "If you were doing what Michael does in Baltimore, that would be wonderful. But the fact is that he's doing it in a place with people who don't necessarily like each other. Even though he doesn't walk around saying he's religious, he doesn't hide it either. He works with Palestinians who know he is religious and they welcome him. No one says, 'We don't want your humor here.'"

Mr. Felderstein says that he was especially impressed by the warmth and generosity displayed in Mr. Tulkoff's home, particularly by his children.

"To see a family operate like that everyone takes care of everybody. It's not easy to have five kids and move to another country, and then another kid. To me, that is his success, his family. He's raising such incredible kids; the magic is just the icing on the cake."

For his part, Mr. Tulkoff is more than happy to be devoting his professional life to helping other people's children, too. "Sometimes the degree of challenges [the patients] have is very sad," Mr. Tulkoff says. "You just have to smile and do your best to work on tikkun olam, "or repairing the world."

And yes, there are many moments when Mr. Tulkoff has to keep his own tears from flowing. "You are face to face with a child who is giggling through the scars on their face, and it's the first time in a long time the parents have heard their child laugh. I look and see a parent biting and chewing on their lip to keep from crying," he says.



"Those moments are when I have to blow harder on the harmonica and say something funny." Working with such children, he says, has helped him better understand the blessings in his own life, which further helps him to serve others.

"The past four years, "he says, "have really shown me a strength and level of faith that these children give over. And it's really amazing considering they are faced with the challenges they have."

So this year on Yom Kippur, when the prayer book turned to the image of the Book of Life, in part Mr. Tulkoff thought of those ill children he had seen in the hospitals in Baltimore and throughout Israel. And he missed the children who have died.

"Sometimes, all I can do is swallow my tears and blow harder on the harmonica, "he says. "I take the blessings given to me and make use of them to help others. That helps the children. And it buoys me as well." ###

### **Capturing Magic**

One's a single director/scriptwriter in Los Angeles, the other's an Orthodox Jewish magician in Israel, married with six children. But their Baltimore past became the foundation for the new documentary "MAGIC(S)." ([www.MagicsDocumentary.com](http://www.MagicsDocumentary.com))

The director, Todd Felderstein, met the magician, Michael Tulkoff, in the early 1970s when the latter moved from the city to Pikesville. They played football together at Pikesville Junior and Senior High schools, visited each other in Europe after college, and Mr. Felderstein helped hold the *chuppah* at Mr. Tulkoff's wedding. After that, they kept in touch, but careers and personal lives took them to different worlds.

Then a few years ago, Mr. Felderstein asked Mr. Tulkoff about life in Israel. The conversation, it turns out, was magic. "He told me and I said, That's a good story," Mr. Felderstein said during a telephone interview from Los Angeles.

In fact, the story of Mr. Tulkoff performing for Palestinian and Israeli hospitalized children was so appealing that Mr. Felderstein, 41, was soon en route to Israel. There, he and his cameras would spend 15 days following around his childhood friend, becoming the ninth person in the Tulkoffs' Rehovot apartment. The resulting documentary recently had its premiere at Los Angeles' Skirball Cultural Center, a major West Coast showcase of Jewish programming and exhibitions. Negotiations are in the works with a Canadian distribution company, and Mr. Felderstein, a University of Maryland, College Park graduate, hopes to bring the documentary to this region as well. "I want to get it in Baltimore very soon, but putting together the premiere was so much work and I need to find someone local in Baltimore because right now I have to get back to my life and make a living," he said. That's because "MAGIC(S)" took two years to make instead of the expected six months, meaning a timeout from Mr. Felderstein's career, which, as he said, has included "getting coffee for the best and having directed and produced."

In fact, his 18 years in Los Angeles have included most recently being a writer in the inaugural season of Sony/Marvel/MTV's "Spider-Man." His production and independent film skills have won the Silver Remi at Worldfest Houston, honors at

Earth Vision 2003 for an environmental PSA aimed at the timber industry's "recklessness," and having directed "documentary-ettes," abbreviated tributes, honoring The Barbra Streisand Foundation, Ed Begley Jr. and others.

But when it came to slicing scenes about his friend's life, Mr. Felderstein knew objectivity could not be found. "In my early cuts, people would say this is really nice but it's redundant. That's because it means too much to me," Mr. Felderstein said. "It's very intimate because we're with his family a lot. You have to remember that while I held the chuppah at Michael's wedding, I have not really spent time with him since just after college and at that time he was secular."

So he learned that his friend would rise early to attend synagogue, come home to take his kids to school and then come home again, grab his equipment and head off to work. The film, however, is not just about Mr. Tulkoff. "It has a very political slant because you can't make a film in Israel without one," Mr. Felderstein said. "What was really remarkable to me is that what Michael does deals with everybody. Palestinians and Jews and Russians and Ethiopians and all religions. People talk in the film about everything that's going on; war, terrorism, Osama bin Laden."

He relates a conversation with an East Jerusalem Palestinian who defined himself as "an activist." His son had fallen off a roof and was in the hospital, and there was Magic Michael bringing laughter into the room. "I said to the man, When your son gets out of the hospital what are you going to say to him? Are you going to allow him to be an activist?" Ultimately he said no," Mr. Felderstein said.

"Here you have a country where everyone has their own opinion and often it's violent, but everyone seems to get through it and the country survives," he added. "To me the magic is that you have all these people that continually say we don't like you and yet they get through their day. And it's remarkable."

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Todd Felderstein's documentary website is [www.MagicsDocumentary.com](http://www.MagicsDocumentary.com)

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