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"Making Medical Magic"

Judy Siegel-Itzkovich, Health and Science Reporter, THE JERUSALEM POST, Nov. 21, 2004



A magician at Jerusalem's Alyn Hospital conjures minor miracles - a smile, a laugh, a step forward.

Any clown worth his salt can make children smile, even if they are hospitalized. But it takes a magician to induce a five-year-old boy with a rare neuromuscular disease to start walking, restore the will to live in a 19-year-old debilitated by cystic fibrosis, and give a sense of power to a nine-year-old-girl attached to a respirator who has to be waited on hand and foot.

(PHOTO: www.MagicsDocumentary.com)

The "medical magician" at Alyn Hospital (the national pediatric and adolescent rehabilitation center in Jerusalem) who has accomplished this is Michael Tulkoff (aka Magic Michael). Making the rounds with doctors and nurses as he carries a violin case full of balloons, packs of cards, musical instruments and gadgets, Tulkoff tries to make patients happy, but is focused mainly on their empowerment and rehabilitation. Thus, while the famed Patch Adams book and movie inspired many hospitals to hire clowns to entertain young patients, the 41-year-old does not regard himself as a clown. A once-traditional and now-haredi immigrant from Baltimore, Tulkoff eschews red noses, wigs, ruffled costumes and face paint. Instead, he exchanges his black haredi garb for a butterfly-print baseball cap and vest, lens-less floral-patterned spectacles, a hanging harmonica, white shirt, black trousers tucked into sports socks, mismatched sneakers and a plastic balloon pump. The only remaining signs of religiosity are the short sidecurls behind his ears and his ritual fringes.

"I'm all for hospital clowns," says Tulkoff, who lives in Rehovot with his wife Debbie (a special-education teacher) and six children aged 10 months to 16 years. "But I don't want to be a hit-and-run clown who makes a joke and gets a laugh but has no long-term effect. Can you imagine if I did clown antics before a disabled teenager or young adult. He would tell me, and justifiably, 'Get outta here! This isn't for me.' The difference between what I do and what a clown does is that I don't come just to lift spirits. I have regular meetings with the doctors to discuss the various cases and brainstorm about the most effective way to achieve our goals. For example, a child with a severely degenerated nervous system who would otherwise sit around like a vegetable is motivated through my relationship with him to pull himself up and take a few steps each day."

Tulkoff's once-a-week sessions with patients at Alyn are sponsored by generous donors, as are his service in the general pediatric wards of Dana Children's Hospital in Tel Aviv and the Safra Children's Hospital at Sheba in Tel Hashomer. He claims he is the only "medical magician" (his own term) in the Middle East and probably the world.

"Magic Michael" began performing for youngsters in 1974, when he was only 11. "I was hooked when I saw a performance in my public school," he says, pausing during rounds in Alyn's respiratory rehabilitation unit with its director, pediatrician Dr. Eliezer Be'eri. It was Be'eri - who served as

Tulkoff's foil during a performance at the annual dinner of the Jerusalem Fund for Alyn at the Inbal Hotel a few weeks ago - who decided to bring the magician to the hospital 18 months ago. "We wanted more than a clown. We wanted to use him as an integral part of our medical team along with doctors, nurses, physiotherapists and occupational therapists. I interviewed various professional clowns, but they were not appropriate. They made loud noises and were aggressive, and this would scare our children. Michael is outgoing but gentle, and combines therapy with entertainment. We thought that once he came, he'd be able to teach our physical and occupational therapists his arts, but it's very difficult. You have to have a unique personality to do such work," the Alyn pediatrician notes.

TULKOFF, WHO WAS president of the Society of American Magicians' Baltimore chapter and has been published in professional magic publications, ran a successful children's educational/entertainment business serving schools, day care centers, libraries and civic organizations in Virginia and Washington, DC. He also volunteered regularly at Johns Hopkins Medical Center, where he honed his medical magic skills before coming on aliya less than four years ago.

While he enjoys his work at Dana and Safra, his audience there suffer from acute conditions from which they will almost always recover. The children at Alyn suffer from usually permanent disability from trauma (especially road accidents and terror attacks) and congenital or genetic diseases such as muscular dystrophy, brittle bones, spina bifida, arthrogryposis (in which the bones shrink, pressing on the lungs and diaphragm) or from acquired infections. Many of those in the respiratory rehabilitation department have a tracheostomy in their necks, through which they breathe with the help of a respirator. Some can speak, while others can only blurt out a few words. Numerous children and teenagers are pushed along in wheelchairs by hospital personnel, but some maneuver the wards using joysticks.

When Tulkoff wanders through the wards, he greets every patient by name, and is greeted in return with the widened eyes of those who cannot answer. Mohi, a five-year-old Arab who looks like he's only three, has no immediate family. Born in Jerusalem with congenital myasthenia gravis (an autoimmune disease in adults and a very rare condition in newborns that causes severe muscle weakness throughout the body), he has spent his entire life at Alyn, as his mother abandoned him; so far, Be'eri says, no Arab family has been found to adopt him. Sitting on a wheeled chair, Tulkoff holds the speechless boys hands and "lures" him forward with his harmonica music and tricks. As Mohi's respiratory muscles weaken quickly, the magician manually forces air into the plastic tube in his throat like a man pumping a bicycle tire. Thanks to these exercises, Mohi actually walks - a feat he was unable to perform only a few weeks ago.

"This is my aim - tikkun olam [repairing the world bit by bit], Tulkoff explains. Although his Hebrew is weak, he performs in that language as well as in English and Spanish, and has a growing vocabulary in Arabic, Russian, Georgian and Amharic.

Dalia, a nine-year-old with arthrogryposis, wheels herself into the hall and is delighted to see Magic Michael. "What balloon do you want today?" he asks. "Pink," she says breathily over the noise of her ventilator, "like my blouse." Able to move only her index finger, she curls it around the pink deflated balloon in his bag and he inflates it. "Would you like a dog, a rabbit, a snake?" he asks. "A hat!," Dalia insists, and he obliges after measuring her head size. He then pulls out a compact mirror and, joyfully seeing the balloon hat she chose, the girl rolls away. Alyn has 93 inpatient beds, as well as 60 day-care beds and an outpatient clinic that receives over 11,500 patient visits a year.

Tulkoff believes there is a need for more "medical magicians" in the country, and hopes there will someday be a place where he can teach others. He doesn't feel he is missing training in psychology or occupational therapy. "I don't have the patience for that, and I'm an outgoing guy.

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have a natural feeling for what the patients need," he says, as Be'eri nods in agreement.

The magician may blow some air on a child's toe, set up plastic bowling pins to get a child to roll a ball at them, give them a kazoo or slidewhistle to blow so they breathe on their own and overcome their fear of asphyxiating without the respirator. Teaching them how to twist a balloon into animal shapes improves their motor skills. He tries to work on all available senses, even pulling out a bar of lemon soap for a child to smell. Every Monday, Be'eri and the nurses steer Magic Michael toward young patients who need immediate help. Many are depressed about the hopelessness of their disability.

"They sent me to 'David' because he was not doing well. Seventeen years old, he was severely disabled by cystic fibrosis. When national service girls gave him a communications board, he laboriously spelled out: 'I want to die!' He was a living skeleton with curled hands, who was attached to a respirator and couldn't stand up or feed himself. He needs suction to clear the phlegm from his mouth and throat; a long tube has to be inserted to vacuum it out. He can't even wipe his own mouth, scratch his nose or wipe a tear from his cheek."

After asking permission to sit with him and the young man's rabbi, Tulkoff did some magic and optical illusions with balls and paper rainbows. "I told him a story he really liked. I gave him some paper rainbows to choose and contributed to his self esteem and empowerment. I told him he could show the rainbows to others. We progressed to some balloon twisting. I asked what his favorite color was. With great effort he raised his arm slightly and chose one. I put a plastic fish on a rod that he was able to grab. Then, before saying goodbye, I put my hand on his - under the circumstances the closest thing to a handshake."

As Tulkoff turned, the rabbi grabbed him by the forearm with tears in his eyes. "I thought I had done something wrong, but the rabbi explained: 'You made him smile, you made him laugh. I never saw him do that before!'" "Working with such patients is a challenge and, sometimes, a triumph," Tulkoff says. ***

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