



# LAUGHTER

## The BEST Medicine

Several months ago, while walking through a ward in Hadassah Hospital on Mt. Scopus, Voices Publisher Israel Katz happened upon two clowns entertaining children and mothers in the hospital's outpatient clinic. He was moved by the sight of a little boy smiling under an oxygen mask, and mothers and nurses laughing at the clowns' antics.

Medical clowns are not just clowns; they are drama therapists with red noses. They spread joy and laughter where they're most needed - within the somber and often scary walls of a hospital, or therapeutic center.

Growing numbers of Israeli hospitals have begun to recognize the benefits of having clowns "fooling around" in their corridors and rooms. Doctors and nurses alike are developing a respect for those jesters with painted faces, wacky clothes and big shoes. They're finding that trained medical clowns can help patients in ways that traditional medicine can't.

"A clown has conversations with your soul. While the doctors are busy

giving the medicines, and the nurse is involved physically with the patient, the clown deals with the person's emotions - getting him in touch with his inner self, and enabling him to see the possibility of getting back to normal life," said Jeff Gordon, who teaches regular folks to become medical clowns.

"Clowning is something that has always touched people. Medical clowning helps them connect with their own strengths and joy and optimism. It assists them in getting over the trauma of the hospital experience," Jeff said.

Almost 400 medical clowns are helping patients cope in medical institutions throughout Israel with their special brand of humor therapy. They have been trained and directed by Simchat HaLev, the non-profit organization that coordinates "clown therapy". This

unique therapy raises patients' spirits through imagination, fantasy, humor and laughter.

Only three years old, Simchat HaLev has made tremendous inroads into the medical world, thanks to the initiation and resolve of its founder Tzvi Meir.

Where Simchat HaLev clowns go, smiles follow



While he characterizes himself as a "pretty serious person", Tzvi said he was determined to begin a medical clown program in Israel, because "Mitzvah gedola lehiyot besimcha (It's is a big mitzvah to be joyous) and I thought hospitals needed a little simcha."

The first hospital Tzvi approached with his revolutionary plan was one of Israel's largest and most advanced facilities, the Assaf HaRofeh Medical Center in Tzrifin. "In the beginning they thought I was a little 'off.' 'This is a hospital, not a place for jokes.' But I showed them how laughter and clowns could help people. Slowly the hospital began to understand the importance of clowning," Meir said.

One at a time, Tzvi contacted hospitals throughout Israel,

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The Simchat HaLev clown crew



asking them to open their doors to Simchat HaLev's clowns. "Every hospital was another story," Tzvi said. "Some took it easily. Some were harder."

Today Simchat HaLev medical clowns can be found in Schneider Hospital, Petach Tikvah; Bikur Holim, Ilan, Eitanim, Neve Horim, Hadassah and Shaarei Zedek Hospitals, Jerusalem; Hospital of the Western Galilee, Nahariya; Kaplan Hospital, Rehovot; the Youth Wing of the Hospital for the Mentally Ill, Nes Ziona; Wolfson Hospital, Tel Aviv; and other medical centers in Haifa, Hader, Tel Hashomer, Holon, Afula and more.

Jeff Gordon noted, "More and more, the hospital is saying that [medical clown therapy] is an integral part of the hospital setting, and giving us respect for the work, and a space to do our work. I've even had situations where the doctor's said, 'We'll wait for you to finish.' We're not interfering with their work." On the contrary, Jeff feels that medical clowns, armed with their balloons and cherry red noses, complement the work

of doctors on a different - emotional and internal - plane.

Along with Tzvi Meir, Jeff is devoted to the goal of spreading Simchat HaLev happiness to every hospital, senior citizens residence, facility for special kids, and even home-bound patients.

### Why Laugh?

The motto, "Laughter is the best medicine," has been increasingly proven over the past four decades. When Norman Cousins, editor of the New York magazine *Saturday Review*, became ill with a crippling disease in 1964, he worked with his doctor to introduce "humor therapy" into his medical treatment. Having read a book about the power of negative emotions to induce illness, he wondered if positive emotions could induce health.

Cousins found that they could, and he detailed his research and findings in the first book of its kind on humor therapy, "Anatomy of an Illness."

Around that time, the now famous West Virginia doctor Patch Adams was spreading his brand of medicine - one of compassion, involvement and laughter.

Years later Connecticut surgeon, Dr. Bernie Siegel wrote a book detailing his belief that the power of healing stems from the human mind and will.

Thanks to these visionaries, the effects of joy and laughter on the human

(Continued on following page)

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## LAUGHTER The BEST Medicine

(Continued from previous page)

body have begun to be studied sincerely throughout the world.

**W**holeHealthMD.com reports that "Laughter triggers the release of natural painkillers called endorphins. These chemicals not only help to block pain, but produce a general sense of well-being."

Research has shown that laughter causes a "significant drop in the levels of the stress hormones, cortisol and adrenalin." These hormones can "corrupt the immune system and weaken its ability to fight disease."

Laughter actually improves the immune system by raising the levels of "infection fighting T-cells, disease-fighting proteins called gamma-interferon, and B-cells, which produce disease-destroying antibodies. Finally, because laughter increases breathing, oxygen use, and heart rate, it can stimulate the circulatory system, bringing healthful lymphatic fluids to diseased areas and (temporarily) lowering blood pressure."

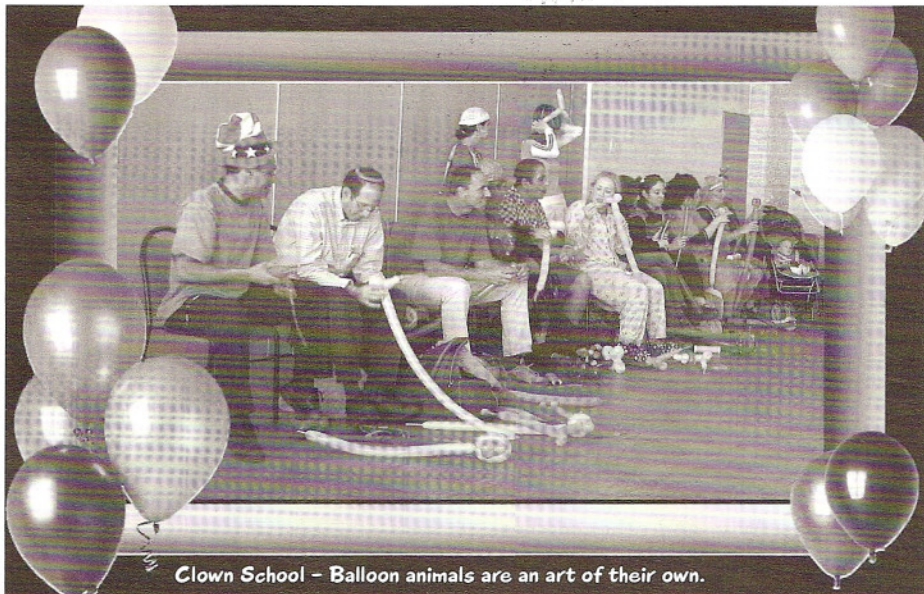
Bed-bound patients can get a valuable cardiovascular workout by laughing, which causes rapid muscular contractions and deep, diaphragmatic breathing. "And because frequent belly laughter empties the lungs of air, it may be especially beneficial for patients who are suffering from emphysema and other respiratory ailments."

With the information above, it's easy to see why Tzvi Meir calls humor therapy a "very serious" treatment.

### Laugh Hard, Train Hard

Simchat HaLev trains professionals

of all kinds for more than six months to become medical clowns. They are specially prepared to work in sensitive medical and therapeutic environments. Across Israel, its clowns and trained volunteers provide a unique kind of encouragement for children and adults in the most sober circumstances: chronically ill patients, cancer patients, terror victims, the terminally ill, victims of abuse, youth in distress and others.



Simchat HaLev educational director Jeff Gordon, formerly of the UK, received his certification in theatre arts, art therapy, drama therapy and psychodrama. He has also studied professional clowning and circus skills in England and Israel. Teaching clowning over the past two years has allowed Jeff to combine everything he had been doing for the last twenty years - facilitating, clowning, and workshops. Jeff noted, "Clown therapy combines the language of theater clowning and drama therapy."

The students learn "the science of humor, drama, empathy, balloon making, magic tricks, juggling, and receive professional lectures from veteran doctors and social workers," according to volunteer medical clown, Shani Simkowitz, a resident of Tekoa.

Shani, who also teaches for Simchat HaLev, explained, "Medical clowns are not circus performers. They have to learn the social welfare side of treatment - when it's the doctor's role, how to speak to the patient, how to make an entrance in the ward, how to treat the family in the room. Clowns are taught how to change their approach depending on a

patient's age. Plus, there's a different way to treat someone who is hospitalized for a week getting his tonsils out, someone there for long term with cancer or another chronic illness, or someone in a drug rehabilitation clinic."

She noted that recently the regional council of Gush Etzion sent a trained medical clown into its *ganim* to teach the preschoolers about the happiness of the month of Adar, and the happiness that results from visiting the sick.

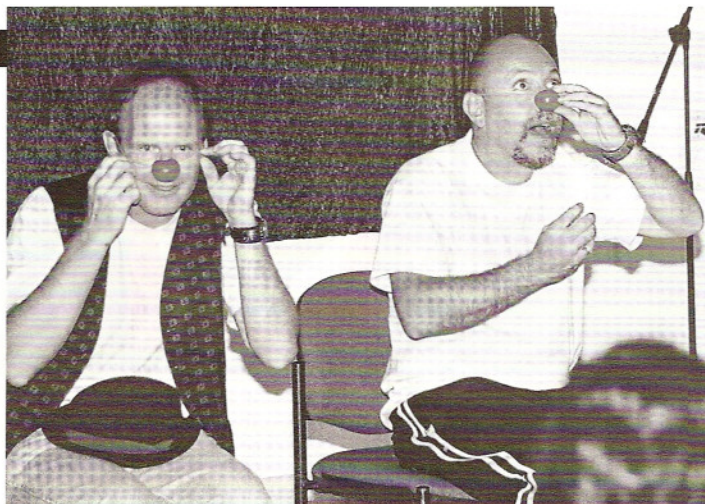
Jeff said that not everyone who takes the intensive course will become a medical clown. Of those who pass, most will work in humor therapy as volunteers. A small number will earn their living as professional medical clowns. But each person will "discover a role" that will benefit him for the rest of his life. His Simchat HaLev students learn how to "discover their inner clown."

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"It affects their personal life and their work life," he explained. "Every one of us has an inner clown. It's a role that allows us to have total freedom, rediscover our childlike spontaneity, creativity and color. Through the years, we lose the colors that form our life, and things become grey. But the clown helps restore the color, and helps others see the color and joy. It's a wonderful way of life."



Clown teachers Yoram and Jeff  
All photos from Simchat HaLev  
[www.simchat-halev.org.il](http://www.simchat-halev.org.il)

## Inner Clowns

Jeff Gordon, who has clowning for patients in hospitals, autistic and special-needs children, said that his is a "very open, very curious, very naive clown. My clown is very excited by everything I see around me, particularly excited meeting people and discovering that everyone has the same human soul."

Shani Simkowitz's clown has a red cap, red nose, red baggy clothing and big clown shoes. "The red nose is basically the mask that separates you from the reality world," she said. "The red nose is a tremendous tool that can be used for controlling anger, overcoming fear, and looking at things in a different way."

"Mine is a confused clown; sometimes I talk gibberish. I need my audience to help me. I use sounds and puppets. Some people use magic tricks. Everyone finds his own way," she said.

Shani, who in real life is the director of the Gush Etzion Foundation, has a degree in theater. She turned to medical clowning as a way of combining her talents and doing *chesed* for others. She volunteers at the Bikur Cholim Hospital. Shani said, "I gain tremendous strength on a personal level every time I clown. You can't imagine how it feels when a child or elderly person smiles and says 'Thank you for coming', when a colorful clown comes into a drab hospital room and cheers things up a bit, or an exhausted mother smiles. When a person is sick and

in pain, whether pain from illness or trauma, a medical clown gives him some relief, helping him forget the pain and replace it for a while with laughter."

Amalya Edelcreek's clown began as a "nebach", but changes all the time. Volunteering at Shaarei Tzedek Hospital with another Simchat HaLev clown,

Amalya visits children and adults in all departments, depending on where the hospital sends them.

"Last time we went to Shaarei Tzedek, we met with a physiotherapist who asked us to clown around with one of his young patients, and encourage him to breathe deeply. The child had become terrified of his treatments, and needed this exercise. I took a bunch of balloons and told him that we needed his help to blow them up. (Of course, I usually use my pump to blow up balloons.) I asked him to breathe deeply with me, and he did. That was a great example of how we accomplished something that the doctors weren't able to achieve."

The same day, Amalya said, "We went to geriatric department and we told them to vote for us - The Red Nose Party - guaranteed not to keep our promises."

A clown's humor, she commented, is just as needed by adults as by children, although the approach is totally different. "You can make kids laugh with balloons or silly physical tricks. You have to be a little more sophisticated with adults. One of the other clowns does a routine when he goes into the room of an elderly person. 'Is this the room you ordered? Did you ask for room service? I thought they promised a view to the pool.' They like that. He takes them out of the current situation and makes them smile."

Simchat HaLev wants to bring smiles to more patients throughout the country. In order to accomplish this goal, it needs to help to subsidize: the professional clowns it sends to hospitals to treat patients with severe illnesses; a special medical clowning service to spread joy and encouragement to children and elderly who are bed-ridden in their homes; equipment for clowns (Did you know that Simchat HaLev spends \$10,000 a year on balloons alone?); clown school training; and a Joy Mobile, which is urgently needed to transport clowns and equipment.

Tax deductible contributions can be sent in Israel to Simchat Halev, Nof Ayalon/ Shalavim, DN Shimshon 99785; in the US to Central Fund For Israel, Attn: Marcus Bros., "For Simchat Halev", 980 6th Ave., New York, New York 10018

Simchat HaLev's next medical clown course begins after Pesach in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. For more information, contact Simchat Halev - 08-979-0083. The courses are in Hebrew, but Jeff Gordon said that if there is enough demand, a class may possibly open in English.

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