

## A Mission of Love and Laughter: *Medical Clowns on Rounds*

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*Chesky* was silent as he and his mother checked in and settled into the waiting room. Within the hour Chesky would be receiving his next dose of chemotherapy. As Chesky waited quietly, he heard faint laughter from an adjacent playroom. Curious, he peeked through the window of a closed door and was surprised to see a raucous scene unfolding inside.

In the center of the room stood two teenage boys with colored greasepaint and large round red noses on their faces. They wore oversized clothes and odd-looking hats. Chesky had seen clowns before – just not in a hospital.

The clown stood still for a moment before attempting a clumsy back flip over a chair. He didn't quite make it and landed on the floor just as his fellow clown threw a large cream pie at his face. By this time Chesky had made his way into the room.

Goopy blobs of cream were splattered everywhere, and the audience of sick children rolled and roared with laughter. Just before the clown stood up, the other clown said, "This cake could sure use some decorations." Having noticed Chesky entering the room, he asked him and another child for some help, and they all joined in sprinkling confetti and candles on the clown's "pied" face. The clown slowly stood up and flashed an exaggerated grimace... and for just a few moments chemotherapy was the last thing on Chesky's mind.

That same day, a group of girl clowns were visiting a local nursing home and decided that the hallways could use the festiveness of a parade. Sitting in her wheelchair, Sarah was handed a balloon baton and was named grand marshal – she was to lead a parade of fellow residents and a silly gaggle of clown gals through the muted neutral lobby of the nursing residence she calls home.

Brightly colored scarves flew through the air as Sarah wheeled her way across the room. In tow were marchers young and old – residents and visiting clowns – some in wheelchairs, some hunched over walkers, and some dancing to the cacophony of kazoos in well-worn sneakers and white ankle socks peeking from under their colorful clown outfits.

Kazoos and IV poles are an odd combination. But that didn't occur to Sarah and her friends that night. That night everything was silly. And everyone was young again.



Scenes like this are not uncommon when large groups of teens gather for trainings and rehearsals in our high-ceilinged studio with walls painted in primary colors. These evenings are times of enchantment when we light the spark of our young students in what has become a transformation for growth, self-exploration, and creativity.

These young adults ages 11 to 23 take time out of their ever busy schedules and dedicate themselves to clowning. Yup, clown school – Lev Leytzan: The Compassionate Clown Alley, Inc. – a place where juggling, magic, costuming,

stilt walking, acrobatics, and comedy are taught and practiced...a place of fantasy like none other. A place where kids from all *frum* backgrounds, ages, and learning levels can come together into a mosaic of creative play.

“So, you’re gonna be a clown?” is the common line the kids received at first from their friends, family, and teachers. “You wanna run away and join the circus?” and “Purim’s over!” became regular greetings. Little did they know we were diligently creating a troupe of clowns who would affirm life, laughter, and humor in the midst of some of the most unfunny places – hospital rooms, nursing homes, rehabilitation centers, and the homes of people recuperating from serious illness. We would begin rounds



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equipped with the ability to deliver healing doses of laughter and distraction from the stresses of being ill, even for just a little while.

Our program of twice-weekly classes grew to include *motza'ei Shabbos*, school breaks, and other nights of the week when the enthusiasm for the work and the thrill of giving was felt. Soon Lev Leytzan's training sessions and rehearsals in the studio turned into real performances at hospitals, nursing homes, and the homes of sick children and adults. We began regular clown rounds – clowns with a mission!

Young people need to give of themselves just as adults do. Many of the young adults that pass through my psychology treatment room doors share

the common thread of being kids with the desire to be ignited – a desire to have a spark lit inside them and an activity to sustain it. This is not accomplished through indulgence or self-absorption. Both purpose and value are concrete when a person spends himself on others.

I developed Lev Leytzan to provide youth with an opportunity to give, and ultimately receive, using their unique creative and imaginative strengths and abilities while confronting their fears and being involved in something larger than themselves. Clowning is a method of giving laughter and love, sometimes at personal expense. As we saw in the first scenario, the clown took a fall and a pie in the face for the sake of evoking the healing resonance of laughter. That laughter offers release, a break from the seriousness and fear of the moment and, afterward, sweet rest. What power!

How powerful it is to heal while being healed, to give while receiving, to have fun while bringing joy and undergoing self-transformation. It's the gift that con-

tinues to grow and gets passed along.

The real accomplishment of clowning is its ability to foster a strong connection to new people in new situations – going beyond being self-conscious and inhibitions and learning how to relate to people and difficult situations in a spontaneous, real, and meaningful way. With clowning, one is provided with the gift of using every single one of your emotions to connect with people of all ages – from a frightened two-year-old on chemo to a ninety-eight-year-old with Alzheimer’s.

Anne Frank said long ago, “How

wonderful it is that nobody needs to wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.” How wonderful that our Lev Leytzan troupe has had the opportunity to give of themselves and push beyond their dreams to improve a life – their own and others.

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**Lev Leytzan:** The Compassionate Clown Alley, Inc., is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization.

Their programs include:

*Clowns on Call:* Trains ambitious youth to use their talent and compassion to deliver doses of laughter and joy to the community through medical clowning and circus arts. Lev Leytzan's clowns provide entertainment to brighten the day of people who are medically ill or recovering from serious illnesses. They visit hospitals, nursing homes, senior centers, camps, and those recovering at home. They serve people of all ages and affiliations with sensitivity, compassion, and mounds of love using humor and circus arts to lift their spirits along with parents, doctors, and nurses charged with their care.

*Clowns for Safety Squad:* A youth troupe that creates clown and circus performances to teach and promote safety education to preschool and elementary age children. The past two years they've worked on shows called "Candle with Care" and "Watch What You Heat," promoting fire safety and burn prevention. Serious safety topics are addressed through school and community shows that are both humorous and entertaining, while memorable and informative.