

news update

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LETTERS
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CYBERSITES
HEALTH
KOSHER CUPBOARD
LIFECYCLES
NEIGHBORHOODS
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SABBATH WEEK
SINGLES
TRAVEL
JEWISH VACATIONS
FRESH INK FOR TEENS
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Thursday, May 27, 2004 / 7 Sivan 5764

NEWS NY Nat'l Israel Int'l Short Takes

(04/16/2004) Print this Article Send this article

Tricks And Tractates

Introducing an act that shows the magic of Judaism.
Steve Lipman - Staff Writer

Arthur Kurzweil can tell you the Jewish history of cards. He can tell you a midrash about water being a metaphor for Torah. He can tell you the Jewish source of "abracadabra."

He can tell you all this while doing a card trick or pouring a pitcher of water into a hat that remains dry.

It's all in a night's work.

Kurzweil, better known for his nearly 20 years as editor-in-chief of Jason Aronson publishers and his landmark book on Jewish genealogy, has recently turned his lifelong avocation into a part-time vocation.

A fan of magic since he was 3, Kurzweil, now 52, has been performing as a magician for the last several years, doing a specialized show that evolved a year ago into a program that combines amusing tricks with a spiritual message.

"It's a serious magic show — a theological lecture with magic in it," says Kurzweil, who belongs to three professional magicians' organizations, writes for *Genii: The Conjuror's Magazine* and is an advocate of David Copperfield's "Project Magic," which uses magic tricks to aid the rehabilitation of people in physical therapy.

"My show is, in itself, an illusion," he says. "It's not a magic show at all. It's a discussion of perhaps the most profound and important ideas in all of Jewish thought."

Its name: "Searching for God in a Magic Shop."

And you won't hear Kurzweil using abracadabra, the standard magician's phrase, in his prestidigitation.

"I have no use for it," he says

The phrase, as mavens know, comes from the Hebrew *abraa k'dabra* ("I will create as I spoke"), an allusion to God's powers that most magicians invoke at crucial points.

"My own phrase is *gam zu l'tovah*," Kurzweil says, Aramaic for "this too is for the good." He says it is the motto of his performances and of his life. The



Illustration: Leah



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words are engraved on a silver ring he always wears.

Kurzweil explains the phrase's literal and symbolic meaning onstage, and relates it to his magic.

He tells an audience that everything that God does is for our good, but we cannot see the big picture. Likewise with magic. A magician distracts the crowd with words and actions, drawing its attention from his sleight of hand.

"The audience doesn't see everything. That's the human predicament — we don't understand everything that is happening in the world because we don't see everything," Kurzweil says.

"It's a hard topic to discuss — why did God make a world with so much suffering. I have studied what our sages say about this for about 25 years now, and I have found that a discussion of these things, in the midst of a magic show, can be quite effective."

Kurzweil calls it "a soft way" of introducing the notion of *gam zu l'tovah*.

"Accepting the notion is life changing. *Gam zu l'tovah* is judging God favorably," he says. "This one phrase has transformed my life."

Kurzweil appears under his own name. "I don't have a stage name — I decided I'm going to be myself." Balding, with a thick, mostly gray beard and a black kipa, he performs in black slacks, black shirt, black tie and black jacket.

His act is "parlor magic," between the close-up magic done for individuals and the stage magic before large audiences. Kurzweil performs a variety of tricks. "No fire — because of my beard," he says.

He gives some Jewish background about magic. For example, according to Jewish tradition, today's playing cards are descended from the ancient 22-card decks of Tarot cards, corresponding to the 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, that readers used to indicate likely future events.

Kurzweil (www.arthurkurzweil.com) will do about a half dozen shows in the New York area this spring. His next performance is Tuesday, April 20, at the Parker Jewish Institute for Health and Rehabilitation on Long Island.

Now a lecturer and a Jewish consultant for Jossey-Bass Publishers and a student of Jerusalem's Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, he spices his act with jokes and personal stories, reflections on suffering, some words of kabbalah and some Talmudic insights into magic.

Talmud is wary about magic, concerned that naive people might think demons or dark forces are involved.

Kurzweil cautions each audience that everything they see is an illusion. "It's not really magic," he warns. "It's my obligation to let them know that these are just tricks."

"Everything he does, he does with such flair," says Alison Bermant, an educator at the North Shore Synagogue in Syosset, L.I. A member of the congregation's programming committee, she arranged for Kurzweil's performance there last fall.

"The way he weaves Jewish philosophy and the magic tricks was really spellbinding," Bermant says. "People were really entranced. The magic made them receptive to the message he was presenting."

Part of Kurzweil's message is a refutation of Rabbi Harold Kushner's best-selling book "When Bad Things Happen to Good People." Rabbi Kushner opines that an all-knowing God is not all powerful and essentially is powerless to prevent evil.

Which, Kurzweil says, is “absolutely contrary to Jewish theology and belief.”

“He misinformed millions of Jews,” Kurzweil says. The philosophy of gam zu l’tovah, he says during his show, explains that occurrences that appear to be bad turn out in the end to be for the good.

“Dozens of times people have come up to me and said, ‘I’m so glad you said that,’ ” he says. They tell him, “You don’t know how angry that book made me.”

“I would like to make that book disappear,” Kurzweil says.

He offers another view of Jewish tradition.

“By the end of the night,” he says, “everyone knows the phrase gam zu l’tovah.” n

Arthur Kurzweil’s performance on April 20 at 8 p.m. at the Parker Jewish Institute for Health Care and Rehabilitation, 271-11 76th Ave., New Hyde Park, L.I., is sponsored by the International Brotherhood of Magicians. Reservations are necessary; call (516) 978-6963.

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