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WRITE ON "Project Magic," which uses magic tricks to aid the rehabilitation of people in FREE subscriptions
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FOR ISRAEL Physical therapy.
"My show is, in itself, an illusion," he says. "It's not a magic show at all. It's a
SPECIAL SECTIONS discussion of perhaps the most profound and important ideas in all of Jewish
thought."
Its name: "Searching for God in a Magic Shop."
MANHATTAN
BROOKLYN/ And you won't hear Kurzweil using abracadabra, the standard magician's phrase, in his prestidigitation.
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View Last Week's Issue City, Long Island and
"My own phrase is gam zu l'tovah," Kurzweil says, Aramaic for "this too is for "Westchester only. The good." He says it is the motto of his performances and of his life. The
the good. The says it is the motio of his performances and of his life. The

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 bestselling 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.

Here is a list of other articles in this sectionBukharan Jews Resentful Following Murder

- Claim media's unfair portrayal of slain leader taints community, Jewish groups and local pols are uncaring.
- From Self-Mate To Soul Mate
- Lost Innocents Does an army have to be cold-blooded in war? Debating the morality issue.
- Prominent Rabbis OK Orthodox Dating Site SawYouAtSinai gets some crucial endorsements; matchmakers' ethics code sought.
- The Greening Of Ansche Chesed Upper West Side shul, Hazon to pioneer 'eco-kashrut' cooperative so Jews can go organic.
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