

At the Battlefield in Israel . . .

By Shawn Cohen, Reprinted with permission from *The Journal News*, Westchester, NY August 10, 2006

Kibbutz Hanita, Israel. As three Katyusha rockets exploded into nearby hillsides and Israeli artillery shells flew overhead into Lebanon, Zvi Peretz Cohen, wearing a clown suit, drove toward the front line of fire.

The Ossining native, a 61-year-old married father of six, who now lives in northern Israel, seemed unfazed by it all as he pulled into a kibbutz at the Lebanese border and jumped out of his car. He put on his red nose and jumbo shoes, and then waddled into a room full of frightened children.

"Who wants to dance with me?" he asked the kindergartners at Kibbutz Hanita, 30 yards from the border. They instantly perked up and joined him when he started parading around playing his kazoo, and they clapped their hands and stomped their feet as he led them in a spirited chorus of "Hoo! Hoo! Hoo! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Cohen, a so-called "medi-clown," said he considers it his duty to make these children laugh, even as they endure a war that has forced them to hide in bomb shelters.

He's been doing his one-man, traveling clown show throughout the month long war between Israel and Hezbollah, entertaining youngsters in the north whose communities are being bombarded by rockets.

This is about the last thing he envisioned for himself while growing up in northern Westchester, though he did have a strong Jewish upbringing. After graduating from Ossining High School in 1963, he toured Israel with a Zionist youth group and fell in love with the Jewish state. He never moved back, though he returns on the High Holidays as a cantor at a temple in Peekskill.

In Israel, he served three years in the army and taught history for a year in a kibbutz. He then spent 20 years working for an oil refinery in Haifa as a chief buyer, and eight years administering contracts for a project to build a new terminal at Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport. But as he approached retirement, he said he was looking to do something that had more meaning for him. "I wanted to make a psychological change in my own life to be able to enjoy life more by helping other people enjoy more," he said.

Two years ago, he was visiting his 10-year-old granddaughter in the hospital after she developed an infection that left her temporarily blind in one eye. He went to try to cheer her up, he said, and she raised the suggestion that he become a clown for sick children. "I took her advice," said Cohen, who enrolled in a 22-week medi-clown course at a Tel Aviv hospital, offered by an organization called *Simchat Halev* — Hebrew for "joy in the heart."

As far as he knows, he's the only medi-clown making the rounds now in northern Israel. Some of his shows take place in the shelters themselves, while others are held upstairs from them, depending on the security situation at that moment.

He started at 10 a.m. yesterday, performing the first of his shows at Beit Haemek, a kibbutz that has about 220 adults and 150 children a few miles south of the Lebanese border. The kibbutz has been hit four times by Katyushas, including one that narrowly missed striking men farming avocados in a field. Sirens warning of rockets sound several times a day, and many of the families have been sleeping in bomb shelters.



Cohen, sporting a purple beard and giant technicolor bow tie, began this show by swatting at pretend bees and having the children say "abracadabra" before performing a magic trick in which he pulled a yellow ribbon from his fist.

Then he brought out Chippy, his chipmunk hand puppet, which allowed him to raise some delicate issues. "Chippy was frightened to go to the shelter and sometimes he pees on himself, but it's OK, he's fine," Cohen told the kids, and they giggled. "And we're in a safe place." The children have experienced extreme anxiety since the war began, parents said, and it has affected them deeply. Some scream at night. Others wet their pants or lash out at others.

Gal Lindeman, a 5-year-old boy, huddled next to his mother as he watched Cohen perform, and shadowed her when she went to talk with friends. "Mommy, come to the shop, I want something sweet to eat, maybe an ice cream," he said, tugging at her shirt when she attempted to walk off to the bathroom. He's always coming up with some excuse to keep her around, scared to leave her side since the fighting began. This is just one change she's noticed in him. "He knows what's going on," said his mother, Dina Lindeman. "He cries a lot. He's angry a lot. And he wants to eat all day. I read that it's because of nerves, because of the situation."

Several of the children also are nervous about having older siblings fighting in the Israeli army. Cohen touches on this topic by having Chippy ask, "Who wants to send a blessing to the soldiers?"

"We wish them to be safe," one little girl softly replied.

The kids are aware of what's going on around them. When Cohen blew up a long balloon, one of the boys blurted out, "Katyushas!" and another said, "That looks like a rocket."

Cohen said it upsets him deeply to see them grow up in such an environment. After this session, held in the kibbutz's main activity room, the older children went back down to the shelter to spend the day in a reinforced basement. The parents try to make it more normal for them, allowing the youngest ones to step outside and see daylight whenever possible.

As Cohen left the building, he heard an explosion followed by an ambulance, but continued to his second show at another kibbutz at the border where children barely flinched at the sound of artillery fire. That afternoon, all residents of the area had to hide out when sirens sounded. Cohen had to perform his fourth show from one of the bunkers.

"I feel the importance of what I'm doing is more important than the amount of danger I encounter," he said. "The whole country's in a trauma. This is what I can do to help."