

LOOK AT THIS CLOWN

I would have to say that the most important thing that I learned in my day at *mitzvah* clown training – aside from how to put on makeup – was that no matter what happens, I should not give out medical advice.

I wasn't planning on it. My plan, if someone started kvetching to me about his problems, was to complain about my own.

"Look at me!" I would say. "My skin is pale, my nose is swollen... See how unruly my hair is? And this is a wig! And look at my shoes. This is really how big my feet are!"

Mitzvah clown training is not like your typical clown school. Regular clown school takes years to complete and teaches things like how to purposely walk into walls by accident and how to deal with children who are very wary of adults who look like they fell face-first into several vats of food coloring – whereas *mitzvah* clown training goes for one day and focuses mainly on how to make conversation with the elderly.

"*Mitzvah* clowning" is the process of getting dressed up and bringing happiness to senior homes and children's hospitals. It's basically *bikur cholim* on helium. The session that I attended, which was sponsored by an organization called "Areyvut," is designed to teach groups of people the basics of *mitzvah* clowning, after which they take the entire class over to a nursing home. But not all in the same car.

The class is given by a man named Cookie, which I assume is an old family name. Cookie started off by saying that you don't actually have to have a specific



talent to be a *mitzvah* clown, although it doesn't hurt. You're not performing for a very critical audience; you're performing for an audience that is so happy to see a clown dancing around and making balloon animals that they don't care that all you know how to make is snakes and eels. (Also worms. Making a worm is a lot like making a snake, except that you don't bother blowing up the balloon.) And if you make a fool of yourself, no one knows it's you because of all the makeup.

Cookie started by teaching us some of the basics of *mitzvah* clowning, such as "Don't all come barging into a nursing home dressed as clowns without an appointment. Unless you want to end up on the news."

He then talked about choosing a name. It's very important in *mitzvah* clowning that you give the patients something to call you, because it makes them feel more at

ease. It's not important what your name actually is, so long as you give them one. But there are several basic guidelines to follow:

1. If you're clowning with a group of people, don't all choose the same name.
2. Don't randomly change your name in the middle of a visit. If a patient calls, "Hey, Puddles! Puddles!" and you don't respond, he's going to start to think that maybe your name isn't really Puddles.
3. It's important to use an upbeat name, such as "Sunshine" or "Happy," as opposed to a depressing name, like "Mildew." Also, "Buttons" is a better name than "Zippers," "Cornflake" is better than "Raisin Bran," and "Patches" is better than "Potches."
4. When introducing yourself, you don't have to say, "I'm Potches the Clown!" You can just say, "I'm Potches!" It's pretty obvious that you're a clown.
5. But just in case, don't give out medical advice.

Then we talked about balloons. Cookie stressed that balloons are very important because they break the ice

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and give you something to talk about, and it also serves as a reminder of your visit after you leave. He also showed us how to make some basic balloon shapes, such as hats, dogs (small dogs, like the kind that are always being carried around in handbags or getting sucked into recliners), swords (I don't know why the elderly would need swords — perhaps to fend off all the clowns,) and flowers, which are basically just upside-down swords. (I think there's a lesson there, but I've inhaled too much makeup to figure out what it is.) We were also taught to have a one-liner prepared for when the balloons pop so no one has a heart attack.

Cookie finished off the training by giving out makeup kits. The good thing about clown makeup is that it comes off really easily. On the other hand, it also comes off really easily. It gets on your hands, on the inside of your glasses, and if you choose to blow up your balloons without a pump, all over your balloons. Also, the makeup melts in your hot car while you're at the senior center, and it gets all over your nose. The red one that you left in the car.

I had never put on makeup before. Cookie said that we should put on the lighter colors first and then do the darker colors. So I started off by painting my entire face white. And I do mean my entire face. By the time I was done, I had white paint in my hair, my eyes, and the inside of my nose. Then I started painting my lips red, but

because I'm a lefty, the right side of my mouth looked like I had put the makeup on while driving. So I took a paper towel and attempted to wipe it off, but rather than coming clean off, it smeared across my chin. So I started to put more white on my chin, but it started mixing with the red. And then my whole chin was pink, and the more I tried to fix it, the more it kept mixing, and the next thing I knew, my cheeks were pink too. So I gave up trying to fix it and decided to just make my whole face pink. Then I put a little bit of blue around my eyes, but that started mixing with the white as well. You know how you learned in science class that if you mix all the colors of the rainbow, you get white? At some point, I had all the colors on my face, and I definitely was *not* getting white.

Now I know why it takes my wife so long to get ready to leave the house.

When we were all dressed up and made up, we went over to the nursing home. And no, we didn't pile into the same car; we went in a procession of cars, sort of like a clown funeral. At some point someone tried to merge in front of me, but I didn't let him in because I didn't want

to lose the car I was following. The guy looked over at me, and I could tell by his facial expression that he did not think I was a responsible driver. I'm not totally sure what he could tell from *my* facial expression.

"Look at this clown!" he was probably saying to his wife. "I'm trying to merge, and this clown just cuts me off! Someone should wipe that big grin off his face!"

As it turns out, the seniors were very happy to see us. They were all full of comments.

"Nice shoes."

"What? No, these are my *shoes!*"

But whenever I tell this story to anyone, they all want to know the same thing:

"Old people like clowns?" they ask.

The truth is that old people do not specifically like clowns. But they do like entertaining others with stories of their life experiences. There are not a whole lot of new experiences when you're living in a senior center. But now they have a new one, and they can tell it to their kids when they come to visit:

"The strangest thing happened the other day! Here, have a balloon." 

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