

Fair Weather

Written by Mordechai Schmutter for Hamodia Magazine

It's 3:00 on a Sunday afternoon, and I'm standing in a crowd of people in the pouring rain and watching the members of my neighborhood Hatzolah use the Jaws of Life pry the driver's side door off a car. After what feels like an eternity, the door falls to the ground, and they pull the victim out of the driver's seat and onto a backboard and stretcher. Everyone applauds, including the guy on the stretcher. Then he leaps off the stretcher and asks if he can have a turn with the claw. I wonder whose car that is.

The town was Passaic, and the setting was the first Passaic Health and Safety Fair, sponsored by the Hatzolah of Passaic/Clifton EMS and Bikur Cholim of Passaic and Clifton. The point of the fair was to "raise awareness", although I'm not entirely sure what that means. I, for one, was already aware that we're supposed to be healthy and safe, but apparently there are some people who aren't sure, and that's who we're trying to reach. I was just in the way. Or maybe the point was to raise awareness that "These are your Hatzolah guys: The guy handing out balloons at the door, the guy running the popcorn machine, the one taking pictures of everything including the big unmanned pile of fruit near the door, and the guy laying on his back on the stretcher and staring up at the rain."

But most of the organizations who'd setup booths at the fair seemed primarily concerned with raising people's awareness of their phone numbers. I must have come home with about fifteen refrigerator magnets, an assortment of pens and key chains, and what appears to be a squeezable egg. But the main point is that everyone in town who was a member of Hatzolah OR Bikur Cholim was in one place, so that was definitely the safest place to be. Unless you didn't want to get trampled.

There were over thirty booths at the fair, some of which were trying to sell something. Early on, we passed a booth that was trying to sell the concept of acupuncture. Acupuncture is a process wherein someone sticks a bunch of needles into strategic points on your body to make you feel better. This is how it works:

ACUPUNCTURIST: "Perhaps we should stick some more needles into strategic points on your body."

PATIENT: "No!! I feel better! I FEEL BETTER!!"

But I'm pretty sure that you can't sell the concept of acupuncture. From what I understand, everyone is either already considering it, or would never be able to get past the fact that you're talking about sticking them with needles.

"But look!" the acupuncturist said to me. "The needles are so small!"

Like that's supposed to make it better. That doesn't even work when I'm trying to get my son to eat his last bite of chicken.

But although most of the booths were directed at adults, there was a lot for the kiddies to do too. This was good for people like me, who brought their kids along as a cheap Sunday outing and could not, say, get a massage at the massage therapist booth without having his kids wander off and knock over the baby-proofing booth. So I spent most of the time at the kiddie stations.

For instance, the fire department had set up a booth that gave out fire hats. The guy must have brought about ten hats, total. Seriously, he ran out of them in the first ten minutes. No one had told him that little kids are into fire hats. But he did have plenty of educational coloring books that teach kids that if they're on fire, the best thing to do is to stop, drop and roll. Although nowhere in the book does it tell them not to light themselves on fire in the first place.

In addition, Hatzolah themselves had set up a booth near the entrance, and when each child came in, he or she was given a balloon. This is a sound safety tactic, because when you can't find your child in a crowd, all you have to remember is that he had an orange balloon. Unless another kid also has an orange balloon. Also, when you're standing in line for popcorn surrounded by little kids, the balloons keep getting attracted to your face via the static in your hair. That's where the acupuncture booth would come in handy.

There were also a whole bunch of safety demonstrations, such as Choking Intervention, Fitness Training, and Self-Defense. But we, of course, watched the magic show, which was performed by two guys name Donny and Zip, who wore colorful clothing and big floppy shoes, and who illustrated the need for safety by falling down a lot. (I think important safety lesson number 1 was not to wear big floppy shoes.) The kids found the show hilarious, except for the ones who were scared of the performers, or of the balloons, or of other kids crying. There was definitely a lot of crying going on, so I missed most of the plot, plus there were rows and rows of kids sitting near the stage, and each one had a balloon, which meant that directly above them, right in the typical adult line of vision, was about two hundred balloons. But I think at some point someone made a bird appear. Or disappear.

Meanwhile, a large portion of the fair was going on outside, in the rain. For example, there were cops inspecting people's cars for seatbelt and car seat safety. I myself didn't sign up for that, because best case scenario I spend the entire time waiting in line with the engine running, and it costs me five dollars in gas to find out that my brand-new car seats are fine, and worst case scenario I would go through all of that and then get a ticket. Fairgoers could also tour a fire truck, a Hatzolah ambulance, and a police motorcycle, and Dr. Robert Grunstein was there with his "Dental Rescue Unit" made from a refurbished fire truck with a dentist chair in the back. (I understand he doesn't do dental work while the truck is in motion.)

But that is how I ended up standing in the rain, watching the members of Hatzolah demonstrate how to extricate a victim from a car at the scene of an accident. The Hatzolah guys were very excited about this part, because Hatzolah of Passaic/Clifton EMS does not have an extrication unit, and, being guys, they loved the prospect of ripping off a car door with nothing but their bare hands and what looks like the claw to an animal game machine. One of them volunteered to be the victim, which meant that he got to sit in the car out of the rain, while the other guys fired up the jaws of life and proceeded to pry off the driver's side door like you might pry open a can of tuna fish, assuming you were very excited about your tuna fish, and had a few hundred people watching you open your can of tuna fish in the rain. When they were done, we all went back inside, except for the Hatzolah guys, who enthusiastically spent the two hours cutting the car into tiny little pieces that could be loaded into the back of a van and carried to the mechanic. ("We don't know what happened. Can you put it back together?")

But overall, I'd have to say that the most important thing that I learned at the fair is that sometimes it's raining. But Hatzolah just marches on.

Support your local Hatzolah. Or at least let them practice on your car.