

# Heart Beat

**T**HE CALL WAS clocked in at 11:26:00 and the dispatcher depressed the TRANSMIT key on his mike: "FLATBUSH units vicinity Avenue O and East Ten: respond." He held the caller on the line and five seconds later repeated his transmission: "Any F units vicinity O, East Ten: respond."

**11:26:08** "F-98 here." It was Zev Stein, one of the Flatbush drivers. "I'm at Ocean Parkway and X."

"Ten-four, F-98. Proceed to 913 Avenue O. Code Blue."

The term "Code Blue" evoked a flurry of responses. When it crackled out of the walky-talky in Moishe Weinberg's inside jacket pocket during a business meeting on Fourteenth Avenue, he leaped from his seat. His chair went skating across the polished office floor and smashed into the wall six feet away. Without so much as a "Pardon

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me," Moish was out the door. "B-83 here," he reported, "I'm at Fourteenth Avenue and Fifty-first. Do you copy?"

"Ten-four, B-83."

Joe Rosen was in the shower when his walky-talky gasped the message from the edge of the bathroom sink. He raced out of the stall and into his clothes, zipping up his coveralls in the elevator down. As the floor indicator marked his descent, Joe checked his watch: 11:27:14. Not too bad, he thought. From dripping wet to fully dressed and on his way in one minute, six seconds. Still, he'd have to hustle if he hoped to make it in time. He plotted the route in his head as he ran through the lobby. "This is F-76," he reported. "H-Base, do you copy?"

Tully Gluck was testing the heating system of a tenant's apartment on the seventh floor in the Park Slope neighborhood when the call came through. He bounded down the steps like a mountain goat, hurdled the banister of the front stoop and made tracks for his van. While Joe rode in the elevator several blocks away, Tully was turning the key in the ignition. Nate Wexler was already rolling, but he was way over on Eighteenth Avenue in Boro Park.

FROM FIVE DIFFERENT directions, Zev, Moish, Joe, Tully and Nate converged on Avenue O and East Tenth Street. These were the men of HATZOLAH. On voluntary call day and night, each ready to drop whatever he was doing, go wherever he was sent, whenever he was needed, these men — along with a cadre of hundreds of other "ordinary" Jews like them — formed a unique corps. All of the Big Apple was their beat.

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Zev, travelling down Ocean Parkway from Avenue X, was the "first responder." Unaware that four of his associates were already en route to the emergency, he called upon every ounce of driving proficiency he possessed in his haste to reach the patient. "Code Blue" meant cardiac arrest: the victim's heart had ceased beating, cutting off the vital supply of oxygen to the brain. After four minutes without oxygen, the irreversible process of deterioration begins: the rapid destruction of brain cells that results in paralysis, loss of memory, loss of sensory function, and, ultimately, brain death — the stage at which the patient is reduced to a "vegetable," kept alive by machines.

The static-crackle of responses coming over his radio was comforting. Now he knew he wasn't alone in his race against the clock. He reached out the window and attached the magnetic red light to the roof of his car, then flipped the siren switch on the dash. Instantly, the siren began to whoop and the "cherry" light to rotate in a concert of urgency, and the traffic divided to allow him passage.

The human brain is an incredibly efficient apparatus. Unlike man-made computers, God's ingenious piece of work is equipped to handle a multitude of problems simultaneously. Thus Zev had no difficulty guiding his car skillfully through the mid-morning traffic while mentally reviewing the medical supplies in the kit at his side and calculating the time elapsed since the emergency call was placed. He'd been doing forty-five when the flow of vehicles entering this major Brooklyn artery had forced him to decelerate to thirty. With the aid of the siren, he was able to spur his little Mustang up to sixty.

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**O**CEAN PARKWAY, however, was never designed to accommodate vehicles at that speed. A broad, bench-lined thoroughfare with an asphalt divider down its center, it splits the borough roughly along an East-West axis. On either side of the divide, three lanes of traffic flow in both directions, accessed by alphabetically sequenced avenues and paralleled east and west by numerically sequenced streets. The flow of cars and buses entering the heavily used boulevard is constant.

Drivers scattered at the sound of Zev's siren but few were able to pinpoint its source. Inevitably, with some cars merging into the traffic from the right, others pulling over to avoid the speeding siren-sounder, and still others stopping altogether in bewilderment, a massive traffic jam resulted. Undaunted, Zev shifted into reverse and backed away from the wall of honking cars and into the intersection, with no noticeable reduction in speed.

Zev swung right onto Avenue T and burned rubber all the way to East Eighth. At Avenue R, he hooked a left on two wheels in front of the Mirror Yeshiva, and squealed into another left directly under a Con-Ed cherry-picker, from the crow's-nest of which a yellow-suited electrician was changing the bulb on a sodium-vapor lamp. Zev's unexpected appearance beneath his perch caused him to drop the huge bulb and it crashed to the pavement explosively. The sound convinced a co-worker, emerging from a manhole, that Brooklyn was under nuclear attack. He took a flying leap back down his manhole and slammed the cover over his head.

By this time, Zev was long gone. Ignoring the light at the corner, he braked slightly for a right back onto Ocean

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Parkway beyond the traffic jam he'd created. He was only six blocks short of his goal.

**11:27:40** Similar stunts were being perpetrated in other parts of Brooklyn. Had the emergency call come through at any other time, up to thirty HATZOLAH men would have been rushing to the scene, wreaking minor havoc with the city's traffic patterns as they sped through the streets. But what's a little havoc when a life is at stake?

**A**LTHOUGH few HATZOLAH volunteers shared Zev's enthusiastic derring-do, they all — for one reason or another — were equally motivated. As the borough's elderly population increased, the volume of emergency calls to the City hospitals rose and the ability of paramedical rescue teams to reach victims in time diminished. On average, City ambulances arrived on the scene nine minutes after the call. Occasionally it was possible to revive the victim; more often, the patient was wheeled into the hospital under a red blanket: D.O.A.

Zev's next-door neighbor had suffered such a fate twelve years earlier, when Zev himself had been hardly more than a teenager. He had stood by helplessly as the clock ticked that nice woman's life away. With each jerk of the second hand on his watch, Zev's youthful imagination had conjured up the vision of millions of tiny brain cells gasping for breath, collapsing on the floor of the cerebellum, and, finally, stiffening in the classic comic-strip pose of *rigor mortis*.

The woman who had been like an adoptive grandmother to Zev had not made it. There were no more of Bubbe Bella's oatmeal cookies, no more stories "from the old

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country," no more fresh-baked challah after that. That summer, Zev had taken an EMT course at Lutheran Hospital, not knowing how he would put it to use — until HATZOLAH was formed. And while the City ambulances continued in their failure to meet the rising demand with their nine-minutes-plus response time, HATZOLAH was always on the spot in under two.

Zev made a right onto Ocean Parkway directly into the passing lane alongside the median, sailing across the bows of two lanes of oncoming cars in the process. His own siren was swiftly joined by several others. He glanced at the rear-view mirror, expecting to see a flotilla of his fellow HATZOLAH members, but finding only the looming shapes of the Highway Patrol cruisers. They bore down ominously on his spunky Mustang and Zev shrugged in resignation.

"H-base, I've got three Smokeys on my tail," he reported to the dispatcher at Headquarters, "and they don't look very friendly."

"Ten-four, F-98." There was no time to spare for a driver who was out of commission. The dispatcher's next transmission brought a grimace to Zev's lips. "Attention all FLATBUSH and BORO PARK units responding to the call: F-98 out of action. Units F-76, B-91, F-79, B-83: report your locations."

**Z**EV RAISED the volume on his radio for the benefit of the trooper now swaggering towards his window. The patrolman hitched his Sam Browne higher on his spreading hips, tilted his hat to the back of his head, and thrust his big face into Zev's car.

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"Cute little cherry light ya got there, fella," he said, breathing into Zev's nostrils. "Ya playin' cops an' robbers or somethin'?"

"Officer, I'm an emergency medical technician, on an urgent call. It's a matter of life and death!"

"D'ya get that, Mike?" the patrolman called to his partner. The second policeman was white-gloving traffic around the captured Mustang. "The little guy's in a big hurry — sez he's goin' to a 'mergency!"

Zev smiled disarmingly. "Officer, please, I'm on a mission of mercy!"

"Uh-huh," the skeptical cop grunted. "An' I'm Cinderella, on my way to the ball." Then, suddenly tiring of the game and reverting to type, he squared his hat and commanded: "Step out of your vehicle, sir. License and registration, please." The order was spiked with a generous dollop of sarcasm.

**11:27:48** While Zev was being slapped with nine citations for traffic violations, including exceeding the speed limit, failure to stop for a red light, failure to signal, unauthorized use of a revolving light, and constituting a vehicular menace to the general public, Nate arrived on the scene. His drive from a far greater distance had been only slightly less creative than Zev's, but he'd been mercifully unencumbered by either traffic or "Smokeys". He braked to a screeching halt with one wheel up on the sidewalk and jumped out of his car, leaving his door flung open.

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NATE FOUND the victim slumped over the kitchen table. He opened the man's collar and felt for a pulse in his neck. There was none. He eased him off the chair and laid him flat on the floor, preparing to administer cardio-pulmonary resuscitation.

Tully's arrival was no less dramatic. The HATZOLAH team, folk-heroes of the religious community, attracted a crowd of admirers wherever they went. School teachers had long since abandoned hope of controlling their classes when an emergency occurred in the vicinity of their school: the moment a siren was heard, the students bolted from their seats and jammed the windowsills to watch their heroes in action. Tully's car had zipped past a group of school children on a science outing and their teacher — no less prone to hero-worship than his youthful charges — had no trouble keeping pace with his pupils as they raced to join the mob gathered on the sidewalk on Avenue O.

Joe's Austin was ideally sized for sidewalk driving, a tactic that had frequently come in handy when traffic blocked his path. If the Sanitation Department were to give out Purple Hearts, countless Brooklyn trashcans would be thus decorated, having been wounded in action by Joe's front bumper. The patrolmen who spotted "The Sidewalk Streak" — as they called him — were of the friendly variety and, with the best interests of the City's trashcans at heart, graciously provided a police escort.

**11:27:59** Just as Nate was checking the victim's pulse a second time, Tully appeared at the door with Joe at his heels, each gripping an equipment bag. Tully broke his open and removed the oxygen unit while Nate checked to see if

the victim's mouth and throat were clear of obstructions.

Joe spoke into his hand-held transmitter: "H-base, units F-76, B-91 and F-79 reporting. Over."

"Go ahead, F-76."

"Patient is a male senior citizen, about seventy-five. Pulse: negative. Administering CPR. Send us a bus with a thumper and notify the medics."

"Ten-four, F-76."

TULLY POSITIONED the oxygen mask over the old man's nose and mouth, adjusting his neck to prevent the tongue from blocking the airway, and Nate straddled the victim's torso. There was no need for any signals to pass between them: each man knew his job. Tully pressed the button on the manual respirator, pumping three blasts of air into the man's lungs, and then began counting: "One-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand." The count set the cadence for Nate — ninety beats per minute.

With his left hand gripping the back of his right and elbows locked to exert the maximum pressure, Nate pressed the heel of his right hand down on the victim's chest just above the sternum, once for every "one thousand." By stimulating the heart's normal rhythm, they could keep the brain adequately oxygenated to sustain it undamaged. Every five beats, Tully reactivated the respirator.

"My Sidney!" the victim's wife cried. "My Sidney! What are you doing to my Sidney?"

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"It's alright," Joe said, trying to keep her calm. "They know what they're doing. Now what's your husband's full name and does he have a previous history of heart attack?"

"Heart attack!! *Oy vey's mir*. No, no. Just angina, sometimes a little indigestion. Is he having a heart attack? *Oy mein Gott!*"

Joe was afraid they might have another victim on their hands if he didn't get the woman under control. "Missus, please, just relax. Sidney's going to be alright. But you've got to help."

He quickly hooked up the small EKG monitor and attached the leads. Instantly, the machine issued an audiovisual representation of Sidney's inert heart. The uninterrupted "bee-ep" was far from encouraging. He hurried back to the victim's wife.

"...two-one thousand, three-one thousand..."

**11:28:45** Moish arrived at last and took in the whole scene at a glance. He nudged Joe aside and positioned himself so as to block the woman's view of the kitchen.

"Are you Mrs. Bulofsky?" he asked, gesturing towards the nameplate below the doorbell.

"Yes, Ida Bulofsky. Is my Sidney going to be alright?" She peered around him nervously.

"Is that B-u-l or B-e-l?" he asked, distracting her from the frightening spectacle behind him.

"B-u-l." She noticed Moish's suit for the first time. The air of officialdom with which it endowed him seemed to steady her.

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"Can you tell me what happened to your husband, Mrs. Bulofsky? Did anything like this ever happen before?"

"No, no. Never. He's got angina, see, and he got this pain in his chest so I went to get him his pills and when I come back he's laying there and I called him and called him but he don't answer so I take a look and he's not breathing!"

"When was this, Mrs. Bulofsky?"

"When? How should I know when? When I called you, that's when."

**W**HAT TIME have we got?" Tully called. While Moish was doing his number on Ida Bulofsky, Joe had taken over for Nate, Nate had replaced Tully on the respirator and Tully, with the stethoscope around his neck, was trying to find a heartbeat.

"I make it just under three minutes," Moish replied, looking at his watch. "How long has he been on CPR?" "Less than a minute."

A siren wailed in the street, and Moish dared to hope. In an instant, though, the sound receded. "H-base," he shouted into his transmitter, "this is B-83. Where's that *farshlugener* bus?!"

"On the way, B-83. ETA 11:34."

Five more minutes! Moish stripped off his jacket and tie and replaced Joe on Sidney Bulofsky's chest. Joe stood up slowly. Patches of perspiration mottled his coveralls; his arms trembled after the exertion of the closed-chest massage.

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"I think I got a flutter that time," Tully said tentatively, pressing two fingers to Bulofsky's carotid artery.

Moish gave it everything he had. Broad-shouldered and heavily built, he put his weight and years of experience behind the push that compressed Sidney's heart against his spine. The strongest muscle in the body, the heart can withstand enormous pressure; the ribs, however, cannot. Even when properly administered, CPR occasionally breaks some ribs — a small price to pay for a life. On the third count, Moish felt the gentle cracking beneath his hands as the old man's fragile bones gave way.

"...four-one thousand, five-one thousand..."

**11:29:15** The trembling in Joe's extremities had settled down to a tolerable quiver. He turned his attention to Ida Bulofsky. The poor woman reacted to every push on her husband's body with a shudder of her own and all the color had drained from her anguish-pinched face. Joe quickly sent her on an errand to collect all of her husband's medications and assemble them on the hall table.

A minute later she returned, holding the corners of her apron skirt like a sack. Isordil, nitroglycerin, Inderal, antacid tablets. Joe was pleased to note that the effort had brought some color back to her cheeks. Then Sidney vomited.

**N**ATE WHIPPED the oxygen mask off the man's mouth, turned his face to the side to prevent aspiration, and cleared the airway. Tully handed him a fresh respiration unit. Working together like parts of a well-oiled machine, they each performed a separate, critical function,

fueled by a unity of purpose. Moish hadn't missed a beat.

"...three-one thousand, four-one thousand..."

**11:32:55** The men had all switched positions. In the four minutes, fifty seconds since CPR was initiated, the patient's pulse had registered only two feeble flutters. They had no idea how long a cardiac arrest victim could be sustained by this method, but statistical data on the subject was irrelevant: the men of HATZOLAH were prepared to keep going for as long as was necessary, as long as there was strength in their hands.

"He's fibrillating," Moish exclaimed, reading the EKG monitor. The twitching of the muscle fibers was a good sign, but the muscle itself was still inactive. Another siren wailed down Avenue O, this time followed almost immediately by the sound of heavy footsteps on the stairs. The paramedics had arrived. Nate sent Mrs. Bulofsky off to pack a bag for her husband: she had to be safely out of the way during the next procedure.

The paramedic crouched on the floor and peeled back Bulofsky's shirt. He turned a rheostat to charge up the battery-operated unit and removed the defibrillating paddles — two black-handled rods, each terminating in a metal disk — from his case. Placing the paddles on the dying man's chest, he called "Clear," and everyone stood back. Two hundred volts of electricity slammed through Sidney Bulofsky's motionless form. His body arched and flapped momentarily like a beached trout and Moish searched again for a pulse.

"Hit it again."

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"Okay." He waited for the electric surge to build. "Clear." Another powerful jolt smacked into Sidney's inert heart muscle. There was not a sound in the room as all eyes remained glued to the monitor. Four pairs of lips moved in silent prayer while the men of HATZOLAH awaited the verdict.

The EKG blipped sharp peaks on its screen, and Moish slapped his stethoscope to the patient's chest. "Got it!" he cried.

"All *right!*" the others cheered. "*Baruch Hashem!*"

**11:33:40** "Let's get an IV going here," the medic ordered. Nate held the plastic bag of saline solution while Joe inserted an intravenous line in Bulofsky's arm. Tully was tossing the litter of equipment into their bags when the stretcher bearers entered. They strapped the patient securely to the aluminum frame.

Nate carried the IV bag aloft and Joe handled the oxygen respirator as the team maneuvered the stretcher down the narrow stairwell. Tully was the next one out, carrying three equipment bags. With one hand, Moish swept Bulofsky's medicine bottles into his own case, knowing the doctor would require them, and glanced over his shoulder before stepping out the door.

Ida Bulofsky's red-rimmed eyes pleaded with him wordlessly.

"Promise to be good?"

She quickly nodded her assent. "Get your coat, then, and I'll take you to the hospital." She grabbed her purse and coat and Sidney's overnight bag and hurried to join him in

the hall. "Don't worry, Ida," Moish said. "Sid is in good hands, *B'ezet Hashem.*"

**H**E WAS HELPING HER into his car when Zev pulled up at the curb. Vehicles were scattered along the street and sidewalk like Pik-Up Stix dumped at random from their can. The ambulance screamed its way through traffic and Moish gave his friend a broad smile and a hearty thumbs-up sign.

"H-base, F-98 here."

"F-98?" The dispatcher exclaimed uncharacteristically.

"Where are you? I thought we'd have to raise bail for you. Over."

"Yeah, well, I turned on the charm and mentioned my uncle the judge who suspended the last cop that stopped me for speeding, so they let me go. I'm at the scene now. Over."

"Report, F-98."

"It looks like my buddies managed without me — this time." He grinned, mentally chalking up another HATZOLAH for Bubbe Bella. "Over and out, H-base."

"Hold it, F-98. Proceed to Coney Island Avenue pizza shop. Choking victim. Do you copy?"

"Ten-four, H-base. I'm on my way..."

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