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## The funny business of remembering Koby Mandell

By DAVID HOROVITZ  
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Comedy review: In the expanded confines of the Jerusalem Theater, Avi Liberman's was the act that seemed too short.

So there's this guy called Norman who's foolish enough to take a seat front and center at this season's Comedy for Koby show in Jerusalem.

Foolish in part because this is stand-up, and comedians invariably pick out various unfortunates from the audience for fleeting abuse, and their gaze naturally tends to the folks sitting front and center.

Foolish especially because Norman, the Orthodox father of five children, is, for whatever doubtless excellent reason, not here with his wife – as we all learn in the mildly embarrassing (for him) course of host Avi Liberman's opening act.

We never discover the true identity of the lady seated to his left to whom, at least according to Liberman, Norman turns for confirmation when asked to detail the names and ages of his children. But we do, from the rows behind him, see Norman squirm just a little in his seat as Ari cheerfully misrepresents her as his mistress and chirpily undermines his religious bona fides as well.

In truth, Liberman's comedic assault on the hapless Norman was emphatically of the gentle and good-natured, rather than the pointed and nasty variety. The same can be said, indeed, of the entire evening – a seriously funny comedic showcase, held for the most elevated of reasons: to raise funds for the Koby Mandell Foundation, set up by Sherri and Rabbi Seth Mandell in memory of their 13-year-old son, who was murdered with his friend Yosef Ish Ran by Palestinian terrorists near their Tekoa home in May 2001.

Seth and Sherri began the evening by detailing some of the foundation's recent activities, primarily devoted to programs helping families of terror victims, and by telling a few jokes beloved by Koby. It was his love of humor, after all, that inspired this unique choice of a comedy series in his memory.

ISRAELI-BORN, Texas-raised, Los Angeles-based Liberman has emerged as the true star of these shows. He chooses the changing line up of three US-based comics who make the trips with him, and finds the funds to bring them here, so that all monies raised by the shows themselves can be used solely for philanthropic purposes. And, by virtue of his Jewishness, his Israel expertise and his growing familiarity with this particular audience of good-humored and compassionate Israeli English-speakers, Liberman has developed into the perfect compere.

On Sunday night in the expanded confines of the Jerusalem Theater, Liberman's was the act that seemed too short. He was the comic, unsurprisingly, who most fluently merged his American-targeted material with gags of strictly local interest.

He riffed on the absurd names of some of the Old City's gates – Damascus and Dung, for goodness sake? How did we come up with those? He offered a novel approach to “apologizing” to the Turks over the flotilla affair, suggesting we proffer an utterly un-heartfelt mea culpa – the kind of “I'm sorry you feel that way” brush-off that a woman delivers to a man with whom things just haven't worked out too well. And he made some much-needed merriment of the Egyptians' risible notion that the Mossad had dispatched a shark “with a yarmulke” to terrify the bathers of Sharm e- Sheikh.

LIBERMAN WAS followed on stage by the evening's other big hit, Long Island-born Gregg Rogell, who began with a terrific routine about the letter he'd written to Santa Claus as a kid – in the course of which he revealed that he was a) Jewish, b) possessed of fine supply of sardonic wit and c) considered to be a pain in the butt by his own father.

The audience loved his El Al routine. He mused about the unique Israeli national airline imperative to disclose his religion; no, they don't say, “Welcome to Delta. Are you Jewish?” He played up the security officer's horrified outrage that he'd never had a bar mitzvah. And he sketched a lovely scene that had him imploring a thoroughly disinterested Israeli guard to, please, let him take off his shoes, like the other airlines do, just in case he was a terrorist, and being ordered irritably to “just get on the plane.”

Brooklyn's Dwayne Perkins, the most physical of the comedians, was also warmly received, with a meandering routine that introduced new twists to old clichés about the white man's inability to dance, produced much empathetic nodding of heads with a section on his obsessively clean former roommate, and veered happily into comic absurdity when he argued in favor of not eating that last piece of pizza on your plate. How, he wondered with a certain undeniable logic, could it possibly benefit starving children in Africa if we all finished all the food we were served, as our parents so relentlessly demand? Surely, the only faint hope of helping those poor kids would be if we left some food uneaten, and it fell into a shopping bag, and somehow got transported... Well, it was funny when he did it.

The night's final act, John Caponera, was more of an old-school comic; in fact his opening joke was hoarier than the dumb blonde jokes from Koby's computer that Sherri and Seth read out at the start of the evening. But Caponera's heart was plainly in the right place, too, and during the Q and A session that followed the comedy routines, he had the quick wits to drag out a familiar gag about the inability even of supernatural forces to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The evening was not without its snarls. The Q and A session produced one highly ill-considered remark, and Caponera's routine focused a little too much on death for an event held against this particular background.

But these are comedy evenings that will not be derailed. They are gatherings with what is surely a unique character – performers and audience meeting for the noblest of causes, determined to enjoy themselves, in full cognizance of the appalling event that brings them together.

Koby Mandell's parents, and all who assist them in this humorous, holy endeavor, are to be respected, applauded, and, on these remarkable nights, laughed along with.



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