

INTRODUCING

# Tobias's Tent



by Brad E. Kauffman

**T**obias Vogelstein, a”h, was one of the most incredible people I have ever had the privilege to know. We just commemorated his first *yahrzeit* last December. A year later, it is still painful to realize that he is no longer physically with us. He was such a beacon of light who emanated an aura of vivaciousness and jubilation, which is remarkable considering that he had every justification for being distraught, resentful, and melancholy.

I first met Tobias when I was 16 while working as an instructor at Beth Tfiloh Camps. At that time, Tobias was a camper there. He was seven years old and a year-and-a-half removed from a pediatric brain tumor diagnosis that caused him to become blind and deaf. We instantly formed a special bond that lasted 25 years, until Tobias’s untimely death at 32 in November 2023 from a second recurrence of brain cancer.

Stan Lustman also formed a long-standing relationship with Tobias after teaching him how to recite the *Haftorah* for his bar mitzva. Enthralled by Tobias, Stan stated that Tobias “had a greater positive impact on those fortunate enough to have had their lives cross paths with him than anyone could expect of another human being who lived to be even 120. Despite being dealt a terrible hand in life, Tobias made life glorious.”

Stan and I observed firsthand Tobias’s many achievements, which included being a prolific storyteller, writer, lyricist, and magician, among other talents. He earned a degree in electronic media and film from Towson University, never allowing adversity or his significant disabilities to impede his success or

obstruct his tenacity. Six weeks after his second brain surgery, Tobias walked down the aisle at my wedding and sang a song about our cherished relationship that he wrote.

His cheerful and upbeat disposition often invigorated others with a renewed commitment to rise above their challenges. As his mother Debbie Vogelstein noted, “Tobias always was smiling. He found joy through all kinds of literature, music, and interactions with people. Believing that, ‘entertainment is the greatest gift one can offer humanity,’ Tobias dedicated himself to sharing deep conversation and vibrant laughter with others.” Even after his death, Tobias still inspires others. Recently, his family located a publisher who published one of Tobias’s masterpieces, titled *Stories Can Inspire*, which is a story about a young boy who struggled with adjusting to his new home and, by finding a magical book off of a dusty shelf, the boy became acquainted with his surroundings.

Stan Lustman and I were both determined to keep Tobias alive in our hearts and minds. In February 2024, we jointly launched Tobias’s Tent, a non-profit organization that will preserve Tobias’s exceptional legacy and combat loneliness in the Jewish community.

Loneliness is a serious epidemic that can severely impact one’s health, which is compounded by the difficulty in identifying people who need support and companionship. “Many people think about helping when someone reaches out, but the reality is that most people – around 80% – don’t reach out for help,” said Shlomo Bergmann, who joined the board of Tobias’s Tent.

“The organization addresses a gap that is both critical and often overlooked. This is a one-of-a-kind initiative that addresses a huge demand with very few others stepping up to fill it,” empha-

sized Shlomo.

Guided by Tobias’s affinity for encouraging other individuals through entertainment, Tobias’s Tent is focused on pairing volunteer entertainers with people of different age groups who may be suffering from loneliness while residing in a facility or who may perhaps be isolated while living at home.

In the last few months, Tobias’s Tent has hosted events at several assisted living facilities in the Jewish community, starring Cantor Avi Albrecht, who performed for the residents. At one of the events, Yonatan Grinberg played his violin for the residents. These events have been a resounding success. “At events, I’ve personally seen people smiling, singing, and dancing – moments that brighten not just a day but sometimes a whole week. I even overheard a caregiver say it was the first time in a long while they had seen their patient smile,” observed Shlomo Bergmann.

Currently, the organization is recruiting volunteer entertainers to visit individuals seeking to be uplifted. Although having unique talent is a plus, it is not required to be a volunteer. Being a skilled conversationalist can easily bring a smile to a lonely individual. Additionally, Tobias’s Tent hopes to partner with rabbis, lay leaders, and community members in order to connect with individuals who would benefit from visits from our volunteers. If any readers of the *WWW* are interested in becoming a volunteer or receiving visits from a volunteer, they are encouraged to go on the organization’s website, [www.tobiastent.org](http://www.tobiastent.org), and fill out the appropriate form in order to be contacted by the organization.

Additional events will be planned in the near future. ♦