



Photo by Gidon Louin

Dr. Mordechai Shani

the medicine man

by Aliza Davidovitz and Benjamin Goldberg

A look at Dr. Mordechai Shani's extensive resume would convince anyone that he's held more positions than a yogi. Since 1970 he's held 45 different titles, from Director General of Israel's Ministry of Health to his current title as Director General of the Sheba Medical Center-Tel Hashomer; from hospital boards, to school boards to government posts, he has been a director, a chairman, an adviser, a founder and a consultant, to list a few of his responsibilities. Shani, otherwise known as the "medicine man," has played more roles than Al Pacino not because he suffers from indecision, but because he knows exactly what he wants to do: to completely reshape health care in the State of Israel.

Although the task ahead of him is Herculean, unlike most doctors, Shani doesn't think he's God. In fact, it is his blatant humanness that is driving him to change the system. He feels that technology, HMO's and money control the medical world and the human touch is gone. "I grew up in the old school where we had time to be with patients and we could devote ourselves to them," Shani says. "That world is gone." Today it's a matter of saving money and turnover. Shani anticipates that the average hospital stay for acute diseases will be two days by the year 2010; today it is approximately four days.

"The system doesn't address the human element," Shani explains. Shani also feels that the medical field has become too specialized and that doctors focus on their specialty and forget to treat the complete human being. "I'll never forget when a patient came to me and said, 'My liver is alright, my blood is alright, my thyroid is alright—but I'm sick,'" Shani recalls. "Doctors have to learn to treat the whole human being."

In his endeavors to give people a quality of life no matter how ill they may be, Shani has created three hospices in Israel, one for children and two for adults. Shani recalls how one man was clinging to life so he could see his daughter get married, or how another patient was looking forward to the *bris* of his grandchild. "There are still very beautiful moments in life even if one has two or three months to live," Shani says. "We as medical professionals have the responsibility to help these patients live those moments."

And so when the issue of euthanasia is raised, Shani, who also teaches Health Administration and Ethics at the Sackler School of Medicine, Tel Aviv University, says if he'd be on a jury he'd find any doctor who assisted in euthanasia guilty of murder. "Call me old

fashioned but I've been taught to help people not kill them," Shani declares. "I will give a patient the strongest medication I have to take care of them, but if you want to kill people, you don't need to become a doctor. People do come out of comas," he adds.

Although his philosophy toward assisted suicide or euthanasia is a religious one, Shani, who was born Orthodox, admits that he stopped wearing his yarmulke when he was 26 years old. "I didn't respect people who went to *shul* to talk about business instead of praying."

But even though Shani says that he doesn't pray or keep *Shabbos* anymore, he has a religious philosophy toward human beings. He doesn't view medicine as a profession at all, but rather as a mission, perhaps even a religious mission. He values the preciousness of human life, the godly soul in each individual. He also says that the only thing he fears in life is God.

When asked if his fear is based on the Talmudic teaching which states that even the best of doctors can go to *Gehemim* (hell), Shani jokingly replies, "There are a lot of people who suffer in hell, so they'll need very good physicians."

Shani, however, is more concerned with the living. And he doesn't discriminate between people and the value of their lives. He tells how in 1969 thirteen Israeli soldiers were killed during the "War of Attrition" and the next day Shani and his medical unit went into El Arish to help the Arabs who were also injured. He recalls how two Syrian pilots who were shot down in 1973 were treated in Tel Hashomer's Spinal Injury Department; and perhaps as measure for measure, we learn how recently a Palestinian heart was donated and used to save the life of an Israeli.

The procedure was performed at the state of the art Sheba Medical Center-Tel Hashomer, the largest and most comprehensive hospital in Israel and the Middle

East. Many patients come from the Gaza Strip to receive treatment at Tel Hashomer's Cardiac Surgery Department, the Oncology Department, and the Pediatric Oncology unit. The hospital also assisted in the establishment of the Department of Open Heart Surgery in Ramallah. Emissaries for Sheba have also provided support and supplies to countries in dire need, including Kosovo, Armenia, Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Rwanda.

But long before the Chaim Sheba Medical Center-Tel Hashomer became a super-high-tech life-saving institution, it was called "Army Hospital #5." It was started in 1948 and its patients were members of the Israel Defense Forces and civilians wounded in the battle to liberate the access road from Tel Aviv to the besieged Jerusalem during the War of Independence. The wounded were carried to the former British army barracks on stretchers and were brought in through the windows of the Quonset huts.

That was 52 years ago. Army Hospital #5 was later named "Tel Hashomer" by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion to honor the pre-State citizens' defense unit "Hashomer" (the guard) which protected Jewish settlements in the beginning of the century. On the death of Tel Hashomer Medical Center's founder, Dr. Chaim Sheba in 1971—the first Surgeon General of the Israel Defense Forces—it was renamed the Chaim Sheba Medical Center-Tel Hashomer. Shani, who assumed the mantle of Director General of the hospital at the age of 32, helped transform Tel Hashomer into the 150-acre campus on the outskirts of Tel Aviv that it is today. It houses 1,900 beds, 6,000 employees, and cares for over 700,000 patients every year.

Shani's personal involvement in each aspect of growth of the hospital and his great contributions to the medical field have earned him the

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Albert Schweitzer Humanitarian Award. He was also honored by the Goethe Foundation for reorganizing the extremely primitive medical services in Gaza and the Sinai.

In fact, it was Moshe Dayan who recommended to Dr. Sheba, upon Israel's conquering of Gaza and the Sinai, that the medical services in those areas be restructured. Experts from all over Israel were sent there to set up a clinic. Shani was one of those experts and it was there that he met his wife, Esther, a biochemist. And so following the scriptural namesakes of the heroes of the Book of Esther, Dr. Mordechai and Esther Shani set out to save Jewish lives. They have also brought six Jewish lives into this world: five boys and one girl. Each is very bright. In fact they were smart enough to stay out of the medical profession, Shani jokes. “My children saw how difficult my work was and decided they didn't want to do that.”

Shani admits that there is a price for everything, including his own success in the medical field. “I didn't spend as much time with my family as I could have. My wife and my kids would have really liked to see me more.”

Shani also recognizes that the price for saving invaluable human life is even greater—meeting patients' medical needs with the fast-paced and forever changing technical advancements costs money. Lots of money! To date, Shani, with the help of Friends of Sheba Medical Center, has been able to raise over \$250 million—not a lot of money when we're talking about high-tech medical machinery such as Magnetic Resonance Imaging machines which give

real time pictures, fundamental to treating certain kinds of brain tumors.

On a recent fund-raising trip to New York, Shani indicated that he doesn't have a fixed dollar objective. “First I want friendship with people who identify with the attitude and philosophy of our hospital. Once we have friendship then dollars will come.”

But Shani admits the fundraising is much harder than it used to be. He tells how 45 years ago Chaim Sheba had met a group of women in Manhattan who later formed the Manhattan Guild, and they devotedly supported the hospital, building a children's center and a gynecological center, helping with scholarships, and helping to create a pediatric and geriatric center. “It was easier then, because following the Holocaust people had a stronger connection toward Israel.”

Shani has established his own group of supporters called “Friends of Sheba Medical Center-Tel Hashomer.” He is hoping to make 1,000 friends over the next two years to bring in the money that is so necessary for the hospital to continue to maintain and improve its quality and quantity of care. Linda Frankel, Executive Director of Friends of Sheba Medical Center in New York, says that Shani is a man that no one can say no to. “He has the ability to stand behind what he says he is going to do,” Frankel says. “Where there were huts 15 years ago, today stands a world renowned hospital.” Frankel also recounts how Shani's pure and passionate visions have lured top-notch physicians away from secure med-

ical practices and preeminent medical institutions to join in his causes.

And if you catch Shani in between his life-saving missions, you may find him going to the opera, the theater, or simply reading a sci-fi novel. “I believe that individuals are permanent students; we must always learn whatever we can,” Shani says. True to his ambitious self, he adds, “I'm devoting a lot of time to reading and understanding everything. Even if you read the same page many times, upon each reading you may learn something new!” Shani also lauds the Jewish brain as the most excellent on earth and says that Jews are responsible for the greatest innovations throughout time.

But this Dr. Shani, who is looking for “friends,” does not anticipate that Israel will soon be friends with its Palestinian neighbors. As much as he'd like to see peace and eliminate the victims of war that his hospital treats, he feels the issue of Jerusalem is unsolvable. This Israeli-born doctor, who was 10 years old when the State was created, says he himself does not want to give up Jerusalem. Shani also says that he is amazed by the hostility toward Israel that is ever present in the Jordanian and Egyptian medical communities. “I'm amazed because these are intelligent people, intellectuals.”

Shani, however, prefers to leave the politics to the politicians and focus on his own calling: trying to help reshape medical care in the State of Israel. “I have a vision that I know I can never achieve in full,” Shani says. “But at least I know what my objectives are and where I am going.”

[Photograph]