

Jewish history is set to come alive in a Broadway musical.

By Robby Berman



A question of words: Rabbi Danny Wise (left) with lyricist Sheldon Harnick

(Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The 'Miracle' worker

Whether you believe in them or not, *Miracles* will be playing at the Beacon Theater on Broadway next year. *Miracles* – the brainchild of 31-year-old Rabbi Danny Wise – is a Broadway musical based on the Jewish tradition of miracles.

"The great art of humanity stored in the Metropolitan Museum of Art come to life, reenacting periods of Jewish history. What could be more exciting?" spouts a sharply dressed Rabbi Wise sitting behind his oak desk in his office at the corner of 57th and Broadway in Manhattan.

Miracles is a fantasy about two kids who get lost in the Met. As they wander around, high-tech special effects, inspirational music, superb choreography, and good old legerdemain magically bring the exhibits to life. Ancient Egyptian artwork enters the third dimension, dancing Persian costumes recreate the story of Purim, and antique armor revives the dramatic tale of David, here pitted against a four-meter-tall mechanical Goliath. The panoply of special effects is created by such techniques as shadows, lasers, holograms, smoke, and radio-controlled vacuum tubes.

Since this holiday show will appear on Broadway during the Christmas, uh... Hanukka season, it will feature the miraculous military victory of the Maccabees. The production even goes so far as to attempt to recreate the Ten Plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, and the construction of the Holy Temple – all on a Broadway stage in midtown Manhattan.

So who is running the show? Who serves as the nerve center to funnel, stroke, and encourage all this talent, money, and excitement? The unassuming Rabbi Danny Wise.

And how does a rabbi come to produce a Broadway musical? A man who had a Habad education and authored an eight-volume

compendium on Halacha, no less? Well, if the Torah can have 70 sides and a dreidel four, isn't a rabbi entitled to two?

At age seven, little Danny was making home movies; during adolescence he wrote short stories and poetry; as an adult – while continuing to study Torah – he was heavily involved in theater. He wrote and directed summer stock as well as community and regional theater.

He graduated Juilliard as a violinist and came home every day to his piano-playing father and opera-singing mother. Educated in Boro Park in a Lubavitch yeshiva, he maintained a "close relationship with the rebbe" – who, not parenthetically, gave his blessing for *Miracles* to succeed.

In 1992, Wise married, moved to Israel, and assisted Rabbi Shlomo Riskin in producing halachic literature. Now amicably divorced, with a four-year-old daughter named Auriana, Wise spends a lot of time in New York producing *Miracles*.

Wise is not the only Israeli resident who has a hand in making *Miracles*. Mark Zell, a Tel Aviv entertainment lawyer who resides in Alon Shvut, is reputed to be a driving force in its production. Some \$1.5 million of the \$10m. production price tag was covered in part by Micha and Yael Taubman from Jerusalem, Shalom Menorah who owns Netmedia, and Danny and Gila Brock from Safed. They all believe they are involved in "a tradition in the making," says Wise.

The other side of the Atlantic is home to an impressive pool of contributing creative talent. Although Wise conceived the story, the libretto and lyrics were written by Joseph Stein and Sheldon Harnick, who collaborated on such critically acclaimed shows as *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Zorba the Greek*. Some of the music was written by Marvin Hamlisch, known for such hits as *A Chorus Line* and *The Way We Were*. Other cele-

brated composers include Barry Manilow, David Shire, and Stephen Schwartz, who recently worked on *Pocahontas* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. The play's stage and prop designers have worked on major successes such as *Annie* and *Beauty and the Beast*.

When it was pointed out that the story of Purim has no overt miracles, the set designer admitted, "True... so we threw in a couple of flying Persian carpets."

SIGNIFICANT Jewish cultural contributions to the entertainment world such as *Schindler's List*, which brought about a global awareness of the Holocaust, and *Fiddler on the Roof*, that gave the world a glance into the shtetl, are rare. Yet "Miracles are something that everyone believes in," says Wise. "This show will be enjoyed by people from all backgrounds. Timeless works of art telling the story of a miraculous history have the potential to bring about great unity," he says with the exuberance of a religious emissary on a mission.

But is there a market for a feel-good Jewish "long-awaited musical extravaganza"?

Danny Wise thinks there is, and his backers pray he's right. His market research shows that 85 percent of the three million Jews residing in the New York/New Jersey/Connecticut area are theater-goers.

During the holiday season, Broadway sells five million tickets to shows like Radio City Music Hall's Christmas special and the most frequently performed ballet, *The Nutcracker*. But none of the seasonal shows cater specifically to a Jewish audience. Research further shows, according to Wise, that non-Jews as well as Jews are interested in seeing *Miracles*. The show, that is.

Rabbi Wise and his backers are so convinced by the project they invested \$1m. in

revamping the Beacon Theater. The Beacon has 2,800 seats – about double the capacity of the average theater. It will be the play's home from November next year to the following January, and for the rest of the year the show will tour the world.

The rabbi and his backers might believe in miracles, but they're not relying on them. The production company has hired marketing director David Sass, who was responsible for almost doubling revenues of the Radio City Christmas show from \$25m. to \$45m. annually, making it the most successful holiday show of all time.

"There's an insatiable demand for holiday entertainment. I don't believe we're going to take the market share away from other shows, but *Miracles* will bring more people to the theater," boasted Sass at a posh Fifth Avenue penthouse party celebrating *Miracles*.

"If we were to look at *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* as an indicator, it is the longest-playing show in Chicago." He pointed out the unlimited revenue to be earned from licensing action figures, videos, and CD-Rom games. "The show is a creative production, but don't forget it's a brilliant commercial concept as well."

So what is Rabbi Danny Wise's real motivation for producing a 90-minute non-Christmas Christmas show called *Miracles*? Is it his innate love for and connection to the theater? Is it the lucrative potential of filling a market niche? Or is he surreptitiously on a Lubavitch mission to spread the word of divine intervention in the quixotic hope of uniting the world?

He pauses, folds his arms, looks straight ahead and says with a smirk, "So I can have a show during Hanukka to take my adorable four-year-old daughter to."

But the wry smile says it all: D – all of the above.