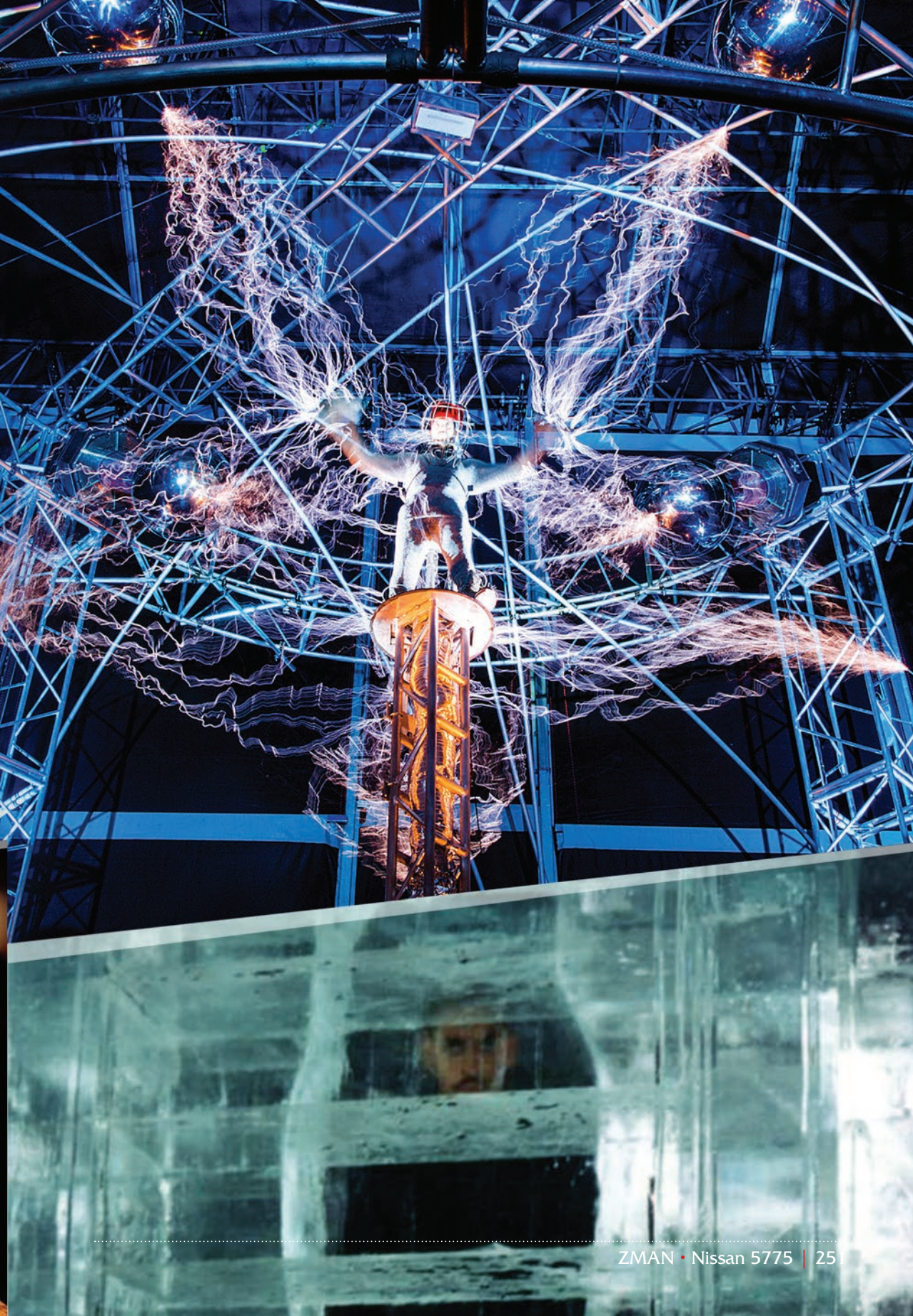


Endurance... Beyond Belief

The Death-Defying Exploits of David Blaine

There are many stunt artists, but few (in fact, none) who risk their lives like David Blaine. He is often compared to Harry Houdini, who amazed all with his death-defying stunts, especially breaking free from seemingly unbreakable locks, chains and restraints. Whether being buried alive, drowned in the ocean, electrocuted by a million volts, swimming among sharks or any of the many other spectacles that have stunned the world's biggest skeptics, Blaine is in a class all his own.

Yakov M. Wagschal



It is a cold, wintry night on November 27, 2000. Thousands of people are gathered, while millions more around the world watch live. All eyes are fixed on a man on a platform as workers erect an unusual structure around him: large blocks of ice piled atop each other on all sides to form a hermetically sealed room of ice.

The man stands in the middle, lightly clothed and shivering from the cold even before the ice chamber is sealed. His only contact with the outside world is a tube that delivers air and another that delivers water. Otherwise, he is completely enclosed in a large ice cube. The entire ice-prison stands on a platform raised a few feet above street level to allow the public to make sure that he remains inside the entire time. There is no secret trapdoor to escape.

Exactly 63 hours, 42 minutes and 15 seconds later, the ice block is cut open with large electric chain saws. From inside emerges a confused and disoriented man. Wrapped in blankets, his body shivering violently, he is whisked off to a hospital before he enters a state of shock. It takes him over a month to recover to the point where he can walk on his own two feet.

This was but one small episode in the strange hard-to-belief life of David Blaine, master illusionist and endurance artist.

Beginnings

David Blaine was born in Brooklyn (of course!) in 1974. As a child, he was asthmatic and had to wear braces to straighten out his congenitally deformed feet. Worst of all, though, was the extreme poverty in which he lived; his parents struggled to put food on the table.

Most of Blaine's wardrobe came from welfare organizations. His only real possession was a small pack of cards he received as a gift from his mother. She, in turn, had received it from her mother as a young girl and she passed it on to her son because she



Spectators watch as Blaine remains enclosed in an ice chamber.



David Blaine encased in ice.

could not afford to buy him toys. Blaine played with these cards constantly.

At four, he watched a young performer on the subway doing simple tricks and was fascinated. At five, he began performing tricks for his family and friends. They were absolutely amazed. The enthusiastic response encouraged Blaine to develop his talents further.

In 1997, he began traveling across America, performing for passersby on the street. He allowed his audience to scrutinize him up close. The public was used to sleight-of-hand tricks performed at a safe distance too fast for the eye to follow. Blaine's openness made him stand out among the crowded world of street performers.

Buried Alive

However, Blaine found minimal satisfaction in performing such tricks. He was well aware that street magicians came a dime a dozen. Instead, he turned to developing



Assistant cuts Blaine out of his icy prison with an electric chainsaw.



Cold and weak after spending days inside an ice cube.

feats of endurance that demanded exceptional physical and mental stamina, beyond anything a regular person is capable of.

In 1999, now 24, Blaine performed his first in a series of public stunts in which he was buried alive. He modeled these performances after his hero, the legendary Harry Houdini (see *Zman* 40 – Iyar 5773). In fact, before Houdini died he had plans for a major stunt where he was buried in a casket. Although he never got to perform it, the casket was used to transport his body to his final burial spot.

At the predetermined time, Blaine entered a transparent casket made of Plexiglas buried six feet underground. A crane then lowered a huge tank filled with 3.5 tons of water above the casket, after which workers filled in the spaces around the tank and casket with earth. Now people could observe Blaine lying in his casket buried six feet deep in the ground. He had only six inches of space around him to move his head, and only two inches of space to move his body.



Inside his casket, prepared for live burial.



Spectators look down through the water tank and into the pit where Blaine lies buried.

Blaine remained in this eerie state of repose for seven days. His only means of communication was a small electronic device to alarm rescue workers at the ready in case anything went wrong. During the ordeal he survived without any food, sipping no more than two to three teaspoons of water per day.

The stunt was performed in a very public venue across from the Trump Place complex in Manhattan's Upper West Side. Close to 100,000 visitors came to see him during the stunt. Among them was a niece of Harry Houdini who stated, "My uncle did some amazing things, but he could not have done this."

At the end of the seventh day, when the stunt was scheduled to finish, hundreds of news teams arrived to cover the story live. Workers removed the earth and a crane lifted the tank of water from above. Blaine then crawled out in reasonable condition. In the words of *BBC News*, "The 26-year-old has outdone his hero, Harry Houdini."