



JEWISH COMMENTARY

May You Be Inscribed for a Good Laugh

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

‘**L**AUGHER,” writes the essayist Jim Holt in his book *Stop Me If You’ve Heard This*, “is our characteristic response to the aesthetic category of the humorous, the comical, or the funny. What is it about the humorous situation that evokes this response? Why should a certain kind of cerebral activity issue in such a peculiar behavioral reflex?”

This is not only a question that is raised every time you watch the Marx Brothers; it is also, you will be surprised to hear, at the very heart of Judaism. Laughter is a central theme on one of Judaism’s most serious days, a fact that makes it clear that for Jews, laughter is no laughing matter.

On Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Awe that begins each new year, we read the passage in the Torah about the miraculous birth of a son to the elderly Sarah, then 90 years of age. This son’s Hebrew name, Yitzchak, means “he will laugh.” This, the Bible informs us, is linked to the laughter that his birth to Sarah provoked: “And the LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did unto Sarah as he had spoken. For Sarah conceived, and bore Abraham a son in his old age.... And Abraham was a hundred years old, when his son Isaac was born unto him. And Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me.”

In other words, “laughter” is the name of one

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK *is the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City and the director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University.*

of our three patriarchs. Why is laughter so important that Abraham’s son is named for this phenomenon? What can laughter tell us about what Judaism brought to the world?

Holt points out that there are two prominent theories of laughter and humor. The first is found in Plato, and it is known as the “superiority theory.” It posits that laughter is an expression of delight in the downfall of others: “We laugh,” Holt writes, “because these types of situations make us feel superior to other people.” This is humor at the expense of someone else, the pleasure of the put-down. The problem with the “superiority theory,” as Holt notes, is that there are all sorts of jokes that do not display a malicious instinct. There are simple little jokes that are just enjoyable, jokes we can tell our children and also laugh at as adults. To take one of Holt’s examples:

Q: What does a snail say when riding on the back of a turtle?

A: Wheeee!

What else, then, lies at the root of laughter? Kant argued, contra Plato, that the essence of humor lies in “incongruity.” As the scientist Richard Wiseman, who designed a complex experiment to uncover the world’s funniest joke, explains: “The idea is that we laugh at things that surprise us because they seem out of place. It’s funny when clowns wear outrageously large shoes, people have especially big noses, or politicians tell the truth”—or, as I might add, when a 90-year old woman becomes a matriarch. Yet as Wiseman notes, more sophisticated jokes also vindicate the “incongruity theory.” A punch line’s humor lies in an inversion of

our expectations—there is a surprising incongruity between the set-up and the punch line. A snail, we know, is slow, as is a turtle; yet our expectations are inverted when we realize that a snail riding a turtle feels as if he's speeding. This shift in expectation is everything. To illustrate this, let's look at one popular version of a joke that scored off the charts in Wiseman's experiment:

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson go on a camping trip, set up their tent, and fall asleep. Some hours later, Holmes wakes his faithful friend. "Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see." Watson replies, "I see millions of stars." Watson ponders for a minute, and then continues. "Astronomically speaking, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, it tells me that Saturn is in Leo. Timewise, it appears to be approximately a quarter past three. Theologically, it's evident the Lord is all-powerful and we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, it seems we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. Holmes, what does it tell you?" Holmes is silent for a moment, and then speaks. "Watson, you idiot, it tells me that someone has stolen our tent."

Plato might insist we laugh here merely because we enjoy Watson's embarrassment. In truth, however, the delight lies in the sudden shift, the realization that there is more to the story than meets the eye. Moreover, this joke resonates because it is so true to life—because, like Watson, so often there is something right before us that we fail to notice and that requires a shift in perspective to understand.

The influence of Kant's theory of incongruity might be found in a fascinating source: The biblical commentary of the 19th-century rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. In his own exegesis on the origin of Isaac's name, Hirsch notes that in Hebrew the words for screaming and laughing are extremely similar: *tza'ak* (screamed) and *tzahak* (laughed). We have, he points out, virtually identical words for two apparently oppo-

site emotional expressions. What then do the two have in common, what binds them together conceptually and therefore also etymologically? Hirsch suggests that both screaming and laughter are symptoms of surprise—reactions to something that, based on our own assumptions, our limited logic, we were not expecting to happen. Both represent a breaking of a pattern, something occurs that we had no notion of occurring beforehand; if tragic, in surprise we are *tso'ek*, we scream in alarm, in dismay; if wonderful then in delighted surprise we are *tsohek*, we emit peals of laughter. Hebrew, for Hirsch, provides evidence for the Kantian theory.

In the ancient world, human beings looked up at the sky and saw only cycles: the waxing and waning of the moon, the endless arc of the sun and stars, and they concluded that life on earth mirrored life in heaven. No one could live a truly revolutionary life; human lives were an endless cycle of birth and death, with one life ending and another beginning.

Judaism's birth itself was also about the inversion of expectation. Thousands of years ago, God took Avram—the man who would become the first Jew—outside and showed him a starlit sky. And He asked, as Holmes asked Watson, what do you see? And Avram said, as did Watson, I see millions of stars.

And God tells him, your descendants shall be as numerous as those stars.

This would have been difficult for Avram to understand; after all, Sarah, the love of his life, was barren. But he believed it anyway, and after Ishmael was born from another woman, he assumed that his heir had entered the world. It is only later, after he has changed his name from Avram to Abraham, that he realizes the incongruity of his expectations, and he too laughs:

And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her. Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear? And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee! And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant

with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him.

Jewish laughter begins with the continuity of the covenant God had established with Noah—thereby symbolizing that the continuity, and the eternity, of Abraham’s children is the ultimate incongruity, the ultimate confounding of expectations.

This inversion changed humanity forever. Thomas Cahill, in his book *The Gifts of the Jews*, notes that the ancient world saw time as inherently cyclical: History never progressed, and people never improved. In the ancient world, in Sumer, in Maya, in China, in Greece, human beings looked up at the sky and saw only cycles: the waxing and waning of the moon, the endless arc of the sun and stars, and they concluded that life on earth mirrored life in heaven. No one could live a truly revolutionary life; human lives were an endless cycle of birth and death, with one life ending and another beginning, and each one no different than the next.

All this, Cahill writes, was changed by one Mesopotamian man named Avram. He was the son of an idolator, with his roots prosperously planted in Haran. And all of a sudden he decided to change his entire life, to leave his land, and found a faith and a family, risking everything on the belief that men and women can defy their fates, can determine their destinies.

Cahill recounts how the world in Abraham’s time would have reacted to his insight:

In most of Africa and Europe, they would have laughed at Avram’s madness....His wife is barren as winter, they would say; a man cannot escape his fate.... The early Greeks might have told Avram the story of Prometheus, whose quest for the fire of the gods ended in personal disaster. Do not overreach, they would advise; come to resignation....The ancestors of the Maya in America would point to their circular calendars, and would explain that everything that has been comes around again, that each man’s fate is fixed. On every continent, in every society, Avram would have been given the same advice that wise men as

diverse as Heraclitus, Lau-tsu, and Siddharta would one day give their followers: Do not journey but sit; compose yourself by the river of life....

Cahill suggests that Abraham’s journey, and his faith that he would father a family against all odds, signified “a complete departure from everything that has gone before in the long evolution of culture and sensibility.” He goes on: “Out of Sumer, civilized repository of the predictable, comes a man who does not know where he is going but goes forth into the unknown wilderness under the prompting of his [G]od.... Out of

the human race, which knows in its bones that all its striving must end in death, comes a leader who says he has been given an impossible promise. Out of mortal imagination comes a dream of something better, something yet to happen, something—in the future.”

Is it inappropriate, then, that Abraham’s child is named for laughter? Surely not. Because the inversions, the shifts in expectation, are constant. Abraham is a revolutionary but he is acting on instructions from a higher authority. He needs to make choices no one else would have made in his time, defying all expectations, just as his descendants will choose to follow the call of God and defy all expectations. The story of the Jewish people is the ultimate embodiment of the Yiddish idiom *a mentsch tracht un Gott lacht*: Man plans and God laughs.

This is why the Jewish love of jokes is often so profoundly misunderstood. In his book *Born to Kvetch: Yiddish Language and Culture in All of Its Moods*, Michael Wex argues that the key to understanding the Yiddish language is the Jewish penchant for complaining. Yiddish, he insists, is a language in which we never say anything nice if we don’t have to. For Jews, Wex suggests, “kvetching is not only a pastime, it is a means of apprehension that sees the world through cataract-colored glasses.” For Wex, Yiddish—not only its humor but in the very makeup of its language—is a way of looking down on the world.

Is Wex right? It is true that Yiddish is a wonderful language for expressing negative sentiment. As Leo Rosten has noted, little miracles of discriminatory

For centuries, in the Pale of persecution, suffering Jews told jokes to one another, wonderful jokes, jokes that may work in English, but are so much more evocative in the original. These jokes were a subject of fascination to Sigmund Freud, who utilized them in developing his own theory of laughter: as embodying a release that comes from the ability to speak of taboo subjects.

precision are contained in the distinctions between a *nebekh*, a *shlep*, a *shmendrik*, a *shlump*, a *klutz*, a *yold*, a *shnook*, a Chaim Yankel, a *bulbenik*, a *shoyteh*, a *shlemazel*, and a *shlemiel*; all refer to someone pathetic, but pathetic for very different reasons.

At the same time, one can study Yiddish speakers and discern exactly the opposite perspective. For centuries, in the Pale of persecution, suffering Jews told jokes to one another, wonderful jokes, jokes that may work in English but are so much more evocative in the original. These jokes were a subject of fascination to Sigmund Freud, who utilized them in developing his own theory of laughter: as embodying a release that comes from the ability to speak of taboo subjects.

More profound insight into Jewish laughter has been provided by non-Jewish thinkers who were more sympathetic to Judaism than was Freud, and who were fascinated with the fact that, despite the sadness of their situation, the apparent hopelessness of their exile, the poverty, and persecution that was the shtetldweller's daily fare, Jews spent so much time laughing. The late sociologist Peter Berger wrote that if Jews loved jokes, it was because "the comic experience provides a distinctive diagnosis of the world. It sees through the façades of the social order, and discloses other realities lurking behind the superficial ones."

In other words, Jews loved jokes because they expressed the idea that there is more to life than meets the eye, that a pattern is not eternally set in stone, that our expectations can be uprooted—that, in Wiseman's

words, there is a completely different way of seeing the situation. Superficially, the Jews appeared to have been rejected by God, doomed forever to wander the earth, if not worse. To many it must have seemed that they lived lives devoid of any reason for joy, for celebration, for laughter.

But to think this is to miss an essential part of the picture, to ignore an Almighty who maintained a close connection to His people, to miss out on a life of Torah that even in the Pale could bring joy, and to fail to understand what every Jew in prayer once confidently predicted: that one day the pattern would shift; that one day an incongruity would occur, a surprise would suddenly take place; one day the expectations of anti-Semites would be shattered, and the prediction in Psalm 126 of a return to Zion would be vindicated: "When the Lord turn again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter . . ."

Jewish laughter is bound up with Jewish faith, and Abraham's child is named for laughter because his birth inverted expectations, vindicated Abraham's faith, and laid the foundations for a people who would confound those expectations again and again, thereby vindicating this faith throughout the generations. Which is why, for centuries, on the first day of the Days of Awe, Abraham's children have stood in synagogues all around the world, remembered the birth of Isaac, and beseeched Almighty God to grant them a year of life, love—and laughter. 🍷