

There's a lot More to Jewish Jokes than Meets the Ear

By George N. Schlesinger

Jewish jocosity has a long tradition reaching way back into antiquity. It is recorded in the *Gemara, Shabbat* 30, that the famous Babylonian Talmudic sage, Rabbah, always regaled his disciples with a joke before he began his lectures. Laughter was thought to relax the mind and put the students in a receptive mood.

The considerable amount of Jewish humor that accumulated throughout the ages may be divided into at least three kinds. The first and least significant variety makes reference to a Jew, but little or no difference would it make if a representative of some other ethnic group was substituted instead.

In the second kind, the reference is not arbitrary or accidental, for it conveys, magnifies or extols some typical Jewish trait. Yet it still lacks uniqueness, for there exist plentiful parallel anecdotes, satirizing, lampooning or celebrating what are believed to be specific Scottish, Irish or Italian characteristics. This kind of Jewish humor doesn't reach the deeper and more intimate aspects of Judaism any more than the frivolity of most other ethnic jokes illuminate the soul of parallel ethnic groups.

There is, however, a third, radically different kind of joke that is virtually unique to Jewish humor. Anecdotes of this kind invariably involve either direct reference or subtle allusion to some item of Torah scholarship.

Those unacquainted with the relevant sacred literature often require some explanation before they can see the point of the anecdote. The force of this kind of humor lies in its ability to astonish by its entirely unexpected, and often untenable but clever interpretation of a passage in the Bible or the Talmud. The listener, as a rule, does not erupt with uncontrollable laughter; the usual reaction is a pleasant surprise and cheery appreciation of the ingenious mental gymnastics exhibited by the author.

Unquestionably it is the third kind of humor that is worth studying most, and its parallel may be found almost nowhere else. The reason is that there exist few if any ethnic groups in which people were so deeply entrenched in learning that it colored all their talks and thoughts.



In the traditional Jewish community, it was not only the intellectual, the expert, or the scholar, but the average man in the street who was likely to be sufficiently well versed in his people's law and lore, as well as in the typical reasoning that evolved through centuries of continuous Jewish learning.

They Don't Have to Be Jewish

There is no scarcity of books presenting collections of, and analyses of Jewish humor, some written by first rate scholars. It is remarkable, however, that the great majority of these focus on the first two types of humor and rarely on the much more significant and unique, on the authentically Jewish humor.

For example, Professor Joseph

Boskin, an expert on racial humor, in his essay "Beyond Kvetching and Jiving" in the anthology *Jewish Wry*, edited by S.B. Cohen, tells us about two Czarist policemen in 19th century Russia observing a Jew drowning in the river. They remain indifferent, "Let the Jew drown!" they exclaim callously. In desperation, the victim shouts, "Down with the Czar!" Hearing this the policemen plunge into the river, rescue the man and arrest him, charging him with **lese majesty** (offending the czar).

This story succeeds at one and the same time to be sad as well as funny. However, its Jewishness is very peripheral. Suppose the story is changed so that the drowning man is Kurdish and his plight is witnessed by two Iraqi policemen. At first they are indifferent but when the unfortunate man makes some irreverent remarks about Saddam Hussein they rescue and arrest him. I do not believe that this would amount to a radically different joke.

Another chestnut, supposed to instruct us in Jewish folkways has a visitor to New York trying to elicit directions to the post office from a Jew carrying a heavy parcel. The latter asks the visitor to hold his parcel for a moment and then throws up both of his arms in a gesture of violent regret and laments, "Terribly sorry, but I have no idea where it is!" Clearly the point is to poke fun at the Jewish propensity to talk with one's hands.

Once more, we do not have here a deeply revealing piece of humor. First of all there are other people given to vigorous gesticulation. More importantly however, suppose it was an exclusively Jewish habit, the story would still not be an instance of a uniquely Jewish joke. It would merely be a specific example of a large species of ethnic jokes. It would have its counterparts among jibes at stingy Scotchmen or pugnacious Irishmen.

Irving Howe, the highly regarded lit-

erary critic, who also writes in the *Jewish Wry*, tells about a *schnorer* (beggar) who used to receive an annual stipend of 500 rubles from his wealthy patron. One year however, the rich man gave him only 250 rubles, apologizing that his son has just married an actress and he has to pay all their bills. The poor man was outraged, "If your son wishes to marry an actress that is his business. But what kind of a *chutzpah* is it to do it with my money!"

Howe says that this joke contains ironic commentary on the typically Jewish inability or unwillingness to discern the vast difference between pretension and actuality. Possibly so. More likely its roots reach back into the traditional Jewish view according to which the giver, who enriches himself spiritually, gains more from the act of charity than the recipient. This noble idea, however, is carried to a ludicrous extreme by the almsman in our story who looks upon his stipend as an entitlement rather than a favor.

The last interpretation puts more Jewish sap into the anecdote. Yet it fails to illustrate anything that is peerlessly original in Jewish jesting. After all, parallel anecdotes exist that reflect the Englishman's devotion to the game of cricket or the Italian's love of opera.

Authentic Jewish Humor

Now let me cite what may qualify as typical examples of genuine Jewish humor.

Two great sages, Rav Aryeh Leib Heller and Rav Yaakov of Lissa were engaged in scholarly strife most of their lives. After R. Aryeh published his epoch-making *K'tzoth Hachoshen*, R. Yaakov published his *N'tivoth Hamishpat* in refutation of the former. R. Aryeh replied by writing his *M'shovev N'tivoth*, and so on.

At one point, R. Aryeh approached his chief antagonist proposing to marry R. Yaakov's daughter. The latter voiced surprise at R. Aryeh wishing to become the son-in-law of his most relentless and harshest critic in the entire Torah world.

R. Aryeh explained himself by reminding R. Yaakov that after Yoseph had been appointed the viceroy of Egypt, Pharaoh "... gave him in marriage Asenath, the daughter of Potiphra..." (Genesis, 41:45). One might wonder, why of all people should Yoseph marry the daughter of Potiphra, for whom Yoseph had worked as a slave and who threw him into prison for allegedly assaulting his

wife?

"Pharaoh was smart" R. Aryeh explained. He was anxious that Yoseph be respected by the people and that his instructions be carried out. But he was afraid that Potiphra would spread the word that this so called man of wisdom and vision is nothing but a common jailbird who repaid all his master's acts of kindness by trying to steal his wife?

Pharaoh had a brilliant solution: Let Yoseph marry Asenath, and surely Potiphra will not vilify the husband of his beloved daughter and ruin his reputation. Similarly, if you give your permission to our marriage, said R. Aryeh, you would cease to run down your devoted son-in-law and his scholarly works!

Now of course, this was an imaginatively contrived argument. First of all, it is not certain that the Potiphra whose daughter Yoseph married is the same man as the one referred to as Potiphar and who was Yoseph's master. But even if he was, we have no idea why Pharaoh brought about the *shiduch* (marriage).

R. Yaakov never had any personal animosity toward R. Aryeh nor did he discount the significance of his works. He had the highest admiration (which was reciprocated) for the latter's scholarship and analytic insight. He regarded it a privilege to be in holy debate with a man of R. Aryeh's caliber. But as is well known, approaching any father to ask his daughter's hand in marriage is wrought with a certain amount of apprehension and embarrassment. Introducing humor into the situation by giving an unexpected twist to the story behind Yoseph's marriage, and making a startling comparison between his own case and that of Yoseph, R. Aryeh may well be assumed to have succeeded to create an excellent ice-breaker.

This then is a typical example of truly Jewish humor, where through the ingenious manipulation of a sacred text, an unsuspected relevance to a matter of current interest is fabricated.

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R. Isaac of Slonim, who had a very sharp, critical mind, received many requests to provide testimonials for books written by his contemporaries. However, he was reluctant to comply with them because they usually did not satisfy his high standards.

Once, a very poor and pious scholar

showed him a work that he planned to publish, and he hoped to derive some badly needed income from the sales. R. Isaac found himself in a quandary. He did not think much of the composition, so how could he recommend it? On the other hand, how could he callously refuse to write a testimonial for an individual who deserved compassion and help?

R. Isaac ended up writing a few lines in praise of the work at the top of his stationary, while putting his signature way down at the bottom of the sheet. Later he explained, "The Torah warns us



to keep *far away* from falsehood" (Exodus 22:7). The Torah means to stress that we do not deviate one iota from the truth. R. Isaac strikingly reinterpreted this as if we were told that if we must write a false recommendation, at least put our signature as far away from what we have written as there is room on the paper.

Of course, R. Isaac did not believe for a moment that his was a plausible reading of the injunction. However, R. Isaac, who was famous for his sense of humor, wanted to lift his own depressed spirits owing to the dilemma he faced. He tried to do so by suggesting an amusing contortion of a scriptural passage.

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In Sotah 36, R. Meir is recorded to have said that the tribes of Israel, when standing on the edge of the Red Sea, were contending with one another, each saying, "I shall be the first to set foot in the sea." R. Yehuda said however, "This is not the way it happened, but rather each one wanted the other tribe to volunteer setting foot in the sea." This seems to present a fairly straightforward dispute between two sages as to whether everyone wished to outdo everyone else in nobility, or in selfishness.

However, the early 19th century

scholar R. Yehoshua of Kutna, advanced a surprising interpretation, according to which R. Meir and R. Yehudah agree with one another completely. R. Meir stated that each tribe said (in advance of the event), "I shall be the first to set foot in the sea." R. Yehudah stated that although this is true, this is not the way it *happened*, that is, there was a big difference between the way people boasted about what they were going to do and between what they actually were prepared to do when the practical stage for action had arrived. In other words, when it was time to go into the sea, each tribe wanted another to go in first.

It is most unlikely that R. Yehoshua believed his interpretation to be an authentic one. He manipulated a passage in order to bring home a lesson he thought was needed by his audience. His was an ironic point, which he believed could be put across in a more dramatic and memorable way by presenting it as an exposition of a Talmudic passage. It was as common then as it is now to find people issuing fighting words and courageous promises, yet when coming face to face with actual danger, they revise their attitudes, believing discretion to be the better half of valor.

The subtle humor of the Rabbi of Kutna consisted of shifting the emphasis to the word "happened" and thus turning R. Yehudah's remark into a comment on the difference between the courage the tribes were manifesting in words and in action.

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The foregoing three examples indicate the uniqueness of Jewish humor. Naturally, the witticism and humor of other cultures too, contain literary allusions. They, however, are relatively few.

In Judaism, learning and scholarship did not belong to an elite minority; the great majority of the population could be assumed to be at least somewhat familiar with the scriptures and rabbinic literature. Secondly, the great *talmidei chachamim* (scholars) were not merely experts in their discipline. Torah was not just a subject they studied; it was the very air they breathed. All their thoughts, their entire personalities were fully absorbed in sacred learning, and everything they said or did was colored by it.

Thus, R. Aryeh Leib Hacohen, when in a situation that generated anxiety, attempted to lighten the mood by inject-

ing a humorous note into the proceedings. Not just any humorous note, but one typical of his ingenuity, well honed through his arduous studies, and presenting a startling gloss on a Biblical incident.

The Rabbi of Slonim faced the vexing choice of acting callously, or expressing a less than candid opinion of the book submitted to him. By inserting a comic element into the proceedings he dispelled the gloom generated by his dilemma. But once again, it was not just any comic element; it was a clever twist given to the injunction to distance oneself from falsehood.

The Rabbi of Kutna wanted to rebuke his congregation for not showing the same courage in their actions as in their words. We may assume that through the oblique way he presented his criticism — by avoiding direct reference to those whom he was actually berating — and through the subtlety and humor of his marvellous reconstruction of the passage about Israel's behavior on the Red Sea, the embarrassment felt by those concerned was considerably eased.

Uniquely Jewish humor is redolent of the contents and subtlety characteris-



tic of Torah study. It presupposes on the part of the listener a certain amount of familiarity with the holy sources. Most importantly, it is one of the manifestations of how totally immersed Torah scholars were in their sacred discipline, and thus to what extent their temperaments, thoughts and speech were shaped by it.

In Sukkah 21 we read, "Even the everyday talk of scholars needs study." The entire being of a true scholar is so thoroughly permeated with the teachings of the Torah that even their more light-hearted remarks require close attention. Whether they were addressing the congregation or talking to the individual, whether serious or jesting, they drew the inspiration and material for their utterances from the vast reservoir of Torah

learning.

Since, as a rule, the incongruity contained in this type of joke consists of using a passage seemingly irrelevant to the topic at hand and giving it an unexpected twist, it is quite usual for the ultimate denouement to convey a straightforward, even wise message.

To conclude with an anecdote of some topical interest let us remind ourselves of R. Joseph Bear of Brisk, who at a rabbinical meeting strongly objected to a plan of setting up an elaborate organization for the distribution of food among those who were hard hit by a recent economic adversity. Instead, he urged that all who can afford it find an appropriate individual or family and supply their needs directly to them.

Nowadays, when we hear that there is no point in sending food to the Soviet Union, since it will remain stuck somewhere in the bureaucratic bottleneck without reaching a single starving family, or when we read about a major charitable organization whose annual intake of several million dollars proved insufficient to cover their operating expenses, we can well see the basis for the Brisker Rav's concern. However, the rabbi did not express his reservations directly, instead he offered the following hermeneutics:

Yoseph prophesied that there are going to be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Maimonides teaches that a Divine prediction of some happy event is always certain to materialize. But when the Almighty threatens with some catastrophe, it is not inevitable that it will take place, since out of compassion He may revoke the grave decree: as when the prophet Jonah predicted that in 30 days Ninveh will be destroyed, and who in the end were reprieved.

So the Brisker asked, how could Yoseph state with full confidence that Egypt is going to be struck by seven years of famine? Why did he not fear (as indeed Jonah feared) that he will suffer the embarrassment of being exposed as a false prophet, in case the Almighty should repeal the harsh decree?

"No," said the Brisker. "Yoseph knew he had nothing to fear. In *Genesis* 41:34 we read that Yoseph insisted, 'Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land etc.' Joseph made sure that an elaborate administrative apparatus was set up for the distribution of food. This provided solid guarantee that there *will* be famine in the land..."