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“WHEN ADAR BEGINS JOY INCREASES”

It happened that Yankel came home from school one day and proudly informed his mother that he had auditioned for a part in the shul's *Purimspiel*. “Nu, tzazkeleh, did you get a part?” asked Yankel's mother. “I sure did,” he responded. “I get to play the Jewish husband in the family.” The mother's smile turned to a frown -- “You march back there this instant and demand that they give you a speaking part . . .”

It is said that a rabbi without a sense of humor is like a musician without an instrument. Actually, I just made that up, but one cannot deny the merit of the observation. Even more so, humor is integral to American Jewish culture as a whole. Consider the following list of names: The Marx Brothers, Jack Benny, Fanny Brice, George Burns, Milton Berle, Buddy Hackett, Woody Allen, Lenny Bruce, Andy Kaufman, Jerry Seinfeld . . . You get the picture. Indeed, according to a *Time Magazine* article some years ago, while Jews constitute less than 3% of the American population, fully 80% of professional comedians are Jewish. I'm not sure how they came up with the figure, but even if *Time* were off by ten or twenty percent, the statistic would still be astounding.

What is this affinity that Jews have with comedy? In his book, *The Haunted Smile - The Story of Jewish Comedians in America*, author Lawrence Epstein suggests that Jewish joke-tellers helped mediate America's relationship to its Jews and vice versa. On the one hand, in the era of “Gentlemen's Agreements” neighborhood covenants, restricted clubs, and quotas at America's top private schools, Jews could take pride in the success of their own funny men. As Epstein writes, “They had power and control over an audience when such authority wasn't yet available to Jews in the wider society, and by doing so, illustrated that Jews could achieve such authority and provided a cultural identity for many non-religious Jews.” By the same token, by identifying themselves as Jews while poking fun at their own kin and community, comedians represented Jewish life in a very human and endearing way to Americans -- even if their routines were, at times, rather distorted and highly stereotypical.

Epstein's argument is a very credible one. Consider the cultural distance between Irving Berlin's *White Christmas* and Adam Sandler's *Hanukkah Song*, a ditty familiar to as many non-Jews as Jews, and you will grasp the dramatic changes in American Jewish life of the last two generations. Think about Lenny Bruce's famous monologue in which Count Basie, Ray Charles, pumpernickel and black cherry soda rated as Jewish, while Eddie Cantor, lime Jell-O and Kool-Aid were defined as goyish, and you'll find yet another example of America's embrace of Jews, and vice versa. That today the English language on this side of the Atlantic is saturated with scores of Yiddish words such as *nudnik*, *shmutz*, *shlep*, *yutz*, *tzurks*, *shlemiel*, and even a non-existent Yiddish word like *verklemp*, courtesy of Gentile comedian Mike Meyers, was not the work of rabbis and scholars; it was the achievement of joke-tellers.

Humor has been a part of Jewish life as long as there have been Jews. Journey back two millennia and you will find the literature of the rabbis suffused with parody and punning, humor and wit. The Talmud reports that when the 4th century C.E. sage Rabbah began a discourse, "He would first offer humorous observations to amuse his colleagues, and only then commence his lecture in earnest" (B. Pesachim 117a). Yet another Talmudic source quotes an authority no less than Elijah the Prophet, who said that jesters are worthy of the World-to-Come because they bring cheer to people, and defuse ill-will through humor (B. Ta'anit 22a).

None of this is surprising, for if we return to the very dawn of our existence, we find that Abraham and Sarah, the progenitors of Jewish peoplehood, chose to name their heir Yitzhak, "one who laughs." Throughout the ages as children of Abraham and Sarah, laughter has been no less a part of our birthright than the soil of the Promised Land. Indeed, unlike our ancestral homeland, we were able to bring laughter with us into exile.

Why is humor so important to us as Jews? To answer the question one must first consider the nature of Jewish humor. The term itself is rather telling, for it presumes the existence of a cultural genre that can be so labeled. I have yet to hear anyone talk about Christian or Muslim humor as a cohesive literary tradition with its own aesthetic. But the phrase "Jewish humor" is one we take for granted; there is something that makes Jewish joke-telling unique. Jewish humor isn't about subject matter. A Jewish joke can involve naive and innocent

souls or cynical and grasping materialists; it can focus on food, digestion, money, professions, education, illness--real and imagined, or one's in-laws. It can poke fun at men or women, ignorance or erudition. No, the essence of Jewish humor is not what it jokes about, but how.

When Iran announced a few years ago that it would hold a contest for the most anti-Semitic cartoon, Israeli cartoonists Eyal Zusman and Amitai Sandy responded with a counter-contest all their own. In a press release they stated, "We'll show the world we can do the best, sharpest, most offensive Jew-hating cartoon ever published. No Iranian will beat us on our home turf."

That is the essence of Jewish humor. It is the old Jewish fellow who has taken to reading the Neo-Nazi press because it makes him feel better to know that Jews control the world; it is the joke about the Israeli who is captured by cannibals and, being granted one last wish begs that they beat him viciously, after which he reveals a concealed weapon and shoots his attackers, later explaining to a puzzled onlooker that had he not allowed them to beat him first he might be accused of aggression.

One of the most incredible aspects of the Shoah was the ability of Jews themselves to use humor as a survival tool in face of the most indescribable evil of all recorded history. The laughter was bitter, but it gave the lie to the Nazis' claim that they could destroy the Jewish spirit. Jewish bodies, they could destroy; but not the Jewish soul.

In Auschwitz the various swamp like paths that served as thoroughfares all had names: Goering Strasse, Goebbels Allee. Whenever Jewish prisoners reached the locale known as Hitlerplatz, they would respond, "Amen," punning on the fact that "Hitler Place" in German also means "Hitler, drop dead!" in Yiddish. The inmates of the camps would also tell a story about the S.S. officer who gave a woman one chance to save her child from death. "I have a glass eye," the Nazi told the distraught mother, "One that is so perfectly matched with my natural eye as to be virtually indistinguishable. If you can tell me which is the glass one, I will spare your child." The woman looked at the officer's face and immediately identified the man's left eye as the false one. The S.S. officer was taken aback. "You are right, but how did you know?" The woman's answer: Your left eye is softer and more compassionate.

The humor of the Shoah, as indeed all Jewish humor in its most religious sense speaks the language of faith. It affirms a belief in our ability to transcend and overcome the obstacles in our path. It is a statement of spiritual strength, for as long as we laugh, our enemies cannot destroy us. In Judaism humor is a defense against despair, which according to one of the great Hasidic masters of the late 18th century, the Bratzlaver Rebbe, was the root of all estrangement from God.

Humor is also a path to God. To laugh at something is to recognize its limits, its boundaries. Humor shatters a variety of idols -- be they our leaders, our enemies, our own foibles. Only God is absolute. All Jewish humor points to the fact that nothing else in this universe even comes close.

Yesterday we entered the month of Second Adar on the Hebrew calendar. According to the Talmud, "When Adar enters, joy is increased." Though every Jewish holiday, even Yom Kippur, partakes of a joyous character, Purim has a dimension of merriment that no other observance on the calendar can touch. Parodies and pranks, jokes and spoofs, costumes and tipling, a veritable Jewish *Mardi Gras*, if you will.

But the story of Purim has a dark side. Each year on *Shabbat Zakhor*, the weekend before Purim, we read of the Amalekites who sought to destroy Israel for no reason than pure hatred and draw a lineal connection between the biblical narrative and Haman, and from Haman down to our own day. Each year, the celebration is preceded by Ta'anit Esther, the fast that reminds us how perilously close we came to utter destruction. We read the story and listen to the twists and turns of the plot, the close calls, the times when Mordecai and Esther happened to be in the right place at the right time, or that Haman thankfully happened to be in the wrong place at the right time.

But Purim is not Passover. There are no divinely-inflicted plagues, no dramatic parting of the sea, no mighty hand and outstretched arm. We believe in God's hidden hand in our salvation, but we are keenly aware that in every age we dance on the edge of a volcano.

We believe that life will overcome death, yet people die; we believe that hunger and oppression will be abolished; yet starvation and persecution are part of our world; we believe that God created a good world, yet each day the headlines speak of suicide bombings, hatred and war, disease and despair. As Jews we are not oblivious to the reality of today's world, but we still firmly insist that righteousness will triumph.

In Judaism humor is the bridge between the pain of history and the possibilities of tomorrow. As writer Yitz Greenberg put it, "Humor makes statements of faith credible without being insensitive to present states of suffering. Through humorous affirmation Jews admit that they follow God not because their hopes have been realized but because they have trust in the Divine. To act as if the final redemption is fact would be insane; not to affirm the totality of hope would be a sellout. Purim offers an alternative: humorous affirmation. Purim's laughter preserves integrity and sanity together."

That Purim is so wonderful and colorful for children is certainly a bonus; but it is hardly a childish occasion. The unconquerable Jewish spirit, a recognition of the odds and a defiance of them, a pathway to God, a rejection of the idolatry that is human self-deification; the point at which the tears of deep pain and those of unstoppable laughter mingle and separate. For Jews making merry is no joke; laughter is a serious business, indeed.