Does Religion Value Comedy?

Rabbi Daniel Feldman: Rosh Yeshiva, editor, and author, Rabbi Feldman doesn't just bring the Talmudic know-how about comedy in religious life to this week's interview—he brings the voice of experience from the other side of comedy. Rabbi Feldman is well-known in some circles for his masterful performances in *Purim shpiels* earlier in life, and so his erudition about comedy is particularly meaningful. Listen to Rabbi Feldman in conversation with David Bashevkin here.

As this month's focus on comedy winds down, this week's Weekend Reader focuses on two important questions: What is the religious value of comedy? Should comedy have limits?

To answer these questions, we will look to Italian author Umberto Eco and Rabbi Daniel Feldman, with stops on the way for contemporary Israeli thinker Rabbi Elchanan Nir and Russian-American singer-songwriter Regina Spektor. Only this week, at 18Forty.

What is the religious value of humor?

Rabbi Daniel Feldman, a far cry from a 14th century monk, is a thoughtful commentator on the place of the comedic urge in religious life. So why is comedy important for a religious Jew? In his interview with 18Forty, Feldman thought through this question through two levels of importance. The first is more pragmatic:

> **Rabbi Daniel Feldman:** I think there are a couple of angles to consider, and some of them are functional and basically pragmatic, like the ability to cope with the day. Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch comments on Parshas Beshalach that when the Jews come out of Egypt, and they say to Moses, "Why did you take us out here? Because there aren't enough graves in Egypt?" So he comments that that's not a serious question, that's a sarcastic comment. And he writes that they were doing that in order to cope. He adds that that's what Jews have done ever since, that that's the quality that we've adopted in order to cope. And if that's the case, which is pretty self-evident, then it's only a short jump to say that if you can make other people laugh when they're having a hard time, so then that's an act of kindness, which is our core mission in this world.

On one level, comedy in religious life is a remarkable coping mechanism and tool for empathy. But religious comedy, or perhaps we should call it comedic religion, has a more ambitious goal. In a piece for *Jewish Action* provocatively titled "Does God Have a Sense of Humor?" Feldman expands on this more ambitious goal of comedic religion:

> Perhaps we can suggest that in addition to humor's practical, functional benefits within a religious context, it also has a primary role to play in a religious worldview—one that not only assists and reduces crises, but that actually comprises a vital part of one's perception of one's world. The Talmud (Avodah Zarah 3b**)** teaches that God's schedule is comprised of daily activities assigned to four quarters of the day, including one devoted to "playing with the Leviathan." … Is there a theological or religious value to this statement being included in the Torah Shebe'al Peh? … What moral or halachic lesson is conveyed here?
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> Rabbi Hershel Schachter (Nefesh HaRav, p. 69) cites Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik as suggesting that the statement is important for the mitzvah of *vihalachta biderachav*, or imitatio Dei (following in God's ways). In the context of delivering a eulogy for Rabbi Moshe Shatzkes, the Rav suggested that **this information helps the individual realize a more Godly personality by recognizing that one does not have to "take everything so seriously."** To relate to this idea as more than a rhetorical device requires a consideration of how such a concept can be a fundamental attribute of the perfect God.
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> … If humor is defined solely as possession of this perspective, it is fair to say that God in His omniscience maintains the ultimate "sense of humor."

If we can feel like the Author, whether of *Netzach Yisrael* or this world, has a sense of humor, it becomes just a bit easier to relate to the Author as Real, and not just a foreign truth or half-hearted *ani ma'amin*.

Comedy offers perspective on our lives, and corrects the ways we allow our views to become biased. Learning perspective is a life skill, not simply a matter of timing:

> **Daniel Feldman**: We need to be able to differentiate between what is important, and requires our focus and our attention, and what is a distraction, what bogs us down and weighs us down and can make us feel bad in ways that aren't productive. And to be able to identify what's important and what isn't, that is a crucial skill in life. And essentially, God is the one who sees it all at once and who knows what is big and what is small. And when we're told to emulate God, in this sense, we're asked to cultivate a sense of perspective, to be able to recognize that this is not something that we should care about and that is.

We laugh like God: In perspective.

Rabbi Elchanan Nir, an Israeli poet, novelist, and thinker, wrote *If Your Heart Races* (p. 108), which discusses descent and ascent in religious life. At the end of a lengthy chapter about the Alter Rebbe, the Russian Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1813), Elchanan asks the following question: Did the Alter Rebbe have a sense of humor?

His explanation for why he finds that question important provides a powerful illumination into the idea of the comedic in religious life:

> One year, I learned the sefer *Netzach Yisrael* with my students, written by the Maharal of Prague, Rabbi Yehuda Loew (1520-1609). This book deals with exile and redemption, a subject relevant to the lives of many students, both on a personal-existential level and on a national level. However, the students never connected with the subject matter. They knew the material, they understood the content, but they felt distant from the material through it all.

> At the end of the year, when I asked them whether they benefited from their encounter with this work, they acknowledged the importance of the sefer, but said that it felt distant to them still, foreign. “Only now do I understand why I felt this way”, one student said: “The Maharal obviously didn’t have a sense of humor.” That student wasn’t saying that the Maharal didn’t have jokes—although this might also be true—but rather a sense of humor.
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> Humor is deep; The Zohar (2, 107a) refers to King David as “the King’s jester,” as he knows how to free the king from the gravity necessary to ruling. Humor engenders an ability to encounter life from within the heavy constraints of the gravity of the human condition and the gravity of religious life.

In a way, asking if the author of a work has a sense of humor is really asking a deeper question: was there an author to this work? While someone put thought to paper, was that person struggling with the stuff of life? Was this work born from a real encounter with life, or just with philosophy? Asking if the Maharal had a sense of humor is like asking if God has a sense of humor: We may feel like there is a Creator to this world, but it’s easy to think of this Creator as a transcendent, Spinoza-esque Creator—above, distant, prone to ruling with gravitas. If we can feel like the Author, whether of *Netzach Yisrael* or this world, has a sense of humor, it becomes just a bit easier to relate to the Author as Real, and not just a foreign truth or half-hearted *ani ma’amin*.

Should comedy have limits?

Rabbi Feldman is also cautious about the dangerous possibilities to the comedic project:

> **Daniel Feldman:** You have to really be careful. And comedy is particularly double-edged in that way, because comedy certainly could have the effect of just knocking down things and being cynical, which is the opposite of a Jewish sense of humor the way we were describing it a few minutes ago: for trying to be able to preserve the importance of important things by identifying what should be focused on. So then a cynic, who doesn’t think anything’s important, like Oscar Wilde said, he knows the cost of everything and the value of nothing. So then cynicism is the opposite of a Jewish sense of humor. And as Rav Hutner discussed in the first essay in Purim, because that’s what the Talmud means when it says all *leitzanus* is prohibited, he defines “*leitzanus*” as cynicism.

> An attitude that knocks down anything of significance and just says it's all nothing, that's something we have to really worry about. And any kind of an attitude that's going to cheapen important things, or going to lessen our sense of reverence or our sense of dignity, is tremendously dangerous. But at the same time, or together with that, what humor can do, in addition to the sense of perspective that we mentioned, it gives us a vocabulary. **It gives us a language towards the world to be able to understand some of what works and what doesn't work, and some of the nuances of life that we don't necessarily always catch onto right away.** And that's where it can be tremendously valuable.

And this brings us to the 14th century monastery. In *The Name of the Rose*, Italian author-philosopher Umberto Eco places a theological dispute between two monks about laughter at the heart of a book that would go on to become one of the best-selling books ever published. In this murder-mystery/literary journey, a theological dispute about whether Franciscans are heretical brings together the Franciscan William of Baskerville and the elderly non-Franciscan Jorge of Borges.

At a pivotal point in the book, Jorge of Borges, a blind, elderly member of the monastery, shouts at the Franciscan William: "A monk should not laugh! Only a fool raises his voice in laughter!" Jorge notes, with no slight disapproval, that Franciscans like William look indulgently upon laughter.

> William: Yes, it's true. Saint Francis was much disposed to laughter.
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> Jorge: Laughter is a devilish wind which deforms the lineaments of the face and makes men look like monkeys.
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> William: Monkeys do not laugh. Laughter is particular to man.
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> Jorge: As is sin. **Christ never laughed.**
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> William: **Can we be so sure?**
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> Jorge: There is nothing in the Scriptures to say that He did.
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> William: And there's nothing there to say that He did not. Even the saints have been known to employ comedy to ridicule the enemies of the faith. For example, when the Pagans plunged Saint Maurus into the boiling water, he complained that his bath was cold. The Sultan put his hand in and scalded himself.
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> Jorge: A saint immersed in boiling water does not play childish tricks. He restrains his cries and suffers for the truth!
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> William: And yet, Aristotle devoted his second book of poetics to comedy as an instrument of truth.

Spoiler alert: In a later scene, William discovers that Jorge had taken steps to poison any who read Aristotle's *Poetics*, which discusses comedy, and the dispute continues:

> William: Venerable brother, there are many books that speak of comedy. Why does this one fill you with such fear?
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> Jorge: Because it's by Aristotle.
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> William: But what is so alarming about laughter?
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> Jorge: **Laughter kills fear and without fear there can't be any faith. Because without fear of the devil there is no more need of God.**
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> William: But you will not eliminate laughter by eliminating that book.
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> Jorge: No, to be sure. Laughter will remain the common man's recreation but what would happen if, because of this book, learned men work to pronounce it permissible to laugh at everything? **Can we laugh at God? The world would relapse into chaos.**

In Jorge's eyes, laughter in religious life erodes the fear that keeps faith alive. But for William, laughter is a part of religious life, and keeps faith alive in its own way. "Can we laugh at God?" Indeed, can we? Should we? Does laughter kill fear, and thus faith? Does God have a sense of humor? Do we?

This question touches upon our deep concern for laughter, and the subsequent concerns born in our appreciation for laughter. And so Nir asks: Did the Alter Rebbe have a sense of humor? Feldman asks: Does God have a sense of humor? And across the theological ocean, Umberto Eco asks: Did Christ have a sense of humor? To each, the answer might just be: It depends. Do you, the reader, seek to find humor in these works? Do you put your personal interests in perspective, and learn to laugh like God, and with God?

Two hundred years after the Alter Rebbe, a different Russian Jew, the singer Regina Spektor, commented in song about the ironic challenge of laughter in religious life. It is easier to find God funny when one is in control. "God can be funny," she sings, "at a cocktail party when listening to a God-themed joke … or when presented like a genie who does magic like Houdini or grants wishes like Jiminy Cricket or Santa Claus." But when the act of living grows more complicated, more vulnerable, that laughter rings hollow:

> No one laughs at God in a hospital
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> No one laughs at God in a war
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> No one's laughing at God when they're starving or freezing or so very poor
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> No one laughs at God when the doctor calls after some routine tests
>
> No one's laughing at God

When it’s gotten real late and their kid’s not back from the party yet

But as her song winds down, Spektor softly sings:

No one’s laughing at God

No one’s laughing at God

No one’s laughing at God, **we’re all laughing with God**

We’re all laughing with God. There are dangers inherent to comedy, possibilities for the cynical edge that laughter sometimes has to creep into one’s life. As Brother Jorge asks: Can we laugh at God? We might answer: We can laugh with God. We can laugh with hope, with faith, and with perspective. While hope and history may not yet rhyme, and while we may not yet have history’s sense of perspective into the travails of our current moment, we can laugh at the shining absurdities that so often make our life worth living.