Punchlines with Boundaries and Opportunities



The famous Jewish comedian, Jackie Mason, began his career as a Rabbi Jack Maza. His Bar Mitzvah speech was fairly sophisticated and later published in his father's rabbinic work. His story was later immortalized in an episode of *The Simpsons* where Krusty the Klown confronts his disappointed rabbinic father, Rabbi Hyman Krustofsky. Jackie Mason played the voice of Krusty's father. In the episode, Krusty, after choosing a career in comedy, is disowned by his father.

> **Lisa**: Excuse us, Rabbi Krustofsky?
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> **Rabbi Hyman Krustofsky**: Oh, what can I do for you, my young friends?
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> **Bart**: We came to talk to you about your son.
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> **Rabbi Hyman Krustofsky**: I have no son! *(slams the door)*
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> **Bart**: Oh, great. We came all this way and it's the wrong guy.
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> **Rabbi Hyman Krustofsky**: I didn't mean that literally. *(slams the door again)*

This is a common Hollywood trope. The first film with sound, *The Jazz Singer*, had a similar plot. However entertaining these plotlines may be, they're also misleading. Watching *The Simpsons*, *The Jazz Singer*, or a Coen Brothers' movie can give one a caricature impression on the rabbinic approach to comedy and humor. Sure, rabbis are serious, but they also take comedy seriously.

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There is a moving story in the Talmud about the value of comedy. The Talmud in Taanis recounts:

אדהכי והכי אתו הנך תרי אתי א"ל הנך נמי בני עלמא דאתי נינהו אזל לגבייהו אמר להו מאי עובדייכו אמרו ליה אינשי בדוחי אנן מבדחינן עציבי אי נמי כי חזינן בי תרי דאית להו תיגרא בהדייהו טרחינן ועבדינן להו שלמא

> **In the meantime, two brothers came** to the marketplace. Elijah **said to** Rabbi Beroka: **These** two **also have a share in the World-to-Come.** Rabbi Beroka **went over to** the men and **said to them: What is your occupation? They said to him: We are jesters, and we cheer up the depressed. Alternatively, when we see two** people **who have a quarrel between them, we strive to make peace.**

Some of my most anxious moments have been when I know I need to finish my humor column and I just have nothing. I'm tired, fatigued, frustrated, and feel empty of any creative output. I remember one time I was feeling particularly lost and I reached out to my friend and editor, Sruli Besser, for some words of encouragement. He just sent me this passage. As he often does, he reminded me that making others smile is an act invested with holiness. But, I think the Talmud is transmitting something even more profound than simply the importance of comedy. The jesters are identified in this story as two who have a share in the World-to-Come. Simply read, the Talmud ascribes comedy with the capacity to merit a share in the World-to-Come—meaning it is a holy endeavor. More fundamentally, perhaps, the Talmud is ascribing an other-worldliness to comedic instinct. There's an old aphorism, "comedy is tragedy plus time." The first time this was in print seems to be in a 1957 *Cosmopolitan* interview with Steve Allen, the original host of *The Tonight Show*:

> When I explained to a friend recently that the subject matter of most comedy is tragic (drunkenness, overweight, financial problems, accidents, etc.) he said, "Do you mean to tell me that the dreadful events of the day are a fit subject for humorous comment? The answer is "No, but they will be pretty soon."

> Man jokes about the things that depress him, but he usually waits till a certain amount of time has passed. It must have been a tragedy when Judge Crater disappeared, but everybody jokes about it now. I guess you can make a mathematical formula out of it. **Tragedy plus time equals comedy.**

Perhaps that is why comedians are described by the Talmud as coming from "The World to Come." With enough time, distance, and perspective, the humor of the world can finally emerge.

Rabbi Daniel Feldman is a brilliant Talmud scholar and author of several books. He's not quite the inverse of Jackie Mason, but before becoming a rabbi he built a reputation as someone with a gift for humor. Many *yeshivos* have a custom of putting on a play before *Purim*, known as a *Purim Shpiel*. It has been the source of some controversy over the years, as students generally imitate their teachers to raucous laughter. Rabbi Feldman famously starred in many such *Purim Shpiels*, providing an uncanny imitation of his eminent teacher, Rabbi Hershel Schachter.

He has both written and spoken about the value of humor in Jewish thought. In fact, we were co-panelists in a written interview discussing the role of pop-culture and humor in teaching Torah. In our discussion together, he cited a brilliant article in *Tradition* by Rabbi Shalom Carmy, entitled "Homer and the Bible." There, Rabbi Carmy discusses the danger of saturating spiritual ideas with overly modern clichés and sensationalist asides. He couches his concern (with a wink) in an episode of *The Simpsons*. Homer begins a marriage class. After failing to capture the attention of his students, he begins sharing the salacious details of his own marriage—much to the chagrin of his wife, Marge. This, explains Rabbi Carmy, is the mistake so many Jewish educators make. They substitute salaciousness for substance. He writes:

> Yes, I have noticed that many students indeed "prick up their ears" the moment such subjects are mentioned. I don't mind the momentary spike in attention that goes with a change of pace. Yet when marginal pursuits become invested with heightened significance and interest, simply as a result of their novelty or shock value, this is a cause for suspicion rather than self-satisfaction. If anything, those in whom consideration of the most intimate and most fundamental elements of religious life induces giddiness, rather than sobriety, are the least qualified to take part in and influence these discussions.
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> An educational mission dependent on the fleeting morbid pleasures of debunking, relying on the desperate stimulation of reflexive skepticism cannot stand.

It’s doubly clever, as only Rabbi Carmy is, to couch his skepticism for the educational uses of pop culture in an episode of *The Simpsons*. It’s also a wink, as Rabbi Carmy knows clearly it’s possible to be done well, but is just too frequently abused. Humor, comedy, and pop culture can both elevate and denigrate. As I once discussed in an article about the uses of humor on Twitter, constructive humor is spiritual; destructive humor is cynical. Learning the difference takes work, patience, and graciousness.

If you listen closely to Rabbi Daniel Feldman, you’ll find someone who is sensitive to the balance. That’s not altogether surprising. Much of his works deal with the human element of Jewish thought. Whether comedy, kindness, negative speech, or human dignity, much of his scholarship surrounds the human condition. His works may make you laugh, they make you think, but they most certainly will highlight the beauty of being human.

Listen to our podcast with Rabbi Daniel Feldman.