Taking Comedy Seriously



This month, 18Forty is thinking about comedy, and its relevance to contemporary cultural and religious life, available here. In preparation for this month's topic, here is a brief history of what makes Jews laugh, from the Torah to today.

(Paul Noth/The New Yorker Collection/The Cartoon Bank)

Biblical Era: Where's the Joke?

It is deeply ironic, and perhaps telling, that the specter of humor in the Torah may be first identified with Yitzchak, who was named for laughter. This is ironic because Yitzchak is far from an easy laugh, and his somber presence in the Torah may reflect the fact that laughter, in the Torah, is a deeply unfunny topic. Finding humor in the Torah takes work, and the millennia have aided commentators small and large in finding witticisms and cosmic comedy in the holy work. "Better sorrow than laughter," Kohelet says, and yet contemporary readers of parts of the Biblical canon work to read subversive humor into Kohelet, Job, and Esther, seeing a subtly comic quality to these texts. We may not yet have the right lens to appreciate the Torah's humor, but groups like contemporary Israeli comedy group HaYehudim Baim are doing their best to provide one.

Talmudic Era: When Jews Learned How to Laugh

Jewish comedy grew up in the Talmud's many pages, as it became a value and lived presence in the text. Witticisms, wordplay, and ripostes provide *daf*-weary readers with many a laughing moment, and it is not for nothing that so-called "Talmudic humor" has become an identifying quality of later Jewish comedy. The intellectual casuistry of the Talmud provides a fertile ground for humor that plays with the over-thought nature of Jewish thinking. But some jokes in the Talmud are far simpler, such as this pithy passage that appears in Yevamot (63b):

> The Gemara cites a related incident: Rav Yehuda was teaching Torah to Rav Yitzchak, his son, and they encountered the verse: "And I find more bitter than death the woman" (Ecclesiastes 7:26). His son said to him: For example, whom? His father replied: For example, your mother.

Medieval Era: Poetry and Parody

Thinking about the golden age of rationalism, helmed by Maimonides and the sages of Provence, one might not think of the disputation and expulsion-heavy medieval era as a particularly funny time, but it was also a time that gave us Jewish parody. The creative efflorescence of the age of Spanish-Jewish literature gave us parodical works of rabbinic literature, such as the *Takhemoni* and *Masechet Purim*. Deeply informed by rabbinic text and style, these works skewer the linguistic and conceptual frameworks of rabbinic literature to hilarious effect.

Enlightenment Era: The Battle for the Comedic Crown

Nothing is better for comedy than disagreement, and as the Jewish world divided into Chassidim, Misnagdim, and Maskilim, each group found comedic ways to target their enemies. In the unbiased opinion of the writer of this newsletter, the award for best parody of the time evades the Misnagdim, who never quite understood comedy as the Chassidim and Maskilim did. The harder decision is between the Maskilic and Chassidic comedies—Maskilic works, such as Joseph Perl's *Megillat Setarim*, were often searing takedowns of Chassidic life, but their polemical tone qualifies their hilarity. Chassidic humor, couched as it is in mystical lessons, is hard to pin down, but found an advocate in Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. In his stories and teachings, he offers divine comedies, theological jokes, and humorous criticisms of the rationality he so feared. But it wasn't all so mystical—Hershele of Ostropole, a famed Hasidic jester and prankster, became a sort of mythologized folk hero, famous for speaking deep truths in playful ways.

Jewish Humor (Spanish). 1990.
Collection of Beit Hatfutsot

Yiddish Humor: The Theology of Kvetch

With the advent of the newspaper age, Jewish humor became a force to be reckoned with. Yiddish humor can be biting, crude, or witty, and the sharp Yiddish refrains, born in Europe, worked their way across the Atlantic, bringing a Jewish touch to American Jewish comedy. In some ways, Jewish humor always responded to and dealt with trauma and persecution, and so it is unsurprising that in the trying years of the 20th century, Jewish humor found a huge audience. Saul Bellow writes that Jewish humor contains “laughter and trembling,” and the Borscht Belt comedians found a generation of eager listeners. Perhaps by continuing the tradition of comical complaint about all injustices, large and small, these comedians were able to find joy in destruction. The theology of the kvetch popularized by this style found later expression in Woody Allen and Larry David, for whom no complaint is ever wasted.

Jewish Humor Today: An Unfolding Story

In an age and society in which Jews are deeply embedded in their host cultures, the styles that were once so identified with Jewish comedy have traced deep outlines on the contours of American comedy. Social media has democratized the funny, and now everyone can be a comedian (for better or worse). Ever unfolding, the story of what makes Jews laugh is in some ways the story of the Jews, and the ways we have found depth and joy in every circumstance. There is no one Jewish humor, and looking at the many faces that this humor has occupied is deeply telling about the many cultures and contexts in which Jews made myth and meaning. Jewish humor is also about boundaries, and it often plays with the differences between the Jewish minority and the host cultures and religion it occupies. As the Jewish story continues, so does the story of its humor, growing ever more layered, and perhaps more funny.

Listen to our introductory episode for Comedy.