

Behind the Laughter: The Purim Shpiel Comes to America (and Chicago)

BY ZEV ELEFF

In 1940, Rabbi Mordecai Waxman declared, “the Purim-spiel is now a thing of the past.” To Waxman, these satirical plays were “crude and primitive,” hardly a “form of art.”¹ No doubt, the rabbi’s evaluation was the result of informed observation. Throughout the United States, rabbinic and lay leaders labored mightily to improve decorum in their synagogues. These Purim plays, Waxman and others feared, encouraged a sort of “European” slapstick that was incongruous with New World refinement. What is more, concerned second and third generation American Jews worried about the cultural baggage that millions of Eastern European immigrants brought with them as they resettled in the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century. Waxman was correct that many congregations viewed the Purim shpiel as far too lowbrow for their American sensibilities.²

Still, the Purim shpiel was far from an endangered comedic species. For instance, a March 1979 Hebrew Theological College (HTC) newsletter reported on the success of the school’s recent shpiel, describing it as “an annual event as old as the Yeshiva.”³ Unfortunately, the sources do not confirm that a band of students organized a revue on Douglas Boulevard in the 1920s. Yet it is certainly the case that the Purim shpiel was a longtime staple within the HTC culture and within other enclaves. Its perennial presence in the HTC calendar represents an oft-overlooked aspect of Jewish life in the United States. Moreover, its place within the rabbinic milieu served as a precious moment in which students and teachers could, with a modicum of irreverence, reverse the current of rabbi-pupil dialogue to flow in the opposite direction. In a word, the shpiel empowered students to speak relatively freely in a time-bound space without upsetting the larger and more rigid yeshiva culture.

The shpiel’s successful transplantation to the United States was due in large measure to the influence of American rabbinical seminaries. In Europe, most of the leading yeshivot hosted these jolly shpiels.⁴ In Volozhin, faculty and students looked forward to the annual one-man-routine of the so-called “Purim Rav.”⁵ In fact, one memoirist from Kovno

recalled that the leading scholars of his community eagerly anticipated the return of young men for the Passover vacation who would recount the musings and humor of the Purim performance that took place several weeks earlier in Volozhin.⁶ The tradition spread to Slobodka, Kamenitz, and other famed yeshivot. In most instances, the sharp and witty criticisms of teachers that were invariably imbedded within the shpiels were tolerated—if not celebrated—by the schools’ administrations as keeping within the jovial spirit of Purim.⁷ It was understood that after the holiday the “Purim Rav” would return to his student status and that the sagacious rabbis would once again regain control of the form and content of their yeshivot. Accordingly, the most astute rabbinic leaders utilized the satires as once-a-year

opportunities to gain insight into the opinions of their all-too-reticent students and improve their organizations.⁸

In time, the “custom migrated to America.” One observer noted that “in major yeshivot, like the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary [RIETS] and the Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood, these ‘rabbis’ [i.e., the Purim Rav] rule with force on Purim.”⁹ The students enrolled at RIETS, Yeshiva University’s rabbinical school in New York, took particular delight in



Audience at HTC Purim shpiel, 1971.
Hebrew Theological College Archives.

expanding the “Purim Rav” tradition into a more elaborate play—with a company of actors and props—that frequently aimed its humor at leading scholars such as Rabbis Yaakov Moshe Lessin, Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Mendel Menachem Mendel Zaks. Here is the student report of the 1950 shpiel:

Rabbi Lessin spoke, followed by Rabbi Joseph William B. Soloveifrank, who delivered a “sheur” of Purim Torah. Willie Frank had a “J.B.ish” beard, and makeup that had even me, a Bostonian and chasid of J.B., fooled at first glance. During the spiel, we were all startled by a trumpet blast announcing the arrival of Reb Mendel of Radun. Armed with a “shtreimel,” a satin “kappote,” white socks and a gray wig and beard, this pseudo-Rebbe later turned out to be (as if I couldn’t guess) Yisrael Wohlgelernter, ’52. The wisecracks that followed were the highlights of the Chagiga.¹⁰

The Purim shpiel also remained a fixture in the Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland and Chicago, though it was resisted by the leaders of several Brooklyn schools like Chaim Berlin and Torah Vodaath.¹¹ Beyond Orthodox circles, students and faculty at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati routinely laughed aloud as its young men performed Purim satires that lampooned noted figures such as Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus, and President Julian Morgenstern.¹² Rabbi Isaac Klein also kept a notebook that he labeled “Purim Thora” [*sic*] that preserved many witty lines—mostly in Yiddish and Hebrew—that he employed in his years at the Jewish Theological Seminary.¹³

Nevertheless, Orthodox Jews embraced “shpiel culture” more than other sectors of the American Jewish community. In 1954, the Orthodox Union included a Purim shpiel script composed by the comedians of the Young Israel of Flatbush—replete with generic barbs and jabs at rabbis and lay officers—in its “monthly program manual for synagogue activity.”¹⁴ Likewise, it is unsurprising to find that the Orthodox students at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1970s were the

ones who advertised their upcoming Purim play in the local press.¹⁵

In Chicago, Jews of all stripes were well-accustomed to shpiel culture. In March 1968, the Zionist Organization of Chicago held a Purim feast at the Palmer House. The local press reported that the “highlight” of the event was the “Purim Shpiel, under the direction of Renee Eisenstadt.”¹⁶ For the few uninitiated readers, *The Sentinel* later published an elaborate explanation of the Purim play phenomenon in its “Ask the Rabbi” column.¹⁷ Owing to all this, it is more than sensible that the annual HTC Purim shpiel was a celebrated event among Chicago’s Orthodox Jews, particularly in the 1960s. In fact, it was a community affair. Here is the text of a circular for the 1966 shpiel that appeared in the Jewish press:

Members of the Student Council of the Hebrew Theological College, 7135 N. Carpenter Rd., Skokie, will hold their annual Purim shpiel on the campus on Sunday, March 6, 7:30 p.m.

The public is invited (admission, 50 cents [today, \$3.69]) to witness the skit, entitled “Wizard of Odd.”¹⁸

The heyday of the HTC shpiel did not emerge in a vacuum. In the 1960s, popular culture and television talk shows served as important forums for “youth rebellion” and a counterculture that featured a flair for the irreverent, much more so than the good-natured *Howdy Doody* disposition of the prior decade.¹⁹ Moreover, Jewish youngsters had an assortment of well-known comedians to emulate: Woody Allen, Mel Brooks, Shecky Greene, Buddy Hackett, and Jackie Mason.²⁰ To be sure, the HTC students did not reach

the high level of insubordination that was then in vogue, but the impact of the ’60s counterculture mixed with the cheeky Purim folkway that had long ago migrated from Eastern Europe was apparent on the Carpenter Road campus.

The 1960s was a crucial decade for HTC. Several factors impelled its leaders, students, and community members to reconsider the school’s



HTC “Hamasmid Brick Company” Purim shpiel, 1971.
Hebrew Theological College Archives.

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uniqueness among other Orthodox institutions, including the newly established Chicago branch of the Telshe Yeshiva. The concern manifested itself in the Purim plays. Take the 1965 shpiel, for example. That year, the students performed “How to Succeed in the Yeshiva Without Really Trying.” The second scene depicted HTC students preparing some sort of theatrical production featuring life at Hebrew Theological College. In it, several students debated a suitable outfit to represent Skokie men. “We could wear our Tzitzis out,” recommended one student. Another concurred, saying that a young man with “ritual fringes” popping out just above his belt was an appropriate and pious image of an Orthodox rabbinical student. The suggestion, though, was misleading to others in the group who were quick to acknowledge that most HTC students in this period preferred to conceal their fringes beneath their clothing in order to “fit in” among non-Jewish Chicagoans. “But people might think we’re from Telshe,” jested a third student, as if to place the new yeshiva to the religious right of HTC.²¹

This and a number of later shpiels offered amusing comparisons between the Chicago students and their counterparts at Yeshiva University, Chabad, and other Orthodox schools. It was not that the HTC men were struck with an “inferiority complex;” to the contrary, hyperbolic and vivid contrasts between different institutions and Orthodox Jews helped concretize the HTC brand.

The HTC Purim humor was appreciated. The students who wrote and performed the shpiels garnered large audiences that numbered in the hundreds and typically filled the capacious Lavin Dining Hall. The crowds arrived eager to learn how the clever rabbinical students would blend contemporary theater and musical culture with “yeshiva wit” to lampoon their school. In 1963, the thespians produced “North Side Story.” Instead of *West Side Story*’s Sharks and Jets, HTC’s musical featured the Shtarks and the Shtaats. And, in lieu of Tony’s and Maria’s celebrated duet, the students portrayed two star-crossed study partners:

Tonight, tonight
We’ll learn downstairs tonight!
Just meet me there
And we’ll shteig away!

Tonight, tonight
Our seder starts tonight
And all night in the tunnel we’ll stay

Be sure to bring down your Gemara,
I’ll bring my Mishna Brurah
And also a flashlight
So meet me there
Right after Azose puts us to bed
Tonight!²²

Subsequent productions also took clever creative license with popular Broadway musicals. The 1964 group performed “Bye Bye Beardie.” In this rendition, the shpiel confronted the students’ absence from the rage and carnage of Vietnam. On the whole, HTC students—like many other clergy-in-training—claimed exemption as “ministers and divinity students” and could not be conscripted into the Vietnam War. In self-mockery, the students parodied Dick Van Dyke and “Put on a Happy Face.” Here is the introductory verse:

So you might be conscripted
But put on a happy face.
All my chavrusas skipped it,
And I will feel out of place.
Will I be able to go to minyan there?
Keep kosher as well?
Just don’t be disappointed when you’re there,
It’s not a hotel!²³

Vietnam was a recurring theme within the HTC Purim theater culture, as students, with certain degrees of subtlety, voiced antiwar protest, and reflections on accusations of “draft dodging.” Moreover, they used the opportunity to list student complaints about the dormitory facilities and the cafeteria cuisine. The dormitory and other facilities were constantly subjected to humorous scrutiny. Of course, though, the HTC comedians reserved the lion’s share of Purim commentary for their rabbinic teachers. In those years, the Chicago school was home to a number of outstanding scholars: luminaries such as Rabbis Eliezer Berkovits, Hertzfel and Mendel Kaplan, Yaakov Perlow, Zelig Starr, Chaim Regensberg, Ahron Soloveichik, and Chaim Zimmerman. Hundreds of students eagerly enrolled in HTC to study with them. It was the task of the Purim shpiel writers and actors to express admiration with a touch of informed satire.

The 1966 shpiel was perhaps the most elaborate Purim production. The costume designs and stage production exceeded the usual high standard. “The Wizard of Odd” offered a narrative that followed the basic outlines of L. Frank Baum’s classic tale. In the HTC iteration, though, it turned out that the “wonderful wizard” was none other than the recently appointed and renowned Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik—

“the only man in the world fit for the job of Rosh Hayeshiva of the Bais Hamedrash L’Wizards”²⁴ The happy commotion over HTC’s new rabbinic leader was considerable, a point that the students made sure to satirize. Their message was one of dutiful appreciation, but also a playful call, in their minds anyway, to gain a better handle on perspective.

Then, as always, Purim ended and matters returned to normal. The administration and faculty resumed their prominent places within and without the institution while the students reclaimed their seats as well as their senses. Just as in Europe, the Purim shpiel phenomenon suited yeshivot in Chicago and elsewhere in the United States. It served as a healthy dose of subversive wit and cautious criticism. Most important, its effectiveness was a credit to the students’ pledge to halt the humor after Purim and the school’s promise to schedule another shpiel for the following year. ❖



HTC “Wizard of Odd” Purim shpiel, 1966. Hebrew Theological College Archives.

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- 1 Mordecai Waxman, “The Old-Fashioned Purim Spiel,” *Jewish Advocate* (March 22, 1940): 13.
- 2 See Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), 245.
- 3 “Annual Purim Shpiel Spoofs Yeshiva Life,” *Hebrew Theological College News* 1 (March 1979): 7.
- 4 In fact, the Purim shpiel is a centuries-old custom. On this, see Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael*, vol. VI (Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 201-202).
- 5 See Shaul Stampfer, *Lithuanian Yeshivas of the Nineteenth Century: Creating a Tradition of Learning* (Oxford: Littman, 2012), 150-53.
- 6 Yaakov Lifshitz, *Zikhron Yaakov*, vol. III (Kaunas, 1930), 153
- 7 See Noson Kamenetsky, *Making of a Godol: A Study of Episodes in the Lives of Great Torah Personalities* (Jerusalem: Hamesorah, 2002), 1057-64; and Mordechai Leib Deutch, *Ish Halakhah* (Brooklyn, 2015), 84-85.
- 8 See M. Eisenshtat, “Purim-Rav,” *Ha-Tzefirah* (March 19, 1916): 2.
- 9 A. Ben-Ezra, “Malkhei Purim,” *Ha-Do’ar* (March 20, 1959): 344.
- 10 “Salami-Satiated Students Get Purim Torah, Grammen,” *The Commentator* (March 12, 1950): 2.
- 11 See Daniel Z. Feldman, “The Lomdus of Laughter: Toward a Jewish Ethic of Humor,” in *Developing a Jewish Perspective on Culture*, ed. Yehuda Sarna (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2014), 419. For prominent and fierce opposition to this tradition within Torah Vodaath, see Avraham Pam, *Atarah Le-Melekh*

(Brooklyn, 1993), 193-94.

- 12 See, for example, “HUC Purim Play 1939,” SC-4772, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH.
- 13 See “Purim Materials & Sermons,” Box 6, Folder 16, MS-149, University at Buffalo, State University of New York, Buffalo, NY.
- 14 See “Minstrel Show,” *Prakim* 6 (February 1954): 13-27.
- 15 “University of Pennsylvania,” *Jewish Exponent* (March 2, 1979): 8.
- 16 “Plan Purim Shpiel for ZOC Seudah,” *The Sentinel* (March 14, 1968): 20.
- 17 See Samuel J. Fox, “What is a ‘Purim Rabbi’ and How did Hamantashen Really Get Their Name?,” *The Sentinel* (February 17, 1969): 30.
- 18 “HTC Purim Spiel Sun.,” *The Sentinel* (March 3, 1966): 26.
- 19 See Aniko Bodroghkozy, *Sixties Television and the Youth Rebellion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 98-122.
- 20 See David E. Kaufman, *Jewhooping in the Sixties: American Celebrity and Jewish Identity* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2012), 104.
- 21 “How to Succeed in the Yeshiva Without Really Trying,” HTC Purim Spiel, 1965, 4, Hebrew Theological College Archives, Skokie, IL.
- 22 “North Side Story,” HTC Purim Shpiel, 1963, 15, Hebrew Theological College Archives, Skokie, IL.
- “Bye Bye Beardie,” HTC Purim Shpiel, 1964, 4, Hebrew Theological College Archives, Skokie, IL.
- “The Wizard of Odd,” HTC Purim Shpiel, 1966, 20, Hebrew Theological College Archives, Skokie, IL.

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