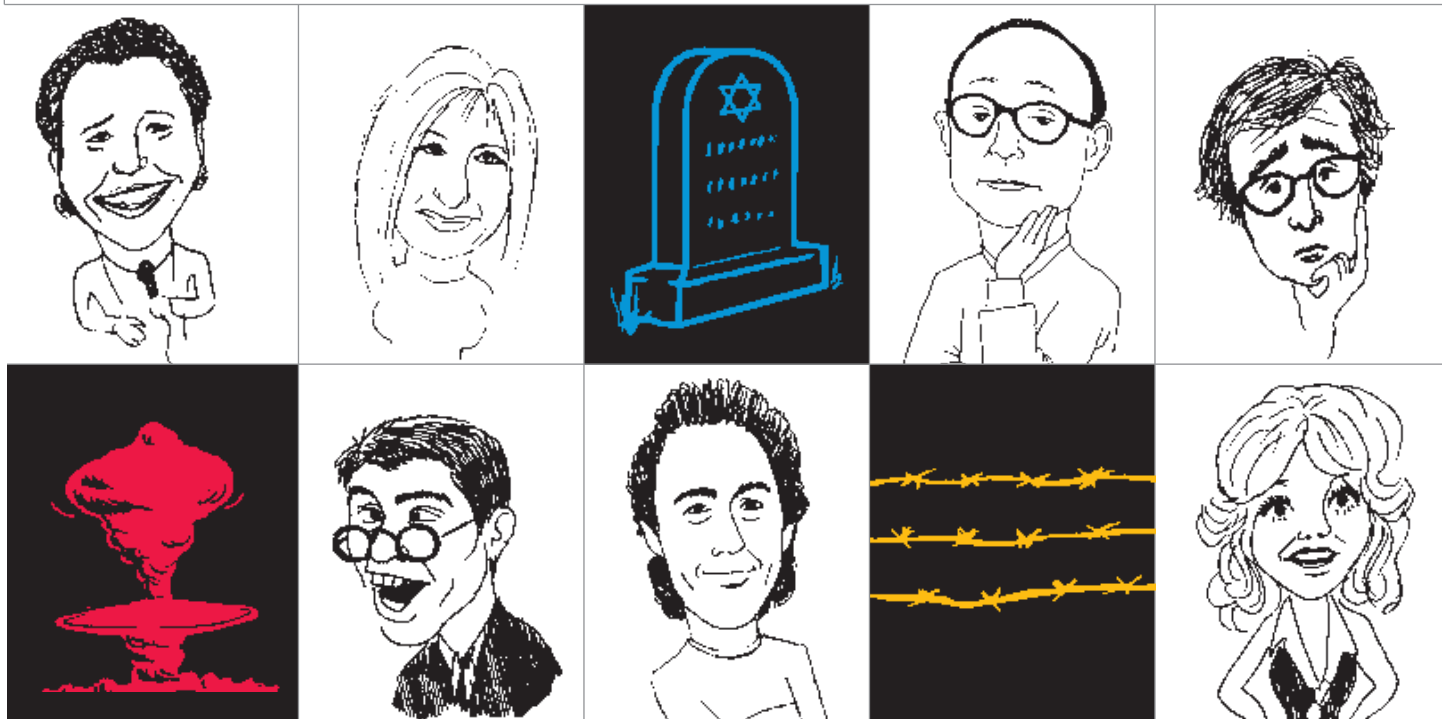


# ISSUES

A · M E S S I A N I C · J E W I S H · P E R S P E C T I V E

## JEWISH HUMOR



## IN NOT-SO-FUNNY TIMES

One day Mrs. Katz and Mrs. Cohen are sitting on a park bench and Mrs. Katz says to Mrs. Cohen, “Did you hear the one about the Goldsteins? They are . . .”

“Oy, stop it,” Mrs. Cohen interrupts, “What is

it with you? Why do all your jokes have to be Jewish, with Jewish names and all? Can’t you just tell me the joke without the Jewish names?”

“Alright,” Mrs. Katz says, “So Mr. and Mrs. O’Brien are going to their son’s bar mitzvah . . .”

*(continued inside)*

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**“Comedy, especially standup, is to Jews what jazz is to [African-Americans]:** an art form whose vocabulary and attitude they invented and that continues to bear their stamp, even when performed by others.”<sup>1</sup>

Humor has long been an essential part of Jewish culture, from the time of Moses, to Tevye the Milkman, from the Yiddish humor of Sholom Aleichem to the shtick of Jackie Mason and the clever comedy of Woody Allen to the post-ethnic humor of Jerry Seinfeld, Adam Sandler, Jon Stewart and David M. Bader. Over the past 40 years, 80 percent of America’s comedians have been Jewish, which is further testimony to the fact that Jewish humor has both a broad-based appeal and staying power.

This humor is recognizable as distinctly Jewish, not only

an apple to eat and they are told this is paradise? They are Russian Jews!”

Our humor is so deeply ingrained in our subconscious that it’s been said that it “in some ways [has] come to replace the standard sacred texts as a touchstone for the entire Jewish community.”<sup>2</sup>

If that’s true, then our humor bears examination, to see what it says about us as well as what it reveals about our past, present and future as a people. We live in times that are increasingly turbulent. Is our wit enough to sustain us through them? Is it enough to say simply, as we face tragic terrorist events, major natural disasters and pending catastrophes: “Oh well, at least we’ve got our sense of humor”?



in America, but around the world. Israeli Jews may have their own brand of it, as do Jews from the former Soviet Union, but Jewish humor is as globalized as our population.

It was mealtime on an El Al flight. “Would you like dinner?” the flight attendant asks. “What are my choices,” the passenger responds. “Yes or no,” she replies.

A Brit, a Frenchman and a Russian Jew are viewing a painting of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. “Look at their reserve, their calm,” says the Brit. “They must be British.” “Nonsense,” the Frenchman disagrees, “They are naked and beautiful. Clearly they are French.” “Oh please,” says the Russian. “No clothes, no shelter and only

**“JEWISH HUMOR IS NEITHER JEWISH NOR HUMOROUS . . . DISCUSS:”**

### DEFINING JEWISH HUMOR

“What makes Jewish humor Jewish?” Is it just one of those things that you recognize when you see it? Or are there criteria for actually deeming comedy Jewish? Rabbi Joseph Telushkin writes, “What makes a joke Jewish? Obviously, it must apply to Jews, but more significantly, it must express a Jewish sensibility.”

He adds, “Jewish sensibility, however, concerns precisely those subjects and values that receive disproportionate attention among Jews. Anti-Semitism, financial success, verbal aggression and assimilation are all particularly significant in Jewish life.”<sup>3</sup>

Besides certain “Jewish” subject matters, the authors of *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*, Moshe Waldoks and William Novak list some other prominent, consistent subjects and characteristics of Jewish humor: laughter through tears, self-hatred, skepticism, anti-authoritarianism, fascination with the intricacies of the mind and iconoclasm.

And those subjects are often tackled through the use of irony. In an article entitled “Insight on Jewish Humor,” the writer says that, “the main characteristic of Jewish humor is the irony that measures the distance between pretense, wishful thinking and reality—the result being self-criticism and self-mockery.”<sup>4</sup>

While Jewish humor is not the only humor that utilizes self-deprecation, we do it with an unrivaled frequency and flair. Sigmund Freud once wrote, “I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character.”<sup>5</sup>

Take for instance the story of Mandelbaum and his wife, Sarah. After Mandelbaum died, Sarah phoned the Jewish Chronicle to place an obituary. “This is what I want it to say,” she tells them. “Bernie is dead.” The Chronicle employee replied, “But for \$25 you are allowed to print six words.” “Fine,” Sarah said, “Then print: ‘Bernie is dead . . . Lexus for sale.’”

This joke reflects our willingness to poke fun at stereotypical Jewish “frugality.” But our ability to mock doesn’t stop at ourselves. Max Jacob Mintz points out that we also mock our oppressors, other Jews and even our relationship with God.

Jewish humor begins with the fundamental assumption that each of us is flawed and worth poking fun at. Henry Spalding, in his preface to *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor*, writes, “. . . the narrator recognizes himself for what he is—a simple human being, subject to all the foibles of mortal mind and frailties of the flesh. And because he has the

moral and intellectual courage to recognize and then ridicule his own weaknesses, he sees no reason to spare the sensibilities of his adversaries for their own deficiencies.”<sup>6</sup>

According to many a psychologist and scholar, this view of humanity and the world, and the humor that comes as a result of such low expectations, is precisely what has seen Jewish people through some of the worst that humanity can dish out. Paradoxically, many also posit that it is this suffering that largely contributed to our being funny in the first place.

## HOW DID WE JEWS GET TO BE SO FUNNY ANYWAY?

At a colloquy on Jewish humor at New York University in 2002, a group of respected Jewish voices in the

entertainment industry gathered to identify aspects of comedy that were distinctly

Jewish. *Forward* writer Abraham Genauer reports:

“The group also debated just how it was that Jews became funny. The ability to

laugh at suffering was offered as a possible reason, although

[Murray] Horowitz pointed out that

suffering alone doesn’t necessarily lead to humor. ‘There’s not a lot of Armenian comedians,’ he offered as evidence.”<sup>7</sup>

Yet, as noted above, Jewish humor revolves around those objects, ideas and situations that are familiar to Jews everywhere and indeed, one thing that Jewish people can most universally relate to is our past (and in some cases present) suffering.

From the time of the pogroms in czarist Russia, even to the concentration camps in Europe, not only did our people survive, but so did examples of the humor that bore them through such suffering. The famous Chelm stories are an example.

In the face of disaster, we Jews get going, we look for ways to defy the odds—and if not, we laugh. Rather than merely succumb to the dire

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circumstances, we learn to fashion our own reality. Though we are sometimes gasping for air in our underwater existence, humor is our life preserver, as the classic joke tells us:

Scientists discover that a great flood will engulf the world in a few days.

In response, the Pope announces to his people: “Repent and you will go to heaven”

The Buddhists say: “Contemplate and you will achieve Nirvana.”

The Chief Rabbi announces, “My Jewish friends, we have three days to learn to breathe underwater.”

But while comic relief has long been a coping mechanism for Jewish survival, the Jewish comic vision often belittles the importance ascribed to suffering. Jewish tradition does not glorify suffering, nor is suffering deemed worthy of deification. Rather it is accepted as the inevitable. “If you want life, expect pain,” the saying goes.

So it appears true that suffering had a part to play in the development of Jewish humor. But in the long run, is humor enough to get people through lives that might be filled with pain and misery, or is something else needed?

## UMOR: A DOORWAY TO HOPE

Maurice Samuel, a student of Eastern-European Jewry, asserts that shrewd and ironic humor is a source of the necessary inner strength that is a mode for survival. He writes, “There was nothing jolly and hilarious about the destitution that lay like a curse on millions of Jews in the Yiddish-speaking world. . . . They were miserable, and knew it; but the question that haunts us historically is, why did they not disintegrate intellectually and morally? How were they able, under hideous oppression . . . to keep alive against a better day the spirit originally breathed into man? The answer lies in the self-mockery by which they rose above their condition to see afar off the hope of the future.”<sup>8</sup>

So it seems as though Jewish humor itself might be a means to an end. Mixed in with Jewish cynicism and self-criticism is a yearning for something greater—a world in which justice, mercy, understanding and equality will prevail, not only for us but for all people. A world without suffering.

These days this hope has faded for many of our people. And some are convinced that if anything better is going to come along, it will be a result of our own achievement. The idea of *tikkun olam* demonstrates this “if it is to be, it is up to me”

attitude as many endeavor to repair the world themselves.

But this point of view overlooks some key parts of our history, and it ignores the original hope for the Jewish people that dates back to biblical times.



## HISTORY OF HOPE

Our Scriptures tell us that God chose us as a people for himself, to make his name great among the other nations, and to bless us. Nowadays, such an idea brings a smirk or an offhand remark like Tevye’s in *Fiddler on the Roof*: “Lord, I know we are the chosen people, but once in awhile couldn’t you choose somebody else?”

Our troubles and *tsuris* started almost immediately after God chose us. And in those hard times were the seeds for our sense of humor. Telushkin says that our culture and history shaped our values and our worldview to include self-criticism. He points to the prophets as examples:

The biblical prophets repeatedly denounced their fellow Jews for their moral lapses: the Jews reacted, not by hating the prophets, but by canonizing their words and making them part of the Holy Scriptures. This tradition has carried over into Jewish humor. . . .

Horowitz likewise concurs that our humor has its roots in the Bible. But the story of the Jewish people as told in the Bible (see sidebar), while it includes moments of comic relief, is no comedy of errors. It is a serious chronicle of numerous failures on the part of people to please God and God’s displeased response. This cycle occurred so many times, that many Jewish people started to lose hope.

Fast-forward several centuries and, as Jewish humor evolved it began to take issue with God or the idea that he had chosen our people for anything but misfortune. Rabbi Marc Gellman of TV's "The God Squad" suggests that a chief earmark of Jewish humor is our readiness to poke fun at rabbis and leaders, and even at God.

The story is told of a middle-aged Jewish woman who asks God, "Is my time up?" God tells her she has another 40 years to live. She then has extensive cosmetic surgery, changes her hair color and as she exits the beauty salon she's hit by a car and dies. Arriving in front of God, she chides him with, "You said I had another 40 years!" "I didn't recognize you," says God.

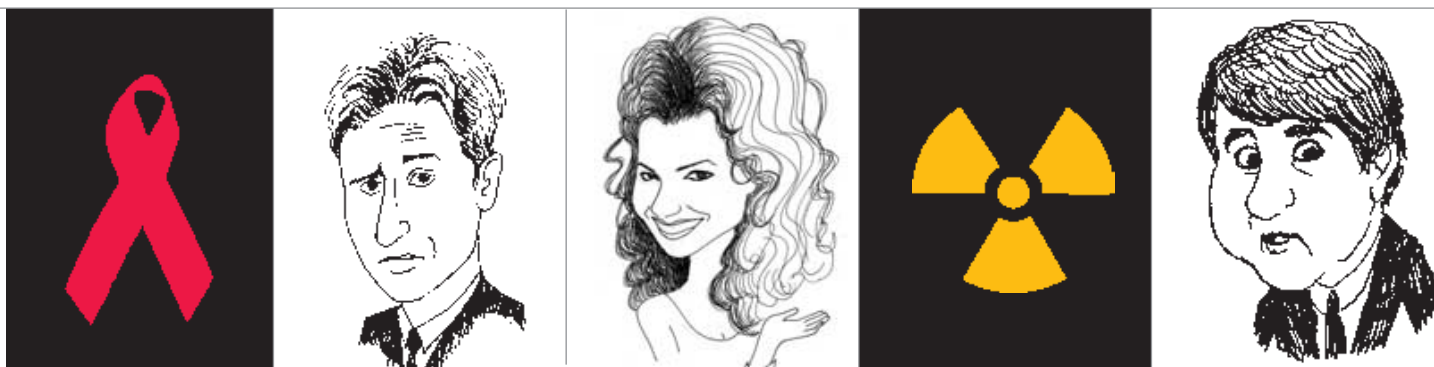
Max Jacob Mintz suggests "... By giving God a sense of humor, these jokes make him or her seem more human,

may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands. Your walls are continually before me" (Isaiah 49:15-16).

God has not given up on us. In fact, true to his word, God has sustained us, even to this day.

Humorist Mark Twain noted: "... the Jew ought hardly to be heard of, but he is heard of, has always been heard of. . . . Other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. . . . What is the secret of his immortality?"<sup>10</sup>

We may think our self-mockery or our wit or our



and with shortcomings. This makes them feel that there is perhaps a way of getting closer to God.”<sup>9</sup>

But at the root of all this, one cannot help but wonder if these jabs at ourselves and God don't come from a deep-seated fear that perhaps God has left us or no longer loves us; that we are on our own to fend for ourselves. It's a scary thought indeed and so we reach for our humor, because as Telushkin puts it, "Anything that can be mocked immediately seems less threatening." But is this perception correct?

## BEYOND THE LAUGHTER

According to our Scriptures, there is a vast disparity between the way we Jews often view ourselves and the way God views us. The Bible tells us that God has not abandoned us; rather, he has always sought to be actively involved in our lives:

"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she

chutzpah have sustained us over the centuries, but really, what our Scriptures have always taught is that God is the one who has kept us alive and will continue to do so. Skepticism may offer us some self-protection, but those who wished our demise were not stopped by our humor but by the will of God to preserve and protect us. Just as he promised.

## CONCLUSION: THE PUNCH LINE

Jewish humor works under the fundamental assumption that people are flawed and that in order to survive we must create a reality for ourselves that is more bearable than the one around us. According to Telushkin, "The 'distressed optimist' strikes the right chord in much Jewish humor. By insisting that the world is moving toward perfection, and that the Messianic days lie in the future, Judaism encourages Jews to be optimists. But Jewish history, with its tragic record of crusades, expulsions, pogroms, and the Holocaust, impels Jews to

*(continued on page 8)*

# JEWISH HUMOR . . . IN THE

“God writes a lot of good comedy, it’s just that he has so many bad actors.”

—Garrison Keillor

The purpose of the Bible is not to entertain, but to instruct and so its subtle humor serves a purpose—to show people what ought to be in comparison to what exists.

Some examples of humor in the Bible include:

## IRONY

When Miriam made fun of Moses’ black Cushite wife, God gave her leprosy, in effect saying, “Miriam, you like white so much? I’ll give you white!” (Numbers 12:1-10).

In the book of Numbers, the Israelites complained that manna was not sufficient and demanded meat. God’s punishment was to give them meat until, “It is coming out of your nose and makes you nauseous” (Numbers 11:19-20).

The book of Esther contains much humor and irony. The people who are “on top” at the beginning of the book end in not-so-fortunate circumstances. For instance, Haman and his sons were hanged on the gallows Haman had prepared for Mordecai. Conversely, a more humble woman becomes queen and hero.

In the gospel accounts of his life, Y’shua (Jesus) says to the religious leaders of the time: “You strain a gnat and swallow a camel” to point out their inconsistency and hypocrisy.

## SARCASM

Consider God’s comeback to Job’s cries of frustration: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” (Job 38:4). Or, in other words, “When you create your own world, then you can tell me how to run mine.”

Elijah’s remarks to the prophets of Baal are steeped in sarcasm and irony (1 Kings 18:27):

“Call out with a loud voice, for he is a god; either he is occupied or gone aside, or is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and needs to be awakened.”

When David found out that King Saul wished to kill him, he fled from Israel and went to Gath. Fearful that Achish, King of Gath, would have him killed, David pretended to be insane. When his servants brought David to him, Achish said (1 Samuel 21:14b-15a): “Why do you bring him to me? Do I lack madmen, that you have brought this one to act the madman in my presence?”

## PUN

Names are very important in the Hebrew Scriptures. God told Abraham to name his soon-to-be-born son, Yitzchak (Genesis 17:19) because Abraham and Sarah laughed when hearing that she would give birth to a son.

It is written (Leviticus 19:4): “Do not turn to the idols (*elilim*).” The word for deities is usually *elohim*. The word *elilim* is connected with the Hebrew word *al* which means not or nought (see commentaries of Ibn Ezra and Rashi). A similar word is used in Job (13:4), “*rofeh eli*” to mean worthless.

Laban said to Jacob (Genesis 30:28): “Designate (*Nakvah*) to me your wages and I will give it.” The word *nakvah* means designate or specify. However, this word has exactly the same spelling as *nekevah*, which means female. This is a clever pun and refers to the fact that previously Jacob worked for females, i.e., he worked a total of 14 years for the hand of Rachel.

Boaz told Ruth (Ruth 2:12): “May the Lord reward your actions and may your payment be full (*shlemah*).” The word for full, *shlemah*, is spelled the same as Shlomo (Solomon) in Hebrew. One of Ruth’s most famous descendants was Solomon (see Midrash Ruth Rabbah 5:4).

Jesus said to his disciple Peter, “On this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). Peter, or Petra, means rock.

# BIBLE?

## HYPERBOLE

The Book of Proverbs describes the contentious woman and the woman who lacks discretion in a clever manner. "As a gold ring in a swine's snout, so is a beautiful woman from whom sense has departed" (Proverbs 11:22). "It is better to live in a desert than with a contentious and angry woman" (Proverbs 21:19). "It is better to live on a corner of a roof, than in a house of companionship with a quarrelsome wife" (Proverbs 25:24).

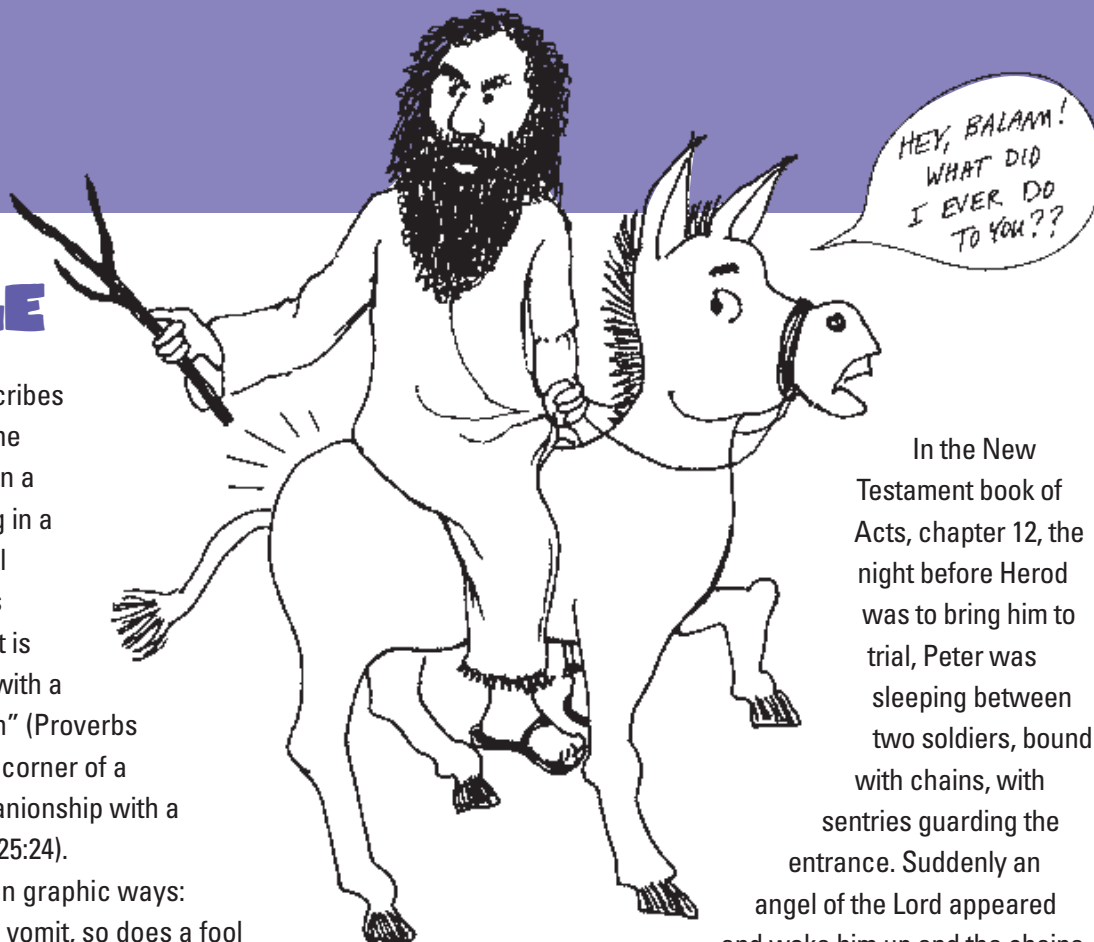
The fool is also described in graphic ways: "Like a dog that returns to his vomit, so does a fool repeat his folly" (Proverbs 26:11).

Finally, the indolent individual: "The door turns on its hinges, and the lazy man on his bed" (Proverbs 26:14). "The lazy man buries his hand in the dish; it wearies him to return it to his mouth" (Proverbs 26:15).

In the gospels, Jesus says, "It is easier for a camel to enter the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:24).

## SITUATION COMEDY

When Balaam called himself (Numbers 24:16): "one who hears the sayings of God and knows the knowledge of the Most High," God showed Balaam that his own donkey saw things that Balaam did not. The ass saw an angel standing in the way, but Balaam saw nothing. Balaam beat the donkey for not moving and God made the donkey speak like an intelligent individual (Numbers 22:28-30): "What have I done to you that you have beaten me . . .?" Balaam said, "Because you have mocked me; if only there were a sword in my hand, I would now have slain you." The ass replied, "Am I not your donkey upon which you have ridden all your life until this day? Have I ever been wont to do such a thing to you?"



In the New Testament book of Acts, chapter 12, the night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with chains, with sentries guarding the entrance. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and woke him up and the chains

fell off. Peter followed him out of the prison and went to the house where many people had gathered and were praying for him. Peter knocked at the door, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening the door and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!" "You're out of your mind," they told her.

So humor in the Bible always points to something greater happening, or some greater truth. It makes the reader stop and pay attention. Much of the humor in the Bible is ironic. Even Jesus' somewhat humorous statements serve to point out that the religious leaders of the day weren't seeing things as they really were, that they were so concentrated on the letter of the law, that they missed the spirit of the law and they further missed the fact that the Messiah they had yearned for was in front of them.

Was Jesus funny? Though there are instances where Jesus used hyperbole and biting repartee, the accounts of his life don't exactly portray him as a comedian.

However, it seems natural that just as Jesus experienced weeping, so he would laugh, too. After all, it's recorded that he spent time with children. But the accounts of his life focus on the main purpose of his coming: to die and rise again to give those who believe in him eternal life and joy.

pessimism. Hence, as Jews, we are optimists—with worried looks on our faces.”

This attitude is reflected in a joke that goes like this: A traveler arrived in a village in the middle of winter to find an old man shivering in the cold outside the synagogue.

“What are you doing here?” asked the traveler.  
“I’m waiting for the coming of the messiah,”  
“That must be an important job,” said the traveler.  
“The community must pay you a lot of money.”  
“No, not at all. They just let me sit here on this bench. Once in a while someone gives me a little food.”  
“That must be hard. But even if they don’t pay you, they must honor you for doing this important work.”  
“No, not at all, they think I’m crazy.”  
“I don’t understand. They don’t pay you, they don’t respect you. You sit in the cold, shivering and hungry. What kind of job is this?”  
“Well, it’s steady work.”

We are strangely comfortable as cynics. Our clever repartee comes naturally. Our self-deprecating humor seems to fit our lot in life. Yet what if we have more than humor as a resource we rely on through the difficult times? What if instead of looking to a Seinfeld, Sandler or Stewart for our inspiration, we turn to the inspired words of the Hebrew prophets. They believed that the one who knows all things and is all-powerful is our true defender. What if he is ours? Then, his promises are ours to appropriate as well.

And he says that we have the potential for a glorious future: “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you,’ says the LORD, ‘thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).

If that’s true, then we have reason, not for cynicism but for smiles and laughter, and for deep joy, as our ultimate hopes are realized. •

—Susan Perlman

End notes

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