JEWISH HUMOR

Temple Sholom, Vancouver BC

Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

March 22, 2024

A New York Times Journalist, a CBC Reporter, and an Israeli commando were captured by Hamas terrorists. The leader of the terrorists told them that he would grant them each one last request before they were beheaded.

The New York Times Reporter said, 'Well, I'm an American, so I'd like one last hamburger with French fries." The leader nodded to an underling who left and returned with the burger & fries. The reporter ate it and said "Now, I can die."

The CBC Reporter said, 'I'm a reporter to the end. I want to take out my tape recorder and describe the

scene here and what's about to happen. Maybe someday someone will hear it and know that I was on the job till the end." The terror leader directed an aide to hand over the tape recorder and dictated some comments. The reporter then said, 'Now I can die knowing I stayed true until the end."

The leader turned and said, "And now, Mr. Israeli tough guy, what is your final wish?"
"Kick me in the ass," said the soldier.
"What?' asked the leader, "Will you mock us in your last hour?"
"No, I'm not kidding. I want you to kick me in the ass," insisted the Israeli. So the leader shoved him into the open and kicked him in the ass.

The soldier went sprawling, but rolled to his knees, pulled a 9 mm pistol from under his flak jacket, and shot the leader dead. In the resulting confusion, he

jumped to his knapsack, pulled out his carbine and sprayed the terrorists with gunfire. In a flash, all terrorists were either dead or fleeing for their lives.

As the soldier was untying the reporters, they asked him, "Why didn't you just shoot them in the beginning? Why did you ask them to kick you in the ass first?"

"What?" replied the Israeli, "and have you report that I was the aggressor?"

That joke about media bias makes us cringe uncomfortably, it does so because like any good joke there is a bit of painful truth in it. As my teacher Rabbi Donniel Hartman observed, "A joke which has a kernel of truth may hurt, but it is the kernel, not the joke, which is the issue."

Ezra Cappell is professor of Jewish studies and English at the College of Charleston in South Carolina, who has lectured and published on Jewish humor, he teaches; “There’s this notion that humor is a way of understanding. It’s also a way of fighting back. Humor is a form of protest, a way of keeping your dignity.”

The connection between Jews and humor has been studied and discussed for decades if not longer. The rabbis of the Talmud tell the story of Rabbi Beroka of Bei Chozai. This rabbi used to frequent the marketplace of Beit Lefet. Elijah the Prophet frequently appeared to him.

Once R’ Beroka said to him, “Is there anyone in this marketplace who is destined for the World to Come?”

Elijah answered, “No.”

Then two men entered the marketplace. Elijah said to R’ Beroka, “Those two are destined for the World to Come.”

R’ Beroka went over to them, and said, “What do you do?”

They said, “We’re comedians. We give cheer to those who are depressed. Also, whenever we see two people involved in a quarrel we try to make peace between them.” (Ta’anit 22a, B. Talmud)

In Judaism jokes are sacred and Jewish comedians are rewarded with eternal life. Well if not the comedians at least it seems their jokes are. So many Jewish jokes are so well known we simply refer to them by number, or with the shorthand of the

punchlines like, “it might lead to dancing” or “A priest, a minister and a rabbi” or “is anything alright”?

Morris calls his son in New York.

Morris says “Benny, I have something to tell you. However, I don’t want to discuss it. I’m merely telling you because you’re my oldest child, and I thought you ought to know. I’ve made up my mind, I’m divorcing your mother.”

The son is shocked, and asks his father to tell him what happened.

“She doesn’t stop kvetching and nagging and I have had enough. I really don’t want to get into it. My mind is made up.”

“But Dad, you just can’t decide to divorce Mom just like that after 54 years together. What happened?”

“It’s too painful to talk about it. I only called because you’re my son, and I thought you should know. I really don’t want to get into it anymore than this. You can call your sister and tell her. It will spare me the pain.”

“But where’s Mom? Can I talk to her?”

“No, I don’t want you to say anything to her about it. I haven’t told her yet. Believe me it hasn’t been easy. I’ve agonized over it for several days, and I’ve finally come to a decision. I have an appointment with my lawyer the day after tomorrow.”

“Dad, don’t do anything rash. I’m going to take the first flight to Miami. Promise me that you won’t do anything until I get there.”

“Well, all right, I promise. Next week is Passover. I’ll hold off seeing the lawyer until after the Seder. Call your sister in New Jersey and break the news to her. I just can’t bear to talk about it anymore.”

A half hour later, Morris receives a call from his daughter who tells him that she and her brother were able to get tickets and that they and the children will all be arriving the day after tomorrow.

After hanging up from his daughter, Morris turns to his wife and says, “Well, it worked. I got them all to come for Seder. But we are going to have to come up with a new idea to get them here for Rosh Hashanah.”

Jewish humor is irreverent and self-deprecating, making fun of ourselves. And, of course, tomorrow night we observe a holiday for doing just that—Purim. It is a time of self-mockery and uninhibited foolishness. We satirize and ridicule what is respected and held in reverence the rest of the year, from our prayers to our rabbis. Mock sermons, singing of the liturgy to outrageously inappropriate melodies and a Purim spiel, plays and skits that leave nothing sacred and no one unscathed, come tomorrow night for Barbie Beach Bash and you'll see for yourself. Our Talmud states: "With the month of Adar (in which Purim falls), we greatly increase joy." We move from Oy to Joy!

Tomorrow night we will quite literally laugh in the face of our own death; and then eat cookies shaped like our tormentor's hat. That's funny; that's dark,

that’s cathartic, that’s Jewish humor. Indeed, it’s the very example of gallows humor.

Rabbi Arthur Waskow taught:

The dark villain Haman, the mythic tyrant from the Scroll of Esther in the Purim story is but a placeholder for all the times that a tyrant, movement, or even natural force has risen against us at so many moments in our Jewish history, personifying the worst in human fear and hatred of the other.”

Waskow taught that in such moments we need to do what we’ve done for generations in the face of hateful danger – rise above with courage, humor, faith, strategic activism, and deep compassion.

Going deeper still, laughter teaches us how God interacts with the world.

On Purim we get dressed up in funny costumes and act silly -- which is funny in and of itself since the Purim story is all about an impending annihilation of the Jewish people!

And just when it appears that this will finally be the end of the Jewish people, envisioned by our enemies to this very day, the tables turn, the story flips upside down. The Jews of Persia go from being the target of annihilation, to being the heroes and victors. It's so absurd in the Jewish psyche that we can only laugh, as though we'd ever actually have the power and the agency to overthrow our tormentors, to save our people from pain and persecution. Until 1948 and the establishment of the State of Israel it was a laughable fantasy.

Now we have the power to defend ourselves and the world abhors, demonizes and castigates us for using it. That too would be funny and ironic if it wasn't so painfully true. Again I am reminded of Hartman's teaching, "it is the kernel, not the joke, which is the issue."

It's the irony in the Purim story that is so improbable that it's funny. Haman is hung and the Jewish people are rescued. A miraculous, inconceivable 180-degree shift in fortune.

One who thought he was in danger and suddenly discovers he's safe laughs aloud in relief.

One who thought he lived alone in a hostile world and suddenly discovers that God is really there laughs aloud in joy.

That's the perspective of the Jewish people.

The Talmud says that in the times of the Messiah, "THEN our mouths will be filled with laughter." Why then and not now? Because today, the world is beset by jealousy, greed, violence, intolerance and fraud. We are suspicious of our neighbors and cynical of our leaders. We are manipulative and seek advantage at the expense of others. Rather than cooperate, we compete.

But in the Messianic era, all that will turn around. As the prophet says: "The lamb will lie down with the lion ... and young children will play at the cobra's nest" (Isaiah 11:6). At that time, when all truth is revealed, "THEN our mouths will be filled with laughter."

When the Messianic age comes, our tradition teaches, the only holiday Jews will need to celebrate is Purim. The lessons of the other holy days—repentance, religious and political freedom, thanksgiving to God—will be second nature to us then. The Hamans of the present and the future will cease to exist and all that will remain is laughter and joy.

An elderly lady was well-known for her faith and for her boldness in talking about it. She would stand on her front porch and shout, "Baruch Hashem! (Praise God)"

Next door to her lived an atheist who would get so angry at her proclamations he would shout, "There ain't no God!!"

Hard times set in on the elderly lady, and she prayed for God to send her some assistance. She stood on her porch and shouted, "Baruch Hashem, Another day begins, But G-d, I am having a hard time. I really could use some food. Please, God, send me some food."

The next morning the lady went out on her porch and noted a large bag of groceries and shouted, "BARUCH HASHEM."

The neighbor jumped from behind a bush and said, "Aha! I told you there was no God. I bought those groceries; God didn't."

The lady started jumping up and down and clapping her hands and said, "Baruch Hashem! You not only sent me groceries, but You made the atheist pay for them!"

There is a serious side to all of this. It is healthy to laugh at our own self-righteousness, to make fun of our ritual practices and to roast our leaders. Having a sense of humor about what we value the rest of the year gives us a fuller context, a broader perspective. As Michael Strassfeld wrote, “Otherwise we make the tradition into an idolatry rather than a smasher of idols, into frozen-in-stone dogma of what once was, rather than a living faith.” (Jerome Davidson)

And, as we are painfully aware in a post October 7th world, religious fervor, unchecked by humor and perspective, degenerates quickly into fanaticism. By being unable, on this one day, as our tradition commands, regarding why we are supposed to get drunk on Purim, being unable to distinguish between Mordecai and Haman, dramatizes just how easy it is

to change from a Mordecai to a Haman, from a crusader for justice into simply a crusader. Humor gives us a larger view.

This year the masks that we wear on Purim, remind us of the masks of academia, of politicians that say one thing and do another, of a society focussed on diversity, equity and inclusion but with no place for Jews, Zionists or Israel. They are all the masks of anti-Semitism.

We remember Esther who ripped off Haman's mask and declared him, "the adversary and the enemy." We need to be alert and vigilant and unafraid to rip off a few masks ourselves. We need to take all of this very seriously, but not so seriously what we lose our sense of humor at it all, our historical perspective that reminds us we've been here before, or as the

classic Jewish joke sums up Jewish history. They tried to kill us, we survived, let's eat!

Chag Purim Samayach!