COMEDIANS GO TO HEAVEN
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Hershel of Ostropol was the court jester to Rabbi Barukh of Medzhybizh. As jesters are, he was a prankster and brought humor even in serious situations. In a fit of anger, Rabbi Barukh lashed out and hurt Hershel. He was brought to the Rebbe's bed.

Hershel of Ostropol: as he lay dying, barely able to speak, people gathered around his bed. The rabbi said, "Hershel, you're dying , now will you at last be serious?"

H: "Why start now?"
R: "But Hershel, in a few minutes the Angel of Death will come for you. He will ask you your name. What will you say?"
H: "I'll tell him it's Moses."
R: "But he'll know it's not Moses, but Hershel."
H: "So I'll say that if he knows, why'd he ask?"
R: "Then he'll ask you what you've done with your life, how you've mended the world. What will you say?"
H: "I'll tell him that I've mended my socks."

As Hershel began to fade, he faintly said, "I have one last request. Come closer." They came closer. "I ask simply this: when you place me in the coffin, I beg of you, please do not carry me under my arms." With this he closed his eyes, was silent, and seemed to stop breathing.

The people were silent a bit longer, and then said, "But Hershel, why? Tell us why."

After a while, seemingly from the world beyond, they heard, "Because I've always been ticklish there."

In a great story from the Talmud Rabbi Beroka was visited by Elijah the Prophet in the Market Place. As they are talking – two men walk by and Elijah interrupts their conversation to remark "Those two men are destined for a place in the world to come – a ticket directly into heaven." Rabbi Beroka is puzzled – why these specific people – what have THEY done to have such a guarantee. Elijah encouraged Rabbi Beroka to approach them and he does. He said to them, "What is your occupation?" They said to him, "We are jesters; we [cheer up] those who are sad…"

Surprisingly, though maybe not when we think about it for a bit, Jewish tradition reserves a special place in heaven for comedians, for people who make others laugh, forget their sorrows even for just a minute, who can defuse a tense situation with humor and maybe, as the Talmud continues in describing the works of these two comedians, make peace between people.

Lots of Jews have taken this to heart. In 1978, Time magazine claimed that 80% of all stand-up comedians in the US were Jewish. That was more than 40 years ago but I don't think our numbers have decreased, there are still a lot of funny Jews.

There have been many famous Jewish comedians, Mel Brooks is one among so many; but perhaps the most famous in recent weeks is of course Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy; even his response to the US offer to evacuate him and his family from Kyiv shortly after the Russian invasion echoed of the humor of our people, now famously he replied, "I don't need a ride, I need ammunition." We laugh and the humor illuminates the truth beneath the sharp retort.

There are plenty of theories to explain Jewish humor — most devised by Jews. Robert A. Heinlein opined, "I know why we laugh. We laugh because it hurts, and it's the only thing to make it stop hurting.

Mel Brooks was a little more direct and darker, which you might expect from Mel Brooks. He said about why so many Jews are comedians, "If they're laughing, how can they bludgeon you to death?"

Brining joy into this world is a critical part of our obligation as Jews. But beyond the Joy of frivolity that Mel Brooks and others bring us – the Talmud says:

The Divine Presence does not come to rest upon a person through gloom, or through laziness, or through levity, or through idle conversations, but rather through the joy that belongs with performing the commandments (simcha shel mitzvah)… (Shabbat 30b)

So important is this mitzvah of bringing joy and laughter of course we created a whole holiday just for that purpose, Purim. A holiday that literally commands us to laugh in the face of the plans of a genocidal maniac. I should be more specific, Haman – we have known many genocidal maniacs in our day as Jews.

Purim, which begins Tuesday night cautions us that Haman was not a once in history character, rather as the Haggadah declares, in every generation they rise up to destroy us.

Tomorrow morning on the shababt before Purim we read "Vayavo Amalek" from Deuteronomy 25:17-19, describing the attack by Amalek. There is a tradition from the Talmud that Haman, the antagonist of the Purim story, was descended from Amalek. The portion that is read includes a commandment to remember the attack by Amalek.

The story of Amalek reads like todays headlines, its was a battle our ancestors fought in the desert on the way out of Egypt, a battle against a hateful and cowardly enemy tribe called Amalek. Time and again they attacked from the rear, killing the stragglers, the weakest of the trekking Israelites, today we might see them through the lens of civilians, non-combatants,

their encampments children's hospitals, schools and residential neighborhoods, that's the way Ameleks of every era wage cowardly war.

Finally at a place called Rephidim battle with the Amalekites is joined.

It's a dramatic story even by biblical standards; and it too echoes the present conflict. I am always reminded of the quote from Mark Twain, "History doesn't repeat itself but it often rhymes".

After the Amalekites' unprovoked attack against the Israelites (Exodus 17:8). Moses urged the Jews to fight and placed his people under the leadership of Joshua.

Moses watched from above. When he held his hands up, Israel gained the military advantage. Whenever he put his hands down, according to the Biblical account, they began to lose. The Bible describes how when Moses became tired, his closest relatives, Hur and Aaron, held up his hands for support (Exodus 17:12). The battle lasted until the evening, ending in victory for the Israelites.

When President Zelenskyy as the world not for a ride but ammunition what he was asking was for us to help hold up the hands of the Ukrainian people.

Of course the Amalekites did not quit harassing Israel. After our ancestors settled in the Land and Saul became king, there was more warfare with Amalek.

So, what does all this have to do with Purim? The battles with Amalek predated the Purim story by a few centuries. But the connection is there. Haman, the Purim villain, is identified in the Megillah as the son of Hamdassa the Agagite. Agag was the king of Amalek, the defeated chieftain whom the prophet Samuel kills in one of two special Haftorah portions for Shabbat Zachor, the Sabbath of Memory which is this weekend and which always precedes Purim. So, the rabbis logically taught, Haman was descended from Amalek.

Likewise, Amalek's spiritual descendants. Titus, Torquemada, Chmelnitzky, Hitler – to name just a few. Destroying the Jewish people was Amalek's goal, a goal not limited to one locality or one kind of weapon. Haman brought it to Persia. And built a 75-foot gallows to hang Mordecai.

Even after Esther's plea to King Ahasuerus which results in Haman being condemned to die on the gallows he built for the Jews, a close reading of the megillah reveals that Ahasuerus refuses to cancel his edict setting a date, the 14th of Adar for the mass murder of Jews.

What he does, however, and this too is an echo of the current war in Ukraine is he arms the Jews and gives them a chance to defend themselves. Ahasuerus does what NATO and the west are doing for Zelenskyy and the Ukrainian people; arming them to defeat the Amalek of present day.

In the story of Purim, in the megillah, they do with great success, once again defeating Amalek. We must hope and pray and work that what came to pass then, will come to pass again.

But now the question, why do we make a joke out of all of this? Why do we fill this holiday which has such a legacy of calamity and terror for the Jewish people with comedy, and parody, skits, and costumes, irreverence to the point of making fun of the prayers we say in synagogue and the rabbis and cantors who lead them? Yes, we didn't teach that in Hebrew school, on Purim you're supposed to make fun of your rabbis and cantors. And yes we are also commanded — to get a bit drunk on Purim, so as, the sages taught, "Not to be able to tell the difference between the phrases `blessed be Mordecai,' 'cursed be Haman."'

Why? Why do we make a joke out of all of this?

The answer is profound:

It is healthy and at times of great stress necessary 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 the scholar and Rabbi, Michael Strassfeld wrote, "Otherwise we make the tradition [itself] into an idolatry rather than a smasher of idols, into frozen-in-stone dogma of what once was, rather than a living faith."

And, as we are painfully aware in our time, and by the events of these past weeks, religious and dogmatic fervor, unchecked by humor and perspective, degenerates quickly into fanaticism.

By being unable, on Purim, 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.

More than ever, we should celebrate Purim at this very moment. Drown out Haman's name and all of his descendants with those groggers. Let our laughter in the face of tyrants, the laughter and the courage of a President who was first a comedian show the Amaleks of every era that nobody can destroy our sense of humor, which means no body can destroy our passion for life. As the old Jewish joke goes, say it with me, "They tried to kill us, we survived, let's eat!"

Hearing that I realize now that my next sermon might need to be on the unhealthy relationship Jews have with food.

Shabbat Shalom