

The Lomdus of Laughter: Toward a Jewish Ethic of Humor

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There is a tremendous pressure placed on one who would address the role of humor within a Torah-based perspective. The push to “open with a joke” is intimidating enough when the subject matter is standard fare; but when the subject is humor itself, the sense is that the bar is significantly raised as to the quality of the opening quip.

In a somewhat uninspired attempt to evade that pressure under the pretense of an introductory statement, let us instead open with a disclaimer: this paper is not of humor, but about it. It is not a collection of jokes; nor, needless to say, is it a discussion of the preponderance of Jewish comedians and humorists, a topic so frequently and proudly invoked in the popular Jewish media.

Rather, it is in the spirit of the Torah U’Madda symposia that have been a vital component of Yeshiva University’s ongoing introspection into its mission that this essay is offered. Indeed, several years ago, in the journal bearing the name “*Torah U’Madda*”, an article appeared that advocated the eponymous philosophy. In the context of that advocacy, an example was given of a Torah scholar reluctantly conceding his benefiting from and appreciating a skit performed by Abbot and Costello.² I found the vignette fascinating, mostly because it was the first time I had heard the work of Messrs Abbot and Costello presented as representative of, or even included in, “Madda”.³

Indeed, this is the question that faces us: is there a special room within our philosophical house for the comedic arts? And if so, is that room tucked away near the basement, a concession to human weakness, or somewhere more prominent, in the main living area, where it is not only an accommodation but a prominently displayed venue in which our loftier aspirations are expressed?

It is natural to come away from the classical texts uncertain on this matter; while some texts seem to either express or support a sense of humor, it is as easy, actually far easier, to locate references – especially in *mussar* works, but in Scripture and the Talmud as well – that cast a harsh light on levity. Weaving a coherent path among the thicket of attitudes toward humor is, indeed, serious business.

If we are not to open our discussion with a joke, we can at least open with the positive elements of them. It would seem to be indicated to start with the most basic, functional benefits, those that

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Rabbi David M. Feldman, Rabbi Jonathan J. Feldman, Rebecca Feldman, Leah Feldman, David Sacks, and Dr. David Shatz for many helpful comments toward this paper, some of which have been incorporated throughout. Thanks are also given to Rabbi Netanel Wiederblank for sharing his thoughts on this topic.

² Rabbi Mayer Schiller, "Torah Umadda and The Jewish Observer Critique: Towards a Clarification of the Issues", *The Torah UMadda Journal*, vol. VI, 1995-1996, p. 89, fn 26).

³ There is an extensive secular literature concerning the philosophy of humor; a helpful summary can be found at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/humor/>. For many reasons, this paper will focus on the “Torah” component of this “Torah UMadda” investigation.

indeed address the genuine needs of fallible mortals. While, as noted above, we are not interested here in the sociological reality that, for better or for worse, the Jewish population is vastly overrepresented in the comedic trade, it is sufficient to note that this is often explained as a reaction to and as a method of successfully enduring persecution. It is noteworthy that this fact was alluded to in the writings of R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch. Commenting on the verse⁴, “*Hambli ein kevarim bi-Mitzrayim* - Because there were no graves in Egypt, have you taken us away to die in the wilderness?” R. Hirsch addresses the unlikelihood that the accusation was sincerely held. Rather, he suggests: "This sharp irony even in a moment of deepest anxiety and despair is characteristic trait of the witty vein which is inherent in the Jewish race from their earliest beginnings".⁵ In this reading, reflective of an indisputable reality, humor is a cherished coping mechanism, an invaluable method of maintaining one's sanity in a world replete with tragedy, agony, and challenge. As such, given that mental health is undoubtedly no less precious than physical health, this necessary element of preserving that commodity might justifiably be identified with the imperative of *vi-nishmartem m'od li-nafshoteichem*.⁶ Whether termed as *pikuach nefesh* or as lesser related benefit, the importance of maintaining one's peace of mind, and the role of humor in assisting in that, is not subject to serious challenge (no pun intended). More positively phrased, it is widely affirmed that possessing a genuine *simchat ha-chaim* is both emotionally healthy and indicative of a praiseworthy attitude toward the fulfillment of one's life mission.

Once it is accepted that preserving and expressing one's own sense of humor is vital to one's emotional wellbeing, it is a clear progression to the next step: providing that service for others becomes instantly recognized as a basic manifestation of *chesed*. We need not suffice with logic to reach that conclusion; the message is clearly borne by an oft-quoted passage of the Talmud⁷, in which R. Brokah Choza'ah asks Eliyahu HaNavi to identify people in the marketplace who are destined to be rewarded in the world to come. Eventually, two men are identified who relate that they are “jesters (*anshei beduchei*) – when we see people who are sad, we cheer them up, and when we see people fighting we work to make peace between them”. Here, the role of providing laughter to those in need of mood enhancement is explicitly identified as one of extreme merit.

While credit may go to the Reader's Digest for popularizing the maxim that "Laughter is the best medicine," the message was conveyed as well by no less a master of both Jewish law and medicine as Maimonides, who wrote in his medical tract *Hanhagat Ha-Beriut*, "...One should strengthen the vital power with musical instruments, by telling the patient joyful stories which widen his soul and dilate his heart, and by relating news that distracts his mind and makes him laugh as well as his friends. One should select people who can cheer him up, to serve him and to care for him. All this is obligatory in every illness."⁸ Accordingly, facilitating laughter in others is a function of both the broad *chesed* mandate and the subset of *bikkur cholim*. As these are fundamental missions of the Jewish people, the value of the tools provided by a sense of humor is clearly displayed.

⁴ Ex. 14:11

⁵ Translation by Isaac Levy, Judaica Press edition, Gateshead, 1989, p.181.

⁶ Deut. 4:15

⁷ *Ta'anit* 22a.

⁸ *Hanhagat Ha-Beriut* II, 20; translation by Fred Rosner, M.D., from his *Maimonides' Medical Writings; Moses Maimonides' Three Treatises on Health*, 47. See *Einayim Le-Mishpat*, *Nedarim* 39b, for further citations from Maimonides on this point. See also commentary of Ibn Ezra to Ps., 41:2.

It is in this vein that R. Betzael Zev Safran⁹, author of the *Responsa Rabaz*, explained the Talmudic reference¹⁰ to R. Yirmiyahu's repeated attempts to use a particular style of halakhic questioning with the deliberate goal of making R. Zeira laugh. R. Safran develops a thesis that R. Zeira was given to an intense seriousness of a morose nature, and R. Yirmiyahu feared that he may descend into depression. Accordingly, he attempted to use humor in an effort to prevent that eventuality.

After acknowledging the value that humor contains with regard to emotional health, it can then be noted that there are other practical usages as well, most notably in the realm of education and pedagogy. The benefits of humor in this area are acknowledged by the Talmud both by advocacy and by example. In the former sense, we are told approvingly that Rabbah, prior to beginning his lecture, would open with a *milta di-bidichuta*, apparently a humorous remark. As a result, his students, notably described as "*rabanana*," (which would counter the notion that such methods are only necessary or appropriate for children¹¹) had their "hearts opened" to the learning.¹²

While the above is commonly understood as referring to jokes, it is necessary to acknowledge other interpretations as well. For example, R. Ya'akov Emden, in his *Lechem Shamayim*¹³ asserts that a "*milta di-bidichuta*" is not a joke but rather an educational device in the form of a riddle or exaggeration; in other words, a statement that might seem amusing or preposterous but is designed to expand the parameters of thought in order to provoke new insights. Further, R. Avraham ben Nachman HaKohen, in his *Shiyurei Taharah*,¹⁴ denies that the "*milta di-bidichuta*" offered before the lecture was a joke in the conventional sense, insisting these comments were not idle words (*devarim betailim*), but rather a "*pilpul in halakhah*, not necessarily in conformity to the actual law", said to sharpen the minds of the students. He notes further that the *Tosafot Yeshanim* (Yoma 9b) uses the phrase to describe a comment that seems to be aggadic in nature, rather than humorous, suggesting this type as an alternate definition. R. Aharon Magid, in his work *Beit Aharon on klalei ha-Shas*¹⁵, notes this suggestion and adds the possibility that the "*milta di-bidichuta*" merely refers to an expression of the joy of a *mitzvah*.¹⁶

In any event, if the Talmud is advocating jokes as an educational tool, it practices as it preaches. It is related that Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan was once asked if there are any jokes in the Talmud, and that his response was, 'yes, but they're all old'. A cursory reading of the Talmud's text validates

⁹ Writing in the journal *Kevutzei Ephraim*, vol. 1 No. 3 Av 5674.

¹⁰ *Niddah* 23a.

¹¹ See, however, *Arukh Li-Neir*, *Sukkah* 49b, who asserts that this methodology is only necessary for those who are not learning *l'shmah*.

¹² Per Rashi's explanation. Another question worthy of further analysis is what exactly is meant by the similar term "*harchavat ha-da'at*", which is sometimes used in contexts similar to this. This may be a question outside the scope of this paper (although not outside the scope of this forum). The impression one gets at some points is that this is a positive term, connoting a "broadening of the awareness" that prepares the mind to receive, understand, and appreciate new ideas. However, this may or may not be the intention in other usages; see, for example, *Berakhot* 57b where the text can equally accommodate that meaning as well as a less positive one, possibly suggesting an unwelcome expansion of one's needs and desires.

¹³ To *Pirkei Avot*, ch. 6, #8.

¹⁴ *Ma'arekhet ha-Beit*, #44.

¹⁵ Volume 11, p. 122.

¹⁶ See also *Responsa Siach Yitzchak*, 437.

that assertion; an informed reading may yield that jokes are not only present in the Talmud but abundant. The Talmud's pun in reference to *bedikat chametz*¹⁷ is well-known; finely-tuned eyes have uncovered many more, as documented in an extensive article in the Bar Ilan journal *Badad*¹⁸. As the author of that article, Binyamin Engleman, notes, the message is twofold: that the sages of the Talmud were capable of joking, and, more significantly that these jokes were worthy of memorializing in the Talmud itself (as he puts it, "jokes with a *hekhsher*").

The above discussion centers on practical, functional usages of humor that provide benefit within a religious context, one that values emotional health and educational progress. Perhaps we can go further, however, and suggest that a sense of humor has a primary role to play in a religious worldview, one that not only assists and reduces crisis but that actually comprises a vital part of one's perception of one's world.

The Talmud¹⁹ teaches that G-d's schedule is comprised of daily activities assigned to four quarters of the day, including one devoted to "playing with the Leviathan". Understandably, this last detail has provoked inquiry: is there a theological or religious value to this statement being included in the *Torah SheBa'al Peh*? The challenge of interpretation aside, what moral or halakhic lesson is conveyed here?

Rabbi Hershel Schachter²⁰ cites R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik as suggesting that the statement is important for the *mitzvah* of *vi-halachta bi-derachav*, or *imitatio Dei*. In the context of delivering a eulogy for R. Moshe Shatzkes, the Rav suggested that this information helps the individual realize a more G-dly personality by recognizing that one does not have to "take everything so seriously". To relate to this idea as more than a rhetorical device requires a consideration of how such a concept can be a fundamental attribute of the perfect G-d.

It seems indicated that the Rav's intent was to highlight humor (or, in this case, playfulness) as an indication of one's awareness of the relative importance, or lack of same, contained in various elements of life. Humor thus represents one's ability to maintain accurate perspective, recognizing that significance is both an absolute (i.e., something either matters or it does not) and a relative concept, and as a function of the second aspect, important things matter more when other things matter less. If humor is defined solely as possession of this perspective, it is fair to say that G-d in His omniscience maintains the ultimate "sense of humor".

As such, *imitatio Dei* in this regard represents one's striving to keep the events of life in perfect perspective, to the extent that humans can strive for perfection (a challenge, of course, certainly not unique to this area). This ability has religious value in another primary sense, as well. The Jews have been gifted the Torah, the text of ultimate significance and importance. The ability to appreciate this gift on any level will necessarily require a capacity to recognize and to act on perceiving greatness and grandeur; otherwise, no gift of any quality will be worth bestowing.

¹⁷ *Pesachim* 9b

¹⁸ Binyamin Engleman, "Humor Mutzhar, Galuy vi-Samuy bi-Talmud Bavli", *Badad*, Volume VIII, winter 5759. For further examples, see Rabbi Yitzchak Blau's lecture, "Does the Talmud Have a Sense of Humor?" available at http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/731967/Rabbi_Yitzchak_Blau/Does_the_Talmud_Have_a_Sense_of_Humor

¹⁹ *Avodah Zarah* 3b

²⁰ *Nefesh HaRav*, p. 69.

This notion is reflected in the comments of the Ramban concerning the dramatic display surrounding the giving of the Torah, which he interpreted as a test of the Jewish nation's capacity to appreciate magnificence.²¹

If the above is true, then it follows that a crucial component to this appreciation is the recognition of varying and contrasting degrees of significance and insignificance. Accordingly, the Jew's attempt to hone his sense of humor, when appropriately executed, can be understood as an effort to develop his ability to appreciate and thus understand any degree of the magnificence of the Torah's message, in addition to being an attempt to view the world in a manner closest to that of G-d's viewpoint, thus fulfilling the *vi-halachta bi-derachav* mandate.

Such an understanding may yield a new interpretation of one of the primary "anti-laughter" texts, a passage in the Talmud²² which prohibits "filling one's mouth with laughter in this world". This exhortation is derived from the familiar verse of the "*Shir HaMa'alot*" recited before *birkat ha-mazon*, "*az yimalei schok pinu* – [only] then shall our mouths be filled with laughter"²³.

The interpretation of this prohibition, which is cited in *Shulchan Arukh*,²⁴ is subject to some debate and analysis. The language of "filling one's mouth" could logically be understood as representing an uncontrolled or excessive laughter, perhaps specifically allowing more restrained mirth. This ambiguity is also present in the *beraita* in the last chapter of *Avot*, *Kinyan Torah*, which lists as a prerequisite for acquiring Torah "*mi'ut schok*", rendered either as a reduction of laughter or something closer to an elimination of laughter. Commentators and other rabbinic authors interpret both passages as sitting on one point or another along this spectrum, with some taking both sources as prohibiting or discouraging excessive laughter, and others taking a position that all laughter is to be avoided (with the possible exception of that celebrating a *mitzvah*).²⁵ Some of these writers locate this debate in the varying attitudes of R. Yirmiyahu and R. Zeira, an interpretative tradition that goes back at least to Rashi: he comments on the above-cited passage in which R. Yirmiyahu tried unsuccessfully to make R. Zeira laugh, and notes that the latter declined because of the prohibition of "*az yimalei*", and states further that he was "more stringent" (*machmir t'fei*, at least in relation to R. Yirmiyahu)²⁶.

Aside from the meaning of the injunction, an additional question exists as to its normative status. Some authorities seem to view this as a genuine prohibition based on scriptural derivation; others

²¹ Commentary to the Torah, Ex. 20:17; see also R. Yitzchak Hutner, *Pachad Yitzchak to Shavuot, ma'amar 7*.

Compare also R. Simcha Mordechai Ziskind Broyde, *Sam Derekh, Bereishit*, II, pp. 117

²² *Berakhot* 31a

²³ Ps. 126:2.

²⁴ *Orach Chaim* 560:5

²⁵ See, for example, R. Tzvi Hirsch Grodzinski, *Milei D'Berakhot to Berakhot*; R. Menachem Natan Nota Auerbach, *Zekhut Avot to Avot*. Regarding a contrast between a permissible laughter and an uncontrolled, prohibited laughter (sometimes phrased as a contrast between "*simchah*" and "*schok*"), and sometimes using different terminology, see Ritva, *Niddah* 23a; Rambam, *Hilkhos Deiot* 2:7 (see also *Hil. Yom Tov* 6:20; however, compare *Peirush HaMishnayot, Berakhot* 9:5, and see also *Hil. Yesodei HaTorah* 5:11 with *Kesef Mishneh* and R. Menachem Krakowski, *Avodat Melekh*); *Sha'arei Teshuvah* O.C., 697; *She'arim Metzuyanim B'Halakhah to Kitzur Shulchan Arukh* 29:6 .

²⁶ Rashi's position is analyzed by R. Yeshayah Asher Yolles in the journal *Yavneh* (Vol. 2 No. 11-12 Tammuz 5690, p. 3.). See also commentary of Maharatz Chajes to *Niddah*. Compare also *Sdei Chemed, ma'arekhet ha-aleph*, p. 86 *aleph, klal* 326.

as a rabbinic enactment²⁷; and there is a school of thought that understands the Talmud's statement to refer to a trait of extra piety (*midat chasidut*) rather than an actual prohibition. It has been suggested that the last position is reflected in the words of the Chida in his *Ya'ir Ozen*²⁸, that people are generally "not careful" about this precept.²⁹

It is of particular interest to us that the prohibition, such as it is, appears to have an expiration date, and further, the entire prohibition is deduced from a context advocating laughter. The phrasing is that mouth-filling laughter should not take place "in this world", and the source verse itself is focused on a future time when such laughter *will* be appropriate. Presumably, this framework is relevant to understanding the concept. In fact, there is a debate among the *rishonim* as to how to understand the range of the prohibition: while many understood the prohibition to apply only during the period of the destruction of the Temple³⁰, there are opinions among the *rishonim* that maintain that the prohibition is much broader than that. They argue that the precept obtains regardless of the status of the Temple, and will only be lifted either in genuine messianic times (and even then possibly only under certain conditions) or in the World-to-Come³¹. It is suggested, both by later sources and in some cases in the words of the *rishonim* themselves, that the relevant issue is the motivation for the ban on laughter. If, as some understand, the intent is to preserve proper mourning for the destruction of the Temple and the exile, it would logically flow that the prohibition should be limited to the times when that sad situation is current. If, by contrast, the concern is that indulgence (or overindulgence) in laughter can lead one into sin (or, more specifically, licentiousness)³², this is not mitigated at all by the presence or absence of the Temple. This view must still account for the explicit permission associated with "then" ("*az*"); as such, it is assumed that the reference is only to an absolute eschatological reality which either negates the evil inclination³³ or provides venue for a laughter that is purely innocent.

In either case, the existence of some future time when laughter is allowed provides crucial context to understanding this precept. In light of our understanding above - that a sense of humor is meant to approximate the Divine perspective on worldly events - we might be able to suggest a different meaning for this injunction. Perhaps the intent is to convey that as much as humans attempt to understand the world through G-d's eyes, they will also be constrained from doing so,

²⁷ See *Sefer Ha-Eshkol* (p. 22 *Hil. Tefilah*), and also *S'dei Chemed, ma'arekhet ha-aleph*, p. 86, *aleph, klal* 326. See also *Birkei Yosef* OC 560:7 (and compare to his words in *Yair Ozen* cited here).

²⁸ *Ma'arekhet ha-aleph*, #117.

²⁹ See *Sdei Chemed*; and see also R. Yosef Engel, *Beit HaOtzar, ma'arekhet alef-samekh* 189, p 236 and *Gilyonei HaShas to Berakhot*. See the discussion of this in R. Alter Ben Tziyon Maggid, *Beit Aharon*, vol. III, p. 458-460. See also the discussion of R. Yehudah Herzl Henkin, *Responsa Bnai Banim* I, 16, who understands similarly within the view of the Rambam. Compare also his comments in vol. III, *Tav'van U'Keshot* part 12.

For further extensive analysis of this prohibition, see R. Meir Gluberman, in the journal *Beit Aharon Ve-Yisrael*, Vol. XV #6 (90), p. 35-42, and XVIII #1 (109) p. 85-109.

³⁰ This appears to be the view of the Rambam, the Tur, and the Ramban (*Torat HaAdam* p. 264); See also R. Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, *He'amek Sh'alah*, 158:5, who interprets the view of R. Achai Gaon in this manner.

³¹ Commentary of *Talmidei Rabbenu Yonah to Berakhot*, also cited in *Beit Yosef*. See also Taz, 560:7 who states (in an effort to reconcile the views of Rabbenu Yonah and the Tur) that there is a prohibition of *schok* that is not for the purpose of a *mitzvah* even not during the time of the exile, while during the time of the exile there is a prohibition to "fill one's mouth" even in celebration of a *mitzvah*. See also R. Yishayahu HaLevi Horowitz, *Shnei Luchot HaBrit, Ta'anit* p. 44, and *Kaf HaChaim, Orach Chaim* 561:39-41 as well as *Responsa Shevut Ya'akov*, I, 182

³² As stated by the *mishnah* in *Avot* (3:13, or 17 in some editions). See *Magen Avraham, Orach Chaim* 560:12 and *Arukh HaShulchan* 560:8.

³³ See *Shittah Mekubetzet to Berakhot*.

due to mortal fallibility, and, even more significantly, limitation of vision and understanding. A "full mouth", connoting complete and total understanding, is not a possibility of this reality. However, once history unfolds in all of its clarity - once the Divine plan is apparent - then, as the expression goes, we will be able to "look back and laugh". Until then, we strive, in imitation of G-d, to cultivate His perspective³⁴; but we maintain awareness that we will always be flawed in that attempt.³⁵

It is worth considering the particular relationship that exists between humor and the festival of Purim. The specifics of this relationship will be touched upon below, but the very fact of the connection is interesting, and is often linked thematically to a single verse in Megillat Esther, "*vi-nahafokh hu*" (9:1) and halakhically to the imperative of "*mishteh vi-simchah*" (9:17) (which does not by itself explain the different nature of this particular festival). Considering this relationship further may require veering, if we have not already done so, into the territory of *drush*. However, I am hopeful that it is appropriate in the context of this paper: it is either correct, or it is not, in which case it can qualify as a *milta di-bidichata*.

The Talmud (*Shabbat* 88a), interpreting the verse "*kiyemu vi-kiblu*" (Esther 9:27), identifies Purim as a time of reaffirmation of the acceptance of the Torah, which was initially accepted under duress, and is now being accepted willingly. Noting the apparent contradiction to "*na'aseh vi-nishma*",³⁶ many highlight the understanding of the *Midrash Tanchuma (Parashat Noach)*, which teaches that the reluctance to accept the Torah was specific to *Torah She'B'Al Peh*, which, replete with stringencies and complexities not found in the written law, was considered burdensome. Apparently, then, Purim was a time when perspective shifted; when, in the aftermath of a miracle, the Jewish people found it possible to see beauty and value in what had once been deemed onerous and undesirable.

If this approach has merit, it can thus be understood that the positive components of the "sense of humor" become associated with the celebration of Purim. It becomes a day, consequently, when we are encouraged to nourish our sense of perspective, to cultivate the ability to see beauty and joy amidst the distraction of challenges, impediments, and tragedies.

³⁴ Conversely, see R. Yonatan Shteif, *Mitzvot Hashem*, II, #40, who maintains that *vi-halachta bi-drachav* is fulfilled by *abstaining* from laughter, in identification with the *Shekhinah* in exile. See also *Ein Ya'akov* to *Berakhot*.

³⁵ Interestingly, R. Ephraim Berman, *Noam Ephraim*, p. 149, suggests that the *anshei beduchei* mentioned earlier as encountered by R. Brokha Choza'ah, were termed *bnai alma d'ati* because their attitude of happiness with their lot and avoidance of conflict approximated life in the World to Come. For other approaches that also emphasize the ultimate redemption as a factor that allows for laughter to be genuinely complete, see Maharal of Prague, *Netzach Yisrael* (ch. 23) who asserts that *simchah* is internal, and laughter is external and thus not appropriate until the perfection of the redemption; see also R. Meir Blumenfeld, *Mishnat Yisrael* to *Pirkei Avot*, pp. 43-44. See also R. Yehoshua Zvi Weinstein, *Birkat Yehoshua* to *Massekhet Berakhot*, pp. 179-180; compare also R. Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin, *Pri Tzadik, Chayyei Sarah*, #1, and the commentary of the Gaon of Vilna to *Berakhot*. Similarly, see *Orchot Tzadikim (sha'ar ha-simchah)* who implies that the issue is that in this world, one's *simchah* usually comes at someone else's expense, and is thus incomplete, in contrast to the situation in the World-to-Come. Further, R. Shimshon Pinkus (*Sikhhot* to Purim, p. 13) cites the Gaon of Vilna as stating that in the World-to-Come there will be constant renewal, and thus constant surprise, which evokes unlimited laughter.

³⁶ As observed by *Tosafot*, *ibid*, s.v. *kafah* (where a different explanation is offered).

This approach may also inform to some degree the unique halakhic character of Purim as a festival. The *Shulchan Arukh*³⁷ allows one to get married on Purim. Other authorities objected to this; on a standard festival, there is a biblical prohibition to "mix" and thus dilute the obligatory joy of the festival with a personal celebration such as marriage. Presumably, this concept should apply to Purim as well (even if only on a rabbinical level, adjusted for the status of Purim itself). Some later writers³⁸ suggest that the difference lies in scriptural phrasing. The biblical festivals mandate "*vi-samachta bi-chagecha*"; one must rejoice, specifically and exclusively, in the festival itself. Purim, by contrast, is a "day of feast and joy", suggesting that while the day must be one of happiness, that mood need not come exclusively from the festival itself. Mourning and fasting are inconsistent with the imperative of Purim; celebration, however, is not, even if it stems from an external source. In other words, the theme of Purim is the cultivation of a sense of perspective and joy in life's blessings and a diminution and deemphasizing of its anguishes.

Whether or not the above is correct, it is the undisputed, if not unanimously endorsed, fact that Purim has become associated with levity and humor. *Rishonim* discuss a relaxed attitude toward demanding compensation for damages incurred in the context of Purim celebration, an implicit agreement in order to facilitate exuberant merriment.³⁹ In later generations, the controversial practice of the "Purim *shpiel*" took shape, in which humorous skits would be performed, often including the lampooning of individuals, including respected figures such as rebbeim and rashei yeshiva.⁴⁰ Along with this development came the somewhat less problematic but still controversial custom of delivering "Purim Torah", in which *divrei Torah* or lectures would be offered using contorted logic or purposely misread sources, presented to evoke laughter rather than the inspiration and enlightenment normally expected. The story is told about Purim in the Volozhiner Yeshiva: "during R. Itzeleh [Volozhiner]'s tenure as Rosh Yeshiva...R. Mordechai Gimpel Yaffeh, one of the best of the students, was chosen as Purim Rav. When it came time for him to deliver his shiur, the students gathered around him. R. Itzeleh, too, listened. The Purim Rav delivered a sharp and well reasoned discourse to answer an apparent contradiction between the words of a Yerushalmi and a halachah cited by the Rambam. The students turned to R. Itzeleh and complained; the Purim Rav had not fulfilled the requirements of delivering a shiur that was not substantiable. R. Itzeleh laughed and said: "The pilpul on its own is true Torah, but the Rambam and Yerushalmi upon which it was based do not exist."⁴¹

Regarding the *shpiel*, different *yeshivot* developed different approaches. Certainly, the current practice in Yeshiva University has been to allow and support *shpiels* on Purim, and it is not alone, in the history of *yeshivot*, most notably the "mother of *yeshivot*", the Volozhiner Yeshiva, already mentioned above in the context of the Purim Rav. (Interestingly, Rabbi Herschel

³⁷ *Orach Chaim* 696:8.

³⁸ See R. Avraham Shmuel Binyamin Sofer, *Responsa Ketav Sofer*, *Orach Chaim* 138, and R. Yisrael Meir Lau, *Responsa Yacheil Yisrael*, I, 13.

³⁹ See *Mordechai*, *Sukkah* 2:742; *Tosafot*, *Rosh*, *Agudah Sukkah* 45a; Rama, *Choshen Mishpat* 378:9.R. Yisrael Grossman, *Responsa Netzach Yisrael* 15; R. Binyamin Yehoshua Zilber, *Responsa Az Nidbaru* IX, 49. Note also the discussion of R. David Shperber, *Responsa Afarkasta D'Anyan* (1:148); and of R. Alter Gelernter, in the journal *HaEmek*, (vol. 64, pp. 16-20).

⁴⁰ See the brief survey of the history of this practice by Zohar HaNegby in R. Daniel Sperber, ed. *Minhagei Yisrael*, VI, pp. 201-202).

⁴¹ Zev T. Paretsky, "Reservoirs of faith: The Yeshiva through the Ages", Feldheim Publishers, Jerusalem/New York, pp. 270-271; also brought in Dov Eliach, *Avi HaYeshivot*, Jerusalem, 5751, p. 202, citing the work "Volozhin". My thanks to Zev Eleff for these references.

Schachter has mentioned in other contexts that the original yeshiva that would become Yeshivat Rabbi Isaac Elchanan was founded by individuals with roots in Volozhin, and thus the customs of that Yeshiva might be legitimately transported to the later Yeshiva.) Rabbi Moshe Tzvi Neriya describes the experience of Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook in Volozhin on Purim, in a manner starkly reminiscent of the contemporary Purim *shpiel*:

"In delivering his Purim compositions, the Rav imitated the Netziv's manner of speech and enunciation. but he was repaid in kind many years later by the great-grandson of the Netziv, Rabbi Yitzchak Charif, who was chosen to be "Purim Rav" in Yeshivat Merkaz haRav. Rabbi Yitzchak, having internalized every word that he'd heard the Rav speak, proceeded to make a Purim speech in precise imitation of the Rav's style and cadence. He analyzed his position of "Purim rav": did it encompass only the rabbinate of Jerusalem, or did his nomination entitle him to officiate as the chief rabbi of Eretz Yisrael? The scholarship and mental agility which he brought to his speech amazed all those present. The Rav was also impressed by Rabbi Yitzchak's address. He admitted that he had been unaware of the rabbi's greatness in Torah and added, "Now I am getting my due. The great-grandson is repaying me here in Jerusalem for that which I said to his great-grandfather in Volozhin".⁴² Similarly, I have been told that R. Elyah Leib Bloch strongly defended the practice of the shpiel at the Telshe Yeshiva, against the objections of a prominent rabbinic Purim guest, asserting that this was an appropriate outlet for the American students of that era.

Both of these practices were subject to strong opposition from halakhic authorities. As would be expected, these authorities are worried about issues such as detracting from the honor of Torah and Torah scholars, and the possible humiliation of any individual portrayed in the performances, an action the Talmud famously compares to bloodshed⁴³. R. Avraham David Horowitz⁴⁴ asserts that such performances did not take place in Poland and Hungary, and that when they do happen they inflict humiliation and dishonor upon their subjects, who will smile and participate due to social pressures, concealing their true anguish. He further implies that the content of the Torah itself can be subject to disgrace in this context, referencing an incident in which a biblical story was performed with a key protagonist made to speak in a fashion deemed grossly inappropriate. Similarly, R. Yosef Zvi Dushinsky, writing earlier, expressed his strong opposition to Purim skits about the biblical story of the sale of Joseph.⁴⁵ Similar objections to the "Purim Torah" presentations were expressed by R. Avraham Ya'akov HaKohen Pam⁴⁶. Also strongly protesting the Purim shpiel practices are R. Moshe Shternbuch⁴⁷ and R. Ovadiah Yosef⁴⁸.

⁴² Rabbi Moshe Zvi Neriya, *Mo'adei HaRe'iyah*, translated by Pesach Jaffe as "Celebration of the Soul: The Holidays in the Life and Thought of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook", Genesis Jerusalem Press, 1992, p. 124

⁴³ *Bava Metzia* 59a, and elsewhere.

⁴⁴ *Responsa Kinyan Torah B'Halakhah*, II, 125:2.

⁴⁵ *Responsa Maharitz*, I, 56. R. Dushinsky bases his objection, among other things, on a statement of the Talmud (Sanhedrin 101a, with Rashi) which apparently condemns the usage of Scripture as a source of personal entertainment.

⁴⁶ *Atarah LaMelekh*, pp. 193-194. I was recently told that in his yeshiva, Torah VoDaath, R. Pam allowed skits on Purim that lampooned him, but no one else.

⁴⁷ *Mo'adim UZmannim*, II, 191, fn 2.

⁴⁸ *Responsa Yechaveh Da'at*, V, 50.

While it is clear that many great *rabbanim* have developed a different and more accepting attitude toward both of these innovations, it is equally clear that the objections raised by the detractors represent very real concerns of tremendous spiritual import. Thus, it must be assumed that the pro-*shpiel* and - Purim Torah camps are equally concerned with these risks, and incorporate into their support mandated safeguards and controls to protect against abuse. As such, these objections must be carefully studied and valued in order to guarantee that that mandate is met.

Toward that end, it is worth considering the word "*leitzanut*". In modern usage, the term is usually relatively innocuous, denoting the kinds of skits that are common on Purim and other such occasions. Similarly, a "*letz*" is a clown. When these terms are used in a derogatory sense, it is usually to disparage content not meant to be humorous, e.g., referring to purported scholarship as *leitzanut* or to a self-regarding politician as a *letz*. However, in classical literature the terms seem to reflect negatively on actions that play out as intended⁴⁹. A notable usage is the verse "*Letz takeh u-feti ya'arim*"⁵⁰ which midrashic interpretation⁵¹ understands as a reference to Amalek. The reference is puzzling; casting one of the most vicious enemies of the Jews of antiquity as a "clown" is not the most likely imagery. As such, R. Yitzchak Hutner notes⁵², in line with the view of Rabbenu Yonah⁵³, that the appropriate definition of *leitzanut* is not humor per se but rather scoffing or cynicism.

R. Hutner expands on this concept by noting another comment of Rabbenu Yonah⁵⁴. Commenting on another verse⁵⁵, Rabbenu Yonah in essence asserts that the truest reflection of one's character is - perhaps surprisingly - not what he does, but rather what he esteems. Humans regularly fall short of their own lofty goals, but it is the goals themselves that are indicative, and goals are reflected in role models. Thus, when one shows honor in a specific direction, he is making a clear statement about his values and aspirations. As such, the ability to confer esteem - or, conversely, disdain - is one of the most powerful tools of self-expression that an individual has.

Thus, this ability must be carefully nurtured. Cynicism - the belief that nothing is truly important - or, in the words of Oscar Wilde, the maintenance of "the cost of everything and the value of nothing", necessarily corrodes the very essence of this crucial aspect. When unfettered, cynicism can negate anything, regardless of its grandeur. The words of the *Mesilat Yesharim* (ch. 5), that one measure of *leitzanut* can overwhelm any degree of wisdom, represent an undeniable reality. Amalek, who refused to acknowledge and respect the Jewish nation and G-d who protected them, may not have had much of a sense of humor, but personified *leitzanut* none the less.

This notion dovetails neatly with what we have discussed above. The goal of a religiously desirable sense of humor is to enhance the appreciation and understanding of that which is truly

⁴⁹ See Ps. 1:1; Proverbs 21:24; *Megillah* 25b; *Sotah* 44a; *Sanhedrin* 63b. See also the discussion in R. Avigdor Neventzahl, *Sikhhot Le-Sefer Shemot*, pp. 129-139.

⁵⁰ Proverbs 19:25.

⁵¹ *Shemot Rabbah* 27:5

⁵² *Pachad Yitzchak, Purim, ma'amar* 1.

⁵³ *Sha'arei Teshuvah, shaar* 3: 176.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁵⁵ Proverbs 27:21.

meaningful and eternal. To pursue a "humor" that is a mechanism of stripping significance and importance, even from where those qualities belong, is clearly the antithesis of what a Jewish sense of humor should represent. This is true not only because of the vastly important concerns of humiliation and assault upon human dignity that can accompany such attitudes, although they are enough reason; in a fundamental way, a cynical mindset can neutralize the very lifeblood of the religious worldview.

Thus, the balance required on Purim is a microcosm of the balance of all of Jewish existence. We strive to laugh, to smile, to be able to place events and issues into a context that allows us to flourish as servants of G-d. However, all of this aspiration is not only unrealized, but is actively negated, if we "laugh too hard"; meaning, both that we are laughing with too much abandon, or with too much "hardness" - too much severity, unkindness, or cynicism. It is not an easy balance; it is one that takes wisdom, sensitivity, and perspective; and lacking those, guidance from those who possess them. It is helpful, perhaps, that Purim is always closely preceded by the Shabbat devoted to the remembrance of Amalek, a placement that has its own reasons⁵⁶, but also serves as a cautionary message as to how the desired sense of humor can veer disastrously off-course.

R. Yitzchak Isaac Sher, the mashgiach of the Slobodka Yeshiva, remarked⁵⁷ upon the fact that out of all the prohibitions in the Torah, it is only that of *lashon hara* that benefits from not only an injunction against the behavior, but also a commandment to remember an episode in which one transgressed and was punished (the story of Miriam⁵⁸). He explains this anomaly by noting that *lashon hara*, which operates in the sphere of human emotion, is enormously complex, and can be violated even by one (such as Miriam) devoid of malice and cruelty. The only hope against its neglect is through active training and practice, "remembrance", to create a personality who can speak both naturally and without inflicting harm.

The same dynamic exists within our struggle with humor. If we do indeed see value in that pursuit, we can do so only within the context of a deeply ingrained reverence and sensitivity toward the individuals and the values that Jewish tradition esteems. Cultivating that attitude is an ongoing, life-long process, but the degree of accomplishment in that area has an immense impact on one's ability to safely navigate the challenges of a "Jewish sense of humor".

It is also instructive, in this area, to consider another halakhic component to the Purim *shpiel* question. These performances often entail implicit or explicit statements about individuals which in another context might be termed as *lashon hara*. It is not immediately clear what justifies such activity. The defense that "it is just a joke" is not a sustainable one⁵⁹; both the Rambam⁶⁰ and the

⁵⁶ See Magen Avraham, *Orach Chaim*, and *Responsa Divrei Yoel*, 33.

⁵⁷ *Leket Sikhhot Mussar*, I, pp. 394-395.

⁵⁸ See Ramban, Deut. 24:9 and *hosafot* to *Sefer HaMitzvot* of the Rambam, positive *mitzvah* #4.

⁵⁹ It is important to address as well the general misuse of this defense to justify other acts of malfeasance. In the context of *lashon hara*, this defense is inadequate but at least has some merit; the fact that a statement is not meant seriously does somewhat mitigate its potentially negative impact. However, this statement is sometimes invoked by those who harass others, such as bullies who inflict suffering upon innocent victims, and then argue that "it was just a joke". In this case, the joke is one-sided; the victim is certainly not amused, and the fact that the perpetrator took pleasure in the harassment makes him sadistic rather than innocent. The stated excuse obscures the fact that nothing within it alleviates at all the suffering of the victim. "Practical jokes" may be justifiable in a setting in which both parties enjoy the experience, at least after the fact, and are understood as such; but in the one-sided fashion in which

Chafetz Chaim⁶¹ assert clearly that *lashon hara* "*derekh schok*" is prohibited (according to the latter as actual *lashon hara*, to the former as "*avak lashon hara*"). A second effort at justification - to maintain that the subjects are "*mochel*", or waive their rights to protection, is only slightly more successful. While it is certainly the case that at least implicit *mechilah* is a prerequisite for such involvement, it might not be enough. Some authorities maintain that such *mechilah* is only effective for monetary rights (i.e., the victim can forgo restitution) but not for personal suffering⁶². It seems, rather, that the firmest grounds to permit this activity is based on the creation of an atmosphere and a context in which it is abundantly clear that the *shpiel* is affectionate rather than malicious.⁶³ Once again, writ large, this notion has implications for humorous statements year-round; it is necessary to create, through one's personality, a context in which these statements will enlighten rather than demean.

In a related sense, R. Tzadok HaKohen, in his *Tzidkat HaTzadik* (260), delineates two kinds of laughter, and notes that each has a positive and negative application. The first, laughter at individuals, is generally negative but necessary when directed at idolatry and other destructive forces.⁶⁴ The second, which he interestingly terms that of "youth" (*na'arut*) is positive when in the service of a *mitzvah*, and dangerous when it is unrestrained. The difficult challenge of positively harnessing the benefits of humor, while avoiding the hostile components, is reflected by the fact that many secular writers have seen all humor to contain either explicit or concealed negativity. For example, Paul Johnson writes⁶⁵: "there is no such thing as a simple laugh. I am tempted to add: or an innocent laugh. The commonest occasion of laughter, especially collective laughter, is the distress, perplexity, or discomfiture of others...[quoting Hobbes in Leviathan] 'the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of some eminence in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly'...[Max Beerbohm] thought that 'there are two elements in the public's humor: delight in suffering, contempt for the unfamiliar' – one reason people laugh at foreigners or strangers generally. Both motives are reprehensible. Laughter, when you analyze it, is no joke... [quoting H. Bergson] 'In laughter' he wrote, 'we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate and so to correct our neighbor'. In particular, he added, mirth was 'the collective punishment of society on the unsociable individual'." If we are to stand behind the thoughts expressed above, we must argue with this quotation, and maintain enthusiastically that there is an enlightened humor that is

they are generally perpetrated, they are squarely within the scope of the egregious prohibition of *ona'at devarim*. See *Responsa Chatam Sofer Choshen Mishpat* 176.

⁶⁰ *Hilkhos Deiot* 7:4

⁶¹ *Hilkhos Lashon Hara*, *klal* 9.

⁶² See R. Moshe Kaufman, *Zera Chaim*, pp. 324-325.

⁶³ This notion can be based on the perspective of *Tosafot*, (*Arakhin* 15b, s.v. *kol milta* and *Bava Batra* 39b s.v. *leit*), that comment on the counterintuitive statements in the Talmud that *lashon hara* is permissible when said in front of either a public crowd or the subject himself. As both logic and the Chafetz Chaim indicate, both those factors should exacerbate rather than excuse *lashon hara*. Rather, as *Tosafot* suggest, the intent is not toward derogatory information, where that would indeed be the effect. Instead, the reference is to information of ambiguous impact; when said in public or in the subject's presence, it can be assumed (presuming the decency of the speaker) that the effect will be a positive interpretation. Similarly, in the case of an appropriately executed Purim *shpiel*, with those portrayed often in (hopefully genuine) cheerful participation, it might be fair to trust that the intent is innocent.

⁶⁴ It is noteworthy in this context that the original Talmudic passage discussing G-d and the Leviathan contrasts G-d's "laughing" with His "laughing at his creations" (which He generally does not do).

⁶⁵ Paul Johnson, *Humorists: From Hogarth to Noel Coward* (Harper, pp. xi-xiii).

not as Johnson describes. However, the existence of such statements show the delicacy involved in entering this arena, and some of the pitfalls that must be avoided.

All of this has implications not only for how we generate humor but for how we consume it as well. Only the truly extraordinarily talented (and usually not even those) can sustain themselves on their own sense of humor.⁶⁶ If we are acknowledging a value to laughter, we are by necessity, at least occasionally, turning to external providers of that mirth. Accordingly, it is important to ensure that these sources do not convey more than that which is desired. Without question, the risks are many. The venues and contexts can certainly breach modesty standards, to say the least, and weaken sensitivities in that important area. The comedy itself can be hostile and aggressive, and diminish one's ability to empathize with others. The humor may, through its treatment of its subject matter or even its choice of subject matter, inappropriately minimize the sanctity, reverence, or even decency that is demanded in relevant contexts.⁶⁷ One who chooses to be a consumer of the comedy offerings of modern society must both choose carefully and work diligently at maintaining internal firewalls against all types of spiritual corrosion.

Similarly, these concepts place a particular challenge upon educators and others who influence the public discourse. As has been discussed, humor can be a powerful tool for pedagogy; but at the same time, the risks mentioned above are magnified exponentially when an influential figure is involved. A remark that is biting when uttered by the average person is devastating when spoken by a respected teacher. A boundary breached is knocked down further when the teacher appears to endorse the compromise in front of student who may lack the same ability of discernment. This is particularly true in that the attitude portrayed toward media consumption is often conveyed as all or nothing; i.e., one either abstains from engaging with popular culture, or does so indiscriminately. While the simplicity of such an approach may be appealing, its premise makes it harder for a teacher to maintain a nuanced approach in public. This is all in addition to the fact that a rebbe has a need to maintain an appropriate level of dignity⁶⁸ at the same time as he attempts to create an atmosphere where his students will reap the positive benefits humor can provide.

Further, a rebbe has to be concerned that his less serious remarks can potentially create a climate of negation of others that the students will pick up on. If a rebbe makes remarks about others that appear to be disparaging, even if it is granted that the remarks may be justifiable from his perspective, the effect on his students' respect for others, as well as their perception of how a Torah scholar relates to others, can be severely affected.⁶⁹ It is instructive in this regard to read the responsum of the *Chavvot Yair*⁷⁰ that the *Chafetz Chaim* printed in the back of his *sefer*, in

⁶⁶ To expand on this point further, it is not at all a given that those who make others laugh are able to provide the comfort of humor to themselves; the high rate of depression and related attitudes in the private life of comedians is well-known.

⁶⁷ To give one such example, one contemporary attempt at humor, operating in various media, mocks the intelligence of individuals who have died tragically by demonstrating foolishness in their behavior that led to their demise. The degrading effect this must have on the sensitivity to loss of human life (not to mention the anguish inflicted upon bereaved family members aware of the citations) is simply horrifying. Compare also *Responsa Iggerot Moshe, Orach Chaim II*, 79.

⁶⁸ See Rambam, *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 4:5.

⁶⁹ This topic is addressed very effectively in Rabbi Shalom Carmy's important article, "You Taught Me Musar and the Profit On It" (*Tradition*, 42:2 (Summer 2009)).

⁷⁰ R. Yair Chaim Bachrach, *Responsa Chavvot Yair*, 152.

which the author contextualizes and explains the statements in the Talmud that appear to challenge our perceptions of what is expected in terms of mutual respect among scholars.

As a whole, the engagement with general culture and liberal education poses both challenges and potential benefits of significant magnitude. Maximizing the latter while successfully navigating the former is the ongoing mission of those who opt for such engagement. The realm of comedy and humor is firmly situated within this spectrum as well, with its own unique components. Jewish tradition, through texts, culture, and theology, points clearly to both the risks and rewards of living a life of laughter. Through the careful attention to the lessons contained within, may we soon merit to see the day when laughter justifiably may fill our mouths.