

ADAR II

Jewish Laughter

Sometimes Yuck Yuck
Sometimes....Not So Much



The first instance of laughter in Jewish tradition is found in Chapter 18 of Genesis. When Sarah heard that she would bear a child of her own “she laughed --*va-titzchaq*.” Sarah’s response has been subject to countless (mainly) rabbinic interpretations that understood her laughter negatively – as Sarah’s derision of Abraham’s manhood. Modern feminist interpretations have viewed it differently – as Sarah’s incredulity over the idea that a woman her age could conceive and give birth.

But laughter, in its many guises, has been used by Jews from time immemorial as a means to confront adversity and challenges.

The famous Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, who was a Holocaust survivor, wrote extensively on his experiences, first at Theresienstadt and later Auschwitz, Dachau and Bergen-Belsen. It is nearly impossible to imagine any form of mirth under such horrible conditions, but Frankl’s training in human neuroscience and psychology no doubt influenced this insight into the human ability to survive trauma: “I never would have made it if I could not have laughed. It lifted me momentarily out of a horrible situation, just enough to make it livable.”

Gilda Radner, the brilliant comedian and observer of human frailties, waged a long and valiant fight against ovarian cancer, to which she eventually succumbed. On this fight – which she endured longer than any medical prognosis – she wrote: “Cancer is probably the most unfunny thing in the world, but I’m a comedian, and even cancer couldn’t stop me from seeing the humor in what I went through.”

Humor is employed as another kind of protection or healing, as well.

As Ruth Wisse, the Harvard professor of Yiddish and comparative literature, suggests in her recent work *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor* (2013), Jews have embraced and developed humor (truly to a Jewish art form) as a survival mechanism. From such brilliant comic writings as those by Sholem Aleichem to I.B. Singer and Philip Roth, humor is a frequent and popular response to the vicissitudes of modernity.

To Jews, who for most of history dwelled in the margins of nations and cultures, humor was a potent weapon in dealing with the many challenges they confronted, from relatively benign forms of exclusion to virulent anti-Semitism. (Who can forget Tevye’s not so concealed dig: “May God bless and keep the Czar ... far away from me!”)

Jewish self-deprecation was a way of preempting worse assaults from the outside world. Possibly channeling their inner Benjamin Franklin – more frequent than most Jewish writers admit – sometimes ‘tis best to strike the first blow. On this Franklin wrote: “If you would not be laughed at, be the first to laugh at yourself.”

It should come as no surprise that Jewish humorists’ favorite targets are themselves and their fellow Jews. In this regard, who better to provide a comical (if slightly bruising) portrait of the Jewish mother than a Jewish son or daughter? So in conclusion, we offer the following excerpt from the classic Mike Nichols and Elaine May conversation between Arthur and his mother.*

“Arthur this is your mother ... Do you remember me? ”

“Yeah, Ma, I remember you.”

“Arthur, you were supposed to call me last Friday ... I sat by that phone all day Friday, all Friday night and all day Saturday and all day Sunday, and finally your father said ‘Phyllis eat something you’ll faint...’ ”

“I said ‘No Harry, I don’t want my mouth to be full when my son calls ...’ ”

Later on the conversation ends...

“You’re very young. Some day, some day, honey, you’ll get married and you’ll have children of your own and when you do, I only pray that they make you suffer the way you’re making me suffer. That’s all I pray, Arthur, that’s a mother’s prayer ...”

Be happy. It’s Adar II!

*See the full Nichols and May routine at www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5pXggZIr6I