

Dvar Torah, September 29, 2012

Just come through the yomim nora'im...days of solemnity, awe, and trembling, so I figure its time to lighten up a bit as we look forward to one of our most joyous holidays, starting tomorrow night

You can think of this Dvar as a warm-up act for the headliner that is Sukkot. I'm going to talk about humor.

Why did humor evolve? Or, if you're not into evolution, why did God endow us with humor?

There are many theories of the PURPOSE of humor—why human beings engage in humor--from philosophers and thinkers from Plato, Aristotle to Hobbes, Schopenhauer, Kant and Freud.....At least 12 reviewed in Wikipedia

But the two most common theories of why people use humor...

- Relief theory—we use humor to overcome sociocultural inhibitions and reveal suppressed desires
- Superiority theory—we use humor to makes ourselves feel superior to someone else (and therefore better about ourselves)

So what makes something funny?

One of the most common explanations of why something is funny is summed up in the Incongruity theory: people perceive humor at the moment they perceive an incongruity between what they expect and what they hear or see. A man walks into a bar....OUCH.

Why is this funny? Because you are set up to believe you are going to hear one of those jokes about a guy who walks through an opening and into an establishment that serves liquor but instead the phrase “walk into” is used in a different way, to bang into.

This joke is a perfect example of humor that can be explained by the incongruity theory....Two different frames of reference are set up and, if you'll forgive me, a collision is engineered between them.

Here's another example of a clash of frames of reference....Look at this cartoon and read the set-up phrase....“I heard a bit of good news today” what are you thinking the good news might be?maybe the husband won the lottery or got a decent job ...

but here's the punch line “we shall pass this way but once” . Obviously most of us would interpret that “news” as BAD or SADbut for this couple whose life is so miserable... So a clash...

Lets look at Jewish humor in particular

According to no less an authority than Freud, the defining characteristics of Jewish humor are:

1. That the primary thrust of the humor is directed against one's own self (the group, Jews)
2. And that, invariably, there is a subtext or an element of self-praise

Here are two examples:

- The old Jack Benny joke ...A Jewish guy is held up by an armed robber who threatens “your money or your life”. The Jew takes his time and when prodded with a gun, he protests “Give me a minute, I'm thinking...” So the primary thrust of the humor is the negative stereotype about Jews loving money, but the subtext –the element of self praise--is that Jews are thinkers, intellectuals
- or Grouchos famous line that he would never belong to a club whose standards were so low it would accept him as a member ... which

derives its humor from the co-existence of elements of both self-deprecation and self-aggrandizement

Where does the Jewish joke come from?

Although there are puns and wordplay in the Tanach, Talmud, Midrash and later rabbinic literature, you don't see the Jewish joke (as we think about it and as Freud described it) until the 19th century. This type of humor arose in the shtetls of Eastern Europe (Shalom Aleichem), came to the US in the mass emigration late 19th, early 20th century and was then amplified by the early and mid 20th century American borscht belt comedians.

However, according to an interesting article by Hillel Halkin in Commentary in 2006, Jewish humor can actually be traced back to the medieval Arabic period. At that time it was a common practice among Islamic scholars to embellish their work, even secular work, with scriptural quotations. This practice was called *iqtaabas* ... literally, lighting one coal or fire from another...heightening the beauty of one's words with the greater beauty of God's words. Over time *Iqtabas* came to also be used for humorous purposes.

Jews living in Muslim lands during the medieval period were influenced by this practice. For example, in one of his poems Shmuel Hanagid (11th century) praises the joys of drinking wine by using a phrase (*menat chelki vekosi*) from Psalms that in its original context refers to God being "my portion and my cup". Any educated Jew of the time would have recognized the irreverence of this humor...using a phrase meant to praise God to praise wine instead.

The Jews, however, took it much farther than the Muslims did. An increasingly conservative, fundamentalist world-view among Muslims put an end to this kind of humor which could certainly be construed as

blasphemous. In contrast, in Jewish culture what started out as subtle wordplay using sacred texts to make irreverent jokes--grew into even more overt sacrilegious joking. Here are some examples:

Mrs Finkelstein is sitting in her living room in Brooklyn when all of a sudden she hears thunder and sees lightening and it gets very quiet and she hears a sonorous voice coming from the sky. I am the Lord your God... After recovering from her shock she says, Hashem I am so honored you chose to reveal yourself to me...can I ask you a question..... Yes Mrs. F you may.....Are we the chosen people? Yes, Mrs Finkelstein you are my chosen people.... She hesitates for just a moment and then says....Would you mind choosing someone else for a change?

Or another example of an irreverent joke...one of my mother's all-time favorites although when she told it to her good friend Atarah Twersky, daughter of... who has a fabulous sense of humor, Mrs Twersky apparently was not amused.

Moshe is up on Mt Sinai receiving the commandments and God says Do not boil a kid in its mother's milk. Moshe says... um does that mean we can't eat meat and milk together? God says Do not boil....Moshe says...does that mean we have to have separate dishes for meat and milk meals? ...God says Do not boil...Moshe says Does that mean we have to wait 6 hours between eating meat and milk... God hesitates and then in an exasperated tone of voice says...OK, have it your way.

According to Halkin, in this emerging form of humor "The bible represents an ideal world that is played off against the world as it is, with the contrast between life's expectations and its realities providing the humor" (p. 51).

Sacrilegious humor not only survived but thrived in Jewish culture in the several centuries since it became taboo in Islam. Halkin relates this to a

fundamentally different philosophy between the two religions. In Judaism our greatest prophet, Moshe, is considered a fallible human being, one who makes mistakes, and one who is repeatedly arguing with and challenging God. In Islam Mohammed is considered the epitome of human perfection, without flaws and certainly without thechutzpah to argue with God. To the extent that our tradition lets us “argue with God” has allowed our humor to be more edgy and bordering on sacrilegious. And maybe this is a healthy way for humans to express their innate desire to rebel against authority.

Halkin concludes his essay, written in 2006, but certainly as relevant as ever in light of very recent events in Libya and elsewhere, with this thought: One can speculate about who, ultimately, is the more secure in his religious faith: the believer who can laugh at his prophet or the one who can't....We might have been better off today if the Islamic humor of the medieval era had been allowed to flourish and perhaps help Muslims let off steam in less aggressive ways.

And I will conclude by asking you to consider this question: What are 3 words a Jewish American Princess (JAP) has never heard?