

# Jewish Humor



# Jewish Humor:

*An Outcome of Historical  
Experience, Survival  
and Wisdom*

By

Arie Sover

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An Outcome of Historical Experience, Survival and Wisdom

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With love  
to my parents, Clara (Zipkis) and Aurel Sober,  
and my grandmother, Fanny Zipkis:  
Holocaust survivors  
who bequeathed their offspring  
with a passion for life and lots of humor.



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## PREFACE

I am a second-generation descendant of Holocaust survivors. I only became aware of this a year before my father died at the age of eighty-nine. My parents and grandparents are natives of Romania, which was allied with Nazi Germany during the Second World War, and they and my other family members personally experienced the events of the Holocaust and the anti-Semitic persecution which preceded it. In the late 1930s and the early 1940s, hatred of the Jews in Romania reached unprecedented heights. The Jews of Romania were forced to wear yellow patches on their clothes which identified them as Jews. They were deprived of their possessions, their homes, and their factories and businesses; fired from their workplaces; expelled from the professional associations they were previously affiliated with; and were often left with no means to support themselves, effectively depriving them of the means to survive. In 1941, the pro-axis government of Romania under Ion Antonescu, decided to exterminate the Jews of Romania, who numbered some seven hundred and fifty thousand souls out of a total Romanian population of sixteen million. Jewish men were taken away from their families, sent to forced labor camps, and made to work digging ditches and canals, paving roads, and laying down railroad tracks in harsh conditions. Over half of the Jews of Romania were murdered by the Romanian government through death marches, orchestrated pogroms, expulsions, and mass murder in the notorious region of Transnistria. A considerable portion of the Romanian population actively took part in the murder of Jews and the looting of their property.<sup>1</sup> As a child and throughout my adulthood, my father would occasionally share with me two stories about his experiences during the Holocaust. What they both had in common was their humor. The first story concerned a period when he was interned in one of the forced labor camps. He would occasionally bribe one of the guards who permitted him to leave the camp to refresh himself. He utilized the short time he was given to sell merchandise in the local markets—my father was a wholesaler of fabrics and lingerie prior to being interned in the slave labor camp—to earn a little money, as well as to drink some wine in the local bar before he returned to the camp. He saved some of his profits on these expeditions for bribing the same guard to let him have another

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<sup>1</sup> Enchel, Jan. 2002.

round in the market. The second story, whose meaning I only understood many years after I first heard it, concerned the summoning of my father, together with many other Jews, to the train station, where a Romanian army officer selected who he judged fit for forced labor and shipping to the slave labor camps. Others were selected for transportation on trains which led to the death camps of Transnistria. When my father's turn before the officer came, he had an idea. He lowered his pants to half-mast and said "Sir officer, look, my intestines are hanging out"—my father had had his appendix removed many years earlier, leaving a bulge in his lower stomach which he revealed to the officer—and the Romanian officer was so mortified with embarrassment that he yelled at him to raise his pants and get the hell out. That was how my father survived. My father, myself, and my siblings all laughed at both stories every time he told them, and he repeated them many times. This was my father's way of coping with the horrific events he experienced during the Holocaust and it was also a way to state that he was victorious after all. When I matured, I asked him what happened in Romania during the Holocaust and his reply was always "Nothing happened in Romania." One of my neighbors, himself a native of Romania, proposed that my father apply to receive compensation for the slave labor he was forced to perform during the Holocaust. When I raised this proposal to my father, he responded with laughter, "What are you talking about? I'm no Holocaust survivor!" When my father grew old and required medical aid, I applied on his behalf to secure him a Holocaust survivor stipend. He was immediately recognized as a Holocaust survivor and, for about a year, he received a small stipend before dying. Only then did I understand that my father was indeed a Holocaust survivor. My father's sense of humor was transmitted genetically to my brother, my sister, and myself. I received it to a greater degree and made humor into my profession. I have written comic scripts and plays, and actively played and directed various comic plays. I have studied the field of humor for several decades, focusing on the study of Jewish humor. Today, I lecture in academic institutions in Israel and abroad in the field of the sociology and the psychology of humor. Furthermore, I lecture to the public at large about humor and positive thinking as a way of life. My family story is a single instance in the life story of the Jewish People. The ability to convert harsh, and sometimes inhuman conditions into humorous situations is one of the main defining characteristics of the Jewish people. This is another reason that I decided to study Jewish humor and to share it with the readers of this book through recounting the unique journey in which Jewish humor developed.

I wish you the greatest possible enjoyment in reading this book about Jewish humor and dare to hope that this book will inspire you to add a pinch of humor and laughter to your own lives.

—Prof. Arie Sover





## INTRODUCTION

Jewish Humor encompasses a long history from biblical times to the present day. It also includes a wide spectrum of styles that are expressed in various fields, including the Bible, the Talmud, poetry, literature, folklore, jokes, movies, and television series. This book focuses upon three socio-geographic regions where most of the Jewish people lived and where Jewish humor was created, developed, and thrived: Eastern Europe, the United States, and Israel. Despite the cross influences and similarity in certain aspects of the humor that developed in these three regions, each one has its own distinct characteristics. It is important to note that Jewish humor existed in other, smaller, Jewish communities, such as Central and Western Europe, North Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East.<sup>2</sup>

This book is a complicated mosaic based on three central components of Jewish life: historical experience, survival, and wisdom. One cannot understand Jewish humor without referring to the various factors which led the Jewish people to create it. It is generally assumed that a book intended to explain the humorous characteristics of a given nation will refer almost exclusively to its humorous products. This is, in fact, what many studies concerning Jewish humor do. In my book, I decided to take a different approach which I think is more appropriate. I took into account that humor is not a self-sufficient entity. Rather, it is interwoven with the reality and life experiences of those who produce and consume it. Therefore, in order to reach the creative roots of Jewish humor, I understood that it was necessary to refer to the entire tapestry of Jewish life throughout the long history of the Jewish people, while focusing on the primary factors which influenced their development. In this book I have interwoven an overview of some of the main harsh experiences the Jewish people have suffered over various periods—antisemitism, Blood Libels, pogroms, expulsions, and extermination—into the humor these experiences created. Furthermore, the harsher the environment the Jews lived in, the more they dedicated themselves to strengthening Jewish wisdom through expanding literacy and scholarship.

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<sup>2</sup> Sover, Arie. 2015.

## LITERACY AND CRITICAL JEWISH THOUGHT

Jewish culture encourages debates and deliberations, the asking of questions and the seeking of creative solutions to any question, even those which seemingly appear to have no solution. Indeed, the Bible is filled with lively dialogue between the ancient leaders of the Jewish people and God, including questioning and challenging divine motivations and decisions. Sometimes, these debates have led God to shift his position. The relationship of equals between God and man, as it is expressed in the Bible, has influenced the Jewish people by encouraging free thought, which has made questioning and doubting everything a normative attitude that also underlies and permeates Talmudic studies. The Talmud, which became the center of gravity for Jewish scholarship in the Diaspora, deals with the constant interpretation and reinterpretation of the Mishnah and the Midrash. Through a learning method based on constant doubting and questioning, in depth deliberations, and asking critical questions that would later be called *Pilpul* (quibbling), the minds of the Talmud scholars sharpened, producing what would later be called “the Jewish mind”, which was expressed in all fields of life, such as science, the economy, medicine, agriculture, art, and also in the creation of Jewish humor. It is frequently said that if you ask a Jew a question he will respond with another question. In other words, the conversation does not end with his initial response but continues in a new direction provided by the new question.<sup>3</sup> The importance of literacy for the Jewish people is illustrated in the text below by Maimonides (12<sup>th</sup> century CE) in the following four sections (*Halakhot Limud, Torah, Chapters 1–2*). The text is focused on the main points and has undergone some editing to clarify its meaning to the modern reader.

### 1- The individual’s obligation to study:

Just as a person is obligated to teach his son, so too is he obligated to teach his grandson. [...] Furthermore, this charge is not confined to one’s children and grandchildren alone. Rather, it is a *mitzvah* (obligation) for each wise man to teach all students, even though they are not his children [...] Also,

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<sup>3</sup> Some view Cain’s reply to God as the first example in the Bible for this type of dialogue: “Where is your brother Abel?” God asks Cain. “Am I my brother’s Keeper?” replies Caine (Genesis 4: 9).

one is obligated to hire a teacher for one's son, while one is not required to undertake any expense to teach a colleague's son. [...] A person who was not instructed by his father is obligated to arrange for his own instruction. [...] Similarly, in every place, one finds that study takes precedence over deed, for study brings about deed. However, deed does not bring about study. A person should always study the Torah and, afterwards, marry. If he marries first, his mind will not be free for study. However, if his natural inclination overcomes him to the extent that his mind is not free, he should marry, and then study Torah. At what age is a father obligated to teach his son Torah? When he begins to speak. [...] Afterwards, he should teach him selected verses, little by little, verse by verse, until he is six or seven—depending on his health—at which time he should take him to a teacher of young children. If it is local custom for a teacher of young children to take payment, he should be paid. The father is obligated to pay for his instruction until he can read the entire written Torah. In a place where it is customary to receive a wage for teaching the written Torah, one is permitted to do so. However, it is forbidden to take a wage for teaching the Oral Law.

## 2- Study until the day a Jew dies:

Every Jewish man is obligated to study the Torah, whether he is poor or rich, whether his body is healthy and whole or afflicted by difficulties, whether he is young or an old man whose strength has diminished. Even if he is a poor man who derives his livelihood from charity and begs from door to door, even if he is a husband and a father of children, he must establish a fixed time for the study of the Torah during the day and at night as commanded: You shall think about it day and night. The great Sages of Israel included wood choppers, water drawers, and blind men. Despite these difficulties, they were occupied with Torah study day and night. [...] Until when is a person obligated to study Torah? Until the day he dies, as is said: Lest you remove it from your heart, all the days of your life. Whenever a person is not involved with study, he forgets.

## 3- Division of time in the day for study:

A person is obligated to divide his study time in three: one third should be devoted to the Written Law; one third to the Oral Law; and one third to understanding and conceptualizing the ultimate derivation of a concept from its roots, inferring one concept from another and comparing concepts, understanding the Torah based on the principles of Biblical exegesis. Until one appreciates the essence of those principles and how the prohibitions and the other decisions which one received according to the oral tradition can be derived using them. The latter topic is called Gemara (Talmud). [...] He should spend three reading the Written Law; three, the Oral Law; and three, meditating with his intellect to derive one concept from another.

[...]

However, when a person increases his knowledge and does not need to read the Written Law, or occupy himself with the Oral Law constantly, he should study the Written Law and the oral tradition at designated times. Thus, he will not forget any aspect of the laws of the Torah. However, he should focus his attention on the Gemara alone for his entire life, according to his ambition and his ability to concentrate.

#### 4. The community's obligations and instruction methods:

Teachers of small children should be appointed in each land, region, and village. If a village does not have children who study Torah, its populace is placed under a ban of ostracism until they employ teachers for the children. [...] Since the world exists only by virtue of the breath coming from the mouths of children who study the Torah. Children should be brought to study under a teacher's instruction at the age of six or seven, according to the child's health and build. Below the age of six, he should not be brought to a teacher. The teacher should sit and instruct them the entire day and for a portion of the night, to train them to study during the day and night. The children should not neglect their studies at all, except at the end of the day on the eve of the Sabbaths and festivals and on the festivals themselves. On the Sabbath, they should not begin new material. However, they should review what was learned already. The children should never be interrupted from their studies, even for the building of the Temple. A teacher of children who leaves the children and goes out, or remains with them but performs other work, or is lazy in their instruction, is included in the admonition of cursed be he who performs God's work deceitfully. Therefore, it is only proper to select a teacher who is God-fearing, teaches them at a fast pace, and instructs them carefully. A maximum of twenty-five students should study under one teacher. If there are more than twenty-five, but fewer than forty, an assistant should be appointed to help him in their instruction. If there are more than forty students, two teachers should be appointed. A child may be transferred from one teacher to another teacher, who can teach him at a faster pace, regarding the Written Law itself or grammar. This applies when both are in the same city and there is not a river between them. However, a child should not be forced to travel from city to city, or even from one side of the river to the other in the same city, unless there is a strong bridge, which is not likely to fall readily, over the river.

Jewish literacy was extensive, even in antiquity. Recently discovered archaeological findings, show that in the late seventh century BCE, literacy among the Jews in Israel was highly developed in comparison to other nations.<sup>4</sup> By the first century BCE, an unprecedented phenomenon had

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<sup>4</sup> Faigenbaum-Golovin, Shira, *et al.* 2016.

arisen amongst the Jews. Every male Jewish child from the age of four or five was obligated to study reading and writing in schools (placed in community centers such as synagogues), as well as the Torah and its interpretation. This study continued into adult life as well.<sup>5</sup> The Jews sharpened their mind through critical interpretation, by studying the Midrash and then the Talmud. In other words, over a period of two thousand years the Jewish nation was the most literate and educated nation on earth. Until the seventeenth century, only the elites in the Christian and Muslim worlds (such as priests, nobles, and the wealthy) were literate, granting them a monopoly on power.<sup>6</sup>

The importance of studying amongst the Jews can also be seen in marriage. Whoever was considered to be a “Talmid Chacham” (an outstanding student), even if his wealth or family status was low, was automatically considered a member of the social elite and a highly desirable catch. Even if an outstanding student came from a poor house, he could still aspire to marry a wealthy girl whose family would support him throughout his studies for his entire life. Furthermore, his own children would retain some of his stature and be considered a good catch when their time came, simply on account of being the children of an outstanding student. This custom exists to the present day among ultra-orthodox Jews.

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<sup>5</sup> Stora-Sandor, Judith. 1984: 35.

<sup>6</sup> Houston, R. 2014: 1–9.

# THE SOURCES OF JEWISH HUMOR

One of the more common claims in the field of Jewish humor studies is that the roots of modern Jewish humor are in the Old Testament and the other religious scriptures of the Jewish people, and particularly in the Midrash and in the Talmud.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, there are others who claim that the Jewish holy texts are serious and lacking humor.<sup>8</sup> My own familiarity with the Old Testament did not leave me with the impression that humor is a central part of the canonical text. I decided to examine the scriptural text itself, in depth.

## The Bible

Religious texts are generally perceived as serious and that they must be approached respectfully, even reverentially. Humor and laughter are by nature subversive and adversarial to the existing or perceived order. Accordingly, humor might undermine the seriousness expected from these texts. God, the dominant figure in the Bible, is characterized by many attributes: a merciful and compassionate God, a God of vengeance, a God of bountiful grace and mercy, the supreme judge of all under heaven, and so on. Humor is not among the qualities attributed to God. In addition, the biblical text contains few references to humor and laughter in comparison to its large scope. However, the attempts to seek expressions of humor in the Bible, or even signs of humor, somehow manage to illuminate certain texts which can be interpreted as indicating humor. Usually, the events towards which humor is attributed are tales (rather than, for example, prophecy or religious law, which are hardly matters for levity). Such tales include the messenger's/angel's announcement to Abraham and Sarah that they will have a son named Isaac; the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; the cunning Laban the Aramaean, who seeks to marry his daughter Leah to

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<sup>7</sup> Bonham, Tal. 1988; Chotzner, Josef. 1905: 1-12; Dauber, Jeremy. 2017: 174–183; Friedman, Hershey H. and Friedman, Weiser, Linda. 2014: 70–75, 80–87, 90–99; Friedman, Hershey H. 2000: 258–285; Good, Edwin, M. 1965; Jemielly, T. 1992; Knox, Israel. 1969; Lang, Dov, B. 1962; Radday, Yehuday, and Brenner, Athalya. 1990; Stora-Sandor, Judith. 1984: 38–39, 56–57.

<sup>8</sup> Morreall, John. 2001; Roeckelein, J. E. 2002; Whitehead, North Alfred. 1954: 30, 109, 199, 355–357.

Jacob; the story of Jacob and Rachel and how Jacob outsmarted Laban; the story of Joseph the interpreter of dreams and the wife of Potiphar; the stories of Moses; Balaam and his she-ass; the description of Elijah's mockery of the priests of the Baal; the story of Jonah the prophet; and the book of Esther. None of these stories, with perhaps one or two exceptions, contain explicit humor. What they do contain is sophistication, cleverness, initiative, or cunning, but no humor, at least not explicit. When Joseph flees Potiphar's home naked because his robe remains clutched in the hands of Potiphar's lusty wife whose advances he refused, the reader must exercise his own imagination to extract some humor from the story (Genesis 39: 7–20).

In the story of Balaam and his she-ass (Book of Numbers 22: 20–38), one can find, if one exercises certain interpretive license, a humorous overtone to the described exchange. God is wrathful because, contrary to his instructions, Balaam intends to curse the people of Israel as they approach the lands of Moab. God sends down an angel to stand in Balaam's path. Balaam cannot see him and only his she-ass can. The she-ass quite sensibly refuses to obey Balaam's instructions and walk into the angel standing before them, and so Balaam strikes her. The she-ass then begins berating Balaam in human speech for his unjust treatment. Finally, Balaam recognizes the angel and realizes he has sinned before God. Therefore, instead of cursing the people of Israel as Balak King of Moab required him to do, he blesses them. The scenes described above—Joseph's flight from Potiphar's home and the interaction between Balaam and his she-ass—may be creatively interpreted as containing humorous overtones. However, even if these stories do indeed contain this grain of levity, it is hidden/implicit and requires significant effort by the reader to be recognized. The composer of these stories made no effort to strengthen their humorous potential and one may conclude that this was not his intention. It seems that the moral or Halakhic principle at the center of these tales was the top priority of the author, rather than the humorous structure of the story, hence the ambiguity of their humor.

Another way to investigate the possible humorous contents of scripture is to seek out words that deal with laughter or glee. The words "laughter" or "mockery" appear in the Bible only thirty-three times in different permutations and situations, in ten out of twenty-four books making up the Bible. Furthermore, seventeen words indicating mocking, humiliating, play, or sexual play appear in various inflections—often these words have varying context and scholar-dependent interpretations. Given that the massive

twenty-four volume composition that is the Bible contains 306,758 words, and only thirty-three words that indicate laughter or relating to humor, this seems to be no more than a drop in the ocean, which is not representative of the ocean itself.

The question that the researchers should have asked is whether those who wrote the Bible stories and verses intended to use a humorous style or whether any humor implied in the biblical narrative is inadvertent. The answer seems obvious. The Bible contains no clear and explicit humor. There does not seem to be any intent by the authors to write in a humorous style. Furthermore, there is no complete text which can be said to have been written in a humorous style. The primary intention of those who composed the verses of the Bible seems to have been to transmit a very grave moral message, together with the laws and regulations required to fulfill that message. Those researchers who claim that humor does indeed exist in the Bible have tended to draw a continuous line between the modern Jewish humor that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the biblical sources, in order to indicate that humor was a latent quality of Jewish history and peoplehood, which had not suddenly emerged *ex nihilo*. These researchers were wrong twice over. First, by trying to force through their interpretations of the existence of humor on the Bible, even though it is almost completely devoid of it. Second, they were looking for the wrong thing. They were looking for humor instead of seeking out the essential components from which modern Jewish humor sprung, namely, the freedom of thought and the critical thinking. Had those researchers sought the critical thinking that served as the foundation of Jewish wisdom, that first essential component of Jewish humor, within the Bible then they would have found greater joy and rewards in the Book of Books.

This sort of critical thinking is apparent in many of the volumes of the Bible. Ecclesiastes deals with the universal issues that man has long contemplated in every culture, such as the place of man in the world, divine providence, and divine justice. Furthermore, Ecclesiastes performs a logical philosophical inquiry regarding the significance of man and what path he should take in life to achieve happiness. The core of the Book of Job is based on the discussions between Job and his friends. These conversations are associated with a certain style of scriptural wisdom literature. This book is one of the earliest and finest examples of the deliberations concerning the doctrine of just punishment and reward. The opening statement of the argument is the bitterness of Job, who curses the day he was born and desires to die. The basic argument of Job's friends is that God judges the world justly, and one



simply cannot question him. If you are punished, states Eliphaz the Temanite, then there is no doubt whatsoever that indeed you have sinned, or else God would not have harmed you. Job, however, insists on his righteousness. This very insistence is a critical challenge to the assumption that a just reward for righteousness, as well as a just punishment for sin, can be relied upon. Eventually, God appears, in a very much *Deus Ex Machina* fashion, to say the final word in this debate, reprimanding Job's friends for failing to understand the foundations of divine justice and wisdom (Job 38: 1; Job 42: 7). Freedom of thought and critical thinking is therefore readily apparent in the many dialogues and debates that the Bible contains. Such critical dialogues, with claims and counter claims advanced by the contending participants, have taken place between the leading figures of the Jewish people and their God, as well as between the political leaders of the Jewish people and their prophets (who themselves frequently talked back to God). This dialogue might be initiated with a request or plea by man to God, with the resulting dialogue often being critical in both directions (God concerning man and man concerning God). The very existence of such dialogues between an omnipotent higher power and his creations; a dialogue which moreover casts doubt upon the demands of God is extraordinary.<sup>9</sup> In the story of the missions, Moses does his level best to dodge responsibility for the task God places upon him. In God's first revelation to Moses in the burning bush, God orders him to lead the people of Israel out of the Land of Egypt and into the Promised Land: the Land of Israel. Moses raises several arguments to evade the task he is required to perform:

But Moses protested to God, "Who am I to appear before Pharaoh? Who am I to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt?" [...] Then Moses said to the LORD, "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue. [...] Then Moses said to God, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?" (Exodus 3: 11–13; Exodus 4: 1–14).

God replies to each of Moses's arguments and rejects them. Finally, Moses asks God to send someone else in his place. At that point God grows wrathful and commands Moses to carry out the mission as instructed (Exodus 4: 13). So long as Moses brings up arguments that can be debated logically, God maintains a dialogue with Moses and answers every point he makes. It is only when Moses asks, unsupported by rational arguments, that God appoint someone else to the task that God grows wrathful. This wrath

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<sup>9</sup> See Frank, David, A. 2004.

can be interpreted as stemming from the fact that this final request is not a critical argument but an attempt to back out of performing the mission. In other words, so long as this is a dialogue in which a rational argument worthy of response is raised, God cooperates. However, as soon as an unsupported plea, which is not the starting point of a logical discussion, comes up, God cuts the dialogue off and goes into “thou shalt” mode.

Proof for God’s preference for critical discussion over inane pleas can be seen on another occasion when God charges Moses with freeing the people of Israel from bondage and enabling them to leave Egypt. Here too Moses seeks to evade the task by raising arguments, such as “But Moses said to the LORD, If the Israelites will not listen to me, why would Pharaoh listen to me, since I speak with faltering lips?” (Genesis 6: 12: 30). God does not respond in anger to this but answers Moses’s arguments and finds solutions to the points he raises. The discussion between God and Moses goes up a notch in the scene describing the construction of the golden calf. It now turns out that not only does God respond to Moses’s claims and convince him to carry out the task but that also in the story of “The Golden Calf beneath Mount Sinai” the opposite can occur. Moses convinces God to change his mind and God is indeed appeased and his wrath is averted:

But Moses tried to pacify the LORD his God. “O LORD!” he said. “Why are you so angry with your own people whom you brought from the land of Egypt with such great power and such a strong hand? Why let the Egyptians say, ‘Their God rescued them with the evil intention of slaughtering them in the mountains and wiping them from the face of the earth?’ Turn away from your fierce anger. Change your mind about this terrible disaster you have threatened against your people! Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You bound yourself with an oath to them, saying, ‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven. And I will give them all this land that I have promised to your descendants, and they will possess it forever.’”

God responds favorably: “Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened” (Exodus 32: 7–14).

God is persuaded by Moses and changes his mind. The dialogue between Moses and God alternates based on personal relationships and on universal moral arguments. The moral debate is the more important of the two, as it transforms the debate itself, rather than its participants, whose power and wisdom is in no way equal, into the main issue. The moral for the Jewish people, which is based on the ability of Moses to change God’s opinion, is

the right of every individual, regardless of his station, to criticize not only God but any authority figure, regardless of the issue. One of the more interesting examples of such a debate is the attempt of the Patriarch Abraham to save Sodom and Gomorrah from destruction by arguing with God. His argument is based on the injustice of slaying the righteous with the wicked:

Then Abraham approached him and said: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?” and goes on to ask him how God can even consider destroying the city without a just trial. “Far be it from you to do such a thing, to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Genesis 18: 23–25).

Abraham continues with his arguments:

“What if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five people?” “If I find forty-five there,” God said, “I will not destroy it.” Then Abraham said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?” God answered, “I will not do it if I find thirty there.” Abraham said, “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?” God said, “For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it.” Then Abraham said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?” God answered, “For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it” (Genesis 18: 26–32).<sup>10</sup>

Once the number of ten righteous men is reached, Abraham ceases his efforts to move God, presumably because he understands that a number that is less than ten will not possess sufficient merit to spare the cities from God’s wrath. In the whole treatise of arguments that Abraham raises before God there is both a willingness to express criticism on the part of Abraham and a willingness by God to consider it.

Although this is not stated explicitly, a glimpse of divine amusement can occasionally be observed in the biblical text. So, for example, when the three messengers/angels inform Sarah that she will bear her son Isaac, Sarah laughs. In response, God says to Abraham:

“Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed

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<sup>10</sup> Ten is the number of Jewish Minyan/quorums required for Jewish public worship.

time next year, and Sarah will have a son.” Sarah was afraid, so she denied it and said, “I did not laugh.”

God, however, understands Sarah’s response stems from her fear of a negative reaction on his part to her laughter, and so he responds simply:

“Yes, you did laugh” (Genesis 18: 10–16).

God already knows why Sara laughed. He understands that, as far as she was concerned, news of her upcoming childbirth was incongruous and humorous. God appears in this scene as possessing a sense of humor. In addition, he takes the role of the first entity in history to explain what humor is.

That God has a sense of humor is later indicated in another context. God wished to call Abraham and Sarah’s son Isaac (In Hebrew, “will laugh”). In other words, the name of one of the three Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is associated with laughter. However, God put Abraham through a test of loyalty and ordered him to sacrifice his only son Isaac as a burnt offering, and yet associates the word laughter with this given sacrifice (Genesis 22: 1–12). How can one make sense of this dichotomy? On the one hand, there is the terrible tragedy of making a human sacrifice out of Isaac, the only son of Abraham, and, on the other, Isaac’s name (“will laugh”) is a complete contradiction of the tragic act of the sacrifice, with both being expressions of the will of God. As soon as Abraham raises the knife to sacrifice Isaac, God stops him and tells him not to do so because it was all a test of Abraham’s loyalty to his God. Isaac was saved, and was not made into a human sacrifice, thanks to God’s will. Even though the scripture makes no mention of Isaac’s emotional reaction to his experience, one can hypothesize that Isaac suffered a terrible emotional trauma. He must have cried at first but, later, he burst out laughing to release the immense tension he had experienced. Isaac’s laughter indicates that he saw this unusual situation as humorous. Isaac’s laughter is part of a psychological-cognitive process through which he could face a harsh situation and maintain his sanity.

Isaac’s story is a symbol to mankind that, regardless of the tragic situations and difficulties that they might experience in their lives, it is possible, through humor and laughter, to overcome them and go on living. Jewish history teaches us that Isaac’s lesson, and the act of his sacrifice has been internalized and well used by the Jewish people.

The following question might be asked: where do Moses, Abraham, and the other prophets derive the will, ability, and presumption to carry out dialogues with God, to criticize his actions, and to try to suggest alternatives to his decisions? The answer is, perhaps, imbued in the very story of creation, in the very beginning of Genesis, where it is written “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1: 27). This verse contains the essence of the relationship between humankind and God. There is similarity between man and God. There is no hierarchy, even though it is God who is the progenitor and creator of man. This is not a divine master ruling over human subjects. In many aspects, these are two equal entities after all. Just as man is made in God’s image, so is God like man. Therefore, just as man can err, so can God. The dialogues we encounter in the Bible are based on this symmetry, which enables a dialogue of equals despite the supposed imbalance in power and wisdom. Buber related the phenomenon of the dialogue between God and man in scripture in the following words:

Go then and compare the holy scriptures of the People of Israel to those holy scriptures of the nations who were not influenced by the Bible. None of those tracts contain any book like the Bible, which is filled with the dialogue between heaven and earth. It tells us of a God who repeatedly calls out to man, and of man who repeatedly calls out to God [...] our lives are a conversation between heaven and earth.<sup>11</sup>

The innovative concept the Bible introduces to human thought is not therefore humor, but the idea of equality between mankind and his God, as well as the freedom to express a dissenting opinion and to criticize. Criticism is one of the inbuilt elements of any humorous text or situation. The criticism revealed in the Bible will later form part of the cognitive infrastructure for the evolution of modern Jewish humor.

## **The Midrash**

The Midrash or a Drasha (sermon) are a rabbinical literature genre concerned with interpreting the Bible. The term “Midrash” refers to a collection of studies relating to the Halakhic laws regulating Jewish life. The source of the term derives from the Hebrew word “Darash,” meaning “searched for.” Some claim that Midrashic interpretation developed after the return to Zion (the return from the Babylonian Diaspora in the sixth and fifth century BCE), when the need to anchor the religious laws (which had

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<sup>11</sup> Buber, Martin. 1952: 45–46.

changed due to the changed living conditions of the returned exiles) in scripture arose. Sermon and study in public is mentioned in the Bible in Deuteronomy (Chapter 11) and in Nehemiah (Chapter 8), which take place in 440 BC during the First Temple period.<sup>12</sup> There is evidence that initially the Drashot (sermons) were delivered orally by regular preachers (who were the great scholars in the Torah) in their communities or by wandering preachers who moved from one locality to another. During the Second Temple period (536 BCE to 70 CE),<sup>13</sup> the term “Midrash” received new meaning in the form of the study and education of the public at large.<sup>14</sup> This form of learning influenced the deepening literacy and critical thinking of the Jewish people. The literature of the Midrash developed from the oral Midrashim, representing the gathered wisdom of the great scholars of the Jewish People over the ages. There are two types of Midrashim: the Halakha Midrash, which is the great religious scholars’ interpretation of the Bible, and the Aggadah (legend) Midrash, which refers to stories in the Bible or invented stories.<sup>15</sup> The Halakha Midrash forms a link between a scriptural verse and a Halakha, and thereby provides proof of the Halakha’s correctness: understanding the verse in a certain way supports the Halakha, as well as the verse itself. However, it is worth noting that many religious laws are not supported by a source in the Torah (the name given to the first five books of the Bible). The Midrash is also used to create new religious laws, whether as a direct deduction from the verse or based on a more complex interpretation of it.<sup>16</sup>

The Haggadah (legend) Midrash is concerned with the Torah stories that contain a moral. They are usually associated with Biblical figures or with the *Chazal* (the great religious sages of the Jewish People). Sometimes the sages include stories and proverbs from the Torah in their Drashot, and sometimes they cite popular folklore. The Haggadic Midrash was based on the Drashot recited in the synagogues or in the Batei Midrash (study halls) between the Mishna period (second century CE) to the thirteenth century.<sup>17</sup>

The Midrash brings, in its own way, critical thinking to a new level. Where Jews in the Land of Israel had previously referred to the verses of the Bible

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<sup>12</sup> Mak, Hananel. 1969: 34–35.

<sup>13</sup> Historians indicate the Second Temple period lasts until the end of the Bar Kokhba rebellion in 136 CE.

<sup>14</sup> Heineman, Yosef. 1982: 712.

<sup>15</sup> Mak, Hananel. 1969: 9–15.

<sup>16</sup> Elbak, Hanoach. 1949.

<sup>17</sup> Mak, Hananel. 1969: 9–15.