

# Sensing Humor in the Talmud: Laughing with the Rabbis

Limmud Boston Rabbi Matthew Soffer  
Temple Israel of Boston

[msoffer@tisrael.org](mailto:msoffer@tisrael.org)

## Coming to Terms: Three Theories of Humor

Saul Steinberg: “Trying to define humor is one of the definitions of humor.”

### 1. The Superiority Theory of Humor

**Plato** (*Philebus*): “Observe the nature of the ridiculous...taken generally, the ridiculous is a certain kind of evil, specifically a vice [a type of malice, a] pain of the soul.... the malicious man is somehow pleased at his neighbor’s misfortunes.”

**Thomas Hobbes** (*Human Nature*, 17th c): Laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly.

### 2. Incongruity Theory of Humor

**Immanuel Kant** (*Critique of Judgement*): “Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.”

An Indian [sat] at the table of an Englishman in Surat, when he saw a bottle of ale opened and all the beer turned into froth and overflowing, testified his great astonishment with many exclamations. When the Englishman asked him, “What is there in this to astonish you so much?” He answered, “I am not at all astonished that it should flow out, but I do wonder how you ever got it in.” (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*).

**Schopenhauer, Arthur.** (*The World as Will and Idea*): “The very incongruity of sensuous and abstract knowledge...is the cause of a very remarkable phenomenon which, like reason itself, is peculiar to human nature, and of which the explanations that have ever anew been attempted are insufficient: I mean *laughter*.”

**Peter Berger** on “Incongruence” vis-a-vis Modernity:

“It is possible that modern consciousness...produces a comic sensibility all its own. Modernity *pluralizes* the world. It throws together people with different values and worldviews; it undermines taken-for-granted traditions; it accelerates all processes of change. This brings about a *multiplicity of incongruences*—and it is the perception of incongruence that is at the core of the comic experience.”

### 3. Relief Theory of Humor

Sigmund Freud: “We obtain a dynamic explanation of the humorous attitude...if we conclude that it consists in the subject’s removing the accent from his own ego and transferring it onto his super-ego.... To preserve our customary phraseology, let us not speak of transferring the accent, but rather of displacing large quantities of cathexis (i.e., the transferring of mental or emotional energy).

**ON COMEDY AND TRAGEDY. Charlie Chaplain:** “Comedy is life viewed from a distance; tragedy, life in a close-up.”

**ON ANACHRONISM: Professor David Stern:** “What greater anachronism can there be than to assume that the ancient rabbis lacked a sense of humor, or a gift of parody, less literary or sharp than our own?”

## Na Na N'Boo Boo!

### Text 1 - Rosh Hashanah 29b

תנו רבנן: פעם אחת חל ראש השנה להיות בשבת, [והיו כל הערים מתכנסין]. אמר להם רבן יוחנן בן זכאי לבני בתירה: נתקע. - אמרו לו: נדון. - אמר להם: נתקע ואחר כך נדון. לאחר שתקעו אמרו לו: נדון - אמר להם: כבר נשמעה קרן ביבנה, ואין משיבין לאחר מעשה.

Our Rabbis taught: Once New Year fell on a Sabbath [and all the towns assembled], and Rabban Yochanan said to the Benei Bathyra, "Let us blow the shofar." They said to him, "Let us discuss [the matter]." He said to them, "Let us blow and afterwards discuss." After they had blown they said to him, "Let us now discuss the question." He replied, "The horn has already been heard in Jabneh, and what has been done is no longer open to discussion."

### Text 2 - Sanhedrin 39a

אמר ליה קיסר לרבן גמליאל: אלהיכם גנב הוא, דכתיב (בראשית ב) ויפל ה' אלהים תרדמה על האדם וישן. אמרה ליה ברתיה: שבקיה, דאנא מהדרנא ליה. אמרה ליה: תנו לי דוכוס אחד. - אמר לה: למה לך? - ליסטין באו עלינו הלילה, ונטלו ממנו קיתון של כסף והניחו לנו קיתון של זהב. - אמר לה: ולואי שיבא עלינו בכל יום. - ולא יפה היה לו לאדם הראשון שנטלו ממנו צלע אחת ונתנו לו שפחה לשמש? - אמר לה: הכי קאמינא, אלא לשקליה בהדיא - אמרה ליה: אייתו לי אומצא דבישרא, אייתו לה. אותבה תותי בחשא, אפיקתה, אמרה ליה: אכול מהאי - אמר לה: מאיסא לי. - אמרה ליה: ואדם הראשון נמי, אי הות שקילה בהדיא - הוה מאיסא ליה.

The Emperor once said to Rabban Gamaliel: "Your God is a thief, for it is written, And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept [and He took one of his ribs]." Thereupon Gamaliel's daughter said to him: Leave him to me and I will answer him. [Turning to the Emperor] she said: "Send me a police officer." "Why do you need one?" he asked. "Thieves visited us last night and robbed us of a silver pitcher, leaving a golden one in its place." "Would that such a thief visited us every day!" he exclaimed. "Ah!" she retorted, "Was it not to Adam's gain that he was deprived of a rib and given a wife instead to serve him?" He replied: "This is what I mean: he should have taken it from him openly." Said she to him: "Let me have a piece of raw meat." It was given to her. She placed it under her armpit, then took it out and offered it to him to eat. "I find it loathsome!" he exclaimed. "Even so would she have been to Adam had she been taken from him openly," she retorted.

### Text 3: The Absurd Oven of Achnai - Baba Metzia 59

תנן התם: חתכו חוליות ונתן חול בין חוליא לחוליא, רבי אליעזר מטהר וחכמים מטמאין. וזה הוא תנור של עכנאי. מאי עכנאי? - אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל: שהקיפו דברים כעכנא זו, וטמאוהו. תנא: באותו היום השיב רבי אליעזר כל תשובות שבעולם ולא קיבלו הימנו. אמר להם: אם הלכה כמותי - חרוב זה יוכיח. נעקר חרוב ממקומו מאה אמה, ואמרי לה: ארבע מאות אמה. אמרו לו: אין מביאין ראייה מן החרוב. חזר ואמר להם: אם הלכה כמותי - אמת המים יוכיחו. חזרו אמת המים לאחוריהם. אמרו לו: אין מביאין ראייה מאמת המים. חזר ואמר להם: אם הלכה כמותי - כותלי בית המדרש יוכיחו. הטו כותלי בית המדרש ליפול. גער בהם רבי יהושע, אמר להם: אם תלמידי חכמים מנצחים זה את זה בהלכה - אתם מה טיבכם? לא נפלו מפני כבודו של רבי יהושע, ולא זקפו מפני כבודו של רבי אליעזר, ועדין מטיין ועומדין. חזר ואמר להם: אם הלכה כמותי - מן השמים יוכיחו. יצאתה בת קול ואמרה: מה לכם אצל רבי אליעזר שהלכה כמותו בכל מקום עמד רבי יהושע על רגליו ואמר: לא בשמים היא. - מאי (דברים ל') לא בשמים היא? - אמר רבי ירמיה: שכבר נתנה תורה מהר סיני, אין אנו משגיחין בבת קול, שכבר כתבת בהר סיני בתורה (שמות כ"ג) אחרי רבים להטת. - אשכחיה רבי נתן לאלהיו, אמר ליה: מאי עביד קודשא בריך הוא בההיא שעתא? - אמר ליה: קא חייך ואמר נצחוני בני, נצחוני בני.

We learnt elsewhere: If he cut it into separate tiles, placing sand between each tile: R. Eliezer declared it clean, and the Sages declared it unclean. This was the oven of Achnai. Why [the oven of] "Achnai"? Said Rab Judah in Samuel's name: [It means] that they encompassed it with arguments, as a snake, and proved it unclean.

It has been taught: On that day R. Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but they did not accept them. Said he to them: "If the halakhah agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!" Thereupon the carob-tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place. Others affirm, four hundred cubits. "No proof can be brought from a carob-tree," they retorted. Again he said to them: "If the halakhah agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!" Whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards. "No proof can be brought from a stream of water," they said. Again he urged: "If the halakhah agrees with me, let the walls of the house of study prove it," whereupon the walls inclined to fall. But R. Joshua rebuked them, saying: "When scholars are engaged in a halakhic dispute, what have you to interfere?" Hence they did not fall, in honor of R. Joshua, nor did they resume the upright, in honor of R. Eliezer. They are still standing thus inclined until this day.

Again he said to them: "If the halakhah agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!" Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: "Why do you dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the halakhah agrees with him!" But R. Joshua arose and exclaimed: "It is not in heaven." What did he mean by this? Said R. Jeremiah: That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because You have long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, "After the majority must one incline."

R. Nathan met Elijah and asked him: "What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do at that time?" He laughed and said, "My children have defeated Me, My children have defeated Me."

## Rabbinic Ribaldry (i.e., Rated “R”)

### Text 4: Unholy Halitosis - Avot D'Rebbi Natan 16

When Rabbi Akiva went to a foreign land, its ruler sent him two beautiful women who had been bathed, anointed, and adorned like brides. All night they kept thrusting themselves at him, one saying, “Turn to me,” and the other saying, “Turn to me.” But he sat there spitting in disgust and turned to neither. [In the morning] they went away and complained to the ruler, saying, “We would rather die than be given to this man.”

The ruler sent for him and asked, “Why did you not do with these women as men usually do? Are they not beautiful? Are they not human beings like you? Did not He who created you also create them?” Rabbi Akiva answered, “What could I do? Their breath came at me like the odor of the carrion, torn beasts, and the creeping things [they eat].”

### Text 5: Harlots, Adultery, and Flatulence (all in one!) - Avodah Zarah 17a

והתניא: אמרו עליו על ר"א בן דורדיא, שלא הניח זונה אחת בעולם שלא בא עליה. פעם אחת שמע שיש זונה אחת בכרכי הים והיתה נוטלת כיס דינרין בשכרה, נטל כיס דינרין והלך ועבר עליה שבעה נהרות. בשעת הרגל דבר הפיחה, אמרה: כשם שהפיחה זו אינה חוזרת למקומה, כך אלעזר בן דורדיא אין מקבלין אותו בתשובה. הלך וישב בין שני הרים וגבעות, אמר: הרים וגבעות בקשו עלי רחמים, אמרו לו: עד שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו, שנאמר: (ישעיהו נד) כי ההרים ימושו והגבעות תמוטינה. אמר: שמים וארץ בקשו עלי רחמים, אמרו: עד שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו, שנאמר: (ישעיהו נא) כי שמים כעשן נמלחו והארץ כבגד תבלה. אמר: חמה ולבנה בקשו עלי רחמים, אמרו לו: עד שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו, שנאמר: (ישעיהו כד) וחפרה הלבנה ובושה החמה. אמר: כוכבים ומזלות בקשו עלי רחמים, אמרו לו: עד שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו, שנאמר: (ישעיהו לד) ונמקו כל צבא השמים. אמר: אין הדבר תלוי אלא בי, הניח ראשו בין ברכיו וגעה בבכיה עד שיצתה נשמתו. יצתה בת קול ואמרה: ר"א בן דורדיא מזומן לחיי העולם הבא. [והא הכא בעבירה הוה ומית] התם נמי, כיון דאביק בה טובא כמינות דמיא. בכה רבי ואמר: יש קונה עולמו בכמה שנים, ויש קונה עולמו בשעה אחת. ואמר רבי: לא דיין לבעלי תשובה שמקבלין אותן, אלא שקורין אותן רבי.

It has been taught: It was said of R. Eleazer b. Dordia that there was not a harlot in the world whom he did not come upon. Once, on hearing that there was a certain harlot in one of the towns by the sea who accepted a purse of denarii for her hire, he took a purse of denarii and crossed seven rivers for her sake. As he was with her, she broke wind and said: “Just as this wind will not return to its place, so Eleazer b. Dordia shall never be received in repentance.” He then went and sat between two hills and mountains and exclaimed: “O, hills and mountains, plead for mercy for me!” They replied: “How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, for it is said, ‘For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed!’” So he exclaimed: “Heaven and earth, plead for mercy for me!” They, too, replied: “How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, for it is said, ‘For the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment.’” He then exclaimed: “Sun and moon, plead for mercy for me!” But they also replied: “How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, for it is said, ‘Then the moon shall be confounded and the sun ashamed.’” He exclaimed: “You stars and constellations, plead for mercy for me!” Said they: “How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, for it is said, ‘And all the hosts of heaven shall moulder away.’” He said: “The matter then depends upon me alone!” Having placed his head between his knees, he wept aloud until his soul departed.

Then a bat-kol was heard proclaiming: “Rabbi Eleazer b. Dordai is destined for the life of the world to come!” Now, here was a case of a sin [other than heresy] and yet he did die! In that case, too, since he was so much addicted to immorality it is as [if he had been guilty of] heresy. Rabbi [on hearing of it] wept and said: “One may acquire eternal life after many years, another in one hour!” Rabbi also said: “Repentants are not alone accepted, they are even called ‘Rabbi!’”

## **TEXT 6: HOLY [You-Know-What!] - Sanhedrin 64a**

תנו רבנן: מעשה בסבטא בן אלס שהשכיר חמורו לנכרית אחת, כיון שהגיעה לפעור אמרה לו: המתן עד שאכנס ואצא. לאחר שיצאה אמר לה: אף את המתיני עד שאכנס ואצא. אמרה לו: ולא יהודי אתה? - אמר לה: ומאי איכפת לך. נכנס, פער בפניו, וקינח בחוטמו, והיו כומרין מקלסין לו: ואומרים: מעולם לא היה אדם שעבדו לזו בכך. הפוער עצמו לבעל פעור - הרי זה עבודתו, אף על גב דמיכוין לביזוי. הזורק אבן למרקוליס - זו היא עבודתו, אף על גב דמיכוין למירגמיה.

Our Rabbis taught: Sabta, a townsman of Avlas, once hired an ass to a gentile woman. When she came to Peor, she said to him, "Wait till I enter and come out again." On her issuing, he said to her, "Now do you wait for me too until I go in and come out again?" "But," said she, "are you not a Jew?" He replied, "What does it concern you?" He then entered, uncovered himself before it, and wiped himself on the idol's nose, while the acolytes praised him, saying, "No man has ever served this idol thus!"

He that uncovers himself before Baal Peor thereby serves it, even if his intention was to degrade it. He who casts a stone at Mercuris thereby serves it, even if his intention was to bruise it.

### **DAVAR ACHER:**

#### **Steven Wright:**

"When I was a little kid, I wish the first word I ever said was the word, 'quote,' so right before I die I could say, 'unquote'."

"So I'm driving down the highway and there's a guy hitchhiking, holding a sign that says, 'Heaven.' So I hit him."

## Further Reading...

**Thesis:** Soffer, Matthew. "Laughing with the Rabbis: Sensing Humor in the Babylonian Talmud," New York: HUC-JIR, February 2010. [www.mattsoffer.com/Matt\\_Soffer/Writings.html](http://www.mattsoffer.com/Matt_Soffer/Writings.html)

### **Rabbinic Literature:**

Babylonian Talmud

--- *Baba Metzia* 59, 84a, 87a

--- *Pesahim* 64b, 117a

--- *Shabbat* 30b, 32a

--- *Avodah Zarah* 3b, 17a

--- *Makkot* 24a-b

--- *Sanhedrin* 39a, 64a, 109b

--- *Megillah* 7b

--- *Nedarim* 66b

Midrash Rabbah

--- *Genesis Rabbah* 8:5, 53:7

--- *Leviticus Rabbah* 12:1

--- *Avot DeRebbi Natan* 16

*The Book of Legends*, Edited by Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, translated by William G. Braude. New York: Schocken. 1992.

### **Scholarship:**

Berger, Peter. *Redeeming Laughter*, New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1997.

Levin, Harry. *Playboys and Killjoys*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1987

*The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. Edited by John Morreall. Albany: State University of New York. 1987.

--- Aristotle, *Poetics*.

--- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

--- Cicero, *On the Orator*, Book II, Ch. 58-59

--- Freud, Sigmund, "Humor." Excerpted in Morreall, *Philosophy in Laughter and Humor*.--- Hobbes, Thomas. *Human Nature*, Ch. 8: 13 in *English Works*, v. 4, ed. Molesworth (London: Bohn, 1840).

--- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*, translated by J.H. Bernard (London: Macmillan, 1892), Part I, Div 1, 54.

--- Plato, *Philebus* 48-50.

--- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Idea*, Book I:13, translated by R.B. Haldane and John Kemp, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1907-1909)

--- Spenser, Herbert. *The Physiology of Laughter*, from *Essays on Education, Etc.* (London: Dent, 1911).

Sperling, S. David. "Aramaic Spousal Misunderstandings." *The Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol 115, No. 2 (Apr-Jun., 1995), pp. 205-209.

Stern, David. "The *Alphabet of Ben Sira* and the Early History of Parody in Jewish Literature." *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation*, Hindy Najman, ed. Society of Biblical Literature. 2008.

### **Lighten up:**

Auslander, Shalom. "The Mathematics of Comedy." *Esquire*. October 1, 2000. <http://www.esquire.com/features/this-way-out/mathematics-comedy-1000>.

Holt, Jim. *Stop Me If You've Heard This*. New York: Norton and Co. 2008.

Wright, Steven. *I Still Have a Pony*. Comedy Central Records. 2007.