

Laughing at the Inscrutability of God: Judaism, Comedy, and the Schlemiel as Holy Fool

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It has often been suggested, at least within the Christian traditions of Western Europe, that the comic impulse and the religious impulse are ultimately inimical urges within the human psyche. Even when the boundary between comedy and religion is recognized as permeable, there is still some sense in which the comic is barred from full admission to the hallowed inner sanctum. Thus even while acknowledging the healing gifts of humor, the great Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr emphatically states that “there is laughter in the vestibule of the temple, the echo of laughter in the temple itself, but only faith and prayer, and no laughter in the holy of holies” (148-9). For Niebuhr, though laughter may help prepare the way for an experience of the holy, humor alone can never bring us into communion with the divine.

The question of the relationship between comedy and religion, between laughter and prayer, is an important one to seriously reexamine in the light of a postmodern consciousness that is justifiably suspicious of all such sharp and emphatic distinctions, especially when expressed in tones of reverential piety. Among comedy's many virtues and assets, perhaps none is more relevant to the postmodern frame of reference than its unique ability to shine a spotlight on the incongruity between the assumptions and expectations of rational consciousness and one's unmediated experience of life.

Significantly, for Niebuhr it is this very gift of comedy for recognizing and taking into account life's enormous incongruities that makes it “more profound than any philosophy which seeks to devour incongruity in reason.” Oddly enough, however, while it is precisely this ability of humor to recognize and accept life's incongruities that Niebuhr credits for bringing laughter into the forecourt of the temple, he seems to imply that faith would be tainted by laughter if both were to enter the divine presence together. Niebuhr's rationale for barring laughter from the core of the sacred is that, as he writes, “the sense of humor remains healthy only when it deals with immediate issues and faces the obvious and surface irrationalities.” This contention reinforces the traditional religious vision of a hierarchy that separates—and privileges—the religious dimension of life from the everyday mundane world in which we live out our daily lives.

An alternative view, and one that sees the comedic voice as potentially bridging this gap between the experience of life's everyday incongruities and those of a more cosmic nature, is offered by Conrad Hyers. Hyers writes that the jester, like all figures of a comic nature, “reminds us of the essential awkwardness of the human condition, an awkwardness that is only intensified in the religious situation.” Moreover, he suggests, “the awkwardness that is portrayed on a more trivial plan in the endless pratfalls of the clown, the predicaments of the comic hero, or the confusions of the fool reaches its climax as we attempt to deal with matters of ultimate concern” (*Spirituality of Comedy* 123). This perspective not only opens up the holy of holies to possibility of laughter's healing power, but also reminds us that there is a sacred dimension to comic impulse. Equally importantly, this view also recognizes comedy's potential for bridging the gap between the realms of religion and of everyday life. “In humor,” observes Hyer, “the unquestioned authority of the sacred is questioned, the superior status of the holy is bracketed, and the radical distance between the sacred and the profane is minimized” (“Dialectic” 220). This ability of comedy to help us bridge the gap between the mundane and the sacred is another of its qualities of heightened interest to postmodern consciousness.

As a response to Niebuhr's approach to the relationship between laughter and faith, Hyers offers the proposition that “religious expression at its best functions within a delicate dialectic between faith and laughter” (*Spirituality of Comedy* 127). It is in keeping with that vision of religious experience that I now wish to explore the particular relationship of comedy and the sacred within the Jewish tradition. To both deepen and focus that exploration, I will also consider the figure of the Schlemiel, a particular manifestation of the archetype of the fool as he has appeared within Jewish folklore and literature.

While the Judaism shares much in common with the various sacred traditions known collectively as Christianity, several factors have resulted in significant differences between the older religion and its offspring and these differences appear to have affected their respective orientations to the comic perspective. Critical among these factors has been the unique historical experience of Judaism, both as a religion and as culture. Throughout most of the last 2000 years of their history, Jews have lived as outsiders within other cultures and other religious traditions. In particular, the status of the Jews within Christian Europe, both East and West, has often been fraught with both religious persecution and physical deprivation and violence. Combining the Jewish sense of self-identification as God's "Chosen People" with the reality of living for generations under such perilous and hazardous conditions resulted in a unique and pervasive sense of life's incongruities. One impact of that unique historical experience seems to have been the evolution of peculiar relationship to the comedic frame of reference. "It can be imagined," writes Steve Lipman, "that humor helped the Jewish people survive a long series of tragedies through the ages—the Crusades, the Inquisition, the pogroms and expulsions." It was to better insure that survival, Lipman suggests that "the wandering Jew never left his sense of humor behind" (135).

As to the question of whether the Jews had a comedic tradition prior to the expulsion from their homeland by the Romans, scholars are of differing opinions. While most research finds little to indicate the sort of vibrant humor of Eastern European Jews in the centuries before the Holocaust, there is some evidence in both the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud of a comedic consciousness. Citing material from at least seven books of the Hebrew scriptures, Rabbi David Marcus, a biblical scholar at the Jewish Theological Seminary, observes that "the interplay of God and the early Israelites is seasoned with dashes of irony" (qtd. in Lipman 134). Marcus also observes, as do number of other Judaic scholars, that while the Talmud offers fewer instances of obvious irony or satire, the entire method of hair-splitting disputation made famous in the Talmud is often but a hair's breadth from falling into satire. Nevertheless, the consensus among scholars seems to conclude that, much in keeping with the general seriousness of the God of the Old Testament, the people worshiping such a god were not overly inclined to a comedic view of life. "In attempting to trace the association of humor with Jewishness back to its earliest manifestations," observes Sig Altman, "one discovers that there is no evidence that the ancient Jews, both of the biblical and post-biblical eras, were a 'humorous' people" (125).

One aspect of the Judaic vision which has remained consistent from earliest times to the present day and has likely fed the Jewish orientation to comedy is that tradition's approach to questions on the nature and significance of suffering in human life. Unlike the ethos underlying Greek tragedy or the central story at the core of Christian belief, Jews do not see suffering as the primary medium through which they must seek self-understanding, salvation, or fulfillment. While suffering is undoubtedly recognized and accepted as part of the mysterious unfolding of the divine will, it is not viewed in the Jewish tradition as having any uniquely salvational properties. "Jewish humor typically drains the charge of cosmic significance from suffering," writes Robert Alter, "by grounding it in a world of homey practical realities." Additionally feeding that sense of incongruity which lies at the heart of Jewish humor's ability to provoke redeeming laughter is the idea that, as Alter wryly comments, if "suffering is understandably imagined as inevitable, it is also conceived as incongruous with dignity" (26).

A second important source feeding Judaism's unique relationship to humor is the particularly fractious nature of Jewish relationship with God. This contentious relationship between God and humankind is a distinctively Jewish conception and, as Peter L. Berger writes, "more than people of any other religious tradition, Jews have *argued* with God." Given such a relationship with God, the whole universe becomes the subject of a kind of cosmic argument. "It would seem that this makes for a surreal vision," comments Berger, "a view of reality as full of immense incongruities reaching all the way to the Divine throne—a vision that is very close to the essential comic perspective" (93-4).

A third contributor to the importance of the comic perspective with Jewish tradition is Judaism's messianic vision of the future. According to that vision, the Jewish People are awaiting a messiah who will lead them and the world into a heavenly realm of eternal peace and love, a realm referred to simply as "the World to Come" by Jews. Devotedly awaited by Jews since biblical times, this messianic age has proven frustratingly slow in arriving. The unmistakable and painful discrepancy between the world which has been promised and the world as-it-is has led to perhaps the most difficult of the incongruities which Jewish

humor seeks to cope. Within the Jewish tradition, Alter notes, “the perception of incongruity implies the perception of alternate possibilities, humor peering beyond the beleaguered present toward another kind of man and another kind of time” (26). The essence of Jewish humor, comments Israel Knox, lies in contrast between “the childlike assessment of the world as though its ideal fulfillment were already an accomplished reality” and the ironical knowledge “of our distance from the redemption” (165).

As a comic figure, the fool in one or more of his many guises is a universal character of folklore, literature, and theater throughout the world. In many cultures, the fool is also a figure of playful reverence and a role-player in sacred ritual. In describing the Jewish comic figure known by the Yiddish term “schlemiel,” Ruth R. Wisse observes that he is “one version of the fool” and that he “shares many of the fool's characteristics” (4). Leo Rosten's definition of the attributes of the schlemiel includes “a foolish person,” “a simpleton,” and “a consistently unlucky or unfortunate person,” as well as one who is “naïve, trusting, and gullible” (344).

While the precise origins of this figure are unclear, most accounts recognize a connection between the schlemiel and the annual observances of the Jewish festival of Purim. Celebrating the ancient victory of the Jews of Persia against a political leader seeking their destruction, Purim has always been granted a unique license for frivolity and seems to have combined aspects of the modern celebrations of Mardi Gras and Halloween. Particularly in medieval times, Purim was the one time of the year when the rabbis formally sanctioned a complete break in public piety. During Purim celebrations it was also customary to engage in irreverence, including irreverence toward religious authority itself. In a similar manner to the medieval Feast of Fools in the Christian communities of France and England, notes Altman, “a town wag was appointed Purim Rabbi,” whose “function was to deliver parodies of sermons and pronounce ludicrous ‘decisions’ based on Talmudic religious law” (130). The Purim gaiety, “writes Wisse, “found expression in the Purim-Spiel, a farcical reenactment of the story of Purim” (39). A typical feature of these Purim plays would have been the figure of a schlemiel-like fool to help garble the story and otherwise provoke laughter and general merriment.

Among the oldest and most enduring of folktales featuring the character of the schlemiel are the stories of Chelm, a village said to be populated entirely of fools. Typical of these tales is a kind of logic that, while seemingly rational on the surface, ultimately proves to be a kind of laughably charming nonsense. Despite the fact that some retellings of these stories seem to provoke laughter at the expense of the poor befuddled citizens of Chelm, writes Nathan Ausubel regarding the Chelm tales, “Compassion, not derision, is the key in which laughter at the fool is pitched in Jewish humor” (380). Beyond that, comments Joseph Telushkin, the best Chelm stories “are not about stupidity, but rather about a naïveté so extraordinary that listeners are catapulted into a new vision of reality” (58). Typical of the flavor of the best renderings of these stories is the line Steve Sanfield offers at the conclusion of his retelling of some of the most famous Chelm tales: “Before you're tempted to say, ‘But I'm no fool, I would urge you to remember what the good folks of Chelm always said: *If you claim you are not a fool, you only show your ignorance, for is it not written that ‘the world was delivered into the hands of fools’? And I ask you, is not this the world?’*” (90)

In considering the figure of the schlemiel further, I wish to focus on two particular and, I believe, interrelated manifestations of the schlemiel as he has appeared in Jewish folklore and literature: in his mundane guise as the simpleton and his sacred guise as the holy fool. Often these two images of the fool have been linked and observations about one of them often applies equally well to the other. In commenting on the image of the holy fool, for example, Elizabeth-Ann Stewart suggests that “his is a foolishness which recommends ambiguity over certainty, innocence over cunning, honesty over deception, humility over pride, simplicity over complexity, living from day to day, instead of planning, plotting, and hoarding” (94). In commenting on the character of the schlemiel, both as simpleton and holy fool, Thomas P. Riggio observes that while “the ordinary run of mortals manufacture a false logic that deprives existence of its magical properties... the schlemiel accepts the world and takes its apparent illogic on faith” (142).

A particularly remarkable aspect of this vision of the character of the schlemiel is his inversion of Jewish culture's traditional reverence for the scholarly man of wisdom, a reverence dating back to the founding of rabbinic Judaism in late-biblical times. As a kind of reaction to the idealized position of the rabbinical scholar, Wisse observes, the schlemiel seemed to evoke a kind of ridicule at Talmudic “sophistry or sterility of thought, which is dissociated from practical experience” (11). One can even detect this anti-

intellectual stance in the Chelm stories, many of which featured the town's council of sages, all of whom were just as foolish as the rest of Chelm's inhabitants. These "wise men" typically would deliberate for seven days and seven nights, only to deliver nonsensical decisions vaguely reminiscent of convoluted Talmudic disputation.

Isaac Bashevis Singer, the Nobel Prize winning author who chronicled the end of the Jewish culture of Eastern and Central Europe in the twentieth century, wrote frequently about schlemiel-like characters and even published three compilations of retellings of the Chelm stories. Among Singer's best-known works is his short story entitled "Gimpel the Fool." Regarding the title character in this story, Edward Alexander writes, "What mainly characterizes Gimpel is his readiness to believe everything he is told, no matter how improbable, fantastic, or incredible (50). >From that observation we can see that Singer's Gimpel clearly derives from the classic vision of the schlemiel as simpleton.

Indeed, Gimpel appears to be so gullible and naïve at the start of the story that he allows himself to be married off to the village whore, a woman whom he accepts as the virgin that both she and the other townspeople unconvincingly portray her to be. He then accepts his wife's convoluted explanation of how "their" first child is born just six weeks after the wedding and accepts paternity of six additional children whom he suspects are very likely not his either. When Gimpel begins to realize the full implications of his wife's unfaithfulness, he tells us "I resolved that I would always believe what I was told. What's the good of *not* believing? Today it's your wife you don't believe in; tomorrow it's God Himself you won't take stock in" (13-4).

As Wisse observes, throughout the narrative, Singer is deliberately ambiguous "about what is alternately referred to as Gimpel's 'faith' or 'gullibility' " (62). For example, in one pivotal scene in the story, when Gimpel returns home unexpectedly to find his wife asleep in bed with another man, Gimpel ruefully refrains from making a scene on account of the small child asleep nearby. "A little thing like that," he says, "why frighten a little swallow?" Wisse contends that Gimpel is actually "conscious of the distinction between the figure he cuts in the world and his own self-conception" and that he is "a character who may be choosing to play the fool in order to retain his moral sanity in the face of universal cynicism" (61).

After his wife's deathbed confession of her continuous unfaithfulness to him, Gimpel finally does become angry, both at his own willingness to play the fool and at the villagers enjoyment of his predicament. Gimpel then has a dream in which a demon urges him to take a kind of revenge on the village and, through them, on the world. When he resists the demon's urging, citing the "judgment in the world to come," the demon replies that there is neither a "world to come" nor a God to invoke such judgment. However, before he is fully resolved to take the action suggested by the demon, he sees his wife in another dream. She chides him for his impending loss of faith on her account, saying "Because I was false is everything else false too? (19). "Is faith contingent on human proofs?" Wisse asks rhetorically in her commentary on this moment in the story. "Gimpel's soul, whose essential quality is the ability to believe," she responds, "would indeed have been lost had he satisfied himself with a mean revenge" (63).

Instead of losing his faith, at the end of the story Gimpel tell us that he decided to leave the village and became a wandering storyteller and a witness to his newly restored philosophy of life. "The longer I lived," he observes, "the more I understood that were really no lies. Whatever doesn't really happen is dreamed at night [. . .]. No doubt the world is entirely an imaginary place, but is only once removed from the true world." That "true world," is, of course, the Messianic "world to come," a world which Gimpel tell us will be without ridicule or deception, a world in which "even Gimpel cannot be deceived" (20-1).

"We may be unwilling to suffer fools in real life," Wisse writes, "yet in our encounter among the pages of books we may learn from them a wisdom more profound than our own." That wisdom, she notes, offers Gimpel—and, by extension, us—a kind of "freedom from despair," permitting him "to live in harmony with his conscience, to practice goodness, and hope for justice" (64). Ultimately, Wisse suggests, this tale offers us an opportunity "to appreciate the challenge of the unheroic," both as a means of seeking one's own redemption and, in the words of the Kabbalah, aiding in "the healing of the world."

Singer wrote "Gimpel the Fool" shortly after the end of World War II and the full disclosure of the events of the Holocaust, so this story would appear to reflect his sense of the continuing role of the schlemiel in the post-holocaust world. Nevertheless, writes Wisse, "the destruction of European Jewry during World War II, the systematic slaughter of millions of people and the annihilation of thousands of communities has necessarily influenced our attitude towards the schlemiel as the victor in defeat." She goes on to inquire, "After entire populations... were reduced to the ash of crematoria, does it not become cruel sentimentality to indulge in schlemiel humor and to sustain a faith in the ironic mode?" (60)

Wisse ultimately concludes that the schlemiel has indeed managed to survive even the horror of the Holocaust. Thirty years after Wisse published her study of the schlemiel in Jewish culture, we can see ample evidence that her conclusion was correct, given that three separate motion pictures produced within a single two-year period have specifically attempted to see the Holocaust itself through the eyes of the schlemiel. Whether or not we find the stories recounted in *Life is Beautiful*, *Jakob the Liar*, and *Train of Life* to be artful, it is clear that even this most horribly incongruous of events can be viewed through the healing irony of the schlemiel. As Hyers writes, "Humor is not only possible in relation to the more superficial and innocent incongruities of life; it may also express a certain heroic defiance in the face of life's most crushing tragedies, and an unquenchable nobility of spirit that refuses to allow fate to have the last word, to be absolute" ("Dialectic" 233).

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