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STOP LAUGHING!....THIS IS SERIOUS!
The Rabbinic Use of Humour in Midrash Rabbah.

Ian D. Morris.

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
for Ordination.

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. New
York, N.Y..

1984

Referee: Professor L.S. Kravitz.

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For Carey: who is only now learning what funny people
rabbis are...

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to examine the Rabbinic use of humour as it is found in the Midrash Rabbah. It will first seek to arrive at some understanding of what humour is, and then determine if our conceptions of "humour" are indeed applicable to the Midrash.

It is the belief of the writer that the existence of a Rabbinic sense of humour is demonstrable beyond any doubt. That being the case, the next task is to attempt to arrive at some understanding of the motivations underlying the Rabbis' use of humour. Is it something that is comprehensible to a Twentieth Century mind? Are we dealing with shared concepts at all, or was that which we may consider to be funny, not in the slightest bit funny to a Second Century rabbi?

There are several caveats that should be made at the outset of this exercise. First, this is a study of Midrash and not an exhaustive psycho-social examination of the nature of humour. There will be some attempt to outline

various theories and views of humour, but ultimately the bottom line definition will have to be: "Humour is that which makes one laugh". It may be an imprecise definition, but it is accurate. And the curious thing is that the scientific studies have not been able to do much better.

Second, the use of the term "Rabbinic sense of humour" is admittedly very sweeping. If asked to analyse such a quality in today's rabbinate, any sane investigator would refuse on the grounds that the topic is too broad and ill defined. How much the more so when the term is being applied to an anthologistic work like the Midrash Rabbah, whose "Rabbinate" spans several centuries!?

The term must therefore be taken to refer to those instances that one comes across in the Midrash Rabbah that communicate to the reader that the rabbi who wrote a given passage did so with some humorous intent. There is no presumption that the entire contemporary rabbinate shared the joke. It is merely that there were those human beings, bearing the title "Rabbi", who sought to communicate humorous thoughts to an audience.

Third, academic analyses of "Humour" tend to be extremely dull, and some of the least humorous treatises ever produced. Given that the surest way to destroy a joke is to dissect and analyse it, the writer apologises in advance for

whatever violence he does the Rabbis' senses of humour. It is to be hoped, however, that the quoted texts themselves will more than make up for the enjoyment that analysis tends to stifle. This may be one of the few cases where the tools actually save the workman.

NOTE ON ABBREVIATIONS.

Whenever a book of the Bible is referred to, its name will be written out in full. Its midrashric namesake, however, will be cited in an abbreviated form. So, "Exodus" refers to the book of the Torah, while "Ex.R." refers to Exodus Rabbah.

"R." before a name should be read as "Rabbi", and "b." in a name should be read as "ben" or "bar" (= "son of").

Chapter 2

"NOW, COMEDY IS A GAME, A GAME THAT IMITATES
LIFE."

Henri Bergson, "Laughter".

How hard can it be to describe what "Humour" is? It is true that it is an intangible quality, but unlike the problem of trying to describe "Colour" to a blind person, we all possess a "Sense of Humour". We have all perceived something (at least once in our lives...) as "humourous", "funny" or "laughable". So we all obviously know what "Humour" is.

Despite Theodore Herzl's protestations to the contrary¹, wishing that this last statement were true will not make it so. The reality is that although humans do experience humour on a regular basis, we do not know what it actually is that we are experiencing. There have been numerous attempts to come to grips with the problem, and several

1. "If you will it, it is no dream."

models have been advanced to aid in the understanding of the process. But nothing has yet been advanced that provides a comprehensive explanation. At best they provide partial conceptions of an extremely broad issue; but if it's the best we have got, then it's that with which we must work.

We all learn when young that the best place to find a definition is in the dictionary. So "Humour" is "Facetiousness, comicality (less intellectual and more sympathetic than wit)."² This leads one to examine the definitions of "facetiousness" and "comicality" and it is at this point that the problem becomes apparent, for these definitions rely on notions of "joke" or "laughter". If nothing else, the dictionary has aided us by pointing out the crucial difficulty in this area; circularity. "Humour" is that which provokes "laughter", and "laughter" is caused by "Humour".

Students of this field have long been aware that this definition is far from adequate, for they point out that tickling or chemicals can also provoke laughter, and neither of those stimuli are ever labeled as "humourous". So if physical response does not provide an answer, other avenues need to be explored.

2. per The Concise Oxford Dictionary.

There is a widespread acceptance of the linking of the notion of "humour" with the notion of "ludicrousness". This idea is far from recent, for it was utilized by Aristotle, who defined "ludicrousness" as a "species of ugliness; it is a sort of flaw and ugliness which is not painful or injurious". But Aristotle was caught up in the problem of circularity too, for the "species of ugliness" was defined by its effect, namely "laughter".³

Aristotle should not have felt too bad about his failure to fully come to grips with the complexities of the issue. He is in the very good company of all those that have come after him, up until the present day. In order to understand the approaches that have been used to attempt to evaluate "Humour", it is worth establishing some conceptual categories. The following may be of help.

2.1 Sociological & Anthropological Theory

Stephen Leacock suggested that laughter was originally a cry

3. Quoted in Neil Schaeffer, The Art of Laughter (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), p.6.

of triumph or exultation that was uttered over a fallen enemy or something which had been destroyed.⁴ He went on to express the belief that "Humour" was a refined product of civilization and that it has lost its primal coarseness. For Leacock:

Humour...changed from a basis of injury or destruction to what one may describe as a basis of "incongruity" or "maladjustment."⁵

Such a change, a civilizational refining process, allowed for the development of wit. It also allowed for the emergence of a "kindliness" in humour that he regarded as being of its essence.

Humour may be defined as the kindly contemplation of the incongruities of life, and the artistic expression thereof.⁶

As the expression of an ideal conception of the process of civilization, this formulation has great attraction, however it does not seem to have much bearing on the real world. It

4. in Humour and Humanity (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1938), p. 21.

5. *ibid.* p.27.

6. *ibid.* p.11. Emphasis mine.

will be seen in many of the examples that appear below that "kindliness" is not a very prominent feature. And if one stops to consider much of the humour of the present day (for instance, "black humour"), one is forced to the conclusion that such a definition, if not totally wrong, is at least wildly inadequate.

Another sociological/anthropological approach to humour suggests that:

...laughter produces, simultaneously, a strong fellow feeling among participants and joint aggressiveness against outsiders.⁷

and that humour reduces tension and hostility in social relationships because it constitutes an acceptable outlet for tension and frustration.⁸ The evidence relating to humour's possible cathartic effects is inconclusive,⁹ however its sociological relevance to the Midrash Rabbah will become clearly apparent in the discussion below.

7. Jacob Levine, "Approaches to Humor Appreciation," in Motivation in Humor, ed. Jacob Levine (New York: Atherton Press, 1969), p.12.

8. loc. cit.

9. ibid. p.13.

2.2 Psychological & Psychoanalytical Theory

There are essentially two psychoanalytic postulates for humour. One involves "innocent" humour, in which the individual derives pleasure from mere mental processes. This leads to "nonsense" and a regression into infantile modes. The other allows for the expression of hostility or obscenity without guilt or anxiety.

Particularly in relation to hostility, Freud said:

A joke will allow us to exploit something ridiculous in our enemy which we could not on account of the obstacles in the way, bring forward openly or consciously;the joke will evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible.¹⁰

The significance of this view will become abundantly clear in the following chapters. This thumbnail sketch obviously does not do justice to the wealth of psychological material on this subject, however it will provide a sufficient orientation for the present. The way in which it may be

10. Sigmund Freud, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious (New York: W.W.Norton & Co., 1960), p.103. Emphasis is Freud's.

applied to the material that follows is not difficult to fathom.

2.3 Literary Theory

According to Schaeffer there are two basic literary interpretations of humour.¹¹ While one focuses on the human ability to impose laughter on the environment, the other argues that laughter is the appropriate human response to whatever is inherently laughable in reality.

Put differently, the first approach suggests that anything in the world can be made laughable, while the second suggests that there are things in the world that are "objectively" humorous.

It is extremely difficult to demonstrate anything in this world that is "objectively" humorous, and so the more acceptable literary theory would lead one to the opinion that humour is imposed on the environment and is the product of contextual incongruity and juxtaposition. If indeed this is the case, then nothing is exempt from the possibility of ridicule - and the significance of that observation will

11. Schaeffer, p.3.

become apparent below also.

While no one of these approaches provides a sufficient explanation of what Humour is, they are all "necessary" explanations. The Psychological theories can be applied to most of the examples that will be adduced, but the views regarding hostility will be seen to have special bearing on the material in Chapter 5. The Sociological theories will also be seen to be particularly applicable to Chapter 5, while the Literary theories will have their greatest application to Chapter 4.

Chapter 3

"...IF YOU TICKLE US, DO WE NOT LAUGH?"

The Merchant of Venice, III:i:65.

Jews do laugh. Although Shylock may not have been the best example of a Jewish comedian that one would be able to find, his point is well taken; Jews find things funny today, as they did in the Seventeenth Century, and as they have done from Biblical times.

There are those who would argue that "Jewish Humour" has always remained essentially the same, while some would maintain that a Jewish humorous response is a function of a given historical situation, and has therefore changed over the years.¹² Whatever the validity of either of these views, the matter presently at issue is to determine whether

12. For a discussion of this question, see Theodor Reik, Jewish Wit (New York: Gamut Press Inc., 1962), p.52.

or not there is any recognizable "Humour" to be found in the Midrash Rabbah.

There does not appear to have been very much work done in the field of Rabbinic humour in general, but those references that may be found, leave something to be desired. Israel Knox held, for instance, that:

Jewish humour does not abound in slapstick, in jokes about sex, in farcical comedy, in what is usually referred to as "broad" humour (although these ... are not wholly absent from Jewish humour). The Talmud is wary of jesting except at idolatory, and it is this kind of "jesting", this strain of irony, that has been the constant element in Jewish laughter from Elijah the prophet to Sholem Aleichem's Tevye.¹³

while a similar point was made by Adin Steinsaltz.¹⁴ The use of general terms like "abound" and "wary" makes the formation of concrete opinions difficult. It is true that a great deal of the humour of the Midrash is directed against idolators, but to hold that there is not much of anything else is patently incorrect.

13. "The Traditional Roots of Jewish Humour" in Holy Laughter, ed. M. Conrad Hyers (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), p.156.

14. The Essential Talmud (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), p.254.

Consider the case of the man walking in the Wilderness of Cub when he sees a giant snake. It is so big, and he gets so scared that all his hair falls out and he thereby earns a nickname equivalent to "baldy".¹⁵

Another man knowingly bought a bad slave,¹⁶ and would beat him when he misbehaved. Not without some justice, the slave complained about the fairness of this treatment because the owner knew what he was getting when he made the purchase. If he had wanted a good slave, he should have bought a good slave.

The question is asked as to how the borders of Palestine can possibly be enlarged in order to fulfill the Biblical promise.¹⁷ The proffered answer is that the Land is all wrinkled with mountains, and all that will happen will be that the "wrinkles" will be "ironed out", and the borders will then extend further!¹⁸

Stories like these are not rare in Midrash Rabbah; stories that have nothing to do with "idolatory", but which are

15. Ex.R. 24:4. The name is "גלגל".

16. *ibid.* 43:8.

17. See Deuteronomy 12:20.

18. Deut.R. 4:11.

nevertheless "funny". It will be shown that sex, scatology and slapstick are all well represented¹⁹, and whether one chooses to make a Psychoanalytic or a Literary evaluation of the quality of such jokes, it is hard to deny that they fall within the bounds of "Humour" as previously defined.

There is one further point that should be made. It is that some of the most famous midrashim are in reality very funny (and intentionally so), although we may not tend to notice it because they are so familiar. Thus, the story of young Abraham smashing the idols in his father's idol shop²⁰ is funny. So is the tale of the pregnant Rebecca walking past synagogues and pagan temples, with the unborn Jacob and Esau trying get out of the womb to enter one or the other.²¹

Having established that there is indeed humour to be found in the Midrash Rabbah, it would be of interest and value to attempt to identify some of its differing manifestations.

19. For a piece of classic slapstick, see Gen.R. 38:10, in which the workers on the Tower of Babel take to hitting each other over the head.

20. Gen.R. 38:13.

21. *ibid.* 63:6. One should also not forget the common story of the Matron asking R. Jose b. Halafta about God's activities since Creation, and then being told that He has been making marriages. See Lev.R. 8:1, or Num.R. 3:6, or Gen.R. 68:4.

This will be the function of the next two chapters.

Chapter 4

"AND IF I LAUGH AT ANY MORTAL THING, 'TIS THAT I MAY
NOT WEEP"

Byron, Don Juan

It may be said with a high level of certainty that the Rabbis never read Byron. It would be almost as certain that Byron never read any Rabbinic humour. It is of more than passing interest, then, that their views of humour have so much in common. Perhaps the greatest divergence would pertain to the word "mortal", for while it is true that the vast bulk of the humour of the Midrash Rabbah is about temporal or mortal topics, there is also a measure of "ethereal" humour. From a Twentieth Century perspective, one would say that there is both secular and religious humour in the midrash, however it must always be borne in mind that such a distinction was meaningless to the Rabbis. "Mortal" and "Immortal", however, were categories that they could understand, and their humour encompassed both

categories.

Up to this point, the discussion has been confined to "humour" in the abstract. The purpose of this was to establish beyond any doubt that humour, as we understand it, is a meaningful concept to apply to the Midrash, and that the Rabbis possessed a "sense of humour". The intent of this chapter is to outline some of the actual types and topics of Rabbinic humour; this categorization being the first step to a more particularized analysis that will follow.

4.1 Puns

Linguistic humour is probably the most common form of Rabbinic humour, but because it has been dealt with extensively elsewhere, it will not receive great prominence here.²² The prevalence of puns in the midrash must be to a large extent a function of the nature of the Hebrew language. Because it so readily allows variant readings of

22. see Brown, Ronald N. "The Enjoyment of Midrash: The Use of the Pun in Genesis Rabba." Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (Cincinnati), Ph.D. thesis, 1980.

vowel-less texts and the manipulation of the roots of words, it presents the Rabbi with an extremely potent tool. The use to which the tool is put may vary; it could be polemical, it could be didactic, it may be merely whimsical. Whatever its application, the device is so readily at hand that the Rabbi cannot help but use it.

Consider but one example of many.²³ Here the word play centres around the root לשג. The animals that are used in the b'rit bein hab'tarim²⁴ are all paralleled with nations that have had dealings with Israel. The pigeon (לש) is paralleled with Rome because as the most recent oppressor of the Jewish people, it was seen as a thief (לש).

In this example, the purpose is clearly polemical. The word play makes a humorous point, while striking out at the enemy. The humour is not situational, however. It simply arises out of the peculiarities of Hebrew.

23. Gen.R. 44:15.

24. "The covenant between the pieces". See Genesis 15.

4.2 Nonsense

Like all evaluations of humour, the labeling of something as "nonsense" is a subjective matter. It would not be unreasonable to assert, however, that if something is so fantastic as to have no bearing upon reality whatsoever, then it may be classified as nonsense.

The clearest instances of "nonsense" in the midrash are, if not linguistic, at least graphemic. The concept of letters of the alphabet flying off and complaining to God about their positions in given words or texts ²⁵ is clearly nonsensical. It would also appear to be little more than a flight of whimsy, for there is little in the way of a message that one may derive from it.

4.3 The Absurd

The relationship between "Nonsense" and "Absurdity" is a close one, and its evaluation and delineation is as subjective as the very essence of "Humour" itself.

25. See for example Gen.R. 1:10 or Ex.R. 6:1.

Nevertheless, there are distinctions that may be drawn, and which may be illustrated by examples from the Midrash.

The question is asked why Jephthah is said to have been buried "in the cities of Gilead"²⁶ rather than in merely one city.²⁷ The answer that is provided is literally "absurd"; that as he was travelling around Gilead, his limbs would drop off and that they were buried where they dropped. Thus Jephthah was buried in the "cities" of Gilead.

Other examples of this category would include the numerous cases of talking animals, such as Balaam talking with his ass,²⁸ or Elijah talking with a bullock.²⁹

The difference between these absurdities and the nonsensical items mentioned above is that they involve conceivable elements (albeit farfetched) that become truly absurd when juxtaposed. Thus, one can conceive of a man's limb falling off, or even of an animal that talks. Even in the wildest flights of fancy, however, it is impossible to

26. See Judges 12:7.

27. Gen.R. 60:3.

28. Num.R. 20:14.

29. *ibid.* 23:9.

conceive of a letter flying out of a word and lodging a complaint with God.³⁰

4.4 Human Foibles and Weaknesses

Unlike the previous categories, this category does not require any analysis. Its nature is part of everyday life. Consider the case of an old, decrepit bandit who sits at the crossroads and orders travellers who happen to come his way to give him their valuables. It finally happens that one day, one of his victims notices that he is feeble, and not only does he refuse to hand over his valuables, but he also beats up the bandit.³¹

A variation of the robber theme ³² finds a (this time) robust bandit asleep by the road. A well meaning passer-by stops to wake him and warn him of the dangerous bandits in

30. While this is not the place for an extensive evaluation of the differences between "nonsense" and "absurdity", it should be borne in mind that to say that one can "conceive" of something is in no way to affirm its reality. Thus, I can conceive of a bagel large enough to be slipped over the Empire State Building. The notion is absurd, but the mind will accept the image.

31. See Gen.R. 22:6.

32. *ibid.* 75:3.

the area, only to be beaten up by the less than grateful bandit.

In a widely known midrash ³³, Hadrian sees an old man planting fig trees and asks why he bothers to do so when he is unlikely to enjoy the fruit. The old man replies that he is doing it for future generations, and is told by Hadrian that if he lives to see the first crop, then he should come and tell him. In due course the old man does harvest the first crop, and he takes a basket of figs to the Emperor. Hadrian is so impressed that he exchanges the basket of figs for a basket of gold and sends the old man home with it. Some of the old man's neighbours decide that Hadrian must be very partial to figs if he makes such an exchange, and that they too could get some gold this way. So a man goes off to the Emperor with sacks of figs, only to be sentenced to stand at the city gate and be pelted with his own figs. When he finally gets home and complains to his wife, she (being a less than sympathetic soul) tells him that he should be grateful that he took figs rather than citrons, and that they were ripe rather than hard.

These examples portray humorous views of fear, irritability and greed. There are many others that could be

33. Lev.R. 25:5.

cited to portray other weaknesses and foibles, but it is not necessary. This is a category of Rabbinic humour that overlaps with many of the others mentioned here, and should not be regarded as being mutually exclusive.

4.5 Folk Wisdom

All peoples have their traditional pieces of folk wisdom that tend to the pithy. If they are not outright funny, then they are often quaintly humorous. Several items such as this are to be found in Genesis Rabbah:

"If one person tells you that you have an ass's ears, do not believe them. But if two people tell you, order a halter."³⁴

"When is a woman to be considered old? According to R. Simeon b. Lekish, when she is called 'Mother So and So' and does not mind."³⁵

In relation to Abraham's and Lot's division of the Land

34. Gen.R. 45:7.

35. ibid. 47:3.

36. See Genesis 13:6ff.

³⁶it is said: "If the wheat is mine, then the barley is yours. Or if the barley is yours, then then the wheat is mine. Either way, the wheat is mine."³⁷

4.6 Rabbis

Given that the current undertaking is an analysis of Rabbinic humour, it should come as no surprise that there are a number of jokes directed at rabbis themselves. It is open to debate as to whether these jokes are the products of intra-rabbinic jealousies and rivalries, or whether they are simply the records of good natured self-deprecation. When one considers the following examples, it may well be that the truth consists of a combination of these stimuli.

It seems that several rabbis took such exception to R. Eliezer's breath that they went and complained about it to Yochanan b. Zakkai.³⁸ While this is not an extremely funny anecdote in the modern world, it is clear that R. Eliezer has become the butt of a not-too-pleasant personal criticism. If indeed this be humour, it is not in any way

37. *ibid.* 41:6.

38. *Gen.R.* 42:1.

gently self-mocking.

Compare this, on the other hand, to the observation that the Sages are to be compared to Ishmaelite tents.³⁹ Like Ishmaelite tents, rabbis are ugly on the outside but beautiful within. Unlike the previous example, this is a reflexive remark, gentle in intent and with no particular target. There is also an implicit jibe at the Arabs in this joke; and this is a whole other category that will be dealt with at much greater length below.

The final example of this kind of joke deals with the interaction of rabbis with those not of the Rabbinic class. Generally the thrust of these anecdotes is to show how the common folk (especially children) are capable of showing up the rabbi in his field of expertise. Thus, when R. Joshua asks a little girl for a drink of water, which she gives him, he tells her that she is like Rebecca.⁴⁰ She retorts that he, however, is not like Eliezer (presumably because he did not supply her with any gifts).

39. Ex.R. 23:10.

40. Lam.R. 1:19. For R. Joshua's Biblical reference, see Genesis 24:17ff.

4.7 Misogyny

In the modern world this is a topic of some delicacy, because there is an extensive school of thought that denies that anything connected with it can be humorous. If further proof were needed that there is much in humour that is situational or contextual, this would be it. Without wishing to make any value laden assessments, however, there can be no doubt that from the Rabbis' perspective, women were fit objects for jokes.

Man's downfall, we are told, is caused by sleep.⁴¹ During sleep a man cannot study nor work, and what is worse, that is how Woman was created.

Further to the creation of Eve, there is an explication of the expression "לִפְתֵּי עֹזֶר".⁴² If the man is lucky, then his wife will be "עֹזֶר" (a help). If he is unlucky, she will be "לִפְתֵּי" (against him).⁴³

41. Gen.R. 17:5.

42. Genesis 2:20, translated as "fitting helper" in the 1967 Jewish Publication Society version.

43. Gen.R. 17:3.

To illustrate this principle, a tale is told of R. Jose's wife⁴⁴ who was "against him". This fact was noticed by his colleagues and students, for one day he brought home R. Eleazar b. Azariah and was told that the cooking pot contained hash. When Eleazar b. Azariah looked in the pot, he found that in reality it contained chicken. When this was pointed out to R. Jose, his response (in attempting dutifully to protect his wife's reputation) was that a "miracle" must have occurred.

Perhaps the most bitterly saracatic misogyny is to be found in a story that appears twice⁴⁵ detailing how during an invasion, the Jewish girls would make themselves as attractive as possible, so as to attract an invading officer. It did not matter that he was an invader; it mattered that he was an officer.

4.8 Parenting

There would appear to be a universality when it comes to jokes about familial relationships. Jokes about spouses

44. loc. cit. and variant at Lev.R. 34:14.

45. Lev.R. 16:1 and Lam.R. 4:18.

(see above) and children are current today, as they were for the Rabbis. The following examples convey the idea.

Children are a cause of suffering, and it is easier to grow olives in the Galilee than it is to raise a child in the Land of Israel.⁴⁶

A father blesses his daughter at her wedding (for which he paid), saying: "May you never return here!". She is startled by the tone of such a "blessing" and asks its reason. His reply is that he hopes that she is so happy with married life that she will never have to return.⁴⁷

4.9 Regional Loyalties

This is also a category that has a bearing on the more extensive grouping that will follow, however it is worth noting that there seems to have been some prejudice on the part of the urban dwellers vis-a-vis the provincials. Hence Resh Lakish and R. Issi remark on God's power to make the

46. Gen.R. 20:6.

47. Gen.R. 26:4.

inhabitants of distant areas actually like where they live.⁴⁸

4.10 Angels

The Rabbis' humorous use of angels is multifaceted. In many instances, the humour is a function of the attribution of human qualities (and usually not the best human qualities) to heavenly beings. Thus, they are seen to squabble and form political parties amongst themselves when God presents them with the issue of whether or not Man should be created. In the meantime, God created Adam.⁴⁹ In a like example, when it is time for Moses to die, God has difficulty finding a willing angel to do the dirty work and go and take his soul.⁵⁰

In other cases, angels are directly involved in human

48. Gen.R. 34:15. For another example of a joke at the expense of the provinces, see Lam.R. 1:4, in which a Jerusalemite sets out to show how much cleverer he is than the provincials whom he is visiting.

49. Gen.R. 8:5.

50. Deut.R. 11:10.

51. See Genesis 27.

affairs. When Jacob is busy stealing Esau's blessing⁵¹, angels help him by releasing animals from Esau's traps and thus delaying his return.⁵² In this case, the humour is not so much the angels' actions, as the extra work that they are placing upon Esau.

4.11 Drink

It may come as a surprise to some that the Rabbis jested about alcohol, but upon sober consideration it becomes apparent that it too was as much a part of life then as it is today. So one finds the story of the sons of a drunkard who are concerned that their father is drinking away their inheritance.⁵³ They decide to cure him by getting him drunk and then depositing him in a graveyard, thinking that he will be frightened off drinking. It so happens, however, that some wine merchants deposit their stocks in the graveyard, and when the man awakens he finds more to drink right at hand. When his sons return to the cemetery some time later to see how their plan worked, this is how they find him, drunker than ever.

52. Gen.R. 67:2.

53. Lev. R. 12:1.

There is also cautionary material such as: "When the wine enters, the secret comes out."⁵⁴ This is based on the gematria that " / " (wine) and "710" (secret) both have the numerical value of 70.

4.12 Circumcision

There is quite an amount of rather nervous humour relating to circumcision. For all that it is a rite central to the Covenant theology of the Jewish People, it is nevertheless the mutilation of a sensitive organ that was possessed by all the Rabbis. And sometimes a joke will help.

The Rabbis have Abraham express doubts to God about this new instruction that he has been given.⁵⁵ "If it is as important as You say, why did You not give it to Adam? And furthermore, how do You expect me to get converts now, if this is part of the process?"

In the matter of Dinah and Shechem⁵⁶, when Shechem agrees

54. Num.R. 10:8.

55. Gen.R. 46:3.

56. See Genesis 34.

that all his people will become circumcised, those whom the agreement involves are heard to complain that just because Shechem wants to get married, they have to become circumcised.⁵⁷

The Rabbis also decided that a foreskin was the passport to Gehenna, and that Abraham was stationed at the gate, barring entry to anyone without a foreskin.⁵⁸ The question was raised regarding the status of a bad, Jewish sinner. The decision was that Abraham had a supply of foreskins from uncircumcised babies, and that he would attach one of them to anyone who really deserved entry to Gehenna.

4.13 Sex

Then, as now, sex was a variegated topic. Jokes about it range from involvement with harlots⁵⁹, to those who would

57. Gen.R. 80:8.

58. ibid. 48:8.

59. Ex.R. 43:7.

60. Num.R. 20:23.

seduce Israelites into idolatry⁶⁰, to God having to decide if he will make a foetus look like its father or the adulterer who subsequently had sex with the mother.⁶¹

4.14 Scatology

Scatological humour does not afford quite the same scope as sex, but it is represented in the Midrash. R. Hanina is quoted as saying: "Whosoever says that God is lax in dispensing justice, may his bowels become lax."⁶²

There is also a tale⁶³ that when God supplied the manna to the Israelites, He arranged it so that they would not have to defecate. This led the Israelites to complain because they feared that they would burst.

4.15 Jewish Jokes

A mention of this topic should be made because it leads into

61. *ibid.* 9:1.

62. *Gen.R.* 67:4.

63. *Num.R.* 7:4.

the major discussion of the following chapter, which is Ethnic Humour. The vast bulk of the Ethnic Humour that is found in the Midrash is directed outwards; that is to say that the Jews (being the "in" group) are making fun of some other group (who constitute the "out" group). There are a number of "Jewish" jokes that are worthy of note, however.

The interesting thing about these jokes is that they are remarks about the Jews that have been placed in the mouths of Gentiles. For instance two Philistine harlots have an argument, during the course of which, by way of insult, one says that the other looks like a Jew. Later on they make their peace, and the one says to the other that she will forgive her everything except the remark about her looking like a Jew.⁶⁴

Another example has circus patrons asking "Jew Riddles": Question: How long do you want to live? Answer: As long as a Jew's Shabbat shirt.⁶⁵

It is unclear as to whether the authors of the Midrash found this sort of material funny, or whether it was included simply because the material was there. What it

64. Lam.R. 1:39.

65. *ibid.* 3:5.

does do, however, is highlight the material that follows. Whether or not a joke is funny is often a function of which side of the joke you are on.

Chapter 5

"LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR AS YOURSELF"

Leviticus 19:18

There is a widely accepted jurisprudential principle that laws are never enacted against actions that are never performed. Framed in a positive way, it could be said that one only legislates against that which is done. Could it be that Jews had to be ordered to love their neighbours? Is it possible that they did not already do so?

A partial response to this question may be found in the number of examples of Rabbinic humour that this study identified. Fully one third of all the instances can be categorized as "Us vs. Them" humour. It would not be fully accurate to call this "Ethnic Humour" (although that is what much of it is), because some of its manifestations are along ideological, rather than national, lines.

If one bears in mind the psychoanalytic approach to humour that was outlined earlier, and views the profusion of these sorts of jokes as a manifestation of aggression or frustration, then one might be lead to say with Hamlet that "...it is a custom more honour'd in the breach than the observance".⁶⁶ It is obvious that Jews did not always love their neighbours, and that their less than positive feelings were often manifested in pointed humour. That which follows will illustrate the point.

The common denominator of all of this humour is that while it underscores the "other-ness" of the joke's subject, it reinforces the "us-ness" of the joke's teller and audience. There were traces of this quality in some of the categories of the preceding chapter, especially "Misogyny" and "Regional Loyalties". It is also possible to view some of the scatological jokes in this light⁶⁷, however it would seem that along with the reinforcement of group bonding, there is a deep polemical intent.

66. Hamlet, I:iv:15.

67. See Lev.R. 18:1, which draws a scatological distinction between scholars and the ignorant, or Lam.R. 13:5 which uses a pun on the word "דולק" (an archer's quiver or faeces) to make a scatological observation about the enemy.

5.1 Heathens and Heretics

This category is really little more than a repository for all of those "Us vs. Them" jokes that do not have specified targets. They often parallel the style of the categories that follow, in that there is frequently a question asked of a Rabbi that has been calculated to trip him up, but which he turns against the questioner through his intelligence and wit. The target, however, is generic rather than specific.

A heathen asked R. Joshua b. Karcha why the Jews did not practice idolatry seeing as there were more idolators in the world than Jews. Joshua responds by simply asking if the heathen has children, leading the heathen to answer that his children have terrible dinner-table arguments because each one blasphemes the others' gods. R. Joshua then sends the heathen away, saying that before he tries to make the Jews agree, he should first get his own children to agree amongst themselves.⁶⁸

The same rabbi is asked by a heathen why God spoke to Moses out of a thorn bush.⁶⁹ Joshua points out to the heathen that he would have asked the question, no matter

68. Lev.R. 4:6.

69. Ex. R. 2:5 and Num.R. 12:4.

what the type of tree it actually was, inferring that it is therefore an essentially frivolous question. He does, nevertheless, provide him with an answer.

There is a recurring theme in these tales that is perhaps the most telling indication of their nature. The Rabbi is usually able to simply "fob off" the heathen or heretic with a pat answer; a fact which his disciples notice and ask him further about.⁷⁰ The heathens and heretics, therefore, are cast as being not very bright - and certainly no match for a student of Torah.

That "non-Jewish" activities in general were not held in the highest regard, or treated as matters of serious concern, may be illustrated by the story of Samuel⁷¹ who was an astrologer. When he said that study of Torah was not suitable for astrologers, it was pointed out to him that indeed he was an astrologer himself. His reply was that he only concerned himself with astrology when he was free from the study of Torah, namely when he was in the bath house.

70. For further examples of this, see Gen.R. 8:9 or Ex.R. 29:1.

71. Deut.R. 8:6.

5.2 Native Peoples

There are several jokes in the Midrash Rabbah directed against indigenous inhabitants of the region, from whom the Jews had an obvious interest in remaining aloof. The chronology of these jokes may be somewhat anachronistic⁷², however it seems that the audiences were quite adept at making the chronological jumps that enabled them to connect with contemporary allusions. In this way, nobody ever had to say a word about Rome. "Edom" was quite sufficient.

R. Simeon b. Abba in the name of R. Yochanan tells a story that when the Canaanites heard that the Israelites were coming, they promptly cut down all of the plants in Canaan. When they heard that the Israelites were wandering in the desert, they immediately replanted the land. It was then that God led the Israelites into the Land.⁷³

When Elijah had his contest with the priests of Baal⁷⁴, the Midrash says⁷⁵ that the bullock that was assigned to

72. What, for instance, is the relevance of a "Canaanite" joke to anybody living in the Common Era?

73. Ex.R. 20:16.

74. See I Kings 18.

75. Num.R. 23:9.

Baal refused to budge. It describes 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah all gathering around trying to shift the bullock, but meeting with no success. Finally it decides to move after it has a talk with Elijah and he convinces it that participating in the sacrificial contest is the right thing to do. The humour of these cases lies in the Canaanites frustrated attempts to achieve some end, and the Israelites success at their expense.

Another "local" who had trouble with animals was Balaam; and in his case, even the Biblical account is comic.⁷⁶ The Midrash makes the situation even more pointed by asking how, if he was unable to even control a donkey, would he be able to handle a curse upon an entire nation? And the question is then repeated, this time from the donkey's mouth. A greater put down is hard to imagine.

5.3 Egypt

The jokes at the expense of the Egyptians are of some interest. Unlike the material that precedes or follows, it could have had little contemporary relevance. When this material was written, there was no suggestion that Egypt

76. See Numbers 22:22ff.

exerted any dominance over the region or was even a neighbourhood presence; like Judea, she was subject to Rome. Nor is there any suggestion that "Egypt" was a code word for any contemporary notion. So one is forced to look elsewhere for an explanation.

The reality is that one need look no further than the Torah. When one stops to consider the role of the Egyptians in the development of a Jewish consciousness, it can be seen that they constitute the archetypical "other"; a "they" who oppressed "us", and who in their turn received their just deserts.

The Exodus from Egypt constitutes a cornerstone of Jewish Covenant theology that is liturgically entrenched in the very roots of Jewish practice and identity.⁷⁷ It is practically impossible to dissociate the concrete "Egypt" from the abstract actor in the covenantal drama. Consequently a Jew would be able to relate to an "Egyptian joke", even though he may never have had any personal

77. It is prominent in the daily, the weekly and the annual liturgical cycles.

78. If further evidence of this ability to concretize the abstract was necessary, all that one need to is consider the universalization of Amalek as archetypical enemy, or Shakespeare's ability to utilize the image of Shylock in a society that had no personal knowledge of Jews.

knowledge of an Egyptian.⁷⁸

We find, therefore, that the Egyptians are regarded as being ugly and dark⁷⁹, and that their princes were involved in a heavy bidding contest for the right to escort the beautiful Sarah.⁸⁰

In a more scatological vein, the question was asked as to why Moses was told to go to Pharaoh in the morning⁸¹. The answer is that Pharaoh purported to be a god, and as such did not want his subjects to think that he had to defecate. Consequently he would go down to the Nile early in the morning to obey the call of nature, when nobody would see him. Moses, therefore, was instructed to "catch him in the act".

Note was taken of the fact that Potiphar is referred to in the Torah as "0'70".⁸² The Midrash⁸³ chooses to render the word literally, explaining that he bought Joseph for purposes of sodomy, and rather than allow that, God

79. Gen.R. 40:4.

80. ibid. 40:5.

81. Ex.R. 9:8.

82. Literally "eunuch", but figuratively "courtier".

83. Gen.R. 86:3.

castrated him. In all of these instances, the Egyptians are being belittled and/or made objects of ridicule - and hence fit objects for laughter.

5.4 Samaria

Unlike the previous category, the Samaritans constituted a contemporary "out" group, with whom the Jews were involved in controversy regarding authentic tradition. Furthermore, they were close neighbours, so the development of "Samaritan jokes" should be expected.

The expectation is fulfilled through the portrayal of the Samaritans in several unflattering ways. In one instance⁸⁴, a Samaritan is drawn as a con-man in a style reminiscent of several jokes about Chelm. He begs only for an onion, but eventually ends up with a whole meal.

In another "con-man" type of story, R. Ishmael b. R. Jose witnesses a Samaritan interpreting dreams, and no matter what the dream happened to be, the same favourable interpretation was always given.⁸⁵

84. Lev. R. 5:8.

85. Lam. R. 1:14.

The Samaritans were not to be highly regarded in matters of Biblical interpretation either, for when one attempted to convince R. Jonathan that Mt. Gerizim had not been covered by the waters of the Flood, he was refuted by R. Jonathan's ass-driver.⁸⁶

5.5 Athens

The next three categories are all related but by no means identical. There are a number of humorous stories about Greeks: either merely "Athenians" or Alexander the Great. While it is true that the Greeks never constituted an actual military enemy of the Judeans, they did constitute an even greater threat - a competing world view.

The conflict between Judaism and Hellenism has been extensively documented elsewhere and need not be dealt with here, other than to demonstrate its humorous manifestations in the Midrash. If one was to isolate a common factor in all of these examples, it would be that in the interaction between the Greek and the Jew, the Jew was able to get the better of the Greek without too much trouble.

86. Gen. R. 32:10 and Deut. R. 3:6.

There is a string of "Athenian" jokes that can be found in Lamentations Rabbah. In one example, a Jew staying in an inn in Athens is told by some locals that in order to be allowed to stay, he would have to make three jumps. The Jew, feigning acquiescence, asks for a demonstration. The locals oblige, ending up out the door, which the Jew promptly shuts against them.⁸⁷

In several of these stories, Athenians are bested by Jewish children⁸⁸ when they are asked to run minor errands. In a more involved confrontation with Jewish school children, an Athenian loses his clothes to them when he becomes involved in a riddle game with them. His clothes are only restored to him after he comes across R. Jonathan (their teacher) who perceives that he must have lost out in the game (the presumption being that this must have happened before!), and so provides the Athenian with the correct answer.⁸⁹ The children's response, as they return his clothes is to quote Samson⁹⁰ when his riddle was answered through unfair means.

87. Lam.R. 1:5.

88. e.g. ibid 1:6 or 1:7 or 1:9.

89. ibid. 1:11.

90. Judges 14:18.

In other stories, an Athenian who unsuccessfully tries to learn "דאס פיל"⁹¹ in Jerusalem, buys a one-eyed Jewish slave for his return journey. With only one eye, the slave is shown to be able to see and understand much more of the world than his master, by interpreting the trail of the caravan ahead of them on the road.⁹² Or in what is perhaps the most involved of these tales, an Athenian is "set up" by some Jerusalemites for making fun of Jerusalem. He ends up sitting in the Jerusalem market, his face blackened and head shaved, with a stock of unsaleable, wildly overpriced sandals. And to add insult to injury, he is hit over the head with some of his own merchandise by an irate customer.⁹³

The most humorous story dealing with Alexander the Great describes his entry into the Temple with Gebiah b. Kosem (who was a hunchback).⁹⁴ As they approach the Holy of Holies, Alexander is told that he can go no further, at which he threatens to "straighten Gebiah's hump". Gebiah

91. lit. "Language of Wisdom".

92. Lam.R. 1:12, with a variant that may be found in Sanhedrin 104b.

93. ibid. 1:13.

94. Gen.R. 61:7.

replies that if he could do that then he would be a famous surgeon and could charge high fees!⁹⁵

5.6 Philosophy

The interface of Philosophy with Judaism is not really a separate topic from the general issues of Hellenism, however there are a few stories dealing specifically with Philosophers who are shown up by Rabbis.

A philosopher asks R. Hoshaya why the Jews demand circumcision.⁹⁶ So the Rabbi asks him why he shaves the corners of his beard. He replies that they "grew in folly". R. Hoshaya points out that he may as well then cut off his hand or poke out his eye; the implication being that they too "grew in folly".⁹⁷

Another philosopher (one assumes) experimented for seven years to determine the gestation period of a snake.

95. For another "Alexander" story, see Gen.R. 33:1 or Lev.R. 27:2, where he is taught a lesson in how to decide a legal problem by a "primitive" king.

96. This issue being a major bone of contention between Judaism and Hellenism.

97. Gen.R. 11:6.

Thinking that he now had some knowledge that the Rabbis did not have, he decided to embarrass them by asking them about it. He asked R. Gamliel, who was ashamed to admit that he did not know the answer. R. Joshua, however, worked out the correct answer from text and tells the philosopher, who can think of no other appropriate response than to beat his head against a wall.⁹⁸

5.7 Rome

The position occupied by Rome in all of the Rabbinic literature, including midrashic humour, is unique. To say this is not to say that it does not share some of the qualities of all of the material that has already been cited, for it does. There is, however, one overriding difference; Rome was a contemporary occupying power for the authors. And when one is occupied, one always has something to say about the occupiers.

In the section dealing with "Athens" above, it was stated that it had something in common with this section. The commonality is to be found in the fact that the Roman Empire became the successor to the Greek Empire and shared a

98. *ibid.* 20:4.

Hellenistic tradition. Rome also confronted Judea with a competing world view, however it "marketed" it differently. The Jews, then, had to deal not only in the realm of ideas, but also in the realm of physical survival.

The nett effect of these similarities and differences is that there was a definite use of humour in relation to the Romans, although perhaps rather more circumspect⁹⁹ and with a greater tendency to be more bitter or black than any of the other material. This is clearly the product of oppression.

Scatology lends itself to the ridiculing of an enemy, and there is the classic example of R. Eleazar quietly minding his own business in the privy, when he is evicted by a Roman who sits down in his place.¹⁰⁰ A snake, which had entered the privy, then bit the Roman. R. Eleazar, seeing this, applies to it the verse "אִישׁ אֶדֹם אֶדֹם"¹⁰¹, punning on the word "אֶדֹם" ("Man") so as to read "Edom" (=Rome).

Hadrian is drawn in a blackly maniacal way, killing Jews

99. Particularly in the use of the name "Edom" as a code word for "Rome".

100. Gen.R. 10:7 and Lev.R. 22:4.

101. Isaiah 43:4. "...I give men in exchange for you."

if they greet him, and then killing them if they do not greet him.¹⁰² Vespasian, on the other hand, appears as something of a buffoon when he receives the news that he is now emperor.¹⁰³ He is pictured as having put on only one of his shoes before being given the news, and when he goes to put on the second shoe, he finds that his foot has swollen and that it will not go into his shoe. The image, clearly comic, is of the Roman Emperor with one shoe on and one shoe off, and stuck that way. And his only relief comes via the agency of Yochanan b. Zakkai who, through the application of some verses, is able to cure the emperor's problem.

In a story that has some peculiar elements, Tinneus Rufus asks R. Akiva why Shabbat is special.¹⁰⁴ He is told to use the services of a necromancer to raise his father from the grave, which he is able to do on every day except Shabbat. This upsets Tinneus Rufus considerably, and when he raises his father next, he accuses him of having converted to Judaism after his death.

102. Lam.R. 3:9.

103. *ibid.* 1:31.

104. Gen.R. 11:5.

105. Numbers 6:24. "May the Lord bless you and guard you."

Exegesis of the verse "פָּנֵא'ל 'ד פִּשְׁפִּשְׁ"¹⁰⁵ leads to the assertion that "guard you" means from ever having to take office in Paneas, which was regarded as a corrupt Roman city, and in which promotion was achieved only by means of extortion.¹⁰⁶

Lest it be thought that all of the humour regarding the Romans was vicious, it should be noted that there is some gentler material as well. An example of this would be the well known story of Antoninus asking Rabbi why the Shabbat dinner tastes so good, and Rabbi explaining that the Jews use a condiment called "Shabbat".¹⁰⁷

There is sufficient evidence in this chapter to indicate an extensive corpus of "Us vs. Them" humour in the Midrash Rabbah. Its presence is neither accidental nor surprising when one views it in the light of the material discussed in Chapter 2, and it is this synthesis which will be dealt with in the following chapter.

106. Num.R. 11:5. See also the footnote on p.433 of the Soncino edition.

107. Gen.R. 11:4.

Chapter 6

"IT IS A GOOD SIGN FOR A MAN TO DIE LAUGHING."

Ketubot 103b.

Up to this point, the study has been dealing primarily with matters of "what" it is that constitutes Humour and "how" it is manifest in the Midrash Rabbah. The time has now come to consider some questions beginning with "why?".

"Why" did the Rabbis include humourous material in the Midrash? "Why" did it take the form it did? "Why" are the objects of some of the jokes appearing in Chapter 5 (in particular) so treated? Some partial answers have been alluded to above, but a slightly fuller discussion is now warranted.

Before getting involved in discussions relating to specific points, there is one overriding consideration that must be borne in mind through all of this. It is that

humour is inherently enjoyable, and is therefore entirely self-justifying. In the same way that it comes as no surprise to learn that rabbis like to eat, sleep and keep warm, rabbis (we are given to understand) are human and therefore enjoy the pleasurable sensations that humour carries in its wake.

The Rabbis of the Midrash Rabbah were no different. The scope and volume of their jokes in the Midrash would suggest that they too derived a simple pleasure from this material, which in and of itself provided sufficient reason for its inclusion.

There is, however, a related question that should be mentioned. If it is accepted that the humour is a source of simple enjoyment, it is reasonable to ask whether the primary intention was to supply enjoyment to the author or to the reader.

To rephrase the question: Is the humour of the Midrash a tool, or a by-product? Was it incidental to the midrashic process, or was it deliberately inserted in order to achieve specific aims?

Perhaps the best answer to this question is a "Jewish" one: Why must the two possibilities be mutually exclusive? The reality, of course, is that they need not be. Consider

the world of the modern day political satirist. He is paid for his ability to provide enjoyment, yet his work is laced with polemical ramifications. Is he primarily an entertainer or a polemicist? The answer will probably vary from case to case.

So it is with Rabbinic humour. In Chapters 3 and 4, there were numerous examples of what the Psychoanalytical theorists call "innocent" humour. These jokes have no barb, and Freud would explain that their pleasure derives from our ability to indulge in infantile regression. They may be "nonsense", or they may provide a new perspective on "truth", but they do not appear to possess any ulterior motive other than pleasure.

Much of the material in Chapter 4, and all of the material in Chapter 5, is of quite a different order, however. This may be best illustrated by an intriguing observation; of all of the texts that were studied, Lamentations Rabbah had the highest concentration of jokes. And none of those jokes were "innocent".

That the midrash on a text bewailing an enemy's depredation contains so much humour is interesting. An examination of that humour's nature is telling. It is all humour at the expense of non-Jews. The victims are no match for the Jews, and are "defeated" at every turn. It is as if

Lamentations Rabbah is a mirror image of Lamentations, and the victim has at last become the victor. Through humour, the world can be turned on its head - and sometimes it looks better that way.

Viewed in this light, the polemic, didactic and tribal components of this material all become evident. From the Sociological and Anthropological perspective, it may be seen how this humour serves to strengthen "tribal" bonds. From the Psychological perspective, it may be seen how the "tribe" is able to vent some of its aggression against those who would otherwise make it impotent. And from the Literary perspective, it may be seen how it is easy to make almost any feature of the enemy appear to be ludicrous.

The humour of the Midrash Rabbah is not uniform in style, content or intent. It is sometimes simple, sometimes barbed. It is clearly a product of the extensive and varied Jewish experience - and perhaps summed up best by R. Abba b. Kahana: "I said of laughter: It is mingled."¹⁰⁸

108. Lev.R. 20:3, expounding on Ecclesiastes 2:2 "I said of laughter: It is mad."

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