Laughing with the Rabbis: Sensing Humor in the Babylonian Talmud

by

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Acknowledgments

"You can't deny laughter," writes Stephen King in *Hearts in Atlantis.* "When it comes, it plops down in your favorite chair and stays as long as it wants." Despite King's point, the laughter in classical Jewish texts is all too often denied. Commentators and translators throughout the ages have silenced the comic voice within texts, at times viewing it as intrusive or profane. My thesis counters this view. This study derives from my own experience, growing up in a home in which laughter plops down in every chair, whether in times of joy or sorrow.

My parents James and Bess and my brother Geoffrey might as well appear in the bibliography, since they were my first sources, urging me always to see the comic dimension of life. My partner Nicole reaffirms this view every day, with every laugh. And my colleague David Segal has been a partner-in-crime, joining me in pushing the comedic limits of our own community. I would like to acknowledge my teachers from my undergraduate studies at Muhlenberg College, Dr. Alan Mittleman (now at the Jewish Theological Seminary) and Dr. David Rosenwasser. Dr. Mittleman was the first to introduce me to the Babylonian Talmud on Friday mornings in his study. Dr. Rosenwasser taught me to read and write analytically and directed me to the rich sources on comic theory. Finally, I want to thank Dr. Michael Chernick, who is most responsible for this work. Practically speaking, Dr. Chernick guided and supported me through every step of this research and writing. He continues to inspire me through his bold approach to the study of Talmud. I hope that this thesis exemplifies the great lesson I learned from studying with Dr. Chernick--that the study of Talmud can be a sacred, life-affirming, and at times even hilarious endeavor.

> There was a pious man whose father drank much wine, and every time he collapsed in the marketplace boys would come, pelt him with stones and pebbles, and mock him: "Look at the drunk!" When his pious son saw this, he was so humiliated that he wanted to die. So every day he would say to his father, "Papa, I will send word and have delivered to your home all the kinds of wine that are sold in the city, just so you won't have to go to the tavern to drink, for you bring shame upon me and upon yourself." Every day he spoke this way repeatedly, until finally the father promised him that he would not go to drink in the tavern. Thereafter, every morning and evening the pious son would prepare food and drink for his father, put him to sleep in his bed, and then leave him.
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> One time, when it was raining, the pious son went out in the marketplace on his way to the synagogue for prayer and saw a drunkard lying in the marketplace. A stream of rainwater was pouring down upon him, and older and younger boys were pelting him with stones and pebbles, and throwing mud at his face, even into his mouth. When the pious son saw this, he said to himself: I will go get Papa, bring him here, and show him this drunkard and the shame children and teenagers heap upon him--perhaps he will learn to restrain his mouth from drinking in taverns and getting drunk. And so he did. He brought him to the marketplace and showed him the drunkard. What did his father do? He went over to the drunkard and asked him what tavern he had drunk the wine that got him so drunk![1]
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> (Leviticus Rabbah 12:1)

Introduction: "Comedy in the Talmud? You've Gotta Be Kidding Me!"

It is perhaps the most common question I am asked in this fifth year of my rabbinical studies, a year in which one assignment remains: "What's your rabbinical thesis?" I answer, and they think I am joking. In a certain sense I am. Yet, I am also entirely serious. My thesis argues against the mere assumption that humor and seriousness are mutually exclusive domains. This paper reflects a hypothesis that I have carried with me, in my symbolic Jewish

[1] *Lev R.* 12:1. Although *Leviticus Rabbah* is clearly an extra-talmudic source, I selected this Rabbinic text as a preface to my thesis because it exemplifies the rabbinic sense of humor that I explore throughout this study.

intellectual suitcase for as long as I can remember: the conviction that the realm of the comic and the sacred are not antithetical.

During my first year of rabbinical studies, I began "listening for laughter" in the Jewish tradition. This began not as an intellectual pursuit, but as a personal matter. Only later did I discover that it had everything to do with scholarly discourse around humor in Jewish texts. It began one Monday morning, during our Torah service. As the Torah reader, reading for the first time since becoming Bat Mitzvah, approached the *bima* looking anxious and afraid, the entire community sensed her worry. The fear of humiliation consumed her. The observant *gabbai* noticed her tension as she approached, and he instinctively whispered a word into her ear. I do not know what he said, but whatever was said drew a slight giggle from the reader, and she emitted a warm smile. She was now ready to read. She chanted gracefully, honoring the Torah with each articulated syllable. However, in the service review a faculty member reprimanded the *gabbai*: "It looked like you whispered something funny in her ear. That was in bad taste." The *gabbai* replied, "Why?" The teacher answered, "There is nothing funny about Torah."

This story serves as a microcosm for comic discourse in ancient Jewish texts. The reader embodies the heavy load of anxieties found in Jewish literature. The *gabbai* reflects the human impulse toward the realm of the comic. Most notably, the teacher's admonition speaks to an anti-comedic discourse that has dominated literary theory throughout the ages. As we will explore in the following chapters, we find this view captured by the Superiority Theory of Humor, found in Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes. This view assumes that what is funny is funny, what is sacred is sacred, and "never the 'twain shall meet." My premise is

the opposite. The realm of the comic and the realm of the sacred are richly intertwined. Noticing this however requires a particular approach. Just as one trains one's ears to hear the brilliantly resonant chords of an orchestra, we must train our own ears to hear humor in Jewish tradition.

To this ends, there is "good news and bad news." The bad news first: With respect to the practice of identifying humor in ancient texts, Jewish interpretation historically sheds very little light on the matter. This is not to suggest that rabbinic texts are altogether devoid of humor. What is lacking in traditional commentaries then is a self-conscious meta-literary discourse on comic theory. In fact, comic theory as a plausible thread of literary theory is a relatively new lens for viewing literature altogether. Therefore, our task requires acquainting ourselves with the language developed by thinkers who have thought about comedy and humor.

This leads us to the good news. We shall find that this comic lens, comprising primarily three theories of humor, provides us with a fruitful vocabulary for understanding a variety of Rabbinic texts. Not only is this new approach to old literature a valid form of interpretation, as I hope to elucidate, comic theory may also render refreshing, unique readings to aggadic literature.

For a variety of reasons to be discussed, ranging from the nature of early philosophical thinking on comedy to contemporary academic fear of anachronism, scholarship has more or less steered clear of comedic interpretations of classical Jewish literature. With respect to parody, one aspect of comedy, Dr. David Stern refers to this void

in scholarship as a "deplorable hole in Jewish studies."[2] The utter exclusion of comic theory from interpretation renders any reading of our texts inherently limited. Thus, through the appropriate application of comic theory to applicable texts, we shall deepen our understanding of this literature and add a nuanced, comic dimension to our very notion of the rabbinic mindset.

[2] Stern, "The *Alphabet of Ben Sira* and the Early History of Parody in Jewish Literature," 2008.

Chapter 1. Coming to Terms: Three Theories of Humor

A. The Superiority Theory of Humor

Plato is among the earliest philosophers to posit a semblance of a definition of comedy. In *Philebus,* Plato regards laughter as a vice: "Observe the nature of the ridiculous…taken generally, the ridiculous is a certain kind of evil, specifically a vice."[3] Plato links laughter to malice, defined as a "pain of the soul…. the malicious man is somehow pleased at his neighbor's misfortunes." Thus, Plato regards comedy as morally corrupt. Plato effectively links humor, as a whole, to the pleasure one experiences over another's pain. For Plato, comedy points to one individual's superiority over another. For this reason, Plato gave rise to the first theory of humor, the Superiority Theory.

For Plato, this is a malicious practice, which leads him to suggest that we suppress laughter altogether. Aristotle, who agrees with Plato that humor involves a claim of superiority of one party over another, tempers Plato's general polemic against comedy. In *Poetics*, he agrees that "comedy…is an imitation of people who are worse than average,[4]" however he adds subtle and critical details to the very definition of comedy, in *Nichomachean Ethics*:

> People who carry humor to excess are considered vulgar buffoons. They try to be funny at all costs, and their aim is more to raise a laugh than to speak with propriety and to avoid giving pain to the butt of their jokes. But those who cannot say anything funny themselves, and are offended by those who do, are thought to be boorish and dour. Those who joke in a tactful way are called witty, which implies a quick versatility in their wits. For such sallies are

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[3] Excerpt from Plato, *Philebus* 48-50 in *The Philosophy of Laughter in Humor*, 11.

[4] Aristotle, *Poetics*, ch. 5, 1449a in *The Philosophy of Laughter in Humor*.

> thought to be movements of one's character, and, like bodies, characters are judged by their movements.[5]

Aristotle's contribution to the Superiority Theory cannot be overstated. While honoring the Platonic premise that comedy is an assertion of someone's superiority over another, he effectively wrests it from the status of a vice, and introduces the notion of wit as a valid aspect of comedy.

A few centuries later, the orator and statesman Cicero complements Aristotle's expansion of the Superiority Theory by applying comedy to the realm of public speaking. He directly addresses the problem with generalizing comedy as a vice: "The seat and province of the laughable, so to speak, lies in a kind of offensiveness and deformity, for the sayings that are laughed at the most are those which refer to something offensive in an inoffensive manner."[6] For Cicero, the lawyer, humor is a risky business, walking the fine line between propriety and perversion. Moreover, it is generally regarded as morally dubious because of its most obvious extreme examples.

Cicero also articulates one nuance to comedy, which will prove particularly helpful as we consider aggadic material. He writes, "there are two kinds of jokes, one of which is based on things, the other on words."[7] Cicero distinguishes humor inherent in a certain object from the humor found in the language used to describe an otherwise non-humorous matter. This distinction may be likened to "that made today between the comedian, who says funny

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[5] Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, Book IV, Ch 8, found in *The Philosophy of Laughter in Humor*, 11. p. 14.

[6] Cicero, *On the Orator*, Book II, Ch. 58.

[7] Ibid, Ch 59.

things, and the comic, who says things funny."[8] We shall return to this observation, as we explore Rabbinic texts that phrase non-humorous subject matters in exceptionally amusing ways.

For more than a millennium, this bleak notion of humor monopolized comic discourse. In the 17th century, the Superiority Theory was most clearly articulated by Thomas Hobbes, who famously defined comedy as "sudden glory…the passion which makes those grimaces called laughter." Hobbes understood human beings to be engaged in constant struggle for power, whereby one person's weakness is another person's strength. One's inferiority renders another superior. Hobbes reduced comedy to this philosophical premise, arguing that laughter itself "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."[9]

The essential position of the Superiority Theory, climactically captured by the Hobbesian notion of "sudden glory," is more or less equivalent to the German concept of *Shadenfreude*, or the Hebrew expression, "*simcha l'aid*"—i.e., when one delights in the suffering of another. This theory of comedy has prevailed historically. It is also prevalent in contemporary society. Human beings habitually laugh *at* as they experience comedy.

However, laughing *at* is not the only way of laughing, any more than making fun is not the only type of fun. In *Playboys and Killjoys*, Professor of English**,** Harry Levin**,** proposes that a full picture of comic theory requires distinguishing between the words,

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[8] Morreall, p. 17.

[9] Hobbes, Thomas. *Human Nature*, Ch. 8: 13 in *English Works*, v. 4, ed. Molesworth (London: Bohn, 1840).

"ridiculous" and "ludicrous." "Ridiculous" means, "laughing at, not with, somebody or something," whereas "ludicrous" means "playsome." It derives from the Latin, "*ludus*," meaning "play," and the word "ludicrous" thus implies an entirely different aspect of comedy than that captured by the ridiculous Superiority Theory. The Superiority Theory fails to capture aspects of comedy that are essentially playful as opposed to essentially power-oriented**.** It dismisses the influence of amusement in the human experience. Human beings do not only laugh *at*, they also laugh *with*. We do not only make fun, we also have fun**.** This too must factor into our theoretical framework for understanding comedy. Therefore, while this theory will aid considerably in the reading of some classical texts, it fails to paint a complete picture. There are other colors on the canvass.

B. The Incongruity Theory of Humor

> 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*).

The Incongruity Theory claims, "What amuses us is some object of perception or thought that clashes with what we would have expected in a particular set of circumstances."[10] In other words, there is a surprising gap between our expectations and our perceptions. This theory derives from Immanuel Kant, who wrote, "Laughter is an affection

[10] Morreall, 6.

arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing."[11] After telling the aforementioned joke, Kant explains, "At this joke we laugh… because our expectation was strained [for a time] and then was suddenly dissipated into nothing.**"** For Kant, this incongruity manifests itself physiologically. The incongruity perceived by the mind results in a reaction on the part of the organs of the body—intervals of relaxation and tension—which often result in laughter.

Arthur Shopenhauer adds another understanding of incongruity to this theory. Schopenhauer agrees with Kant that humor's essential factor is incongruity, but unlike Kant, he thinks that the incongruity does not comprise "strained expectation into nothing**.**" Rather, he emphasizes the incongruity between sensory perception and abstract knowledge. A matter is humorous when it generates a clash between two ontologies—that is, between the idea or concept of a thing, and the thing as perceived by the senses. Within this definition, Schopenhauer further defines three terms, which will prove useful in discussing our stories. Within the category of "ludicrous," he defines wit and folly. Wit expresses itself when "we have previously known two or more very different real objects, ideas—ideas of sense perception—and have intentionally identified them through the unity of a concept which comprehends them both."[12] Folly pertains to the opposite situation: "when the concept is first present in knowledge and we pass from it to reality, and to operation upon it, to action: objects which in other respects are fundamentally different, but which are all thought in the

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

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

one concept are now regarded and treated in the same way, till, to the surprise and astonishment of the person acting the great difference of their other aspects appears."

Regarding the Incongruity Theory, its contrast with the Superiority Theory functions not merely in its definition of humor, but also in its understanding of humor vis-à-vis human nature. For Plato, comedy is a vice, something that should be pushed out of civilization. For the Incongruity theorist, humor is an undeniable aspect of human nature. To discourage it in all its forms would constitute a kind of self-denial. According to Schopenhauer, "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*."[13]

C. The Relief Theory of Humor

If Kant succeeded in focusing our attention to element of incongruity inherent in humor, his physiological explanations fell short for subsequent scientifically-oriented philosophers such as Herbert Spencer. "How comes a sense of the incongruous to be followed by these peculiar bodily actions? Why…should there be a contraction of particular facial muscles and particular muscles of the chest and abdomen?"[14] For Spencer, the answer resided in physiology, and his theory reflects the third major theory on humor, the Relief Theory.

The Relief Theory turns to the phenomenon of laughter as the expression of nervous energy. Spencer understands laughter as the discharge of arrested feelings into the muscular

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[13] ibid.

[14] Spencer, Herbert. *The Physiology of Laughter*, from Essays on Education, Etc. (London: Dent, 1911).

system, which occurs when there are no other adequate means of relieving this nervous energy. Freud, too, sees laughter in light of excess psychic energy, yet he expands and complicates the discussion in light of his own theory of psychology. Freud understands humor as a psychic interplay, a kind of nervous energy transfer, between the super-ego and the ego:

> 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 the super-ego, thus inflated, the ego can appear tiny and all its interests trivial, and with this fresh distribution of energy it may be an easy matter for it to suppress the potential reactions of the 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).[15]

Freud's understanding of humor, thus, involves a shifting of cathexis, of the way in which nervous emotional energy is processed, shifting between conscious and unconscious.

To be sure, the Relief Theory of humor tries to explain the reaction to the humorous in scientific terms. Yet the essential contribution of this theory broadens our readings of texts considerably. This theory opens the door to the consideration of possible tensions that lay beneath the surface of a given story and to anxieties inherent in the world that produced the text**.** In our study, based on what we do know about realities of the rabbinic world, we may consider stories in light of how nervous energy is processed, transferred, or released—that is, in terms of Freud's shifting of cathexis.

D. Contemporary Thinking

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[15] Freud, Sigmund, "Humor." Exerped in Morreall, *Philosophy in Laughter and Humor.*

Today, the Incongruity Theory, according to Morreall, is "the most popular current philosophical theory of humor." Indeed, it is the most user-friendly, as it may be applied to all instances identified as humorous or comedic. Particularly among rabbinic stories that generously employ logical wit and palpable absurdity, we will find the core notions of the Incongruity Theory to be quite helpful in highlighting ridiculous and ludicrous elements. One reason for the prominence of this theory is that it does not negate other theories. The Superiority Theory and the Relief Theory posit certain ideological claims that cannot easily co-exist. They each require stepping into a set of ideas in order to apply their readings to the text. The Incongruity Theory, on the other hand, need not exist in a vacuum. It may be applied to complement other readings without compromising its validity.

There is another related reason for the current prominence of the Incongruity Theory**.** This reason is articulated best by sociologist Peter Berger, who attributes the prominence of the Incongruity Theory to the very nature of Modernity. According to Berger, "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 *incongruencies*."[16] According to Berger, it is incongruence that exists at the heart of the comic experience. Thus, Modernity itself accords with the Incongruity Theory of humor. It sets the stage for a "theology of the comic," a modern lens that is distinctly capable of sensing the sacred within the comic, and the comic within the sacred. Hence, as of late the sense is that these two realms are not mutually exclusive. Assuming

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

that the comic and the sacred share turf, chapter two considers several instances in the Talmud, in which these three theories of humor are most vivid.

E. A Note on the Comic and the Tragic

In fact, it is erroneous to claim that only three theories of comedy exist. There is a plethora of ways of defining comedy. It would be an egregious oversight to omit one such way: defining comedy through its intimate relationship with tragedy. There are compelling reasons why these two dramatic masks, as a pair, have long symbolized theatrical art. Horace Walpole noted, "The world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel."[17] Charlie Chaplain formulated similarly that "Comedy is life viewed from a distance; tragedy, life in a close-up."[18] As Levin explains, "Classical commentators had regularly distinguished between tragic *pathos*, or emotion, and comic *ethos*, or conduct." Comedy and tragedy have been a duo for as long as the words themselves have held meaning. Before comedy was ever a category of its own, it existed within the context of tragedy, as "comic relief."[19] Thus, it comes to no surprise that within rabbinic literature, too, we find these two realms closely knit.

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[17] Harry Levin, *Playboys and Killjoys*. P. 9.

[18] ibid.

[19] Berger, 17.

Chapter 2. Tradition and Humor: The Tension and the Challenge

A. Tense Relationship: In the Bible and Beyond

The overwhelming number of famous Jewish comedians or the celebration of humor within Yiddish culture could easily lead someone to assume that tradition has always looked favorably upon humor. In fact this is far from true. While the aforementioned example of the teacher in the Introduction demonstrates how a contemporary Jew could view the presence of humor as "comic intrusion," our teacher's anxiety is manifest in texts throughout the ages.

We need look no further than the language of the supreme sin of the golden calf for validation:

> *Vayeishev ha'am le'echol, v'shato, vayakumu l'tzachek.*
> The Israelites sat down to eat and drink, and they rose *l'tzachek*. (Exodus 32:6)

The letters *tzadi-chet-koof* compose a popular Hebrew root, which in the *kal* form ("*litzchok"*) means, "to laugh"--as in the name, *Yitzchak* ("he will laugh"). However, in the Bible, this root is not always a laughing matter, specifically when it appears in the *pi'el* form ("*l'tzachek"*). In the story of Joseph, Potiphar's wife accuses him of sexual impropriety with the words: "That Hebrew slave whom you brought into our house came to me *l'tzachek bi*."[20] Unsurprisingly, it is in the *pi'el* form that the word appears to describe the moral corruption of the Israelites with the golden calf: *vayakumu l'tzachek*, "they rose up to make merry."

Nachmanides assigns such significance to this "merry-making" that he contends that it was not the golden calf, per se, that caused God to instruct Moses, "*lech, reid*--go, get yourself down." If it were the golden calf, then this would have been uttered on the same day

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[20] *Gen.* 39:17, often translated, "to mock me," but clearly holds sexual connotations.

that Aaron made the calf. Rather, it is immediately following the word, "*l'tzachek*," that God instructs Moses to descend. Similarly, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch interprets this instance of *l'tzachek* as a "deliberate… mockery of the laws of morality [at the] very time that the Divine Law of Morality was to have found a home and Sanctuary… in the midst of the Jewish people."[21]

Thus, we find within the semantic field of the biblical verb for laughter an internal tension. Their "laughter" joins the making of the calf as an affront to God! This biblical anti-comic discourse aligns with the philosophical Platonic polemic, both cast a disapproving glance upon all instances of the comic.

In the rabbinic period, this discourse continues, as indicated by the following midrash:

> ויקרא אברהם את שם בנו יצחק יצא חוק לעולם ניתן דורייה לעולם.
> And Abraham called the name of his son that was born unto him, whom Sarah bore to him, Isaac (Gen 21:3) [the name signifying:] Law had gone forth (*yatza chok*) to the world, a gift was given to the world.[22]

The literal meaning of the name "*Yitzchak*" is quite clear: "he will laugh." Yet, in this midrash, the Rabbis interpret the word in a different light, silencing the literal laughter. The midrash casts a shadow on the comic realm, and with it, a comic reading of the biblical story.

Is it appropriate to call this midrash a self-conscious polemic against laughter? Are the unknown authors of these stories intent on the complete elimination of humor from the tradition? This is impossible to know. In truth, this rabbinic reading of Isaac's name is

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[21] Hirsch, Samson Raphael. *Pentateuch*. Volume II: Exodus. Translated by Isaac Levy, 2nd edition. Judaica Press: London. 1960.

[22] *Gen R.* 53:7

primarily about law, and it reflects an interest in promoting a particular legal system. Nevertheless, the text promotes its message at the expense of the comic reading, and in so doing it marginalizes the otherwise obvious ironic humor of two very old people baring a son. In the first section of chapter 4, we will consider various aggadot similar to this midrash, which feature what I refer to throughout this study as "meta-comedy" or "meta-comedic discourse." These terms apply to literature that pertains to comic realm, often commenting on the propriety or impropriety of comedy. Specifically, we shall consider aggadot that reflect the dialectic tension between the amplification and silencing of the comic voice.

The trend of interpretation throughout Jewish history followed the course of the midrash above, reading potentially humorous texts in a manner that overshadows the comic readings. Modern readers especially are particularly cautious of reading ancient texts for comic content, due to fear of anachronism. They ask, "How can we know today what was funny long ago?

B. The Challenge of Anachronism: "I Guess Ya Just Had to Be There!"

To be sure, there is a risk involved in proposing that we can understand the ancient sense of humor. After all, it is utterly impossible to be certain about something as culturally determined as humor. However, as Professor David Stern so aptly retorts, "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?"[23]

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[23] Stern, p. 448

In *Stop Me if You've Heard This*," writer Jim Holt traces the history of jokes, and faces this problem head-on, by studying the oldest known joke book, *the Philogelos*, probably compiled in the fourth or fifth century A.D. Although a modern reader might not find the jokes within the *Philogelos* to be "laugh out loud funny," the humor within the work is palpable, suggesting a universality of a great deal of humorous content. Consider this 1600 year old joke:

> "How shall I cut your hair?" a talkative barber asked a wag.
> "In silence!"[24]

Contemporaries would not label this dialogue hilarious, but the humor is obvious. The *Philogelos'* author also includes in his joke book "stock characters: the drunk, the miser, the braggart, the sex-starved woman, and the man with bad breath, as well as a classic type known as the *scholastikos*, variously translated as 'pedant,' 'absent-minded professor,' or 'egg-head":

> An egghead was on a sea voyage when a big storm blew up, causing his slaves to weep in terror. "Don't cry," he consoled them, "I have freed you all in my will."[25]

This joke could easily find its place in a contemporary joke book, despite that it is set in other time and place. Not only do certain ancient jokes often seem to embody a degree of timelessness, but there is also another reason why it is worthwhile for contemporaries to take ancient jokes seriously. In some cases, it was the ancients who deserve credit for modern jokes. The 15th c. Papal secretary and Renaissance humanist, Poggio Bracciolini, is credited

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[24] Holt, Jim. *Stop Me If You've Heard This*, p. 11.

[25] ibid., 14.

with compiling the first volume of jokes published in Europe, entitled *Liber Facetiarum*. Comprising 273 jokes, this work features a joke to which the current television show *Curb Your Enthusiasm* owes credit:

> A husband asks his wife why, if women and men get equal pleasure out of sex, it is the men who pursue the women rather than vice verse.
> "It's obvious," the wife says. "We women are always ready to make love, and you men aren't. What good would it do to us to solicit you when you're not in the mood?" (Facetia XLVII)

Holt retells the incident in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*:

> Cheryl, lying in bed with her husband, Larry, asks him why she's the one who always has to initiate sex. "It's because we men are always ready to go," he replies, "just tap me on the shoulder when you want it!"[26]

Folklorist often contend that jokes don not get invented, they evolve.[27] We will examine various aggadot that suggest that this notion, albeit exaggerated, may be quite accurate. Some texts feature aspects of ribaldry that is common to jokes today and throughout the ages. These involve, among other things, flatulence, genitalia, and various other "unmentionables."

There are some texts in which the humor is difficult to detect. There is a great deal of material that would be quite humorous to the modern reader, if only we spoke the same language as the authors, as in the case of an aggadah from tractate Nedarim 66b. Of course, we do not live in the same culture, nor do we speak the various dialects of Aramaic necessary to understand comedic elements of that aggadah. Such jokes when told nowadays are

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[26] *ibid.*, 20-21. Copies of the *Facetia* are quite rare. Holt bases his work off a fascimile of an 1878 Paris edition, which he found in one of the libraries of NYU.

[27] *ibid.*, 50.

followed by awkward silence and the dreadful cliche, “Ya just had to be there.” In these cases we are deaf to the humor that is camouflaged in the culturally specific stories.

It is clear why tradition and scholarship has tended to err on the side of caution by avoiding the kind of project in which I have chosen to engage. However, it is equally true that this pervasive historical avoidance has left texts themselves significantly understudied and the comic voices therein tragically unheard.

Chapter 3: New Theories Meet Old Texts.

Chapter 1 establishes a vocabulary of comedy based on the three prominent theories. There is, however, a fundamental problem with even this method of exposition, articulated wittily by the great cartoonist, Saul Steinberg: "Trying to define humor is one of the definitions of humor."[28] Effective jokes define themselves, with their humor self-evident, as anyone who has followed a joke with an explanation knows for certain. Accordingly, in this chapter I will elaborate upon the major theories of humor by providing examples of jokes and humorous rabbinic texts.

It is worth noting that for critical reasons this thesis' work does not assume the absolute claims of correctness these theories make for themselves. In most cases, humorous talmudic aggadot do not neatly fit into the theoretical categories of humor based on a protagonist's superiority, or on incongruity, or on the cathectic relief the joke provides. Nevertheless, it will benefit this study if I delineate these humor theories by briefly highlighting certain texts or jokes that elucidate them.

A. Superiority Theory: The Example of Unholy Halitosis

The Superiority Theory involves the wide array of jokes that pertain to making fun and laughing at. Plato's moral objection to humor is not without merit. These stories usually fall into this category because they are overtly unethical, reflecting outright insensitivity by denigrating an individual or group. Consider this egregiously tasteless joke, which an Englishwoman relayed to Holt and is highly offensive to women: "Why do women wear

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[28] Levin, 191.

perfume and makeup? Because they smell bad and are ugly." In fact, this joke is not only lacking in sensitivity toward women, but also in artistry. The humor itself depends on the listener's willingness to play along with the offense against women. Without an audience with a sexist mentality, there is no humor left, rendering this joke lousy at best. In the rabbinic world, we do find an audience willing to denigrate certain other groups, over which the Rabbis had a vested interest in asserting their own superiority. This is clear in a text from *Avot DeRebbi Natan*, the first and longest of the Minor Tractates of the Babylonian Talmud:

> 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].[29]

This aggadah characterizes the other as a sexually corrupt people. The narrative voice empowers Akiva through the ruler's gracious offer--two harlots who lust over him. The ruler's assumption that any man would surely be attracted to these women paints a picture of a certain other who indulges in harlotry and promiscuity. Yet, the superior Akiva reacts with disgust. Reasoning with Akiva, the ruler even alludes to the biblical notion of *tzelem Elohim*, the image of God in which all of humanity was created. That the foreign ruler draws on language from Genesis only adds weight to the laudability of Akiva. Yet, the ultimate mockery embodied in this story pertains not to the sexual corruption of the foreigners, but

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[29] *ARN* 16, from *Book of Legends*, ed. Bialik and Ravnitsky.

rather to their diet, which Akiva considers inferior to his own. Akiva's repulsion results literally from their *terayfah* breath, implying that if it were not for their breath, he might have indulged in the pleasure of their company. Alas, the moment was ruined by their unholy halitosis!

The Hobbesian notion of "sudden glory," the point at which one's superiority over another becomes manifest, is evident in this story's punch-line: "What could I do?" Akiva wittily asks, as if he had no choice in the matter. His sexual desire was stunned by the breath of the otherwise seductive, bride-like harlots. The thick sarcasm of Akiva's response slaps the foreigner in the face, and the reader, ancient and contemporary alike, may bask in the aggadah's humorous representation of religious superiority. The story's superiority pertains to politics as well. Rome is reduced from a world of power and cultural paradigm into a mere sex object whose culinary culture, along with its sexuality, stinks.

B. Relief Theory: The Example of Isaac's Legitimacy

There are some jokes for which the humor is best explained by the Relief Theory, arguing that laughter is the release of psychic energy, and through the comic we find relief. Extreme examples of this theory include the vulgar comic utterances known as dirty jokes. The subject of sex and sexuality is highly repressed, socially and psychologically, and the dirty joke relieves this repression. The flurry of jokes that surface following sex scandals, for instance, reflects a release of pent up anxiety. Following the scandal involving President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky there was no shortage of such jokes flooding people's inboxes.

For example: “Imagine, Monica’s thirty years old already! It seems like only yesterday she was crawling around the floor of the Oval Office!”[30]

There is an entire category in Chapter 4 entitled, “Rabbinic Ribaldry,” devoted to aggadot that involve aspects of human relations that are not easily discussable, including adultery, flatulence, and other realities of civilization that might label as unmentionable. This aggadah provides an example:

> אמר רבי לוי: אותו היום שגמל אברהם את יצחק בנו עשה סעודה גדולה, היו כל אומות העולם מרננים ואומרים: ראיתם זקן וזקנה שהביאו אסופי מן השוק ואומרים: בנינו הוא, ולא עוד אלא שעושין משתה גדול להעמיד דבריהם מה עשה אברהם אבינו ־ הלך וזימן כל גדולי הדור, ושרה אמנו זימנה את נשותיהם, וכל אחת ואחת הביאה בנה עמה ומניקתה לא הביאה, ונעשה נס בשרה אמנו ונפתחו דדיה כשני מעיינות, והניקה את כולן. ועדיין היו מרננים ואומרים: אם שרה הבת תשעים שנה תלד, אברהם בן מאה שנה יוליד? מיד נהפך קלסתר פנים של יצחק ונדמה לאברהם. פתחו כולם ואמרו (בראשית כה) אברהם הוליד את יצחק.
>
> R. Levi said: On the day that Abraham weaned his son Isaac, he made a great banquet, and all the peoples of the world derided him, saying, “Have you seen that old man and woman, who brought a foundling from the street, and now claim him as their son! And what is more, they make a great banquet to establish their claim!” What did our father Abraham do?” He went and invited all the great men of the age, and our mother Sarah invited their wives. Each one brought her child with her, but not the wet-nurse, and a miracle happened unto our mother Sarah, as her breasts opened like two fountains, and she suckled them all. Yet they still scoffed, saying, “Granted that Sarah could give birth at the age of ninety, could Abraham beget [a child] at the age of a hundred?” Immediately the lineaments of Isaac's visage changed and became like Abraham's, whereupon they all cried out, Abraham begat Isaac![31]

Here we have a story, which, true to the midrashic tradition, approaches a problem with the biblical story that the Torah’s text fails to address, namely, how to allay doubts about Isaac’s

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[30] Holt, 79.

[31] *BM* 87a

legitimacy given his parents' age. The Bible simply treats this as a miraculous act of God. However, for the Rabbis, miracles were a source of theological anxiety. Repeatedly, talmudic passages cast doubt upon the relevance of miracles within their own culture, claiming, "One should not depend on a miracle."[32] Elsewhere the Babylonian Talmud admonishes, "One should never stand in a place of danger, with the expectation that a miracle will be wrought on his behalf."[33] Given this view about the miraculous, certain allegations about Isaac's legitimacy might emerge. This story plays out on these anxieties. First, we encounter the implicit allegation that Sarah was infertile. This is not a predicament with which Rabbinic Judaism is altogether unfamiliar. If this were true about Sarah, then she becomes stigmatized, tainting the first matriarch.

The second anxiety focuses on Abraham. Having proven that Sarah is, in fact, the mother of all Jewish mothers, as it were, the midrash focuses attention now on Abraham, and the possible claim that he is not the father of the child. The prospect of Sarah as an adulteress and Abraham as an impotent man elicits significant anxiety. This kind of familial dysfunctionality occurs in all societies, often regarded as "unmentionable." There is an additional problem presented by these claims. If Isaac is illegitimate--even if his lineage is remotely in doubt--then the the Rabbis can no longer claim Abraham as their forefather, and God's covenantal promise to Abraham becomes more manifest among descendants of Ishmael! Clearly, if this story is being told, then it is being heard with heavy psychological and psycho-social unease about the chosenness of the Jewish people.

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[32] *Pes* 64b

[33] *Shab* 32a

The relief for this anxiety is found in two images. The utterly absurd nature of these images propels the humor. In the case of the former, the miracle of Sarah's having given birth to Isaac is proven by the absurdly miraculous transformation of Sarah's nipples into fountains that shoot out milk in jet-streams. In the case of the latter, Isaac's face miraculously morphs into Abraham's face (beard and all?), presenting the audience with an image so ludicrous that the only conceivable reaction is to laugh.

Of course, one may rightly claim, "where is the proof?" There is no scientific proof of laughter as a reaction to this story. Inconveniently, the Talmud was redacted without a record of the emotional reactions to its dicta. However, we may argue that the proof is in the pudding. Through an understanding of these various anxieties, the humor reveals itself. As Horace notes in his preface to *The Art of Poetry: "*Supposing a painter chose to put a human head on a horse's neck, or to spread feathers of various colors over the limbs of several different creatures, or to make what in the upper part is a beautiful woman tail off into a hideous fish, could you help laughing when he showed you his efforts?"[34]

This story tackles issues that were not unfamiliar to the Rabbis. From a Freudian perspective, issues such as adultery and infertility are sources of considerable anxiety. This particular midrashic treatment of the biblical story draws out this anxious energy, transferring it from the ego to the superego, and, according to the Relief Theory, the natural human response is simple: laughter.

C. Incongruity Theory: Equal to Them All

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[34] Horace, "On the Art of Poetry," in *Classical Literary Criticism*. New York: Penguin, 2001. p. 98.

The Incongruity Theory is the most inclusive of the major theories. It offers a reading of humor that is applicable to virtually all comic instances. The aforementioned comment of Horace, conflating the imagery of a human with a horse, or a beautiful woman with a fish, exemplifies the Incongruity Theory. Here, two incongruous items, human and horse, are presented as one, and the result is laughter.

The Incongruity Theory functions palpably within each and every punch-line. Perhaps no contemporary comedian is more brilliant at delivering a punch-line than Steven Wright. For example, his classic: "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'." We need not analyzing this joke at length to view it through multiple lenses. The application of the Relief Theory to an analysis of this joke would consider its treatment of death, a subject of arguably unparalleled nervous psychic energy. Yet, what makes this joke funny is not merely its ability to trigger the transfer of this energy from the ego to superego. There is also a witty punch-line at play, which the Incongruity Theory illuminates. On the one hand, the listener is presented with the most powerful, emotional moments of one's life, birth and death. These loaded moments are instantly juxtaposed with another reality, that of a trite and overused linguistic usage. In Kantian terms, the incongruity itself dissolves with the punch-line and the natural response is laughter.

A similar reading may be applied to another famous Wright joke: "So I'm driving down the highway and there's a guy hitchhiking, holding a sign that says, 'Heaven.' So I hit him." In this quip, we may easily identify all three theories, the Relief and Inconguruity theories function in the same way as in the first Wright joke. Yet this one lends itself to a

Superiority reading as well, as it engages the listener in the sudden glory of laughing at the hitchhiker.

Similarly, we may identify certain incongruities within the rabbinic texts mentioned above. In the case of Rabbi Akiva, the story presents beautiful women with unbearable breath, conflating the images of bride and beast. In the midrash involving Isaac's birth, the merging of infertility and hyperfertility, symbolized by Sarah's fountain-like breasts, presents an incongruity of literally absurd proportions. The image of newborn Isaac with Abraham's elderly face, too, absurdly counters the very dangerous allegation of Isaac's illegitimacy.

A popular bit on Conan O'Brian makes similar use of facial incongruity, postulating what the children of famous stars might look like if they mated. Below is an example featuring Harrison Ford and Ally McBeal:

As we shall see in the subcategory of Chapter 4 entitled "Absurdity," within the fictive world of the rabbinic imagination, incongruity is salient and manifested in both ludicrous and absurd ways. In the case of contemporary comedians such as Wright or O'Brien, their purpose is to draw a laugh. With talmudic tales, the humor is not evidently for its own sake. The comic dimensions serve a variety of functions: didactic, homiletic, or legal. Nevertheless, the humor beneath the surface of these stories demands attention and exposition, for it is quite instrumental within the stories, and it plays a significant role in the rabbinic imagination as a whole.

Chapter 4: Sensing Rabbinic Humor, Tale by Tale

Introduction: Five Senses

Because the major theories of humor are in many cases valid lenses through which we may view even a single story, the theories alone fail to serve as organizing categories. Therefore, our analysis will be eclectic, weaving together the various theories in order to illuminate the comic dimensions of various talmudic tales. We will categorize these stories according to another principle: features. I have identified five broad categories, based on key features: Meta-Comedy, Ribaldry, Intellectual Prowess, Language Games, and Absurdity. Of course, several stories fall into multiple categories, but these categories, by and large, each reflect a distinct comic tone and mood.

Mark Twain wrote, "Truth is stranger than fiction," a quotation typically applied to accentuate the oddness of the so-called real world. But Twain's quote actually tells more about the world of fiction, for it continues: "But it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities. Truth isn't."[35] The irony of this witticism is in identifying fiction rather than truth as a realm that is somehow restricted. Indeed, the fictive world operates with strict notions of plausibility. Even in the case of science fiction, the reader is able to step inside the literary world, despite its utter dissonance with the real world, because there are certain rules in place. We may liken this literary phenomenon to Peter Berger's sociological concept of plausibility structures, referring to the specific conditions and institutions that continually

[35] Twain, Mark. *Following the Equator: A Journey around the World.* Dover, 1989.

reinforce and reconstruct legitimate values and meaning.[36] Berger argues that the comic realm involves its own ontology:

> The comic at its most intense...presents a counterworld, an upside-down world. This counterworld is disclosed as lurking behind or beneath the world as we commonly know it. [This] counterworld seems to be more real than the ordinary, empirical world. On the morning after, so to speak, one must reflect about the epistemological status of this counterworld.[37]

If we consider the comic realm its own ontological domain, then these categories mentioned above serve as sub-domains within which the stories are governed by their own rules. The first subchapter, on Meta-Comedy, picks up the earlier discussion on the dialectic tension surrounding comedy. These stories address the question, "When is it appropriate and inappropriate to laugh?" Within the category of Ribaldry, the Rabbis approach various grotesque and naughty acts, with a surprising degree of silliness, sarcasm, and ridicule. Our largest category demonstrates a confluence of rabbinic obsessions with wisdom and power as we encounter various texts in which the Rabbis employ knowledge and wit to ridicule each other and other peoples. The section on Language Games focus on another comic feature, namely, jokes in which the humor itself is found not in the object or matter being discussed, but in the words used to discuss it. The particularly witty and comic use of language in situations that otherwise might not be considered funny, warrants its own category. This category reflects a dazzling quality of the rabbinic comic voice. Finally, in the Absurdity section, we encounter a text that most aptly elucidates Berger's notion of a counterworld.

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[36] Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy.*

[37] Berger, Peter. *Redeeming Laughter*, 209.

There the rabbinic imagination runs wild, playfully changing the rules of nature in order to stage dramatic ideas of their own.

A. Meta-Comedic Texts

In Chapter 2, we established that the subject of humor is a source of tension throughout Jewish literature. Within the Talmud, we find various texts that stage this meta-comedic discourse.

Text 1. Pesahim 117a

כי הא דרבה מקמי דפתח להו לרבנן אמר מילתא דבדיחותא, ובדחו רבנן. ולבסוף יתיב באימתא, ופתח בשמעתא.

> *Even as Rabbah used to say something humorous to his scholars before he commenced [his discourse], in order to amuse them. After that he sat in awe and commenced the lecture.*[38]

Commentary:

This small text offers a window into the world of the 3rd-4th century Amora, Rabbah. For Rabbah, humor is not necessarily integrated in the study of Torah but it does seem prerequisite to it. It serves a critical purpose, rendering it a customary starting point. Apparently, this starting point characterizes Rabbah, so much so that in Shabbat 30b we find another reference to this custom.

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[38] *Pes* 117a. This teaching also appears in *Shab 30b*, in a discussion pertaining to the relationship between glee and awe.

In *Shemoneh Perakim-Hakdamah Lemasekhet Avot*, Maimonides quotes an Aramaic saying, "The Rabbis, when they tired of their studying (*garsayhu*), used to speak among themselves words of amusement (*milei devedihuta*)."[39] Maimonides does not provide a source for this teaching, but it is complements Rabbah's passage above. Both teachings suggest a critical role for the comic realm in the study of Torah. For Rabbah, humor paves the way for learning; and as Rambam portrays the ancient Rabbis, comedy is what they do when they tire of learning. Humor re-energizes them. Unlike contemporary comedy, humor functions not for its own sake, but rather, as a tool employed for the sake of invigorating the study of Torah.

While the above teaching pertains to humor as a tool for enhancing learning, the following passages address the role of humor in religious life. The most obvious polemic against humor may be found in the passage below, which captures the gloom surrounding the destruction of the Second Temple.

Text 2. Avodah Zarah 3b

רב אחא לרב נחמן בר יצחק: מיום שחרב בית המקדש אין שחוק להקב"ה. ומנלן דליכא שחוק? אילימא מדכתיב: (ישעיהו כב) ויקרא ה' אלהים צבאות ביום ההוא לבכי ולמספד ולקרחה וגו', דלמא ההוא יומא ותו לאֵ אלא דכתיב: (תהלים קלז) אם אשכחך ירושלם תשכח ימיני, תדבק לשוני לחכי אם לא אזכרכי, דלמא שכחה הוא דליכא, אבל שחוק מיהא איכאֵ אלא מהא: (ישעיהו מב) החשיתי מעולם אחריש אתאפק וגו'.

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[39] Stern, David. "The Alphabet of Ben Sirah and the Early History of Parody in Jewish Literature." Citing Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, *Shemoneh Perakim-Hakdamah Lemasekhet Avot*, chap. 5, in Rabbeinu Mosheh ben Maimon, *Hakdamot Lefeirush Hamishnah* (ed. M. D. Rabinovits; Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kuk, 1961), 189.

> R. Aba said to R. Nahman b. Isaac: Since the day of the destruction of the Temple, there is no laughter for the Holy One, blessed be He. Whence do we know that there is not? Shall we say from the verse, "And on that day did the Lord, the God of Hosts, call to weeping and lamentation." But this refers to that day and no more. Shall we then say, from this verse: "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you."[40]

In this text, laughter itself is in exile. According to Rav Aba, God no longer laughs because in the wake of extreme tragedy, there is no room or role for laughter. The Stam challenges the first proof-text, on the grounds that perhaps it applies only to the day of the destruction, however the *sugya* then answers the subsequent challenge, with the argument that laughter would indicate the forgetting of Jerusalem, which is forbidden by the second proof-text. The point is clear: laughter is inappropriate. In the next passage however, Rabbi Akiba demonstrates the oppose claim.

Text 3. Makkot 24a-b

> וכבר היה ר"ג ורבי אלעזר בן עזריה ורבי יהושע ורבי עקיבא מהלכין בדרך, ושמעו קול המונה של רומי מפלטה [ברחוק] מאה ועשרים מיל, והתחילו בוכין, ורבי עקיבא משחק. אמרו לו: מפני מה אתה משחק? אמר להם: ואתם מפני מה אתם בוכים? אמרו לו: הללו כושיים שמשתחוים לעצבים ומקטרים לעבודת כוכבים יושבין בטח והשקט, ואנו בית הדום רגלי אלהינו שרוף באש ולא נבכה? אמר להן: לכך אני מצחק, ומה לעוברי רצונו כך, לעושי רצונו על אחת כמה וכמה. שוב פעם אחת היו עולין לירושלים, כיון שהגיעו להר הצופים קרעו בגדיהם. כיון שהגיעו להר הבית, ראו שועל שיצא מבית קדשי הקדשים, התחילו הן בוכין ור"ע מצחק. אמרו לו: מפני מה אתה מצחק? אמר להם: מפני מה אתם בוכים? אמרו לו, מקום שכתוב בו: (במדבר א') והזר הקרב יומת ועכשיו שועלים הלכו בו ולא נבכה? אמר להן: לכך אני מצחק, דכתיב: (ישעיהו ח') ואעידה לי עדים נאמנים את

[40] *AZ* 3b.

אוריה הכהן ואת זכריה בין יברכיהו, וכי מה ענין אוריה אצל זכריה? אוריה במקדש ראשון וזכריה במקדש שני אלא, תלה הכתוב נבואתו של זכריה בנבואתו של אוריה, באוריה כתיב: (מיכה ג') לכן בגללכם ציון שדה תחרש [וגו',] בזכריה כתיב: (זכריה ח') עוד ישבו זקנים וזקנות ברחובות ירושלם, עד שלא נתקיימה נבואתו של אוריה - הייתי מתיירא שלא תתקיים נבואתו של זכריה, עכשיו שנתקיימה נבואתו של אוריה - בידוע שנבואתו של זכריה מתקיימת. בלשון הזה אמרו לו: עקיבא, ניחמתנו עקיבא, ניחמתנו. הדרן עלך אלו הן הלוקין וסליקא לה מסכת מכות.

Long ago, as Rabban Gamaliel, R. Eleazer b. Azariah, R. Joshua and R. Akiba were walking on the road, they heard the noise of the crowds at Rome [traveling] from Puteoli a hundred and twenty miles away. They began to weep, but R. Akiba was laughing. They said to him, “Why are you laughing?” He said to them, “Why are you weeping?” They said, “These heathens who bow down to images and burn incense to idols live in safety and ease, whereas our Temple, the ‘Footstool’ of our God is burnt down by fire. Should we not weep?” He replied: “Therefore, am I laughing. If those who offend Him fare in this way, how much better shall fare those who obey Him!”

On another occasion, they were coming up to Jerusalem together, and just as they came to Mount Scopus they saw a fox emerging from the Holy of Holies. They began to weep, but R. Akiba was laughing. They said to him, “Why are you laughing?” He said: “Why are you weeping?” They said to him: “A place of which it was once said, ‘And the common man that draws near shall be put to death,’ is now become the haunt of foxes. Should we not weep?” He said to them: “Therefore am I laughing; for it is written, ‘And I will take to Me faithful witnesses to record, Uriah the priest and Zechariah the Son of Jeberechiah.’ Now what connection has this Uriah the priest with Zechariah? Uriah lived during the times of the first Temple, while [the other,] Zechariah lived [and prophesied] during the second Temple; but Holy-Writ linked the [later] prophecy of Zechariah with the [earlier] prophecy of Uriah, In the [earlier] prophecy [in the days] of Uriah it is written, ‘Therefore shall Zion for your sake be ploughed as a field etc.’ In Zechariah it is written, ‘Thus says the Lord of Hosts, There shall yet old men and old women sit in the broad places of Jerusalem so long as Uriah's [threatening] prophecy had not had been fulfilled, I had misgivings lest Zechariah's prophecy might not be fulfilled. Now that Uriah's prophecy has been fulfilled, it is quite certain that Zechariah's prophecy also is to be fulfilled.” They said to him: “Akiba, you have comforted us! Akiba, you have comforted us!”[41]

[41] *Mak 24a-b*. Another example of Akiva’s laughter is found in Yoma 38a, functioning along similar meta-comedic lines.

Commentary:

This passage, like the passage on Rabbah, is not humorous for the audience, but it is remarkably telling in terms of the nature of comedy. This aggadah presents the four Sages passing through tragic scenery, for which the natural response would seem to be tears. Akiba is alone in his laughter, and the other three Sages are as shocked as can be. Why, according to the three theories of humor, is this such a laughing matter?

The obvious reading is the Superiority Theory. Akiba's laughter is, in Hobbes' words, "sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly."[42] The superiority of the Jews over the Romans comes to fruition in the world to come. The scene itself, beheld in the present by the Sages, could not be more more tragic. They are witnessing the desecration of the Holy of Holies! Yet, Akiba's faith in the truthfulness of Prophecy transforms this supremely tragic defeat into a laughable chapter in the longer story of God's people.

The Superiority Theory, however, fails to capture the role of contrast, for it is actually the gap between the present and future which prompts the laughter. According to Schopenhauer, the laughter results from "the very incongruity of sensuous and abstract knowledge," the gap between what they witness and what Akiba understands abstractly.[43]

The relationship between the comic and the tragic is salient in this passage. The element of tragedy, in fact, is necessary for the comedy. We can best understand this relationship by referring to a mathematical equation proposed by one Melvin Kaminsky,

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[42] Hobbes, Thomas. *Human Nature*, Morreall, p. 19.

[43] Schopenhauer, Arthur. I:13.

known better by his screen name, Mel Brooks: "Comedy = Tragedy + Time." [44] Brooks' theory explains the overwhelming success of his Broadway musical, *The Producers*, which staged a comedy out of Adolf Hitler. Brooks' formula argues why laughter may be an appropriate response to tragedies of the past. The aggadah above, however, extends the applicability of Brooks' theory to currently tragic instances. Akiba does the math: The tragic destruction of the Temple + Time, in which God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked = Laughter. In this equation, the laughter is the culmination of the faithful understanding of the incongruity between the Sages' situation in this world and their far superior situation in the world-to-come.

Finally, the Relief Theory is most evident in the concluding words of Akiba's colleagues: "*nichamtanu, Akiva, nichamtanu* (you have comforted us, Akiba, you have comforted us!)" The tragedy itself traumatized the Sages, causing overwhelming anxiety. The initial weeping was one mode of releasing this psychic energy. This aggadah may be read as Akiba's invitation into another mode of cathartic release. Akiba's explanation invites the Sages into his mindset. On a meta-literary level, however, Akiba's explanation ushers the Sages into the comic realm, or as Berger says, a counterworld, which is even more real. Their response is one of relief, literally. In the comic they find comfort.

In this instance of meta-comedic dialectic, comedy wins out. Akiba demonstrates that laughter is a natural human response to various encounters in this world. The passage below critically elevates this rabbinic sense of humor.

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[44] Auslander, Shalom. "The Mathematics of Comedy."

Text 4. Shabbat 30b

אמר רב יהודה בריה דרב שמואל בר שילת משמיה דרב: בקשו חכמים לגנוז ספר קהלת מפני שדבריו סותרין זה את זה, ומפני מה לא גנזוהו ... ומאי דבריו סותרין זה את זה? ־ כתיב (קהלת ז) טוב כעס משחוק וכתיב (קהלת ב) לשחוק אמרתי מהולל. כתיב (קהלת ח) ושבחתי אני את השמחה וכתיב (קהלת ב) ולשמחה מה זה עשה. לא קשיא טוב כעס משחוק ־ טוב כעס שכועס הקדוש ברוך הוא על הצדיקים בעולם הזה, משחוק שמשחק הקדוש ברוך הוא על הרשעים בעולם הזה. ולשחוק אמרתי מהולל ־ זה שחוק שמשחק הקדוש ברוך הוא עם הצדיקים בעולם הבא.

Rab Judah son of R. Samuel b. Shilath said in Rab's name: The Sages wished to hide the Book of Ecclesiastes, because its words are self-contradictory...

And how are its words self-contradictory? It is written, “Anger is better than play.” But then it is written, “I said of laughter, it is to be praised.” It is written, “Then I commended joy,” but it is written, “and of joy [I said] What does it do?" There is no difficulty: “Anger is better than laughter”-- the anger which the Holy One, blessed be He, displays to the righteous in this world is better than the laughter which the Holy One, blessed be He, laughs with the wicked in this world.” And I said of laughter, “it is to be praised”-- that refers to the laughter which the Holy One, blessed be He, laughs with the righteous in the world-to-come.[45]

Commentary:

In the Babylonian Talmud, there is no shortage of debate surrounding Megillot. Ecclesiastes in particular involves a view on life with which the Rabbis were less than thrilled to endorse. It is therefore not surprising to find our current discourse “hung on the big tree” of the debates surrounding Ecclesiastes. The matter being discussed pertains to God’s perspective on two competing human behaviors: laughter and anger. Here as in many other cases the anonymous redactor’s methodology may be roughly summed up as wherever there is a *kashya* (problem), there is a *terutz* (solution). The *terutz* here, as is generally the case in the

[45] *Shab* 30b.

anonymous Talmud, validates what appear to be contradictory perspectives. Like the Akiba aggadah, the resolution pertains to the distinction between this world and the world-to-come. However, this text elevates the role of laughter itself. In the Akiba text, it is human beings who laugh. Here we find that "the Holy One praised be He laughs with the righteous in the world to come." Even God has a sense of humor, and laughter thus can be *imitateo Dei*, an imitation of the Divine.

B. Rabbinic Ribaldry: Harlots, Flatulence, Adultery, other [F]unmentionables

Text 1. 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'!"[46]

Commentary:

Viewing the comic dimension of this story requires first accepting that the realms of the comic and the sacred are not antithetical. Indeed, comedy can be quite serious, and this comic aggadah treats serious matters for the Rabbis. Rabbi Eliezer b. Dordia is guilty of serious sins. So serious are his sins that only his death is sufficient atonement for them. Yet, the story describes his sin with ludicrous imagination. Indeed, Levin's notion of *ludus*, comic

[46] *AZ* 17a.

playfulness, is palpable from the very first line. Without hesitation, the story informs the reader, "There was not a harlot in the world whom he did not come upon." The hyperbolic quality of this first sentence clues the reader into the nature of the fictive world, suggesting that the story to come is not only naughty in content, but also bogus and playful.

The provocative playfulness is not only erotic, but it is also part of a language game. Ironically, the climax of the encounter is no climax at all, but simple flatulence. In a single scatological moment every ounce of erotica is sucked from the fictive world of the story. A fart, of all things, re-situates the aggadah in the didactic world of the Rabbis! Within the context of this comic realm, it is not the voice of a rabbi who exposes the naked truth about Rabbi Eliezer, but rather the harlot who offers the witty metaphor:

> כשם שהפיחה זו אינה חוזרת למקומה, כך אלעזר בן דורדיא אין מקבלין אותו בתשובה.
>
> *Just as this wind will not return to its place, so too Eliezer ben Dordia shall not be received in repentance.*

The harlot draws on the imagery inherent in the root of *teshuva*, "*lashuv*"--to turn, or return. The concept of *teshuva* involves individuals turning or returning to God. The Rabbis were fully aware of this imagery, and thus the Kantian notion of incongruity, "the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing," is fiercely at play.[47] The harlot has reduced Eliezer ben Dordia to a fart in the wind.

Following the initial defamation of Rabbi Eliezer ben Dordia, this story continues to affirm the far-reaching potential of *teshuva*. The aggadah exculpates Eliezer, with the *bat kol* declaring him fully repentant in the world-to-come. The story begins calling Eliezer,

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[47] Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*, Morreall.

"Rabbi," but from the story's end we see that he was not a Rabbi at all at the outset. Only when he was accepted in the world-to-come was he granted post-mortem *semikhah*. Reacquiring the title, "Rabbi," his figurative clothing is put back on. Yet, there is no denying the severity of the sin, nor the playfully comic realm in which it unfolds.

To be sure, the element of erotic *ludus* within this story is not for mere rabbinic amusement. The Rabbis are not dismissing the sin of sexual perversion as a laughingstock. *Teshuva* for the Rabbis is as serious a topic as any. To the contrary, this literary exercise of ribaldry amplifies the impact of the didactic message, all the while enabling the Rabbis to treat otherwise unmentionable matters.

Text 2. 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 ליך. 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 Merculis thereby serves it, even if his intention was to bruise it.[48]

[48] *Sanh* 64a.

Commentary:

This aggadah is set in Northern Israel. Baal Peor refers to the god worshipped by the Moabites, whom the Israelites sinfully worshipped while staying at Shittim.[49] For the Rabbis, Baal Peor was a prototype for idol worship. In this aggadah, there are three noteworthy comic aspects. The first pertains to language. The Rabbis draw on the root of Peor (*pe, 'ayin, resh*), meaning, "opening" to elaborate on the perversion of idol worship. How appropriate that the gentile woman enters the site but Sabta exposes himself, "*pa'ar*," i.e, "opens himself," before Baal Peor. But the ribaldry is not over. The tale takes a further scatological turn when the protagonist wipes himself on the idol's nose and is praised for this act of outstanding "piety."

One can sense the second element of the comic in the caricaturing of the acolytes who respond to this utter defilement (from the Jewish perspective) with the hyperbolic praise: "No one has ever served this idol thus!" The humor is abundantly clear with the incongruity between expectation and reality. Whereas, one expects the acolytes to react with disgust, their response may be idiomatically translated, "I admire your work!"

The Incongruity Theory points to the third and primary comic element. The Rabbis are staging the ultimate incongruity, which resides at the heart of the very notion of worship: the incongruity between sacred and profane. The text concludes with the admonition, "He that uncovers himself before Baal Peor thereby serves it, even if his intention was to degrade it." Sabta's example actually is discouraged, as in the end his action constitutes a form of

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[49] *Num* 25:3

idol worship. The implication is supremely denigrating, as the rabbinic sense of humor becomes darker and dirtier. The story equates the site of idol worship with a latrine, but its final line suggests that Baal Peor is not even suitable as a means of wiping excrement off one's rectum. For the Rabbis, excrement was a source of impurity. For Baal Peor, excrement constitutes worship, as if foreshadowing the English expletive: "Holy sh-t!"

Text 3. Baba Metzia 84a

כי הוו מקלעי רבי ישמעאל ברבי יוסי ורבי אלעזר ברבי שמעון בהדי הדדי הוה עייל בקרא דתורי בינייהו, ולא הוה נגעה בהו. אמרה להו ההיא מטרוניתא: בניכם אינם שלכם - אמרו לה: שלהן גדול משלנו. - כל שכן איכא דאמרי, הכי אמרו לה: (שופטים ח') כי כאיש גבורתו. איכא דאמרי, הכי אמרו לה: אהבה דוחקת את הבשר. ולמה להו לאהדורי לה? והא כתיב (משלי כו) אל תען כסיל כאיולתו - שלא להוציא לעז על בניהם. אמר רבי יוחנן: איבריה דרבי ישמעאל [ברבי יוסי] כחמת בת תשע קבין. אמר רב פפא: איבריה דרבי יוחנן כחמת בת חמשת קבין, ואמרי לה בת שלשת קבין. דרב פפא גופיה כי דקורי דהרפנאי.

When R. Ishmael son of R. Jose and R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon met, one could pass through with a yoke of oxen under them and not touch them. A [Roman] matron said to them, "Your children are not yours!" They replied, "Theirs [i.e., our wives] is greater than ours." "[But this proves my allegation] all the more!" [she said]. Some say they answered, "For as a man is, so is his strength." Others say, they answered her, "Love presses back the flesh." But why should they have answered her at all; is it not written, "Answer not a fool according to his folly"? [They answered] to permit no stigma upon their children.

R. Johanan said: The penis of R. Ishmael son of R. Jose was as a bottle of nine kabs capacity. R. Papa said: R. Johanan's penis was as a bottle containing five kabs; others say, three kabs. That of R. Papa himself was as [large as] the wicker-work baskets of Harpania.[50]

Commentary:

[50] *BM* 84a.

"Scholars must always be aware of the trap of anachronism," warns Professor David Stern.[51] This text, perhaps more than any other, speaks to the problem of anachronism. How are we to read this text? Was this text a source of amusement for the Rabbis? Or, on the other hand, is this discussion a humorless response to those who make fun of portliness? Today, there is no shortage of humor surrounding genitalia. In the middle ages, writers such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Bocaccio all composed works with unquestionable comic playfulness around sexuality. Is it possible that Rabbinic literature, too, involves such a ludic attitude toward genitalia?

Jewish tradition has gone to great lengths to debunk this possibility. The Tosafot comment on the above passage:

> אמר רבי יוחנן איבריה דרבי ישמעאל כו'. אלו דברים נכתבו שלא להוציא לעז על בני אדם שהם כך
>
> The reason why these comments are made is so that shame will not be brought upon people who are born [portly].

The Tosafot suggest that the Rabbis, in an attempt to defend the corpulent, are not seriously speaking about themselves. They are, as it were, just kidding. Thus, even if the Rabbis are not speaking about their own penis sizes, the Tosafot still suggest that the discussion is a kind of *ludus,* or "play."

However, when we consider the application of the line from Judges 8:18, "*ki cha-ish g'vurato,"* the phallic implications are undeniable. Rashi interprets the line as referring to *ever tashmish*, a sexual organ, and for obvious reasons. In the course of the argument between the Roman matron and the Rabbis, this phrase responds to the matron's challenge.

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[51] Stern, 448.

Her argument implies, “How could you possibly mate with such potbellies, especially if your wives are equally large!” In the Rabbi’s response, the word, “*gevurato*- one’s strength,” can only function as a reasonable response if it carries a phallic connotation.

Nevertheless, Rabbeinu Peretz interprets *ever* (penis) to refer to the size of their meals, *achilato, s’udato*. Even the more contemporary translator of the Sonsino Talmud, Tractate Baba Metzia, Dr. Harry Freedman, translates the Hebrew word *ever* as “waist,” removing any genital implication whatsoever from the term. However, *ever* is literally a “limb.” Given that this discussion follows a discussion on how portly rabbis could have actually engaged in sexual intercourse, it stands the reason that this is a discussion on which rabbi had the largest--or smallest--penis. The historical interpretation of the word *ever* in this *sugya,* as anything other than a penis, is a clear mistranslation, which closes the door to the erotic comic interpretation.

To what degree is this entire passage humorous? The application of the proof-text, “*ki cha-ish g’vurato,*” suggests some degree comic sarcasm. Further, given its placement in a discussion on penis size, it is difficult to deny the comic dimension, despite the commentators’ and translators’ effort to do so. The matter of fact tone of the discussion regarding various Rabbis’ phalluses poses a greater challenge regarding finding the comic in rabbinic writing. This contrasts with various other aggadot, which at times reflect distinctly comic voices. Indeed, it is entirely possible that this matter was not as bawdy at the time of composition or redaction. On the other hand, it is plausible, if not probably, that the subject may be considered universally humorous, with no need for the comic embellishment of

rabbinic wit. Thus, the extent of the comedy in this *sugya* remains unclear. Thus, it is only the introductory material about the Rabbis and the matron that can be identified as comedy.

C. Intellectual Prowess: the Wit of Na-Na-N'Boo-Boo

If in the Platonic worldview comedy is a vice, in the talmudic world wisdom is a virtue and the comic realm is a tool for the triumph of this virtue. The Superiority Theory emerges in tales in which one individual outsmarts another, often rendering the other a fool. More often than not, this kind of intellectual ridicule involves the non-Jewish other. Yet, in some particularly witty stories, we find the competitive interplay of wisdom determining superiority among Rabbis themselves. Let us consider this story, which features a halakhic debate among Rabbis:

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."[52]

[52] *RH* 29b

Commentary:

Rabban Yochanan's plot involves pure trickery. His wit is taunting and his punchline triumphant. The matter itself, to be sure, is anything but minor. The halakhic discussion at hand pertains to the proper observance of Rosh Hashanah and Shabbat. A mandatory blowing of the shofar on the Sabbath could require one to carry it from one domain to another, thus violating the Sabbath prohibition against portage. The discussion pertains not only to the proper observance of the Sabbath and Rosh Hashanah--the observance of sacred time--but also to the proper conceptualization of Jabneh vis-a-vis Jerusalem--sacred space.

With such serious concepts as sacred time and sacred space at stake, naturally the killjoy reader might object: "Is this a time for humor!" The text answers with an emphatic, "yes!" because the humor at play here is comic invasion. In this case, the comic invades a serious halakhic matter. In contrast to other conventional halakhic discussions in the Talmud, in which logic and proof-texts typically win the day, here Rabban Yochanan changes the rules. He reverses the order of the process. The Rabbis do not begin with discussion and then orient their actions around the halakha. Rather, Rabban Yochanan dupes the others into performance of the mitzvah of blowing the shofar, rendering the discussion moot by establishing a precedent.

In the end, Yochanan wins the battle, and the story exemplifies the Superiority Theory of comedy. Rabban Yochanan's "sudden glory" results from his conniving wit, which leaves the others inferior. The matter resolves, and the story elicits a certain chuckling. This is not the only instance of this flavor of trickery. In Genesis Rabbah, a midrash displays virtually parallel comic maneuvering, begging comparison:

א"ר סימון בשעה שבא הקב"ה לבראת את אדם הראשון נעשו מלאכי השרת כיתים כיתים וחבורות חבורות מהם אומרים אל יברא ומהם אומרים יברא....
ר' הונא רבה של צפורין אמר עד שמלאכי השרת מדיינין אלו עם אלו ומתעסקין אלו עם אלו בראו הקב"ה אמר להן מה אתם מדיינין כבר נעשה אדם:

> R. Simon said: When the Holy One, blessed be He, came to create Adam, the ministering angels formed themselves into groups and parties, some of them saying, "Let him be created," while others urged, "Let him not be created." ...
>
> R. Huna the Elder of Sepphoris, said: While the ministering angels were discussing with each other and disputing with each other, the Holy One, blessed be He, created him. He said to them: 'What are you discussing now? Man has already been made!"[53]

These two texts differ vastly in terms of content. One is halakhic, seeking clarity over the proper observance of a holy day; the other is midrashic, offering insight into the problematic nature of humanity whose capabilities of good or evil are immense. What these stories share, however, is the very same comic interplay. The Rabbis, wishing to discuss whether to blow the Shofar, parallel the angels, arguing over whether to create mankind. Yochanan, by convincing them to blow the shofar, is analogous to God who creates Adam thereby rendering all discussion moot. The final line of the midrash is even more biting in its sarcasm than Yochanan's line, for it is a question: "*mah atem m'dayenin*- what are you discussing?" The question only makes sense if understood as rhetorical, spoken with, as it were, a triumphant wink.

This ironic Divine taunt leads to an essential component of the analogy, and herein we encounter a self-critical rabbinic sense of humor. The word that God speaks in the punch-

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[53] *Gen R.* 8:5

line, "*m'dayenin*- discussing," is based on the same Hebrew root the Rabbis utter to Yochanan, "*nadun*--let us discuss [the matter]." The midrash effectively picks up where the talmudic *baraita* leaves off, with a story that ridicules the Hebrew root for rabbinic discussions. Are the authors indicating disdain for the drawn out degree of extended deliberation when pressing practical matters are at stake? Reading the aggadah through this lens, the repetition of the word "*nadun,*" would indicate that this is precisely what the Rabbinic author targets with its humor. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai undermines the activity implied by "*nadun,*" and the others around him are made to look like fools due to their blind obsession with that discourse.

While this example of a battle of wits is by no means unusual in the Talmud, the distinctly comic application of wit is most typically employed in order to affirm rabbinic superiority over an external political power. The following Rabbis vs. Other aggadot demonstrate a savvy application of rabbinic comic put-downs.

Text 2: Sanhedrin 39a.

אמר ליה קיסר לרבן גמליאל: אלהיכם גנב הוא, דכתיב (בראשית ב) ויפל ה' אלהים תרדמה על האדם ויישן. אמרה ליה ברתיה: שבקיה, דאנא מהדרנא ליה. אמרה ליה: תנו לי דוכוס אחד. ־ אמר לה: למה ליך? ־ ליסטין באו עלינו הלילה, ונטלו ממנו קיתון של כסף והניחו לנו קיתון של זהב. ־ אמר לה: ולוואי שיבא עלינו בכל יום. ־ ולא יפה היה לו לאדם הראשון שנטלו ממנו צלע אחת ונתנו לו שפחה לשמשו? ־ אמר לה: הכי קאמינא, אלא לשקליה בהדיאֵ ־ 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.[54]

Commentary:

This is one of several aggadot in Sanhedrin 39 that present a battle of wits between Gamaliel and the Emperor. I selected this text in particular because it involves not only a power-play between political entities, but it features a subversive gender dynamic as well. The setting of the story is clearly absurd. It requires a certain leap of faith for the reader to accept the plausibility of a theological conversation between Gamaliel and an Emperor and even a larger one to accept one between Gamaliel's daughter and an Emperor. The daughter's method frames the issue in a particularly humorous manner. With each question that Gamaliel's daughter asks, the Emperor falls deeper and deeper into the role of the fool. The humor comes to the fore when she dupes the Emperor into disproving himself.

For the Incongruity theorist Shopenhauer, a matter is humorous when it presents two incongruous ontologies. This story embodies Shopenhauer's notion of folly: "When a concept is first present in knowledge and we pass from it to reality."[55] Gamaliel's daughter

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[54] *Sanh* 39a.

[55] Schopenhauer, Arthur. I:13.

asks a series of questions to the Emperor that moves him, along with the reader, from one ontological understanding to another. These incongruities, moreover, culminate with the absurd image of Gamaliel's daughter sticking flesh into her armpit and then telling the Emperor to eat it. What could be more degrading to an Emperor or almost any other human being! In the real world, one would expect the Emperor to immediately punish such a disrespectful display. Yet, surprisingly, this ridiculous gesture only accentuates the Emperor's intellectual inferiority as once again he ends up outwitted.

Beneath the surface of the text loom various anxieties as well, which the Relief Theory highlights. The fictive world of the story masks the real world's facts. Rabbinic political authority is practically nonexistent and the authority of women even more ephemeral. Upon this backdrop the comedy within the story relieves these anxieties by permitting the subversion of these realities. In the end, the otherwise powerful Emperor is proven to be so weak that a woman can defeat him intellectually. Along the way she proves the value of women. All of this takes place in a text composed by men, nonetheless!

Text 3: Sanhedrin 109b.

ארבע דייני היו בסדום: שקראי, ושקרוראי, זייפי, ומצלי דינא. דמחי ליה לאיתתא דחבריה ומפלא ליה. אמרי ליה: יהבה ניהליה דניעברה ניהליך. דפסיק ליה לאודנא דחמרא דחבריה, אמרו ליה: הבה ניהליה עד דקדחא. דפדע ליה לחבריה אמרי ליה: הב ליה אגרא דשקל לך דמא. דעבר במברא יהיב ארבעה זוזי, דעבר במיא ־ יהיב תמני זוזי. זימנא חדא אתא ההוא כובס, אילקע להתם, אמרו ליה: הב ארבע זוזי. אמר להו: אנא במיא עברי. אמרו ליה: אם כן הב תמניא, דעברת במיא. לא יהיב, פדיוהו. אתא לקמיה דדיינא. אמר ליה: הב ליה אגרא דשקיל לך דמא, ותמניא זוזי דעברת במיא. אליעזר עבד אברהם איתרמי התם, פדיוהי, אתא לקמיה דיינא. אמר ליה: הב ליה אגרא דשקל לך דמאִ שקל גללא, פדיוהי איהו לדיינא. ־ אמר: מאי האי? ־ אמר ליה: אגרא דנפק לי מנך ־ הב ניהליה להאי, וזוזי דידי כדקיימי קיימי. הויא להו פורייתא דהוו מגני עלה אורחין, כי מאריך ־ גייזי ליה, כי

גוץ ־ מתחין ליה. אליעזר עבד אברהם אקלע להתם, אמרו ליה: קום גני אפוריא. אמר להון: נדרא נדרי, מן יומא דמיתת אמא ־ לא גנינא אפוריא. כי הוה מתרמי להו עניא יהבו ליה כל חד וחד דינרא, וכתיב שמיה עליה, וריפתא לא הוו ממטי ליה. כי הוה מית ־ אתי כל חד וחד שקיל דידיה, הכי אתני בינייהו: כל מאן דמזמין גברא לבי הילולא ־ לשלח גלימא. הוי האי הילולא, אקלע אליעזר להתם, ולא יהבו ליה נהמא. כי בעי למסעד, אתא אליעזר ויתיב לסיפא דכולהו. אמרו ליה: מאן אזמנך להכא? אמר ליה לההוא [דיתיב]: אתה זמנתן. [אמר: דילמא שמעי בי דאנא אזמינתיה ומשלחי ליה מאניה דהאי גברא], שקל גלימיה ההוא דיתיב גביה, ורהט לברא. וכן עבד לכולהו עד דנפקי כולהו ואכלא איהו לסעודתא.

There were four judges in Sodom, [named] Shakrai, Shakurai, Zayyafi, and Mazle Dina. Now, if a man assaulted his neighbor's wife and bruised her, they would say [to the husband], “Give her to him, that she may become pregnant for you.” If one cut off the ear of his neighbor's ass, they would order, “Give it to him until it grows again.” If one wounded his neighbor they would say to him [the victim], “Give him a fee for making you bleed.” He who crossed over with the ferry had to pay four *zuzim*, while he who crossed through the water had to pay eight. On one occasion, a certain fuller happened to come there. They said to him, “Give us four *zuzim* [for the use of the ferry].” But he protested, “I crossed through the water!” “If so,” they said, “you must give eight *zuzim* for passing through the water.” He refused to give it, so they assaulted him. He went before the judge, who ordered, “Give them a fee for making you bleed and eight *zuzim* for crossing through the water.”

Now Eliezer, Abraham's servant, happened to be there, and was attacked. When he went before the judge, he said, “Give them a fee for making you bleed.” Thereupon he took a stone and smote the judge. “What is this!” he exclaimed. He replied, “Give to this man [who attacked me] the fee that you owe me, while my money will remain in status quo.”

Now, they had beds upon which travelers slept. If he [the guest] was too long, they shortened him [by lopping off his feet]; if too short, they stretched him out. Eliezer, Abraham's servant, happened to go there. They said to him, “Arise and sleep on this bed!” He replied, “I have vowed since the day of my mother's death not to sleep in a bed.”

If a poor man happened to come there, every resident gave him a *denar*, upon which he wrote his name, but no bread was given him. When he died, each came and took his back. They made this agreement among themselves: whoever invites a man [a stranger] to a feast shall be stripped of his garment. Now, a banquet was in progress, when Eliezer chanced there, but they gave him no bread. Wishing to dine, he went and sat down at the end of them all. They said to him, “Who invited you here?” He replied to the one sitting near him, “You invited me.” The latter said to himself, “Perhaps they

> will hear that I invited him, and strip me of my garments!" So he took up his raiment and fled without. [Eliezer] did this to everyone, until they had all gone; then he ate the entire meal.[56]

Commentary

Our story begins with the complete perversion of a justice. It is noteworthy that this fictive world is not absent of justice altogether. Rather, the presence of a twisted justice affirms Berger's notion of the comic counterworld. The story presents of a system of justice that strictly enforces the opposite of legal and ethical notions of just punishments. Only in the Rabbis' comic counterworld of Sodom is it just for a wife abused by a stranger to be returned to the abuser and impregnated.

The plot of the aggadah comprises essential symbols of normative Jewish values. The bridge, for instance, symbolizes the welcoming of strangers into one's community. The bed embodies the value of *hachnasat orechim,* welcoming guests into one's home. Yet, each of these symbols aligns with an edict that is sadistically unjust, such as the law that cruelly abuses the body of a weary stranger in order to fit him into a bed. The final section of the midrash pertains to *tzedakah,* the communal obligation to provide sustenance for the needy. This value is countered by the law that punishes not only the poor, but anyone who performs the biblically and rabbinically mandated deeds that ease their suffering. These plot components create a picture of Sodomite customs and rule of law that are ruthlessly perverse. Eliezer enters this world and wittily becomes its comic hero.

In terms of comic theory, the Incongruity and Superiority theories are complementary. The incongruous elements paint the comic realm. Each of Eliezer's actions embodies

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[56] *Sanh* 109b.

incongruity. He matches each absurd Sodomite law with an equally absurd yet mitigating response. The incongruities alone however fail to capture the full breadth of comedy. The Superiority Theory captures the essential comic moments--the punch-lines.

Eliezer's intellectual superiority functions two-fold. On a plot level, his wit mocks and humiliates the Sodomites, turning them into fools. The literal punch-line, the final image, could not be more ridiculous. The story ends with an uncivilized civilization, chasing one another around *ad infinitum*, in an attempt to strip each other of their clothing.

His wit not only mocks the Sodomites, sending them all into self-imposed exile, naked and hungry. The story itself asserts the superiority of the Jewish legal system over that of the other. The Sodomites' system of justice is itself a caricaturesque opposite of the rabbinic system. In righting each of the wrongs he encounters, Eliezer untwists the twisted social policies, circuitously affirming righteous results. Thus, the Rabbis through the employment of comic wit implicitly affirm their legal system, strip the Sodomites of their power, and turn the other into an utter fool.

In response to the sweeping claim that the Babylonian Talmud lacks a sense of humor, these stories evidence the contrary. The Rabbis created these stories within a context of political inferiority. The comic realm inherent in this fiction conduces an aggressive display of intellectual superiority. The Rabbis wear a comic mask, but their laughter at the Sodomites, the Emperors, and all the foolish others, is deadly serious.

D. Language Games: Laughing at the Language

> There are two kinds of jokes, one of which is based on things, the other on words. Whatever is wittily expressed consists sometimes in an idea, sometimes only in the language used. But people are most delighted with a joke when the laugh is raised by the idea and the language together.[57]
>
> - Cicero

Cicero deserves credit for being the first to distinguish "the comedian, who says funny things, and the comic, who says things funny."[58] According to the Superiority Theory, humor is in the eye of the beholder. A subject is funny only because of its relationship to an individual or group perceiving the matter in a particular way. Similarly, the Relief Theory depends on the perception of an object, pointing to the psychic energy transfer of the beholder. The great contribution of the Incongruity Theory is its position that comedy can be inherent, as a valid feature of a subject, regardless of how it is perceived or articulated. This distinction is critical to a complete study of talmudic humor. We have encountered various stories in which, arguably, the comic inheres, regardless of the particular language used to articulate the humor. The midrash from Baba Metzia involving Abraham and Sarah's fertility[59], for instance, is rather straight forward in its narrative style. The humor of the story speaks for itself. Language is the inescapable vehicle through which imagery achieves its comic impact, but the language is not the focal point of the humor. In this chapter, we shall

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[57] Cicero, *On the Orator, II:59.* Morreall, 17.

[58] Morreall, 17.

[59] *See chapter 3.*

consider humorous texts in which the humor depends mainly on the use of language, rather than the object being discussed.

For a simple example, let us return to Steven Wright: “I have a half-twin.” The audience upon hearing this joke pauses for a silent moment. On the surface it sounds like a description of Wright’s family. Then the language sinks in, and the audience realizes that Wright’s language itself plays a trick on the listener. In a single moment the listener realizes the surprising absurdity and impossibility of the one-liner. As a result the audience then moves into a state of laughter, due to the employment of language. This joke is not Wright’s best. As Cicero notes, “people are most delighted with a joke when the laugh is raised by the idea and the language together.” The audience laughs more boisterously when Wright says, “I think it’s wrong that only one company makes the game Monopoly.” The line is funny due to Wright’s language, yet the wording here partners with an essential contradiction inherent in the object being discussed, an incongruity ripe for comic expression.

The text below is an example of an aggadah, which if it were not for the particularly comic language, would be undoubtedly disturbing, if not altogether tragic.

Text 1: Megila 7b

אמר רבא: מיחייב איניש לבסומי בפוריא עד דלא ידע בין ארור המן לברוך מרדכי. רבה ורבי זירא עבדו סעודת פורים בהדי הדדי, איבסום, קם רבה שחטיה לרבי זירא. למחר בעי רחמי ואחייה. לשנה אמר ליה: ניתי מר ונעביד סעודת פורים בהדי הדדי - אמר ליה: לא בכל שעתא ושעתא מתרחיש ניסא.

> Raba said: It is the duty of a man to become inebriated on Purim until he cannot tell the difference between "Cursed be Haman" and "Blessed be Mordecai."
>
> Rabbah and R. Zera joined together in a Purim feast. They became inebriated, and Rabbah arose and cut R. Zera's throat. On the next day he prayed on his behalf and revived him. Next year he said, "Will your honor come and we will have the Purim feast together." He replied: "It is not on every occasion that a miracle happens."[60]

Commentary:

Although this story might not elicit heaps of laughter, it nevertheless enters the comic realm in its final line. A simple refusal by Rabbi Zera would appropriately conclude story. Alternatively, an appropriate response for Rabbi Zera would be anger or even rage. Instead, Rabbi Zera responds with sarcasm. The comedy in this aggadah is dark, and its subtlety in effect transforms the story from an otherwise horrible trauma to a comic and didactic incident.

The story reflects Chapman's statement, "Comedy is life viewed from a distance; tragedy, life in a close-up."[61] The plot itself is, at first glance, horrifying. How else could one describe a plot involving two individuals who get so rowdy while drinking that one slits the other's throat! If presented close-up, the narrator would describe the blood and gore, accentuating all of its tragic details. Instead, the narrative jumps from the incident to the next day (*l'machar*), in which he offers prayers that succeed in preventing Rabbi Zera's death, then to the following year, culminating with the sarcastic response. There is no actual

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[60] *Meg* 7b.

[61] Levin. 9.

healing process mentioned, no demonstration of visiting the sick, no apology. The narrative lens views from a distance, where the comic presents itself.

Centuries after the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud, Maimonides defined *teshuva* as when "a person who confronts the same situation in which he sinned when he has the potential to commit [the sin], yet he abstains and does not commit it."[62] If the Rabbis held this view of *teshuva*--not altogether implausible, given Maimonides expertise of the rabbinic mindset--then the individual who is demonstrating repentance is Rabbi Zera, rather than Rav. This is a surprising if not absurd display of Maimonidean repentance. The story simply does not hold up as anything more than a ludicrous *teshuva* story, and even this reading treads in the dangerous waters of anachronism.

The story most aptly reinforces the rabbinic suspicion of miracles, which, as the Relief Theory suggests, may be a source of psychic anxiety.[63] Another comic possibility is that this story presents an exaggeration of the teaching that one is obliged to get absurdly drunk on Purim. After all, the context of the aggadah is the quintessentially comic holiday. What kind of Purim aggadah would this be if it lacked a twist of dark humor in making its point!

Text 2: Nedarim 66b

ההוא בר בבל דסליק לארעא דישראל, נסיב איתתא, אמר לה: בשילי לי תרי טלפי, בשילה ליה תרי טלפי, רתח עלה. למחר אמר לה: בשילי לי גריוא, בשילה ליה גריוא. אמר לה: זילי אייתי לי תרי בוציני, אזלת ואייתי ליה תרי

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[62] Maimonides, Moses. *Hilchot Teshuva* 2:2

[63] In chapter 3, we discussed the rabbinic concern over miracles in the section on the Relief Theory.

שרגי. אמר לה: זילי תברי יתהון על רישא דבבא. הוה יתיב בבא בן בוטא אבבא וקא דאין דינא, אזלת ותברת יתהון על רישיה. אמר לה: מה הדין דעבדת? אמרה ליה: כך ציוני בעלי. אמר: את עשית רצון בעליך, המקום יוציא ממך שני בנים כבבא בן בוטא.

> There was a certain Babylonian who went up to the land of Israel and took a wife. He said to her, "Boil me two [cows] feet." She boiled him two lentils. He raged at her. The next day he said, "Boil me a neck." She boiled him a bushel of lentils. He said to her, "Bring me two squashes." She brought him two lamps. He said to her, "Go and break them on the top of the gate." Baba b. Buta was sitting at the gate and was judging a case. She went and broke them [the lamps] on his head. He said to her: "What is this you have done?" She said, "Thus my husband commanded me." He said, "You have done the will of your husband. The Lord will bring forth from your belly two sons like Baba b. Buta.[64]

The modern parallel to this aggadah is Abbot and Costello's famous "Who's on First" bit. Every ounce of humor within this aggadah from Nedarim pertains to the hilarity of miscommunications, exposing the stupefying limits of language. This story, set in the time of the sage Baba b. Buta in the first century A.D., features a comic presentation of two Aramaic dialects. Dr. David Sperling analyzes the various spousal misunderstandings in light of the differing dialects, enabling the modern reader to view the story in its full comic light:

> The confusion between the "lamps" and the "squashes" or "pumpkins" is the clearest to modern readers. In TBA, *butzeina* meant both "lamp" and "pumpkin/squash," or the like. In JPA, the vocable is attested only in the meaning "lamp" or "light." Accordingly, the wife would only have known the meaning, "lamp."[65]

The other misunderstandings reflect similar dialectal discrepancies between the husband and wife. The climax of these misunderstandings is the breaking of the lamp upon the head of

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[64] Ned 66b, translated by S. David Sperling.

[65] Sperling, S. David. "Aramaic Spousal Misunderstandings." *The Journal of the American Oriental Society*, pp. 205-209.

the sage Baba b Buta. Sperling notes that this is a pure joke, based on the dialectal discrepancies pertaining to the word *baba,* which the wife likely understood as "gate." "The joke," explains Sperling, "is that the Palestinian woman would not have known the Eastern Aramaic common noun "*baba*," and, obediently, smashed the lamps on the head of the only Baba in sight."[66] The Incongruity Theory is palpable in every instance of miscommunication, presenting to competing ontologies according to the differing dialects. This incongruity culminates in the shattering of the lamps upon the sage's head, a literal manifestation of the Kantian notion of the instant dissipation of incongruity.

The story, to be sure, does not leave the Superiority theorist bereft of a rich reading. In fact, the humor extends beyond incongruities, featuring a certain degree of mockery as well. Sperling notes, "the joke [regarding the lentils and hooves] is based on Babylonian perceptions of Palestinians weakening of the gutturals."[67] Thus, the wife mistakes "*talpi*" for "*talup'chi*," inserting a letter *het* into the word, and thus transforming cow's feet into lentils.

The ultimate punch-line emerges with Baba b. Buta's closing remark: " The Lord will bring forth from your belly two sons like Baba b. Buta." The two translations of the term *baba* are plausible even in the end, and this final line serves as a double *entendre*, offering, at once, blessing and insult. The blessing offers good wishes: "May your children rise to great power in the Jewish community." The insult offers the comedic counter: "May your children be humiliated, beaten with the very candlesticks that you shatter upon my head!" This double *entendre* reflects pure rabbinic *ludus,* a linguistic playfulness that characterizes the Rabbis at their comic best.

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[66] ibid., 207.

[67] ibid.

E. The Absurd Oven of Aknai: K'neged Kulam (Equal to them All)!

With regard to humor, no theory has a monopoly. Similarly, no category perfectly encompasses all of its comedic stories. Particularly with a literature as discursive as the Babylonian Talmud, categorization lacks rigidity. Aggadot and halakhot on idol worship for instance are not contained neatly within tractate Avodah Zarah. Similarly, the humorous stories of this study fail to fold perfectly into the identified categories. This final aggadah reflects a fictive world of unparalleled absurdity. This famous tale, referred to as the "Oven of Aknai," is fertile ground for the exposition of comic theory in Rabbinic literature. It encompasses a variety of comic features, spanning the identified categories and deserving an absurd category of its own.

Text: 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 ראיה מן החרוב. חזר ואמר להם: אם הלכה כמותי ־ אמת המים יוכיחו. חזרו אמת המים לאחוריהם. אמרו לו: אין מביאין ראיה 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 מטין ועומדין. חזר ואמר להם: אם הלכה כמותי ־ מן השמים יוכיחו. יצאתה בת קול ואמרה: מה לכם אצל רבי אליעזר שהלכה כמותו בכל מקומ 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 לאליהו, 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 Aknai. Why [the oven of] "Aknai"? 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."[68]

Commentary:

Though the aggadah continues, this point marks a narrative break, concluding the distinctly comic tone. We learned from the story of Rabbi Eliezer b. Dordia and the harlot that when

[68] *BM* 59.

absurdity colors the backdrop, the comic is ripe for outrageous expression. Within the comic counterworld, we can expect the unexpected, such as farfetched miracles and bizarre situations that in the real world are utterly implausible. In Berger's terms, the comic, in this case through the use of absurdity, provides a plausibility structure for these features. This absurdity is so central to the plot of the Oven of Aknai that it warrants its own critical treatment.

Beneath the surface of the argument between R. Eliezer and the Sages is a tension that pervades talmudic stories, which out of respect for a certain 1980's sitcom we might label, "Who's the Boss?" This aggadah stages the fight for power between God and man. Specifically, who has the right to determine halakha? The story presents at least three answers. The first suggests that this is an ongoing tension, evidenced by the walls, which *"lo niflu-* did not fall," in honor of two rabbinic luminaries. Our second answer, captured by the proof-text from Deuteronomy, "*lo vashamayim hi-* [Torah] is not in the Heavens." This line seems to carry the most narrative weight, as it ends the debate, and the story eventually buttresses this rabbinic power over the law and its proper interpretive method with the excommunication of R. Eliezer. However, it appears that God has the last laugh, repeating the phrase, "*Nitzchuni vanai!* My children have defeated me*!"*

This phrase itself deserves meta-comedic consideration. The depiction of a God who laughs is no small matter. In the larger meta-comedic discourse pertaining to the propriety of humor in holy matters, it emphatically resolves any debate between Levin's "playboys and

killjoys."[69] But this ending does not answer all questions. The aggadah leaves the comic theorist curious. Why is God laughing?

Indeed, the comic counterworld permits God's laughter. The absurdity in the air is conducive to provocative imagery and sets the stage for even more provocative humor. The roots of trees move, rivers flow backwards, and walls cave in half way in defiance of gravity. All of these impossibilities occur at the command of a single man who believes, "*Halakha k'moti*- the law agrees with me." This setting, as we know from previous aggadot, is an "amusement park" for the comic. Yet, this setting does not explain the actual amusement. Absurdity permits comedy, but it does not necessarily engender it.

Spencer's notion of the Relief Theory captures the physicality of God's laughter. The story embodies no shortage of nervous energy, which requires release. God's laughter results from the tension that dominates talmudic aggadot regarding Rabbinic vs. Divine authority. The nervous energy bursts beyond the confines of the narrative, which explains why God's laughter is an addendum to the story. In the end, God releases any nervous energy resulting from the defeat. Yet, more significantly, for the unknown authors, as well as subsequent storytellers, God's laughter discharges their own nervous energy.

According to the Incongruity Theory, God's laughter stems from the clash between God's omnipotence and rabbinic authority over halakha. Pascal wrote, "Nothing produces laughter more than a surprising disproportion between that which one expects and that which

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[69] This is the title of Levin's work, a collection of his essays on the theory and practice of comedy. Levin notes, "to appreciate ludicrousness....one must be aware of seriousness." The realm of the comic depends on the interplay between "non-laughers" or "killjoys" and comics, "playboys." Levin, 17.

one sees."[70] It is unusual that the talmudic tension over authority plays out as overtly as it does in this story, and the clear-cut victory of Rabbi Joshua surprises God. So, God laughs and we laugh with God.

Finally, given the central role of power in this story, the Superiority Theory most clearly captures its humor. This theory functions on two levels. Superficially, we can identify God's laughter as Hobbesian "sudden glory," a sarcastic acquiescence. Through laughter, God in fact regains God's authority by presenting a glimpse of God permitting the appearance of man's superiority. What for man is a wall-collapsing crisis is, for God, a laughing matter. God is laughing at man, for in the end it is only man's use of God's word that provides the authority that man seeks.

On a more profound level, the reader is reminded that this story itself is man-made. The aggadah is a literary product of rabbinic hands staging God's superiority by laughing at the perception of man's superiority. Consciously or not, the Rabbis are meta-literarily mimicking the leaning walls of the academy. With comic artistry, they articulate their own ambivalence over "who's the boss," within a story that argues over who has the last laugh. Literally, it is God. Meta-literarily, it is the Rabbis who authorize this laughing God, having a tacit laugh of their own. Thus, through the lenses of comic theory, we hear robust laughter resounding from this page of the Talmud. And we might as well join in!

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[70] Quoted in Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, p. 130.

Chapter 5: Conclusion (Talmudic Tickle-Torture)

Ultimately, laughter is instantaneous, and humor itself is culturally influenced. Therefore, labeling ancient texts comic requires caution. However, assuming they were bereft of humor deprives the talmudic sages of the very respect that tradition has gone to great lengths to afford them. Particularly in the modern era, which according to Berger is most suitable for a "theology of the comic,"[71] it is appropriate for contemporary thinkers to consider that Rabbinic Judaism had a sense of humor and that this humor influenced its cherished literature.

Traditional commentators did not have the language of comic theory, nor the critical interest in bringing to light a talmudic sense of humor. This is no longer the case. The application of various theories leaves little doubt over the comic content of these tales. With the language of comic theory now in our vocabulary, how else are we to view stories of subversive trickery and playful perversion? Is there a more realistic reading for talmudic tales that treat flatulence and scatology with palpable silliness? The comedy, the laughter, as it were, has been an undeniable part of these stories all along.

The realm of the comic, moreover, does not lessen the seriousness of the stories. To the contrary, it broadens the breadth and depth of meaning within the tales. Wittgenstein wrote, "a serious and good philosophical work could be written that would consist entirely of jokes."[72] Of course, the claim that the Talmud is itself a joke book is in itself a joke. Nevertheless, it embodies a palpable comic dimension that cannot be dismissed. As this study

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[71] Berger, 202.

[72] Morreall, 1.

elucidates, the identification of humor enhances the literary richness within the aggadot of the Babylonian Talmud.

A profound teacher of mine once submitted to me a thesis of his own, that contrary to what scholars once thought, deciding halakha is not the primary concern of the Babylonian Talmud. If this were so, the work would be less discursive, and it would read more like a code. Rather, the goal of the talmudic enterprise is more basic: to tickle the mind. My thesis extrapolates upon this claim, considering the tales that constitute talmudic tickle-torture. This demands a willingness to be attuned to the comic dimension, sensing humor, listening for laughter, and, with a leap of faith, laughing with the Rabbis.

Abbreviations of Tractates*

BM	*Baba Metzia*
Pes	*Pesahim*
Shab	*Shabbat*
AZ	*Avodah Zarah*
Mak	*Makkot*
Sanh	*Sanhedrin*
Meg	*Megillah*
Ned	*Nedarim*

Other sources:

Gen R.	*Genesis Rabbah*
ARN	*Avot DeRebbi Natan*

*Note: All talmudic citations in this thesis are from the Babylonian Talmud

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