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Comedian Benji Lovitt 521. (Photo by: Sam Sokol)

What war zone?

By SAM SOKOL
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American comedian Benji Lovitt sees the funny side of life in the Jewish state.

If one wants to understand the Israeli experience as seen through American eyes, one has to go to a standup show by comic Benji Lovitt. Just as the sensibilities of modern-Orthodox Anglos in Jerusalem can be said to be expressed through the act of his sometimes collaborator David Kilimnick, Lovitt's comedy expresses the expatriate experience for the Tel Aviv crowd.

Sitting and sipping an ice coffee at a sidewalk cafe just off Nordau Street in Tel Aviv, Lovitt says that the cultural and military ferment surrounding Israeli life is the stuff from which comedy is born.

"Nothing sparks creativity like frustration," he explains.

"So the days of the flotilla or Pillar of Defense, that's when I'll just post tens of statuses a day and get hundreds and hundreds of likes."

One of the pioneers of the Israeli-Anglo blogosphere, Lovitt is a major presence on social media, making comedic observations on his own blog "What war zone?" as well as on the websites of news outlets such *The Jerusalem Post*, *Haaretz* and the Times of Israel.

"When something brings up a lot of tension in this country, my reaction is to laugh," he elaborates, mentioning the Women of the Wall. When people demand respect for a holy site by throwing eggs there, he says, that is funny.

Sometimes, Israeli humor, or its sources can be dark, it seems, however, Lovitt is anything but. His comedy affirms the positive side of the Israeli experience that he lampoons.

No matter how much he pokes fun, he says, "it's very clear that my loyalties lie with this country."

Between his blogs, his thrice-yearly American tours (he will be in the US from October 18 to November 8) and his weekly standup act at Jessica's bar every Sunday night at 10:30pm, Lovitt is constantly using humor to express the daily reality of Israel.

This started just before the 38-year-old Dallas native made aliya seven years ago during the Second Lebanon War.

"Coming from a background [of working for] Young Judaea... I was always very bothered how people talked about Israel as such a war zone and the day before before I made aliya I started my blog called 'What war zone?'" he says.

“I used that to write about my experiences to my friends and family and this was before Facebook, and of course you know immigrants love to use the Internet to complain and vent and laugh about their experiences.

Slowly it got discovered by this person, by that person; I went to the Nefesh B’Nefesh blogger conference and I started working for jpost.com and Haaretz [as a blogger] and slowly like a band that builds its audience – through a combination of blogging and videos and stand-up – I developed this niche.”

“Dear Friends, There is a planned attack on Israeli websites today from the hacker group Anonymous,” he recently joked. “If you receive what looks like a suspicious looking email from me saying I desperately need money, that one is real.”

Following through on his online comedy success, Lovitt began doing stand-up, which he had engaged in occasionally while living in the US.

“I do it in English,” he says. “Some day I’d love to do it in Hebrew, but I’m American, so the crowd that enjoys it the most is [made up of] olim, people who were here a long period of time, and then the Birthright crowd.”

However, the longer he lives here, the more his humor changes. Originally, his act seemed to be mostly the observations of a fish out of water, but lately he has been feeling more Israeli.

“I write for aliens like me. Most of the stuff on Facebook is not the same humor as six years ago, seven years ago. Now the stuff is sort of insider for people who live here. I want to make my fellow Israel-loving people and immigrants laugh. I can no longer laugh at how Israelis mop the floor. I can no longer laugh at typos in menus. Now I parody politics more. I’ll write about the Women of the Wall. I write a lot of things on election day [or] when there’s a war. That’s something I couldn’t have done when I first moved here. I didn’t get it, and also I don’t think I would have been this comfortable,” he says.

“I feel like I have credibility now. I feel like I can say pretty much what I want.”

Sometimes you have to be a local to get the humor.

One recent witticism had Lovitt comparing peace talks to Agrippas Street in Jerusalem, which has faced severe congestion since the completion of the light rail on nearby Jaffa Road.

“What’s the difference between the upcoming peace talks and Agrippas Street? The peace talks have a chance of movement,” he quipped.

Asked if there is a difference between American and Israeli stand-ups, Lovitt said that “Israeli comedians don’t joke about politics nearly as much as in America.”

However, he added, Israeli comics are starting to look to the US for their inspiration, just as he looks locally for his.