

Comedy in times of crisis

COVID-19 triggers a
flood of Jewish humor

By Paula Slier



JEWISH IRONY: Passover was canceled because of a plague.

I moved my mezuzah from the front door to my fridge because it's the only door I still open. Why are we running out of toilet paper? Because when one person sneezes, a hundred others sh** themselves!

As the world hunkers down, threatened by the worst global health crisis in 100 years, it doesn't seem like the most appropriate time to crack jokes. And yet as the COVID-19 outbreak kills thousands, gags, memes and funny videos are spreading even faster than the virus itself. We might be scared, but we seem determined to carry on laughing.

My cellphone lights up with another coronavirus joke. A stock market crash is worse than a divorce, you lose half your money and your wife is still around.

Black humor is a psychological means for coping with very difficult or impossible situations, explains Prof. Arie Sover, a lecturer and researcher in communica-

tions and humor studies at the Open University of Israel.

"It's both a relief system and a tool which permits sharing one's anxieties with the community."

If anything, as concern over the virus increases, so have attempts at humor. Laughter relieves mental and physical stress and is the physiological end of a psychological process. But many criticize making light of a serious subject. When a group of students threw a coronavirus-themed party at the University of Albany, complete with corona beers and face masks, the school's Asian American Alliance released a statement on Instagram condemning the event – even going so far as to call it a hate crime.

"Everyone has his own line," says Sover. "It depends on culture, psychological traits and education. Remember the Mohammed caricatures published in a Belgium journal in 2005. People were killed because of that. The same happened in Charlie Hebdo, the Parisian paper,

sometime later. Should they not publish these caricatures? To answer this question is not a simple task. One has to be smart using humor, but humor should not be restricted or forbidden."

"I think many things provoke anxiety at a time like this," says Philadelphia-born Israeli comedian, Yisrael Campbell. A convert to Judaism, he lives today as an Orthodox Jew with his wife and four children in Jerusalem. One of his aunts is a Catholic nun which prompts him to quip that "of course makes Jesus my uncle, allowing for easier parking in Jerusalem."

"When it comes to dealing with anxiety and coronavirus, for some people staying at home is soothing and for others it's the opposite. Some people will be comforted to wear a mask outside, some people will be more anxious. I don't think we can blame humor for this, or tag it as an anxiety provoker," he says.

Benji Lovitt is another leading English-speaking comedian who made aliyah in 2006 and uses humor to strengthen

Yisrael Campbell

CAROL ROSEGG



connection to Israel and Jewish identity. He says if someone is watching stand-up comedy, or reading jokes, and getting stressed out, there's nothing that can be done.

"You can't please everyone. If there are a thousand people and someone is getting offended, what are we saying, that we should shut down comedy? Forget coronavirus, should we not have stand-up comedy about relationships because someone got dumped? This is the problem with today with the masses on twitter, the loud minority. They represent everyone. If we are worried about people getting offended then we have no more freedom of speech. The judges say if a reasonable person would find this not offensive then that's what we should go by and not by the crazy one percent."

As for Campbell, when he's not doing standup comedy he can be found working as a guide at Yad Vashem Holocaust remembrance center. He's familiar with humor in the Shoah and doesn't find it at all offensive.

"It wasn't uncommon that there was humor in the Holocaust, let alone among those who survived it," he says.

"I think what it is about humor that helps us cope is that it's a great equalizer, it's a deflator of the inflated and a lifter up of the oppressed. You might be able to tell me what to do – you might be able to say do this or do that - but I can laugh at you."

What's most important is context, adds Lovitt.

"There is a lot of Israeli humor about the Holocaust which is very funny because I think it's done in a smart way but if that same stuff was done abroad where 'goyim' were listening, it would be less funny. I think it depends on who makes the joke.

"By definition racist jokes aren't funny. Can a black person tell a racist joke? This is why when people say these are the lines, it's problematic. What if you're Jewish? Can you make a Jewish joke? What if you're half Jewish? What if your mother's Jewish? It gets blurry. The co-

median should be smart and that's why comedy is tough. It often takes a professional to know where the lines are and what is appropriate. Once you start saying this person cannot tell this joke, it's a dangerous and slippery slope and you can't have comedy anymore. What we do

Israel

know is that a person in a certain group is going to be more successful telling a joke about that group than someone who is not in the group.”

With COVID-19 we are all in the same group which makes the jokes universal.

After years of wanting to thoroughly clean my house but lacking the time, this week I discovered that wasn't the reason.

Wow... bars, clubs, and gyms all closed? My life is about to be seriously exactly the same.

Especially now as COVID-19 seems to be growing with no vaccine on the horizon, joking gives people a sense of being in control of an uncontrollable phenomenon. We laugh also to connect with others – something we have lost in our fight against the virus. We are being forced

to endure this reality alone in our own homes - powerless and isolated. Many people find that the joke is their warmest companion against what's happening.

A rabbi was asked what to feed a person suffering from the coronavirus.

“Matza, of course!” said the rabbi.

“Well, does it help?”

“No,” said the rabbi, “but it slides easily under the door”.

Jews, posits Sover, are more prone to black humor because of our history of persecution. That's not to say Jews laugh more at COVID-19 jokes; we're just more familiar with the type of humor. And while such jokes transcend borders there are those that do not. “What I assume, but it's not yet scientifically proven, is that the response to experiences is also transferred from one generation to the next,” says Professor Sover.

“The harsh experiences that Jews suffered, have made a genetic mark on those who experienced them.”

According to epigenetic studies, these marks are conveyed to the second and third generations who have not directly experienced the same incidents.

“We say Jews throughout our history have laughed to keep from crying,” piques Lovitt.

“It's not surprising. There's been so much adversary and darkness over Israel's 72 years – war, terror – of course we have to laugh. There is definitely an Israeli sense of humor that is more in-your-face, blunt and shocking than American Jewish humor – and that goes hand-in-hand with cultural differences.”

That difference derives from among other things, the fact that Jews lived as a minority amongst gentile majority populations and faced endless anti-Semitism.

“Open and direct criticism of the majority population or government under such circumstances was not a path commonly undertaken,” reflects Sover. “Jews therefore turned their criticism inwards and developed self-humor as a means of facing their condition and this was expressed in Diaspora humorist literature.”

The two classic characters of Jewish humor – the schlemiel and the *shlimazel* – represent the image of the weak Diaspora Jew and arose in Europe and the United States. The schlemiel does everything the opposite to how it should be done. He creates the circumstances that lead him

to fail. The *shlimazel* will do whatever needs to be done in order to achieve the objective, but some outside factor always intervenes to prevent his plan from coming to fruition.

Jewish humor encompasses a long history from biblical times to the present day and includes a wide spectrum of styles expressed in various fields such as the Bible, Talmud, poetry, literature, folklore, jokes, movies, television and more. Modern Jewish humor thrives in three socio-geographic regions where most Jews lived during the 18th – 21st centuries and where Jewish humor was created and developed: eastern Europe, the United States and Israel. In spite of the cross influences and similarity in certain aspects of the humor that developed in these regions, each has its own distinct characteristics.

Israeli humor is a physical, “kind of slap-sticky kind of what we could call prop comedy with stuff,” says Campbell. He describes it not unlike the hammers and silly string used to celebrate Israel's Independence Day.

“I'm an English-language comedian – I tell jokes in Hebrew but not on purpose as a friend of mine used to say – so I'm really referring to Israeli humor from the outside. Jewish humor, in my estimation, is more wordy, it's more intellectual, it's more about the juxtaposition and positioning of ideas, coming out of oppression and depression and the pushback against being put down.

“I HAVE a joke where I used to say that before I came to Israel I thought Israel would be like New York – just with more Jews. But it's not. It's like Saudi Arabia but with less Arabs, so in my view there is definitely a difference between Jewish and Israeli humor.”

Black humor is so effective because it's really true, he laughs.

The Jews in Israel are the majority in their own independent country and so the literature no longer needs weak characters such as the schlemiel and the *shlimazel*, explains Sover. No more is the Jew in constant existential distress. Israeli literature reflects the supposed ‘new Jew’, the ‘sabrah’ Jew who is self-confident, strong and in control of his life.

This virus must be wrecking India. I haven't got one phone call in three days about my extended car warranty.

COURTESY



Yisrael Campbell: When it comes to dealing with anxiety and coronavirus, for some people staying at home is soothing and for others it's the opposite

Prof. Arie Sover

COURTESY



April Fools Day is canceled this year as no made up prank could match the unbelievable sh** happening in the real world right now.

COVID-19 came during an unprecedented third Israeli election in less than a year and all the politicking and coalition-building that followed. It prompted jokes such as, “Thirty days has September, April, June and November; all the rest have thirty-one except March which has 8000 and in case you lost track today is March 97th.”

Many researchers have tried to find the origin of jokes but the problem is that until the advent of the printing machine in the 15th century, jokes were passed on orally. The first written Jewish jokes were found in a printed collection only in the 19th century and yet humorous Jewish jokes were told by the Badchens since the 13th century. There are also many tractates in the Talmud that could be the source of Jewish jokes.

“Jokes can be invented out of spontaneous situations that occurred in the real life or can be extracted from comic shows and comedy plays,” points out Sover. “Many of today’s jokes are recycled, changed in the social networks, and get local names so that in many cases one cannot identify where they came from.”

Three hours into home schooling and one child is suspended for skipping class and the other one has already been expelled.

That moment when you’re worried about the elderly and you realize that you are the elderly. “Is there anything that’s not funny to me? Yes,” smirks Campbell, “Jokes that are not funny. I mean in the end it has to be funny. In the end it’s

sometimes hard to figure out what exactly that is. I can’t find humor in everything, but if I can, I will tell the joke.

Are there jokes that are offensive? Yes. Are there jokes that are racist? Yes. Who gets to decide it’s not a rule, not a law. Some people can tell jokes that other people can’t tell. Sometimes because it’s about them, sometimes it’s because they have the courage to do it”.

For Lovitt, “anyone who says certain topics are off limits, I challenge them because there’s not a single person on earth

who laughs at something that someone else wouldn’t be offended by. You could say why did the chicken cross the road? Well, you shouldn’t joke about that because chickens are murdered by the millions. Well that’s silly; it has nothing to do with the context of the joke. You have comedians who have cancer and who are making fun of that to cope with it; that’s okay, right? This person is bringing joy to, and inspiring people. It depends on the context, the message and the messenger.” ■