



# HUMOR AND CYNICISM

ISSUE #26

MARCH 2014

ADAR II 5774

R. Yechezkel Landau served as the *chazan* (cantor) for his congregation during the High Holidays and had a very unique tune for the words *mechalkel chaim* (sustainer of life). One of R. Landau's students was at a wedding and noticed that a *badchan* (comedian) named Chaim was imitating R. Landau's tune. The student reprimanded the *badchan* for using the tune without permission and for mocking it. When R. Landau heard about the incident, he summoned the *badchan*. The *badchan* explained with humility that he earns his livelihood through comedy and he never intended to mock or offend anyone. R. Landau then handed him a paper that stated: אני החתום מטה נותן רשות לרבי חיים לכלכל חיים שלו במכלכל חיים שלי - I the undersigned, give permission to R. Chaim to sustain his own life with my "sustainer of life."

Humor can be a very effective tool to liven up a situation, convey a message or teach a lesson. However, use of certain types of humor or using it in the wrong situation can lead to negative consequences.

## Let's look at the following scenarios:

<b>CASE ONE</b>	Steven is known for his humorous comments. Most of the time, his teachers appreciate his jokes, but once in a while his jokes get him into trouble. After making a comment that got him into serious trouble, he says that he is thinking about going to the opposite extreme and always being serious. What would you advise him to do?
<b>CASE TWO</b>	Shira is a member of her school's debate team. At the next school-wide assembly, she is scheduled to debate her friend Michal and the student body is going to determine the winner. She knows that her best chance of convincing her peers of her position is by making fun of the other position. Is that a fair way to debate?
<b>CASE THREE</b>	Yosef and Bradley are preparing a Purim skit and Yosef would like to include a scene that mocks people who are overzealous about religious observance. Everyone that they told about it thinks that it is really funny but Bradley thinks that the scene is going to send the wrong message about religious observance. What would determine whether the scene is appropriate or not?

## Let's Examine the Sources

Tanach and rabbinic literature have many references to the *leitz*, scoffer, and the concept of *leitzanut*, cynicism. There are numerous types of activities that can be branded as acts of *leitzanut*.

*Silliness and foolishness lead one to lewd (inappropriate) behavior.*

**Avot 3:13**

שחוק וקלות ראש מרגילין לערוה.

אבות ג:יג

The Mishna seems to frown on humor. Yet, we find a few passages in the Talmud that seem to say the opposite, including:

Two people came [to the marketplace]. [Eliyahu HaNavi] said to [R. Broka]: Those people are destined for the World to Come. [R. Broka] went to them and said: What is your profession? They said: we are comedians who entertain those who are sad.

### Ta'anit 22a

אתו הנך תרי אתי אמר ליה הנך נמי בני עלמא דאתי נינהו אזל לגבייהו אמר להו מאי עובדיכו אמרו ליה אינשי בדוחי אנן מבדחינן עציבי.  
תענית כב.

## Question for the Table:

If silliness and foolishness should be avoided, why were the two comedians destined for the World to Come?

In *Hilchot Dei'ot*, Rambam teaches us that our character traits must be balanced and each individual must find the perfect balance that is personally appropriate for him/her. When discussing the proper balance of emotions, Rambam writes:

*A person should not be full of foolishness and silliness and not sad or depressed, but rather happy. Our rabbis said: Silliness and foolishness lead a person to lewd behavior and they commanded that a person shouldn't be bursting with laughter nor sad and despondent. Rather one should greet each person with a cheerful expression.*

**Rambam, Hilchot Dei'ot 2:7**

לא יהא אדם בעל שחוק ומהתלות ולא עצב ואונן אלא שמח כך אמרו חכמים שחוק וקלות ראש מרגילין את האדם לערוה וצווי שלא יהא אדם פרוץ בצחוק ולא עצב ומתאבל אלא מקבל את כל האדם בסבר פנים יפות.  
רמב"ם, הל' דעות ב:ז

## Questions for the Table:

- 1) Based on Rambam's comments, how would you explain why the two comedians were acting appropriately? Why aren't they considered people full of foolishness and silliness?
- 2) Why is greeting someone cheerfully the proper balance between seriousness and foolishness?
- 3) What role does humor play, if any, in greeting someone cheerfully?

R. Yisrael Lipschitz has a comment that provides a resolution to the apparent contradiction between the Mishna that frowns upon foolishness and silliness and the story about the comedians. Commenting on a statement in the Mishna, *Avot* 3:10, that *sichat yeladim*, conversations of children, are detrimental, R. Lipschitz writes:

*Conversations of children refers to foolishness and silliness where a small dose is good to relax and gladden oneself but only with mature people whose jokes have meaningful ideas ... However, "conversations of children" are usually foolish and silly without any trace of insight or wisdom. They don't provide happiness, but rather confuse one's thought processes.*

ושיחת ילדים. הוא משל לשחוק והתלות, שג"כ מיעוטו יפה, להבליג ולשמח הנפש, אבל רק עם אנשים גדולים, שיש במילי דבדיחותא עמהם דברי השכל ... אמנם שיחת ילדים, הן מסתמא דברי צחוק והתול בלי לחלוחית תבונה ודעת, לא ישמחו הנפש, רק יבלבלו תהלוכות השכל

## Questions for the Table

- 1) Does R. Lipschitz follow Rambam's general approach to balancing character traits? Why or why not?
- 2) How would you apply the comments of Rambam and R. Lipschitz to case #1 where Steven is thinking of giving up humor altogether?

Case #2 deals with the proper way to debate. Let's review a Mishna that teaches us that there are two types of debates: [This Mishna was discussed more fully in the Shabbat Table Discussion titled "[Ahavat Yisrael](#)."]

*Any dispute that is for the sake of heaven will eventually have a lasting result and [any dispute] that is not for the sake of heaven will not have a lasting result. What is [an example of] a dispute that is for the sake of heaven? The dispute between Hillel and Shammai. [What is an example of] a dispute that is not for the sake of heaven? The dispute of Korach and his followers.*

**Avot 5:17**

כל מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים, סופה להתקיים; ושאינה לשם שמים, אין סופה להתקיים. איזו היא מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים, זו מחלוקת הלל ושמאי; ושאינה לשם שמים, זו מחלוקת קרח ועדתו.

**אבות ה:יז**

Korach's dispute with Moshe represents the way we should not debate. The Midrash teaches us about one of his tactics:

*[The verse (Tehillim 1:1) states] "One who never sat in a gathering of cynics (leitzim)," [cynics], refers to Korach who mocked Moshe and Aharon. What did he do? He gathered a crowd ... He began to tell them words of mockery and said, "There was a widow in my neighborhood and she had two young daughters who were orphans. She had one field and when she started to plow, Moshe told her, 'Don't plow with an ox and donkey together' (Devarim 22:10); she started to plant and he said to her, 'don't mix seeds in your garden' ... [He and Aharon continued to tell her numerous laws relating to farming] and he left her and her two daughters crying."*

**Midrash, Tehillim, ch. 1**

ובמושב לצים לא ישב. זה קרח, שהיה מתלוצץ על משה ואהרן, מה עשה, כינס עליהם כל הקהל ... התחיל לומר לפניהם דברי ליצנות, ואמר אלמנה אחת יש בשכונתי, ועמה שני נערות יתומות, והיה לה שדה אחת, באתה לחרוש, אמר לה משה לא תחרוש בשור ובחמור יחדו (דברים כב י). באת לזרוע, אמר לה שדך לא תזרע כלאים (ויקרא יט יט) ... והניחה בוכה עם שתי בנותיה.

**מדרש תהלים פרק א'**

## Questions for the Table:

- 1) In Korach's story, Moshe and Aharon were simply telling the widow how to observe the Torah. Why did Korach think that appealing to people's emotions by telling a story about a widow was a successful strategy in debating Moshe and Aharon? Why does the Midrash call this *leitzanut*?
- 2) Why do you think Korach's strategy was considered an unfair way to debate the issues? Is it always wrong to use an emotional reaction when debating an issue?

Rabbeinu Yonah teaches us that even when we don't mock a specific person, mocking the message that he/she represents can also be a form of *leitzanut* that is harmful:

*The third form [of leitzanut] is one who consistently mocks ideas and actions without any intent of mocking the person behind them. Nevertheless, in doing so, one distances people from ideas that should be embraced and from actions that have a positive value.*

**Sha'arei Teshuva 3:176**

החלק השלישי מי שלועג תמיד לדברים ולפעולות ואין דעתו להבזות בעליהם אך מרחיק הדברים שאין להרחיקם, ומרחיק תועלת הפעולות שיש תקוה לתועלתן.

**שערי תשובה ג:קעו**

## Questions for the Table:

- 1) Why do you think criticizing an idea through mockery is problematic? Are there humorous criticisms that are acceptable?

2) How would you apply the Midrash and Rabbeinu Yonah's comments to case #2?

Why does mockery have such a negative effect on a person? R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto explains:

*Frivolity leads to the loss of emotional sensitivity – for one's reasoning and knowledge no longer rule over the heart. One becomes like a drunkard or a fool to whom one can neither impart wisdom nor guidance since he is unwilling to accept guidance ... And why is this so? Whereas the maintenance of vigilance depends on one's focused awareness, frivolity is totally involved in distracting one's heart from all clear thought and analysis and, as a result, the thoughts in fearing the Eternal will never find their way into the heart.*

**Mesillat Yesharim, ch. 5 (adapted from Feldheim Translation)**

כי הנה השחוק הוא מאבד את לב האדם, שכבר אין הטעם והדיעה מושלת בו, והרי הוא כשכור או שוטה אשר אי אפשר לתת להם ערמה או להנהיגם, כי אינם מקבלים הנהגה ... וכל כך למה, לפי, שכמו שכל מציאות הנהגה תלויה בשימת הלב על הדבר, כן כל עצמו של השחוק אינו אלא מסיר הלב מן המחשבות הישרות והעיוניות, ונמצא שלא יבואו הרהורי היראה בלבו כלל.  
**מסילת ישרים, פרק ה'**

Purim is a time when humor and laughter are given more prominence. Does that mean that it is a day of *leitzanut*? R. Tzadok HaKohen Rabinowitz writes:

*A permissible form of mockery is mocking idol worship, and this is recorded in Tractate Megillah (25b) because this is a theme of Purim ... For this reason it is a Jewish custom to make a mockery out of Haman who became a subject of laughter ... [The permission] is not exclusively related to idolatry because all 365 negative commandments are branches of the prohibition against idol worship and all forms of evil are called idol worship ... [However,] if there is an area that a person is not completely scrupulous in its observance, he/she should not mock it because it will lead others to accuse this person of hypocrisy. [This is why, in reality, the permission to mock is] limited to idol worship itself because the desire to worship idols no longer exists among Jews and therefore every Jew may mock it.*

**Tzidkat HaTzadik no. 260**

וצד ההיתר שבו ליצנותא דעבודה זרה וזה נזכר במס' מגילה כה: כי זה ענין יום הפורים ... שלכן מנהג ישראל לעשות בו מיני שחוק וליצנות מהמן שהיה הוא לשחוק ... ולא דוקא עבודה זרה כי כל השם"ה לא תעשה הם ענפים מלא יהיה לך וכל מיני רע נקרא עבודה זרה ... דבר שאין האדם עצמו נקי גם כן ממנו אין לו להתלוצץ מן האחר מאחר שגם הוא עדיין אינו נקי מזה אתי לאגרויי ביה רק מעבודה זרה גמורה דכבר בטלו ליצרא דעבודה זרה מישראל מזה יוכל כל א' מישראל להתלוצץ.  
**צדקת הצדיק ס' רס**

## Questions for the Table:

How do the comments of R. Luzzatto and R. Tzadok apply to case #3 and the skit that mocks overzealous people? What negative consequences might result from the skit?

Humor can be a great tool for learning and teaching. The sources we have seen show us that when we use humor, we should make sure that it is meaningful and not just silly or foolish. We should also make sure that we don't use humor to put others down, misrepresent a message by using emotions or distract people from religious growth. If done correctly, Purim is an opportunity to use humor in a way from which everyone can enjoy and benefit.

*Compiled by Rabbi Josh Flug, Director of Torah Research, Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future*

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF AUTHORS CITED

**R. Yechezkel Landau** (1713-1793) served much of his rabbinic career as the rabbi of Prague. He was regarded as a major authority on Jewish law and wrote numerous works on the topic.

**R. Moshe ben Maimon** (also known as **Rambam** and **Maimonides**, 1138-1204) is one of the most famous rabbis in Jewish history. His works on Jewish law and Jewish philosophy are extremely influential and continue to be studied regularly by scholars and students from all walks of Jewish life. He began his life in Cordoba, Spain but eventually settled in Egypt.

**R. Yisrael Lipschitz** (1782-1860) was a rabbi in Dessau and Danzig. He is most well-known for his *Tiferet Yisrael* which is a commentary on the Mishna.

**R. Yonah ben Abraham Gerondi** (also known as **Rabeinu Yonah**) was a Catalonian rabbi who died in 1263. He is renowned for his *Sha'arei Teshuva*, Gates of Repentance, a famed ethical work and his commentary on *Pirkei Avot*, Ethics of Our Fathers.

**R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto** (also known as Ramchal, 1707-1746) was an Italian scholar who wrote numerous works on Jewish thought and mysticism. His *Mesillat Yesharim* is considered one of the most important Jewish works on ethics. He settled in the Land of Israel in 1743.

**R. Tzadok HaKohen Rabinowitz** (1823-1900) was a Chasidic leader in Lublin. He was a prolific writer, writing about many different Jewish topics.