Humor in Torah and Talmud

- Not general presentation on Jewish humor, just humor in Tanach and Talmud, and list below is far from exhaustive
- Tanach mentions "laughter" 50 times (root: tz-cho-q) [excluding Yitzhaq]
- Some commentators say humor is not intentional.
  - Maybe sometimes, but one cannot avoid the feeling it is.
  - Reason for humor not always clear.
- Rabbah (4th cent. Talmudist) always began his lectures with a joke:
  Before starting to teach, Rabbah joked and pupils laughed. Afterwards he started seriously teaching halachah. (Talmud, Shabbat 30b)

Humor in Tanach

- Sarai can’t conceive, so she tells her husband Abram:
  I beg you, go in to my maid [Hagar]; perhaps I can obtain children through her. And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. [Genesis 16:2]
Hagar gets pregnant and becomes very impertinent towards her mistress Sarai. So a very angry Sarai goes to her husband Abram and tells him:
  This is all your fault! [Genesis 16:5]

- God tells Sarah she will have a child:
  And Sarah laughed, saying: Shall I have pleasure when I am old? My husband is also old.
  And the Lord said to Abraham [who did not hear Sarah]: “Why did Sarah laugh, saying: Shall I bear a child, when I am old?” [Genesis 18:12-13]
God does not report all that Sarah said for shalom bayit -- to keep peace in the family. Based on this, Talmud concludes it’s OK to tell white lies [Bava Metzia 87a].
Note: After Sarah dies Abraham marries Keturah and has six more sons.

- Middle-Eastern negotiations (still that way today)
Sarah dies and Abraham looks for a place to bury her. He offers to buy a cave from a man named Ephron. Ephron says:

No, my lord, listen to me! I have already given the field to you, and as for the cave that is in it, I have given it to you [as well]; in the view of my countrymen, I have given it to you, bury your dead.

Abraham insists on paying:

If only you would listen to me. I am giving you the money for the field...

Ephron says:

My lord, hear me! A piece of land worth 400 silver shekels, what is that between me and you? Bury your dead.

Abraham gets it and pays Ephron that outrageous price. [Genesis 23:11-16]

-There is a deep famine in the Land of Israel. Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to buy food, and tells them to bring gifts to the ruler of Egypt (who, unbeknownst to him, is his own son Joseph):

If it must be, then do this: Put some of the best products of the land in your bags and take them down to the man as a gift--a little balm and a little honey, some spices and myrrh, some pistachio nuts and almonds. [Genesis 43:11]

Gifts of food when there is a famine?

-The Israelites see Pharaoh’s army closing in on them from behind, and before them is the sea. So they tell Moses:

Is it because there were no graves in Egypt, that you took us away to die in the wilderness? [Exodus 14:11]

-Moses is away to get Torah. The people get scared and ask Aaron to make them a Golden Calf to worship. Aaron obliges. An angry Moses comes back and confronts Aaron. Aaron replies:

They gave me their gold, and I just threw it in the fire and out came this calf! [Exodus 32:21-24]

-God promises meat for a whole month:

And Moses said,” [There are] 600,000 [of us] and you said, I will give them meat, that they may eat a whole month. Will it be enough if we slaughter all the flocks and the herds? Will it be enough if all the fish of the sea are offered to them?”

And the Lord said to Moses, “Has the Lord’s hand become short? You shall see now whether my word shall come to pass to you or not.” [Numbers 11:21-23]

Translation: Moses: God, this one may be too big even for You!
God: Oh yeah? You just watch!
-Korach rebels. Moses summons the rebel leaders for a little talk. They reply:
  
  Lo naaleh -- We will not go up. (Numbers 16:12).

  They were right. Later the earth opened and they were swallowed, going straight down (Numbers Rabbah 18:10).

-David is brought before King Achish and pretends to be insane. King Achish tells his servants: "Why did you bring him to me? Does it look like I don’t have enough lunatics [in my kingdom] that you have brought this one to carry on in my presence?" [I Samuel 21:15-16]

-Sarcasm towards idolaters
  And Elijah said to the prophets of Baal… “Call on the name of your gods!”…
  And they …called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, “O Baal, hear us.” But there was no sound, no response…
  And it came to pass at noon, that Elijah mocked [the prophets of Baal], and said, “Shout louder; for he is a god; maybe he is deep in thought, or maybe he is relieving himself in the bathroom, or maybe he is on a trip, or maybe he is sleeping, and you can wake him.” [1Kings 18:25-27]

-Proverb:
  If you rise up very early in the morning and wake your friend with a wonderful blessing, your friend will consider it to be worse than receiving a curse. [Proverbs 27:14]

**Humor in Talmud**

**Desire for accuracy can be funny**

-Rabbis very careful to assign credit for their pronouncements. The Talmud says twice:

  He who reports a saying in the name of its author brings deliverance to the world. [Megillah 15a, Chullin 104b]

  This leads to cases where attribution can take longer than saying itself, to wit [8 levels]:

  R. Shim’on b. Zebid said in the name of R. Yitzhaq b. Tabla, who said it in the name of R. Hiyya Areka, who belonged to the school of R. Aha, who said it in the name of R. Zera, who said it in the name of R. Eleazar, who said it in the name of R. Hanania, who said it in the name of R. Mi’asha on the authority of R. Yehudah b. Il’ai: ____ [Nedarim 8b]
- Talmud frequently cites and credits minority opinions first, then concludes with the majority opinion, which is binding. That majority opinion is introduced with “But the Sages said…” [v’chachamin omrim], making it look like the minority rabbis are not Sages! [178 times in Talmud/Midrash]

- What difference does it make?
  R. Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument [to convince his colleagues] but they did not accept them. He said he to them: If the halachah agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it! Thereupon the carob-tree [uprooted itself and moved] 100 cubits out of its place; others say 400 cubits… [Bava Metzia 59b]

- What difference does it make? II
  Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] observed: 'Suffering is precious'. [He suffered] for thirteen years, six because of kidney stones and seven because of scurvy: others reverse them... [Bava Metzia 85a]

- Rest of story deserves to be told to show that love and compassion are very much present in the Talmud:
  [His sufferings] came to him through a certain incident, and departed likewise.
  'They came to him through a certain incident.' What is it? A calf was being taken to the slaughter. It broke away, hid his head under Rabbi's skirts and wailed [in terror]. 'Go', said he, 'you were created for this.' Thereupon they said [in Heaven], 'Since he has no pity, let us bring suffering upon him.'
  'And departed likewise.' How so? One day Rabbi's maid was sweeping the house. [Seeing] some young weasels lying there, she began to sweep them away. He said to her, “Leave them be. It is written, 'and his tender mercies are over all his works.'”
  [V'rahamav al kol maasav -- Ps. 145:9]. They said [in Heaven], 'Since he is [now] compassionate, let us be compassionate to him.' [Bava Metzia 85a]

The humor is frequently in the phrasing

- Don’t overdo the splitting of hairs:
  1. We learned: A young pigeon which is found on the ground within fifty cubits of a cote belongs to the owner of the cote; if found beyond fifty cubits from the cote, it belongs to the finder...
     Rabbi Jeremiah raised the question: If one paw is within fifty cubits and the other beyond, how do we decide?
     It was for asking this question that they kicked Rabbi Jeremiah out of the House of Study [Bet HaMidrash]. [Bava Batra 23b]
2. Pelemo asked Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi]: If a man has two heads, on which one must he put the tefillin? Rabbi replied: Which do you choose, to leave immediately, or be excommunicated [placed under cherem]? In the meantime a man came [to the school] and said, 'My first-born child was born with two heads. How much must I give the kohen, [the usual amount or twice that]?' [Menachot 37a]

- The fulfilled vow
  Man to wife, 'I vow that I will not have sex with you until you show me something beautiful about you.' Man went to see Rabbi Yishmael son of Rabbi Jose to get out of vow. The rabbi said:
  - Perhaps her head is beautiful?
    - It is round.
  - Perhaps her hair is beautiful?
    - It is like stalks of flax.
  - Perhaps her eyes are beautiful?
    - They are bleary.
  - Perhaps her nose is beautiful?
    - It is swollen.
  - Perhaps her lips are beautiful?
    - They are thick.
  - Perhaps her neck is beautiful?
    - It is squat.
  - Perhaps her waist is beautiful?
    - It protrudes.
  - Perhaps her feet are beautiful?
    - They are as broad as those of a duck.
  - Perhaps her name is beautiful?
    - Her name is 'Muck'.
  - The rabbi said: Then I pronounce your vow fulfilled. Her name suits her beautifully. (Nedarim 66b)

Stories of the rabbis

- The proper sukkah
  [If one] erects his Sukkah on the deck of a ship, R. Gamaliel declares it invalid [because it could easily be blown away] and R. Akiva declares it valid. It happened that R. Gamaliel and R. Akiva were traveling on a ship [during Sukkot] and R. Akiva arose and erected a Sukkah on the deck of the ship. The next day the wind blew and tore it away. So R. Gamaliel said to [R. Akiva], Akiva, where is your Sukkah? [Sukkah 23a]

- Ambush?
Rabbi once suffered from a disorder of the bowels and said, Does anyone know whether apple-cider bought from a non-Jew is prohibited or permitted?
R. Ishmael son of R. Jose replied, 'My father once had the same complaint and they brought him apple-cider bought from a non-Jew which was seventy years old; he drank it and recovered.'
[Rabbi] said to him, You had this information all along and you let me suffer! [Avodah Zara 40b]
(You never asked me before!)

-Use as few words as possible with women
R. Jose the Galilean was once on a journey when he met Beruriah. He asked her, “[Excuse me], what road should we take in order to get to Lod?”
She replied, “You stupid Galilean! Did our Sages not teach: ‘Do not talk too much to women’ [Avot 1:5] ? You should have asked: How to Lod? [Eruvin 53b]

-Hefker!
R. Ishmael son of R. Jose was walking on a road when he met a man carrying a load of sticks. The man put the sticks down, rested, and then said to [R. Ishmael], "Load me up." [as required by Ex. 23:5]
R. Ishmael [who was rich and overweight] asked: "How much are the sticks worth?"
The man answered: "Half a zuz,.
Rabbi Ishmael paid him the half zuz and said “Hefker!” [meaning: I declare these sticks ownerless, so that anyone who takes takes them is not a thief].
The man said, “I claim ownership of these ownerless sticks. Now [to Rabbi Ishmael]: Load me up!
Rabbi Ishmael gave him another half zuz and again declared the sticks ownerless.
Seeing that the man was again about to claim them again, he added, "I have declared the sticks ownerless except to you."
But [the Rabbis asked]: Can something be declared ownerless with a condition attached? No, but Rabbi Ishmael [had to stop the man and] did it with mere words. [Bava Metzia 30b]

-Wrong reason
The Emperor proposed to R. Tanhum, Come, let us all be one people. The rabbi answered, Very well, but we are circumcised and cannot possibly become like you [because our circumcision cannot be undone]. So why don’t YOU become circumcised like us?
The Emperor replied: You have spoken well. Nevertheless, anyone who gets the better of the king [in debate] must be thrown to the lions. So they threw [the rabbi] to the lions, but they did not eat him.
An unbeliever remarked [to the Emperor]: The reason they did not eat him is that they are not hungry.
[To test this theory, the Emperor had the unbeliever] thrown to the lions, who ate him. [Sanhedrin 39a]

-Stay away from me!
Raba said: It is a man’s duty to drink 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 got drunk and Rabbah arose and cut R. Zera’s throat. On the next day he prayed on his behalf and revived him. [Rabbah] said, “Next year come again and we’ll celebrate together again.”
[R. Zera] replied: [No, thanks.] A miracle may not happen every time.
[Megillah 7b]

Not for ladies

-All aspects of our lives are guided by the Torah
R. Akiba said: Once I [secretly] followed R. Yehoshua to a bathroom…
Ben Azzai said to him: “Did you dare to take such liberties with our master?”
He replied: “It is a matter of Torah, and I have to learn.”
R. Kahana once hid under Rav’s bed. He heard him chatting [with his wife], joking [with her, then] doing what he needed to do…
[R. Kahane whispered to himself:] You would think [my master] has never eaten this dish before!!
[Rav heard him and] said to him: “Kahana, are you here? Get out, because it is rude.”
He replied: “It is a matter of Torah, and I have to learn!” [Berachot 62a]
The rabbis were not shy about discussing these matters, but the students felt a picture is worth a thousand words.

-The limits of politeness
R. Nahman said: All foul language is forbidden except where directed at idolatry, in which case it is permitted…
R. Huna b. Manoah said in the name of R. Aha the son of R. Ika: A Jew is permitted to tell [an idolater], “Take your idol and stick it up your rear end.”
[Megillah 25b]

-Who is the fairest of them all?
The Rabbis taught: There have been four women of exceptional beauty in the world: Sarah, Rahav, Abigail and Esther…
R. Joshua b. Korha said: [Actually, I heard that] Esther was sallow, [even though she was] endowed with great charm. [In that case, they said], Vashti should replace Esther in the list.
Our Rabbis taught: Rahav inspired lust by her name [alone]… R. Isaac said: Whoever says. ‘Rahav, Rahav’, has an immediate orgasm. R.
Nahman said to him: I say ‘Rahav, Rahav’, and nothing happens to me! [R. Isaac] replied: I was speaking of someone who [really] knows her and is intimate with her.

Yael inspired lust by her voice, Abigail by the memories she left in people, Michal, Saul’s daughter, by her appearance. [Megillah 13a, 15a]

But elsewhere Talmud says Eve was more beautiful than Sarah [Bava Batra 58a]. Tosafot says she is not on the list because only daughters of human beings are mentioned.

-Size matters?

R. Johanan said: The penis of R. Ishmael son of R. Jose was as large as a nine-kav canteen. R. Papa said: R. Johanan's penis was as large as a five-kav canteen; others say, three kavs. The penis of R. Papa himself was as [large as] a Harpanian basket. [Baba Metzia 84a]

-Tosafot: They were overweight, but could still father children because they were well-endowed. Latter is mentioned to dispel doubt that their children are really theirs. (See earlier story in Bava Metzia 84a. But different rabbis are mentioned there and R. Johanan could not have been overweight – see below.)

-Chochmat Shlomo: Talmud says: The greater a man, the greater his evil inclination. [Sukkah 52a] So even though they had unusually great desire, they overcame it [being Sages].

-Puritanical Soncino translates ‘penis’ as ‘waist’!

-Rabbis comparing their beauty

R. Johanan said: I am the only one remaining of Jerusalem’s men of outstanding beauty...

But that is not so; for did not a Master say: R. Kahana's beauty is a reflection of R. Abbahu's beauty; R. Abbahu's beauty is a reflection of our forefather Jacob's beauty; our forefather Jacob's beauty was a reflection of Adam's beauty; whereas R. Johanan is omitted! R. Johanan is different, because he lacked a beard.

R. Johanan used to go and sit at the gates of the mikvah. He said, ‘When the daughters of Israel come out of the bath, let them look at me, that they may bear sons as beautiful and as learned as I am.

The Rabbis said to him: Do you not fear an evil eye? He replied, I am of the seed of Joseph, against whom an evil eye is powerless... [Bava Metzia 84a]

R. Eleazar fell ill and R. Johanan went in to visit him... He noticed that... R. Eleazar was weeping, and he said to him: Why do you weep?... He replied to him: I am weeping on account of this beauty [of yours] that is going to rot in the earth. He said to him: On that account you surely have a reason to weep; and they both wept. [Berachot 5b]

-A funny, puzzling, down-to-earth, human, touching, poetic story with a moral
It was said of R. Eleazar b. Dordia that he did not leave out any prostitute in the world without having sex with her. Once, on hearing that there was a certain prostitute in one of the seaports who accepted a purse of denarii for payment, he took a purse of denarii and crossed seven rivers for her sake. As he was having sex with her, she passed some gas and said: Just as this gas I passed will never return to its place, so will Eleazar b. Dordia never be accepted in repentance.

So he went and sat between two hills and mountains and said: O hills and mountains, plead with God to have mercy on me!

They replied: How shall we pray for you? We need it ourselves, for it says [in Isaiah], “For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed!” [Isaiah 54:10]

So he said: Heaven and earth, plead with God to have mercy on me!

They, too, replied: How shall we pray for you? We need it ourselves, for it says [in Isaiah], “For the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall become old like a garment.” [Isaiah 51:6]

He then said: Sun and moon, plead with God to have mercy on me!

But they also replied: How shall we pray for you? We need it ourselves, for it says [in Isaiah], “Then the moon shall be confounded and the sun ashamed.” [Isaiah 24:23]

He said: O stars and constellations, plead with God to have mercy on me!

They said: How shall we pray for you? We need it ourselves, for it says [in Isaiah], “And all the hosts of heaven shall rot away.” [Isaiah 34:4]

He said: Then the matter depends on me alone!

He placed his head between his knees and wept aloud until his soul departed.

Then a heavenly voice announced: Rabbi Eleazar b. Dordia [has been accepted in] the World to Come!

[When he heard this story] Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] wept and said: Some acquire eternal life after many years, others in [only] one hour!

[He] also added: Those who repent are not [only] accepted, they are even called Rabbi! [Avodah Zara 17a]