

*Blazing Saddles* is one of my favorite movies. In fact, this Mel Brooks comedy classic is one of the funniest movies ever. Literally. It was ranked #6 on the American Film Institutes' funniest movies of all time. For those of you who need a refresher, *Blazing Saddles* is a farce about racism and the political process, set against the background of the Old West. It dives headfirst into the contentious issue of racism, with its frequent use of stereotypes, racial epithets, anachronisms, and comedy. The genius of the film is that it makes us laugh while upending all of our assumptions about what life was like in the Old West.

While the entire movie is one big hilarious romp, one scene in particular stands out as especially funny to Jews of a certain age and background. The Waco Kid, played by Gene Wilder, and Sheriff Bart, played by Cleve Little, are sharing stories about their pasts, and how they came to this point in their lives. The Waco Kid is surprised that Sheriff Bart, who is black, became the newly appointed Sheriff of Rock Ridge. The Waco Kid asks, "What's a dazzling urbanite like you doing in a rustic setting like this?" Sheriff Bart picks up his drink and says, "Back in '56, my folks and I were part of this long wagon train moving west." The movie then flashes back, showing the wagon train, and that Bart's family, being black, were not allowed to travel in the same line as the other wagons. Bart continues, "suddenly, out of the west came the entire Sioux nation, and let me tell you baby, they was open for business."

We then see the Sioux charging in on horses, firing rifles in the air, and creating a panic among those traveling in the wagon train. In an attempt to form some sort of protection against the Sioux, all of the wagons in the wagon train formed a circle. All of the wagons except one: Bart's family, which formed their own circle, because the white folks wouldn't let them in their circle.

After securing their capture of the many wagons, the Sioux chief and two of his lieutenants rode over to Bart's family. The chief took a good, long look at the man, woman, and boy, and in an expression of surprise said...well, if you've seen the movie, you know what he said. It's one of the funniest lines in the history of cinema, as the chief says a word that may have been more socially acceptable when the movie came out, but now considered derogatory, and one I'm uncomfortable saying, certainly not from the Bimah, and especially not on Rosh Hashanah. But the reason that this line of dialog is so funny is that it is spoken in Yiddish.

As the chief's lieutenant was raising a tomahawk to attack, the chief stopped him and said, "Nah nah, zayt nisht meshuge!" (Don't be crazy!) Looking to the heavens, the chief yelled out, "Loz im geyn!" (Let him go!) He looked at the family, and in a familiar accent said, "Cop a walk, it's alright." Each member of the family expressed their gratitude to the chief, who responded, "Abi gezunt (As long as you're healthy) Take off!" The family shook the reins of their horses, which pulled their wagon away. As they left the Sioux chief and his lieutenants, the chief turned to his fellow countryman and said, "Hosti gezen in dayne lebn? (Have you seen such a thing in your life?) They darker than us! Woof!"

This movie debuted in 1974, and my father has told me the story of how, when he saw this movie in the theater in Pikesville, MD, everyone erupted in laughter at the first utterance of Yiddish by the Sioux chief, so much so that my father did not hear all of the lines in Yiddish that followed. It was not until many years later when he finally saw the movie again that he got to hear the dialog of the entire scene.

It is common knowledge that one should never explain why a joke is funny, but doing so will lead us to an important insight today. We must ask the question: Why is this scene from *Blazing Saddles* funny? Firstly, it is because the Sioux Indian Chief is played by Mel Brooks, born Melvin Kaminsky, one of the funniest individuals ever. More importantly, it is because a Sioux Indian Chief does the unthinkable: he speaks Yiddish as his native tongue. We would assume that an Indian Chief in a movie from the 1970s would be portrayed as speaking in some sort of stereotypical, overstated, cartoonish broken English. But the movie subverts our expectations with several lines of dialog spoken in a language known only to a subdivision of one of the smallest peoples on Earth: Eastern European Jews.

We laugh because the unexpected happens, one of the classic answers to the age-old question of why people laugh. Plato, living in Athens nearly 2,500 years ago, gave us the "superiority theory of comedy," and hypothesized that the essence of humor is when we find something funny because we feel superior to it, like when bullies laugh at their victims, or more likely, when a crowd laughs at someone's mistake or embarrassment. Less malicious examples include laughing at a child's naivete, an animal doing funny things, or self-deprecating jokes. While some of these things are certainly funny, the problem with

this theory is that it is not sensitive to other aspects of humor like humility, a sense of connection, and empathy. This kind of humor creates emotional barriers between the joke teller, the audience, and the butt of the joke, putting people in a different category from the person laughing.

Next is the relief theory, which explains that we find things funny because it helps us relieve tense feelings, anxiety, or nervous energy. It is cathartic and can be helpful in tense or awkward interpersonal situations.

Finally, there is the incongruity theory, which says that a conflict or contradiction of ideas makes things funny. A set-up creates some sort of expectation, and the punchline violates this expectation through a misdirection or absurdity. The human brain is great at anticipating patterns. If the brain thinks it knows what is about to come next, our imagination automatically fills in the blanks. When the punchline does not match our brain's construction of what the expectation is, our mind has to reconstruct the connection between the expectation and the unexpected result. In most cases, our physical reaction to that is laughter.

This is the most agreed upon theory of comedy. *Blazing Saddles* is full of this kind of humor. Case in point is the Sioux Indian Chief speaking Yiddish. Similarly, in the opening scene of the movie, a group of Black, Chinese, and Irish railroad workers are being supervised by white men in 1874. The white bosses ask the black workers to sing a song like they used to sing when they were slaves. The black workers begin singing the 20th-century Cole Porter classic, "I Get a Kick Out of You," most famously sung by Frank Sinatra. This confuses and frustrates their white bosses, who ask for traditionally black slave songs, like "Swing low, sweet chariot," and "Camp Town Lady." The black workers profess ignorance of these songs, resulting in their white bosses singing "Camp Town Lady," dancing, hooting, and hollering, until their boss stops them because they look like idiots, to their supervisor and to us, the audience. Zooming out to the plot of the entire movie, the incongruity theory is also why we find it funny that a black man can become the sheriff of a town of racist country bumpkins in 1874.

The incongruity theory of comedy is a staple of Jewish humor, and it helps us appreciate one of the cornerstones of Jewish comedy: the Book of Esther. The book speaks about very serious themes: political intrigue, hidden identity, and the fragility of Diaspora Jewish living. But the book presents all of these themes through farce and a subversion of expectations. King Achashverosh is a drunken buffoon who cannot make a decision on his own and is directed only by his libido. The Jews in the story, Esther and Mordecai, while Jewish by birth and ethnicity, do not display Jewish behavior in any way. Women are the main drivers of the plot, as Vashti, Esther, and Zeresh, the wife of Haman, move the story forward with their actions and ideas. The feud between Haman and Mordecai is actually one that dates back hundreds of years to another story in the Bible. Best of all, the villain, Haman, is executed for the one crime he does not commit, as in a case of mistaken identity, Achashverosh thinks that Haman is trying to force himself on Esther, when he is really on his knees begging for his life.

Everything that was set up at the beginning of the story turns out to be a reversal by the end. In fact, the theme of the book comes from a phrase found in its text: *nahafokh hu*, which means "the opposite happened."

Ultimately, the story speaks to the fears of a Diaspora Jewish community that does not control its own fate, but is set in one of the most tolerant empires in human history, accepting of cultural and religious differences and diversity. By placing this tale in such an open society, the author is saying that anything can happen anywhere. The story distrusts its rulers as fickle and whimsical: a government that is tolerant one day could plan genocide the next. The genius of Esther's author was that he gave us a way to laugh at these fears by subverting all of our expectations and creating a story that inspired a holiday and has stood the test of time.

However, the origins of Jewish comedy date back even earlier than the Book of Esther. In fact, we can trace them to the origins of the Jewish People, to our Torah reading for this First Day of Rosh Hashanah, when a one hundred year old man and a ninety year old woman become parents to a newborn son, and patriarch and matriarch to a nation in covenant with God.

Our Torah reading today begins with God taking note of Sarah, so let us get some background to discover the matter about which God was taking note, and laughter-infused events that culminated in what was

chanted earlier this morning. In Genesis 15, God promised Abram a son, but did not specify that it will be his wife Sarai who will bear and birth that child. Understanding her own barrenness, Sarai, in Genesis 16, offered Hagar, her Egyptian maidservant, as a surrogate, who bore Ishmael to Abram. However, when Hagar became pregnant, tensions predictably and inevitably arose between Sarai and her servant, resulting in Sarai's insistence that Abram banish her into the wilderness. An angel appeared to Hagar and named the child Ishmael, meaning "God will hear," invoking the cries of Hagar as well as the cries of Abram, that his own desires for an heir were heard. In Genesis 17, Abram was renamed by God as Abraham, and was instructed about the covenant of circumcision. God then renamed Sarai as Sarah, and said, "I will bless her; indeed, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she shall give rise to nations; rulers of peoples shall issue from her" (17:16). In response, Abraham literally fell on the ground laughing. Genesis 17:17 says, and listen to the Hebrew, וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָהָם עַל-פָּנָיו וַיִּצְחַק "Abraham fell on his face and laughed as he thought to himself, "Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?" Abraham's laughter is not meant to be derisive. Rather, it is an expression of his astonishment, a subversion of expectation.

Abraham's thoughts go where they naturally would, and he asked God: what about Ishmael? God responded that Abraham's first-born son will achieve his own greatness and have numerous descendants, but Sarah's son will continue the covenant. In the previous chapter, an angel gave Ishmael his name. In this chapter, God named Isaac, saying, "My covenant I will maintain with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year" (17:21) Isaac's name means "he will laugh," and it is clearly linked to Abraham's reaction.

The story continues in the next chapter. After Abraham circumcised himself, he graciously received three guests, one of whom may have been God disguised in human form. This guest announced the fulfillment of God's previous promise of a son, as Sarah hid and listened at the entrance to the tent. The Torah says, again, listen to the Hebrew

וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּה "And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment, with my husband so old?" (Genesis 18:10).

Both Sarah and Abraham laughed at the incongruity of their situation: a one hundred year old man who already had a male heir, and a ninety year old barren woman, bearing, birthing, and raising a child. Granted, this is not the gut-busting, laugh-out loud humor of the Book of Esther, but to Abraham and Sarah, this is a major subversion of the expectations for the twilight years of their lives. In his commentary, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch notes that the Hebrew words for "Screaming" and "laughing" are very similar: ק-ע-צ and ק-ה-צ, respectively. They are both human outbursts of surprise, expressing that something incongruous with our expectations has occurred. Both are reactions, that based on our assumptions or limited knowledge, we were not expecting to happen. When tragedy occurs, we are *tzo'eq* or *tzo'eqet*, a person who cries. When something wonderful occurs, we are *tzocheq* or *tzocheqet*, a person who laughs.

The announcement and birth of Isaac are symbols of laughter because of the incongruity and wonder that embodied his announcement and eventual birth, and that God's covenantal promises to Abraham have been fulfilled. As we read from Torah earlier today, after Isaac's birth, Sarah said, and again, listen to the Hebrew: וַתֵּאמֶר שָׂרָה צָחֵק עָשָׂה לִי אֱלֹהִים כִּלְיָה שִׂמְעַע יִצְחָק־לִי, "God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me." And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children! Yet I have borne a son in his old age." (Genesis 21:6-7) After Isaac's birth, Sarah laughs again, but this time, it is not in surprise and self-mockery as before. This time, she laughs in delight because the unexpected has occurred, and everyone around her will laugh with her. This truly is the greatest joy: when we can share laughter with others.

Not only does Isaac's announcement and birth elicit laughter from his parents. These events lead us to a profound understanding of Jewish existence itself. Isaac, whose name was inspired by laughter and whose birth ensured the Abrahamic covenant, subverted the expectations of those around him, as good comedy does. In this way, Isaac becomes the prototype for the entire Jewish People.

We have continually subverted expectations throughout history. Our tiny people gave the world the Book of Books, monotheism, the notions of good and evil, the idea of human equality, and so many of the building blocks of western society and the modern world. We have been persecuted by every society in which we have lived, and yet we have survived, achieved, and thrived. We have subverted the expectations of those who have sought to destroy us throughout the generations. We

punch above our weight. More importantly, no other group with a unified existence and a coherent and connective story can trace itself as far back as we can. And we trace it back to a child who subverted the expectations of his day. We are all Isaac.

In our own era, the Jewish People has experienced one of the great inversions of expectations of human history: a people murdered in Europe that immediately established a state in their ancestral homeland, which became the mightiest in the Middle East, and the focus of the world's attention. It speaks to the words of Psalm 126, which almost became the national anthem of the fledgling State of Israel: "A song of ascents. When the LORD will restore the captivity of Zion, we will be like dreamers, our mouths shall be filled with laughter, our tongues, with songs of joy" (Psalm 126:1-2).

For many generations, it may have seemed to outsiders like the Jewish People were rejected by God, that we had a dry, legalistic existence. But that could not be further from how we Jews saw ourselves. It is part of the Jewish story to subvert expectations, to live a life of joy and celebration, even in times of persecution, and to be in relationship with a God who has maintained a connection to us through the joyous performance of mitzvot. Unfortunately, there are many Jews today who have forgotten this. Many have chosen to see the Jewish story as one of "oy" instead of "joy." Other Jews have forgotten how we subvert expectations and cannot see the miraculousness of the Jewish People reborn in our homeland. There are also those Jews who exalt causes and visions over humility and God. I'll have more to say about all of these things over this High Holy Day season. For right now, I'll just say that they just don't get the joke.

Several years ago, for a Batman-themed Purim spiel at my previous congregation, I played the villain, a Haman-inspired Joker.

After the Rosh Hashanah, ask me to show you a picture of me and Jena dressed as Joker and Harley Quinn. It's pretty epic. As this Haman-inspired Joker, I wanted to kill all of the Jews because I did not think that the Jews were funny. I could not find one funny Jewish comedian. This was obviously a farce, and begs the question, why do we Jews love jokes? Why are there so many Jewish comedians? Sociologist Peter Berger once wrote that "The comic experience provides a distinctive diagnosis of the world. It sees through the facades of the social order and discloses other realities lurking behind the superficial ones."

Like the way we interpret our sacred texts, joking and laughter expresses that there is more to life than meets the eye, that our expectations can be overturned, that there is a completely different way of seeing any given situation, from the Book of Esther, to the pages of the Talmud, to Lenny Bruce or Jerry Seinfeld dissecting the endless minutiae of our daily lives.

Among many other reasons why we love jokes, humor is also a powerful coping mechanism. When life is hard, even to the risk of one's own life, one way of getting through tough times is by joking about the situation, especially by poking fun at one's oppressors. Jews have excelled at this for thousands of years, since the Book of Esther's farce about possible extermination to the very real modern extermination in Europe, less than seven decades ago.

It's Berlin, 1938. Two Jews are sitting together reading newspapers, one with tears streaming down his face, the other chuckling to himself. The sad Jew notices that the smiling Jew is reading *Der Sturmer*, the viciously Antisemitic Nazi newspaper.

"How can you be reading that? And smiling, no less!" he asks. His friend responds, "Well, what does your paper say about the Jews?"

Fighting through the tears, he looks down at his Zionist weekly newspaper and reports, "It says that the Jews are being harassed. They're being beaten, and their property is being taken away from them. They're being gathered up and taken away in trains to who knows where!"

The Jew reading *Der Sturmer* responds, "Exactly why I'm not reading that garbage. In this paper, we control the world's economy and we are the real power behind all of the world's governments. We are an unstoppable force. Which Jew would you rather be?"

Here's another one for you: A German motorist loses control of his car and crashes off the side of the road. A Jew pulls up to the crash site, gets out of his car, and pulls the man from the wreck, saving his life. The German motorist turns out to be Hitler. For his assistance, Hitler grants the Jew one wish. The Jew says, "Don't tell anybody about this!" These are just two of the countless jokes about the Holocaust, as humor was a means of coping with the terrible tragedies happening.

Israelis are especially good at this kind of coping humor. In the wake of the Gulf War 30 years ago, a popular costume for Purim that year was a gas mask. During the recent Hamas-Israel conflict in May of this year, you might have seen a video that went viral of Iron Dome rockets shooting down Hamas missiles in the night sky, set to the music of Star Wars. Last year, with the outbreak of the deadly pandemic in which we still find ourselves, one joke in Israel went: "I've lost my sense of smell and taste. I think I might have Covid." "Or, maybe you've just been eating Ashkenazi food."

Rabbi Hirsch's astute observation about the grammatical fine line between laughing and crying rings true when, under dire circumstances, it feels like if we don't laugh, we could cry. To illustrate this point another way, I draw upon the wisdom of contemporary pop-culture Talmudist, Jerry Seinfeld. On an episode of Seinfeld, Tim Whatley, Jerry's dentist, played by Bryan Cranston, converted to Judaism, and immediately upon doing so, began telling Jewish jokes. We learn that this offended Jerry partly as a Jewish person, but mostly as a comedian. Regardless, Whatley astutely and correctly insisted that, "it's our sense of humor that sustained us as a people for three thousand years." In fact, even longer than that, back to the moment when the father and mother of the Jewish people laughed at the prospects of having a son to which God's covenant would be passed, upending their expectations, as we have upended expectations ever since.

Rosh Hashanah is the day that God remembered Sarah and brought news of her impending pregnancy. It is a day of dual meaning: the day of judgment, when all creatures, even those of God's celestial host, are judged. It is also a day of great celebration, when we acclaim God sovereign of all creation and celebrate God's power of remembrance of our own deeds and His promise to Sarah. It is in our nature to hold those contradictions: the universalistic and the particularistic; the terrifying and the joyous. In times of challenge, especially in times like our current moment, we who trust in the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac must continue to subvert expectations, embrace the miraculous with joy, and find ways to laugh in the midst of the most dire of circumstances. This is seriously a laughing matter. Shanah Tovah U'metukah!