

Humor in the Talmud, Part III

Introduction

- Tanach mentions “laughter” 50 times (root: *tz-cho-q*) [excluding Yitzhaq]
- Rabbah (4th century CE) always began his lectures with a joke:
Before he began his lecture to the scholars, [Rabbah] used to say something funny, and the scholars were cheered. After that, he sat in awe and began the lecture. [Shabbat 30b]

Warning

Talmud includes halacha (law) and Aggadah (homiletic folk stories, light stuff). “Talmud study” is the first only, not the second. The Book of Hosea says:

Those who dwell in [God’s] shade will return. They will revive like grain and blossom like a vine. [Hosea 14:8]

The Midrash comments on this verse:

“They will revive like grain” means through Talmud [study, i.e. halacha];
“and blossom like a vine” means through Aggadah [study, i.e. homiletic teachings and stories of the Sages.] [Lev. R. 1:2]

The Netziv, from 19th-century Poland, adds:

Grain is the staff of life and without it man cannot exist. Just as grain is the primary source of man's nourishment, so too the study of Talmud, with its instructions regarding the laws of living, is to be man's primary focus. Aggadah, on the other hand, is like wine. It can make man happy, but it must be imbibed in proportion. And it is destructive if it is man's sole source of nourishment. One who engages primarily in Aggadah risks misunderstanding and misrepresenting the teachings of our Sages, for his life and view of the world are not thoroughly rooted in the firm ground of Talmud. [Netziv, Haamek Davar, Harchev Davar on Deut. 32:4]

So light stuff isn't enough and can't be called studying Talmud!

Stories

-Fatherly advice

Rabbi Akiva taught his son Rabbi Yehoshua: My son... do not dwell in a town whose leaders are scholars. [Because scholars are bad administrators!] [Pesachim 112a]

-Where can I get some?

A pious student had a father who drank too much wine and [frequently] collapsed in the streets in drunken stupor... One time, it was raining and the pious son... saw a drunk man lying in the gutter with water running all over him... He brought his father there and showed him the drunk [to show him the consequences of excessive drinking]. What did the elderly father do? He went to the drunk, [came close,] and asked him, "Where did you get such good wine to drink?" [Midrash Tanhuma, Lev. Shemini 11]

-Order of precedence

The Talmud established a strict hierarchy in Israel, for protocol purposes. At the very top is the scholar. Why? The Talmud answers:

A scholar takes precedence over a king of Israel, because if a scholar dies there is no one to replace him, but if a king of Israel dies, anybody in Israel is eligible to replace him. [Horayot 13a]

After the king comes the High Priest (the *kohen gadol*), then prophets, then ordinary priests, then Levites, then ordinary Jews, then bastards:

But if a bastard is a scholar, he takes precedence over an ignorant High Priest. [Horayot 13a]

-God, you can do better!

Rabbi Eleazar ben Pedath found himself in very great poverty... The Rabbis came to see him... [He told them: Just now] the Holy One, Blessed be He, was sitting by my side and I asked Him: How long will I suffer in this world?

And [God] replied: Eleazar, my son, do you want me to turn back the world to its very beginnings? Perhaps then you might be [re]born in better conditions?

I replied: All this [upheaval], and then only perhaps?...

[God] replied: As a reward... for refusing [my offer], I will grant you in the next world thirteen rivers of balsam oil as clear as the Euphrates and the Tigris, which you will be able to enjoy.

I asked: [That's it?] And nothing more? ... Am I asking from someone who has nothing?

[God] then snapped at my forehead and exclaimed: Eleazar, my son, I have [made a ray of light radiate from your forehead.] [An expression of love.] [Taanit 25a]

-I am very humble!

Our Rabbis taught:

When Rabbi Eliezer died, [scholarship] ceased...

When Abba Yosei ben Ketanta died, piety ceased...

When Ben Azzai died, diligence [in the study of Torah] ceased.

When Ben Zoma died, [good teaching] ceased...

When Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] died, humility and fear of heaven ceased...

Rabbi Yosef [replied:] Don't include humility, because I am still here [and I am very humble]. [Sotah 49b]

-The rabbis frequently argued strenuously and criticized one another

Rabbi Sheshet said: It seems that Rav made this statement while he was sleepy and about to doze off. [Yevamot 24b]

Translation: I don't know what he was smoking...

Commentator: It's a compliment: He would never say that while fully awake!

-Go off on a spaceship?

The Talmud has a twist on whether Jews may take time from Torah study for secular subjects:

Ben Damah, the son of Rabbi Ishmael's sister, once asked Rabbi Ishmael, "May one such as myself, who have studied the entire Torah, learn Greek philosophy [*chochmat yevanit*]?"

[Rabbi Ishmael] then read to him the following verse [from the Book of Joshua], "This Book of the Torah shall not depart from your mouth; but you shall meditate on it day and night." [Joshua 1:8] Therefore, go and find a time that is neither day nor night, and at that time you may study Greek philosophy! [Menachot 99b]

Why did he phrase it that way, rather than just saying "No"? Was he telling him to go off on a spaceship, where there is no day and no night, to study Greek philosophy to his heart's content?

-One trouble at a time!

Torah:

And Moses said to God [at the burning bush]: “Behold, when I come to the people of Israel, and shall say to them: The God of your fathers has sent me to you, and they shall say to me: What is his name, what shall I say to them?” And God said to Moses, “I AM WHAT I AM”. And he said: “So shall you say to the people of Israel, “I AM” has sent me to you.” [Ex. 3:13-14]

Talmud:

[Why was “I am What I am” shortened to just “I am”?]

-“I am What I am” means that the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: “Go and say to Israel: I am with you in this servitude of yours, and I shall be with you in your servitudes [of the future, in] the kingdoms [of Babylon and Rome].”

-[Moses] said to Him: Lord of the Universe, they have enough trouble now. [No need to tell them about future troubles.]

-The Holy One, blessed be He, [agreed] and said to [Moses]: Go and tell them [just]: “I AM” has sent me to you. [Ber. 9b]

Sex, bathroom and other unmentionables

-Oldtime remedies

Rabbi Yaakov was suffering from sores in the slit of his rear end. Rabbi Ammi (some say Rabbi Assi) told him: Take seven seeds of red aloe and tie them up in the cloth cut from the neck of a shirt. Wrap the bundle around with animal hair, dip it into white naphtha, and then burn it. Then spread [the ashes] on the affected area. While preparing this, bring the seeds of the fruit of thornbushes, and apply its split side to the slit of the rear end.

Do this only if the sore is external. But what if the sore is internal? Then take the fat of a goat that has never given birth, melt it [over heat] and apply it to the affected area. Alternatively, take three melon leaves which have dried in the shade, burn them, and apply the ashes to the sore.

Alternatively, apply [ground] mussel shells. Alternatively, bring olive oil mixed with wax and wrap it in rags of flax cloth during the summer and cotton rags during the winter, [and apply it to the affected area].

[Avodah Zarah 28a-b]

Some of these remedies have been found to work, others not. Some commentators even suggested that human physiology was different back then!

-Verbosity

The future King Saul asks some young maidens by a water well: “Is the prophet Samuel here?” Here is what the girls answer, verbatim from the Tanach:

He is. Behold, he is before you. Make haste now, for he came today to the city; for there is a sacrifice of the people today in the high place. As soon as you come to the city, you shall find him, before he goes up to the high place to eat; for the people will not eat until he comes, because he blesses the sacrifice; and afterwards those who are invited, eat. So therefore go up; for about this time you shall find him. [1Sam. 9:12-13]

The Talmud [Berachot 48b] asks:

Why did they make such a long story of it?

and it gives three answers:

-Because women are fond of talking.

-Because the girls wanted to feast their eyes on Saul's good looks. Indeed, the Bible tells us:

[There was not among the people of Israel a more handsome person than Saul,] from his shoulders and upward he was higher than any of the people. [1Sam. 9:2]

-Because Saul was not meant to be king until a certain moment, and God made the girls delay him until that moment.

The Talmud comments in this respect:

Ten measures of speech descended to the world. The women took nine [and the men took one.] [Kiddushin 49b]

-Old King David and young Abishag

Tanach:

And King David was old and advanced in years. They covered him with blankets, but he could not become warm. So his servants said to him, "Let there be sought for [you] a young virgin, and let her stand before [you], and be [your] attendant, and let her lie in your bosom, that [you] may become warm." And they looked for a pretty girl throughout all the territory of Israel, and found Abishag, a Shunammite, and brought her to the king. And the girl was very pretty, and she attended the king, and ministered to him. But the king knew her not. [1Kings 1:1-4]

The Talmud adds:

Abishag said to [King David], "Let us marry."

But he said: "You are forbidden to me [since I already have the maximum number of eighteen wives.]"

She teased him: When courage fails the thief, he becomes virtuous. [I.e., you can't do it anymore!]

Then he said to [his servants:] Bring me [my wife] Bathsheba...

Rav Yehudah said in Rav's name: On that occasion Bathsheba dried herself thirteen times. [Sanhedrin 22a]

David had intercourse with his wife thirteen times in a row to show Abishag he still could!

-Explain it to me more clearly!

Shechem rapes Dinah, Jacob's daughter, then sends his father to ask her father for her hand in marriage, thinking that by so doing:

...their livestock, their possessions, and all their animals will be ours!
[Gen. 34:23].

Jacob agrees, provided all males in the tribe are circumcised. The deal is struck. Shechem then orders all the males circumcised. The Midrash says:

There was one particular individual, [Magbai,] who, [after being told] "Come and get circumcised", retorted: "[Let me get this straight:] SHECHEM is getting married and *I* have to get circumcised!?"
[Gen. R. 80:8]

-Mordechai as father and mother

Tanach

And [Mordechai] brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. And the maid was beautiful and of good presence; and, when her father and her mother died, Mordechai took her for himself as a daughter. [Esther 2:7]

Midrash:

Said Rabbi Yudan: One time [Mordechai] went looking among all the wet nurses [in town for someone to nurse Esther] but could not immediately find one. So he himself nursed her. Rabbi Berekiah and Rabbi Abbahu said in Rabbi Eleazar's name: Milk came to him and he nursed her! When Rabbi Abbahu taught this publicly, his audience laughed! He said to them: Is this not [taught] in a Mishnah? [Machshirin 6:7] [The Mishna says:] Rabbi Shim'on ben Eleazar said: The milk of a male is [ritually] clean. [Genesis R 30:8]

Mishna:

The following do not cause uncleanness or susceptibility to uncleanness: sweat, ill-smelling secretion, excrement, blood issuing with any of these... blood from the slaughtering of cattle and wild animals and birds that are unclean, and blood from bloodletting for healing... Rabbi Shim'on ben Eleazar says: the milk of a male is [also] clean. [Machshirin 6:7]

This is scientifically correct and documented: A male CAN lactate "in the presence of physiological stimuli connected with nursing infants", but it's rare.

(A midrash is either a true story passed on from generation to generation or something meant to teach a lesson. If no lesson is obvious, as is the case here, then it must be true!)

-Let's be practical, OK?

Our Rabbis taught: Who is wealthy?

Rabbi Meir said: He who takes pleasure in his wealth.

Rabbi Tarfon said: He who possesses 100 vineyards, 100 fields and 100 slaves working in them.

Rabbi Akiba said: He who has a beautiful and virtuous wife.

Rabbi Yosei said: He who has an indoor restroom near his [dinner] table.
[Shabbat 25b]

-Worship or not?

The Moabites had a God, Baal Peor, that was worshipped by...
defecating on it. The Talmud asks: If a Jew does it on the idol,
intending it as a gesture of contempt, is he guilty of idolatry? Yes!

Mishna: He who defecates before Baal Peor [is guilty of idolatry, for] this is
the mode of worshipping him. [Sanhedrin 60b]

Gemara: Our Rabbis taught: Sabta, a [Jewish] townsman of Avlas...
entered [a shrine to Baal] Peor, defecated on the idol, and wiped himself
on the idol's nose. The attendants praised him, saying, "No man has ever
served this idol so well".

He who defecates before Baal Peor thereby serves it, even if his intention
was to degrade it. [Sanhedrin 64a]

Many Gentiles were equally revolted!

There was once a gentile woman who was very ill. She vowed:
"If I recover from my illness, I will go and worship every idol in the world."
She recovered, and proceeded to worship every idol in the world.
When she came to Peor, she asked its priests, "How is this one
worshipped?" They told her, "One eats greens and drinks strong drink,
and then defecates before the idol." The woman responded, "I'd rather
become ill again than worship an idol in such a [disgusting] manner."
[Sanhedrin 64a]

-Telling it like it is

[Four] things in this world hint at pleasures in the World to Come: Shabbat,
sunshine, sex, and going to the bathroom. [Ber. 57b]

-Beauty matters!

Happy the man whose wife is beautiful! The number of his days is
doubled. [Sanhedrin 100b]

-When to marry

Our Rabbis taught:... A man should first study Torah and then marry. But if he cannot [live] without a wife, he should first marry and then study. Rav Yehudah said in Shmuel's name: The halachah is: [A man] first marries and then studies. [But] Rabbi Yochanan said: Is he going to study [with] a millstone around his neck!..

[A student came before Rabbi Huna bare-headed.] The rabbi asked: Why do you not have head-covering? He replied: Because I am not married. [Rabbi Huna then] turned his face away from him [and said:] Do not appear before me [again] until you are married... He who is twenty and unmarried spends all his days in... sinful thoughts.

-Rava said: The School of Rabbi Ishmael taught likewise: Until the age of twenty, the Holy One, blessed be He, sits and waits: "When will he take a wife?" As soon as one becomes twenty, if he still has not married, [God] exclaims, "May he be blasted!"

-Rabbi Hisda said: The reason I am superior to my colleagues is that I married at sixteen [and so my mind was entirely free for study]. And if I had married at fourteen, I would have said to Satan, [I defy you! You can't tempt me!] Rava said to Rabbi Nathan ben Ammi: While you still [have some authority on your son, marry him off]. [Kidd. 29b-30a]

Ulla visited Rav Yehudah in Pumbeditha. He saw that Rabbi Yitzhaq, son of Rav Yehudah, was grown up, yet was not married. He asked him: Why has the master not taken a wife for his son? [He answered:] Who knows where I can find a wife for my son from a suitable family? [I do not know who is of pure descent.] He retorted: Do WE know from where WE are descended? Perhaps from [Jewish women raped by invaders]. Granted, if an idolater or a slave has intercourse with a Jewish woman, their child is [Jewish and] legitimate. But perhaps [we are descended from adulterers and wife swappers, which would make us bastards!]. He asked, "Then what shall I do?" [He answered:] Take someone from a peaceful family. [Quarrelsome families are probably unfit!]... Do a test: When you see two people quarreling, observe which one quiets down first. This one is of superior birth. [Kiddushin 71b]

-Let's go a little faster, shall we?

Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] was engaged in preparations for the marriage of his son into the family of Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra. It was agreed that [his

son] should [first] spend twelve years [studying] at the academy. When the girl was led before [the son, and he saw how beautiful she was], he said to them, "Let's make it [just] six years!" When they made [the girl] pass before him [a second time] he said, "[Actually,] I would rather marry [her first] and then go [to the academy.]" He felt ashamed [by his fickleness], but his father said to him: My son, you have the mind of your Creator. In the Torah, [God] first says:

You bring them in and plant them. [Ex. 15:17]

But then later [God] says:

And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them.

[Ex. 25:8].

[Ketubot 62b]

In other words, God first told the Israelites to build the sanctuary after they settled in the promised land, but then He ordered them to build it while they were still in the wilderness, so He could be with them even sooner!

-Four in bed

When a divorced man marries a divorced woman, four [people] go to bed [together]. [Pes. 112a]

Comparisons will be made!

-Stay away from my husband!

Homa, Abaye's wife, came to Rava [after the death of Abaye, her third husband,] and asked him: Give me an allowance for food. He did so. Give me an allowance for wine. He said to her: I know that [your husband] did not drink wine, [so you probably did not have it in the house]. [She replied:] By the life of the Master, he gave me to drink from cups as long as this [and she showed him her bare arm]. When he saw her uncovered arm, its beauty radiated through the courtroom. Rava got up, [interrupted the proceedings,] went home, and had intercourse with [his wife.]... [His wife asked:] Who was at court today? He replied: Homa, [the late] Abaye's wife. [Rava's wife] immediately went after [Homa], struck her with leather straps and drove her out of the town of Mahuza. She said to her: You have already killed three [men, your previous husbands who died], and now you come to kill another [man, my husband]! [Ketubot 65a]

-Too old

Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] asked Rabbi Shim'on ben Halafta: Why [did you not come to visit me] on the Festival...? [He answered: Small] rocks have become large, the near has become far, two have become three, and the peacemaker of the home does not work anymore. [Shabbat 152a]

Meaning: I have grown old.

- Small rocks have become large: What was a small matter before is now a big undertaking.

- The near has become far: I can't easily move around.

- Two have become three: My two legs are no longer enough. I need a cane.

- The peacemaker of the home does not work anymore: I can no longer perform sexually!

Conclusion

Contemporary rabbi Aryeh Kaplan was once asked if there are any jokes in the Talmud. He replied, "Yes, but they are all old."