

THE LAST LAUGH

by Yaakov Asher Sinclair

When Sir Donald Wolfit, the last of the great English actor/managers, was lying on his death bed, one of his young actors said to him:

"Sir Donald, after a life so filled with success and fame, dying must be hard..."

To which Sir Donald replied: "Dying is easy... Comedy is hard."

They say a coward dies many times; the same must also be true for comedians.

Any actor who has stood in front of an audience and watched a line that he practiced for weeks, clang helplessly to the floor to roars of silence, will appreciate Sir Donald's sentiments.

Comedy is hard because we don't really understand what makes people laugh. We know what's funny because we laugh at it. But trying to distill the essence of comedy into a set of principles or laws is not so easy.

One of the basic elements of comedy is incongruity. Seeing a king wearing a red clown's nose is funny. Seeing a clown wearing a red nose isn't.

Underlying this aspect of incongruity is a deeper idea - absurdity. We expect the world to have a certain natural order of events. When these events are suddenly turned upside down, the result is comic.

Which brings us to another element of comedy: Sudden reversal. Comedy depends on that mysterious quality, timing. The information which will make the audience laugh has to be revealed in a certain time-frame. Too quickly, and the laugh is stifled before it's born. Too slowly, and the joke is "telegraphed" - people see it coming and it dies its own death.

PERFECT TIMING

One of the most notable aspects of the Purim story is "hippuch" - sudden reversal. Haman has his gallows ready to hang Mordechai. The letters decreeing the "final solution of the Jewish problem" have been sent out in all 127 languages to the far corners of the Persian Empire.

In a split second, everything was turned upside down.

The only difference between tragedy and comedy is the ending. The Purim story is a comedy in the classic sense. All seems set for disaster and in an instant everything is turned on its head. This combination of total reversal and perfect timing gives Purim its special flavor of joy.

COMEDY VERSUS RIDICULE

Most of what passes today for comedy is in fact ridicule. Where is the real comedy that fills our mouths with laughter?

It seems that in a world which accounts cynicism as wisdom, we have lost the genuine article of real comedy. Like some "invasion of the body-snatchers," comedy has been abducted and in its place sits ridicule grinning like an imbecile.

Jews have always been known for their humor. It's as if the world recognizes that there is something particularly Jewish about humor and that humor is part of the essence of Judaism. But how can something as serious as religion tolerate something as light as humor?

Humor doesn't have to be light. It doesn't have to lead to scoffing, to derision. Comedy is a serious business.

JEWISH HUMOR

Jewish humor is about the absurd. It's about the human condition itself. It's about living in a world which seems to make no sense:

Belorussia. Mid-winter. Temperature: 45 degrees below zero. Moishe and Shloime are lying shivering in their tattered coats on two iron beds. Moishe says to Shloime: "Shloime, close the window, it's cold outside."

"Moishele, and if I close the window, it will be warm outside?"

Or try this one:

Groucho Marx in a letter resigning from a golf club that didn't let in Jews:

"Dear Sir, I do not wish to be part of a club that will have me as a member."

Behind every Jewish joke there's a Jewish tear. A wry bitter/sweet feeling of 2000 years of exile. Tears of sadness. Tears of joy.

THE LAST LAUGH

In the Psalm, "Shir Hama'alos," that we sing after a festive meal, there is a line that yearns for the coming of Mashiach: "Then will our mouths be filled with laughter..." When the Mashiach comes, he will come in an instant, and things will be totally turned upside down.

Just like Purim, he will come in crisis, in catastrophic reversal - hippuch. His coming will not be through gradual improvement. He will come in the darkest hour... which is always just before the dawn.

The bitter/sweet humor of the Jewish People will then be transformed to a sweet/sweet humor. There will no longer be an elegiac quality to it. Ridicule will be deposed from its throne of idiocy. Our mouths will be filled with laughter. It will be a laughter of discovery, a laughter of total realization.

Then we will see how all the pieces in this Comedy of the Absurd called Life fit into place.

Then we will laugh the last laugh.

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