

THINK AGAIN!

by Rabbi Label Lam

And Pharaoh drew near and the Children of Israel lifted up their eyes and behold the Egyptians were coming after them and they were extremely afraid and the Children of Israel cried out to HASHEM. And they said to Moses, "Were there not enough graves in Egypt that that you have taken us to die in the desert?" (Shemos 14:10-11)

Were there not enough graves that you have taken us to die in the desert:: This sharp irony even in moments of deepest anxiety and despair is characteristic of the witty vein which is inherent in the Jewish race from their earliest beginnings. (Rabbi S.R. Hirsch)

The One Who sits in heaven will laugh... (Tehillim 2:4)

The tension could not have been higher. The entire Nation of Israel finds itself sandwiched between the Army of Pharaoh and the Red Sea. All hope seems lost. They're trapped like rats. There is no real solution and in that darkest of situations the only escape or way of coping seems to be humor. Why? What is there about those pressing moments in life that satire becomes the only sane outlet? What is there in a joke that seems to offer at least some temporary relief in times of major crisis?

This looks like the earliest record in human history of "gallows humor"! What's that? Two Jews find themselves standing before a firing squad and the orders are being given, "Ready! Aim..." At that moment one of those about to be fired-upon begins to make a stir. While bound in chains he shouts, "This is not fair! You'll pay for this!" Then the other one jumps in and attempts to quiet his comrade telling him, "SHHHHH! Don't say any more! You'll only make them mad!"

Not only is a joke useful in response to danger but also prior to learning. The Talmud tells us that Rabbah, a master teacher would begin his Torah lessons with a joke. What are the common ingredients that make laughter a useful tool for emotional survival and intellectual growth? A young lady with her little daughter entered the food mart and promptly set her into one of those grocery carts. As they wove up and down the aisles the child started to reach with desperation for the items on the shelf. At each outbreak the mother would pause and exclaim ever so calmly, "Chani we only came here for a few items and we are going right home!"

As they passed by the cookie and the candy shelf the struggle became even more pronounced and the mother would again quietly declare, "Chani, we'll be home soon!" The final test was the impulse buying section near the checkout counter and here the child was near hysterical and again the mother's calm prevailed with another soothing speech, "Chani, we're going to the car and then home

for dinner!"

In the parking lot, now, by the car a man approached and told the mother that he had been observing carefully all that had transpired in the store and how impressed he was with her parenting skills and how she had displayed grace under incredible pressure. He said, "Your tone was so soothing and it was just wonderful to see how nicely you spoke to your daughter Chani." At that moment she gave a look of surprise and responded to the kind man, "My daughter is not Chani. I'm Chani!"

There is usually an element of surprise in a joke that challenges a set of prior assumptions and forces us to shatter certain categorical boxes. This is a valuable exercise before entering the creative realm of Talmudic thought. Similarly, when we feel trapped and see no way out, the search for a solution and the need to make whole sense of a situation may lead to some outrageously absurd and even humorous conclusions as we desperately reconfigure the prevailing paradigms. And just when you think you've figured it out the sea splits and we're made to think again!

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