“Smiling Through Tears? Jewish Humor in the Diaspora”

Erich S. Gruen, Wood Professor Emeritus History Department, U. C. Berkeley
Summarized by Stephen Pitcher

Diaspora is an idea deeply rooted in Jewish consciousness—the Jews have brooded about it for two millennia and will probably go on doing so for millennia to come. Such archetypal documents as the 137th Psalm narrate a mournful yearning for a vanished homeland, while Jewish art and literature from antiquity to the present is haunted by images of uprootedness, dispersal, and wandering, providing the basis for what Professor Gruen terms the “lachrymose interpretation” of Jewish history. Yet Gruen offers an alternative interpretation: despite the regularity with which the Jews have found themselves in difficult circumstances—a vulnerable, conspicuous minority subject to discrimination, oppression, and violence—their biblical and post-biblical texts are permeated with a rich strain of humor. He further contends that this humor does not operate as a form of “smiling through tears,” or (as Sigmund Freud might have put it) a means of masking a grim reality. Rather, it appears as a gentle mockery not only of foreign rulers but of the Jews themselves, and indeed of the wide spectrum of human foibles, always a rich subject for good-natured satire.

Professor Gruen began his discussion of this humorous tradition by citing the *Book of Esther*. Featuring the Jewish diaspora in the Persian capital city of Susa, the tale waxes comedic right from the start, with King Ahasuerus commanding the presence of all the princes, officials, and courtiers of the realm at a lavish feast slated to last 180 days. Any thoughts of somber theological discourse are thus vanquished at the outset—for surely even the dullest reader will be inclined to wonder who, precisely, is going to be attending to matters of governance during the half-year that this revelry is transpiring. At some point in these extravagant festivities Ahasuerus decides to show off his beautiful queen, Vashti—naked, according to some rabbis. This good lady refuses thus to expose herself, igniting royal wrath and widespread panic: for if the queen can behave with such defiance, may not every household in the land fall prey to female domination?

This depiction of hilarious excess and carousal, and of a domestic squabble escalating into a national security crisis, fairly wallows in levity. Fiats are issued mandating wifely respect (something the king himself cannot, apparently, command) and soliciting a replacement for the now-banished Vashti is sought. Making a solemn reading of the text increasingly difficult, we are told that applicants for this position are to undergo a year-long regimen of spa-like treatments, involving oil of myrrh (six months) and sweet odors and other purifying agents (another six months). As Professor Gruen noted, spending some time preparing for such an important job interview would be entirely appropriate . . . but a *year?*

Esther, a young, lovely Jewish girl, is goaded to enter the contest by her uncle, Mordecai, who proceeds to pace the courtyard in front of the palace the entire time she is being processed and appraised. Meanwhile, the king’s grand vizier Haman (a cardboard villain if there ever was one), finding the people to be less in awe of him than he might desire,

causes Ahasuerus to issue a decree commanding everyone in the palace to perform obeisance to him, which decree Mordecai scorns to obey (apparently no one in the upper ranks of Susa can get any respect). Haman naturally flies into a rage and demands that the king decree the death not only of Mordecai but of all the Jews in the realm, which Ahasuerus, ever the portrait of moderation, promptly does. Mordecai rends his clothes and dons sackcloth and ashes, and all the Jews mourn this terrible decree. Esther, having by now handily outstripped the competition and become Ahasuerus's queen, sends Mordecai a new suit of clothes, and beseeches the king to spare her people; he, incapable of denying her anything, grants her this, orders that Haman be hanged on the very gallows he'd had constructed to dispatch Mordecai, and for good measure authorizes the Jews to take up arms against their enemies, specifying the very date a year in the future on which this deed should occur. Mordecai puts on princely apparel and the Jews, punctually upon the appointed day, rise up and slay 75,000 of their foes.

Among the more overtly satirical elements of this story are Esther's naïveté in responding to her uncle's grief by dispatching fresh garments; Ahasuerus's continual vacillations; Mordecai's vanity and greed; Haman's arrogance; and such utterly gratuitous plot twists as Ahasuerus's condemnation of Haman not because the latter was a self-aggrandizing, intemperate villain, but because the king, bursting in on his vizier in the process of supplicating Esther for clemency, mistakenly believes he is witnessing the scene of an attempted rape.

A "smiling through tears" reading of *Esther* would characterize members of the Persian Jewish diaspora as anxious and vulnerable outcasts living on the brink of genocide, for whom a tale of heroism might serve to brighten their bitter existence. Professor Gruen finds no support for the idea that Jews living in Persian dominions did so in misery and dread. Jewish life in Susa seems to have been perfectly comfortable: Mordecai himself is an official at the palace and his conflict with Haman is personal, not ethnic; his niece, though known to be Jewish, rules the land as its queen. In general, the story's wealth of jovial hyperbole and parodic zest would seem to attest to a fairly healthy mindset among this particular diaspora.

The next two narratives adduced by Professor Gruen, the *Book of Tobit* and the tale of Susannah and the Elders, likewise exhibit a strong tendency toward satiric, self-mocking, and even scatological humor. In the former (of disputed provenance but probably from the first or second century BCE), the eponymous Hebrew earns a living digging ritually correct graves for his coreligionists in exile in Nineveh, until one day a sparrow defecates on both his eyes and blinds him. When Tobit's wife is forced as a consequence to seek employment, she and Tobit quarrel, and he begs for death rather than continuing to endure her disrespect.

Meanwhile, in Median Ecbatana, the luckless Sarah has seen seven weddings lead to seven promptly deceased bridegrooms, without ever having enjoyed the customary fruits of the wedding bed; she, too, begs for death. Tobit, believing that his days are numbered, sends his son, Tobias, to collect a debt from a friend in Media, at which God dispatches the archangel Raphael who, disguised, conducts Tobias to Sarah, providing him with the

means of evicting the resident demon by whom Sarah is afflicted—a concoction of fish liver and heart so foul the demon flees as far as Upper Egypt after just one sniff. Sarah's father, however, nervous over her marital history, has already prepared a grave so that Sarah's latest ex-husband can be buried without attracting shameful attention, only to learn from a canny maid that *this* particular bridegroom has passed through the night very much alive and will not be needing a grave. The embarrassed father scrambles to fill in the grave, Tobias cures his father's eyes by smearing them with fish gall (another of Raphael's recipes), and order is restored.

The business with the fish seems blatantly farcical: it makes its entrance leaping from the water and seizing Tobias's foot (or other appendage), and subsequently yields a substance so vile it even grosses out demons (while miraculously remaining inoffensive to everyone else) and a salve potent in the removal of fish excreta. But the humans, too, behave with an almost clownish lack of dignity. It is when Tobit accuses his long-suffering wife of stealing a goat to succor the afflicted household that squabbling erupts, she citing his insufferable self-righteousness, and he craving death explicitly because it would be preferable to enduring his wife's insults. Sarah's morbidity has a similarly ignoble source, as it is a maidservant's impertinent complaint regarding her mistress's effect on the flower of Median manhood that provokes her desire to die. Her father is distressed not by the prospect of another untimely death, but by the embarrassment such a death might cause; and Tobit is depicted as lamenting not his son's prolonged absence (as his wife does), but the possibility that the money for which he sent him will not be forthcoming.

While the *Book of Tobit* transpires within the Jewish diaspora in the Assyrian empire, there is no evidence that its characters experience any form of oppression: their sources of annoyance are internal—a wife, a maid, a bird, seven dead husbands—rather than official. There are undeniably a number of serious religious and social issues broached in the tale, but they are leavened by the author's lightly comic depiction of some all-too-human flaws.

Professor Gruen's final example of Jewish diaspora humor was the well-known biblical tale of Susanna and the two elders, which, although it takes place in Babylon, features an exclusively Jewish cast. The principal targets of ridicule are two leaders of the Jewish community, who falsely accuse Susanna, while she is bathing, of trysting with a lover, in an attempt to blackmail her into having sex with them—an idea she finds so repugnant she chooses to stand trial instead, and is exonerated when her accusers contradict each other under cross-examination. They are punished and virtue prevails, but not before a fair amount of virtually slapstick humor has enlivened the proceedings. The image of the two old men smacking into one another as they attempt to sneak back to the bath could come straight from a commedia dell'arte skit, while the din produced by Susanna and the two extortionists dispels any solemnity the scene might possess. In addition to the elders' lechery and ineptitude, Susanna comes in for some gentle ribbing, as an idle young woman with nothing to do but loll about naked in her garden. Misgivings about the rectitude of the Jewish community as a whole arise when Susanna is initially condemned to death without any attempt being made to corroborate her accusers' lies. Far from

articulating the misery of life in exile, the moral of the tale would seem to be that Jews living abroad would do well to clean up their act.

In conclusion, Jewish diaspora humor embraces a wide array of targets, Jewish and Gentile alike, in modes varying from amused observation to trenchant satire, with an amount of self-deprecation indicative of a well-adjusted community possessed of a healthy level of self esteem. This is the literature of a people prepared to laugh not only "through tears," but with genuine amusement at the frailty of humanity.

Q&A

Q: Who was the intended audience?
A: Good question. By and large the audience were Jews, not Gentiles. We have very little evidence that non-Jews read these texts—they're not quoted until much later. This is true of the Bible itself: even when translated into Greek, so it could be read widely, there's no evidence that anybody other than the Jews read it. There are numerous papyri from Egypt about reading matter; none cite the Bible.

Q: These are texts from three different periods. Are there any examples of non-Jewish literature from these times that's humorous?
A: Yes. There are interesting parallels to humorous texts from Alexandrian culture, and Jewish intellectuals were familiar with comic/sardonic/satirical works by Greek authors. It's okay to argue that there's influence the other way, from texts preceding Jewish ones, but I'm not convinced Gentiles read Jewish texts.

Q: Humor is the most difficult thing to understand in a foreign—timewise or geographically—culture. How do you deal with the implications of that?
A: I've thought and worried about that, have been and am anxious about it. There's always a risk when you're trying to put yourself into the mindset of another people; even with contemporary humor there are jokes that one person finds hysterical and for somebody else it just falls flat. Finding humor is therefore risky, yes. If I found it in one or two texts, and it was just me, maybe not. But I found humor in text after text, and in terms of academic debate, I'm not a lone, solitary person finding this humor. And I've just seen so much of it. Another riotous text is the Testament of Abraham. It's too difficult to summarize. Abraham has this reputation as the most righteous of the Hebrews, ready to sacrifice his son, the epitome of righteousness; but he's made to look like a ridiculous character—he's well over several hundred years old and God is ready to harvest him, but Abraham doesn't want to die. God sends an angel down to tell him it's time and Abraham proceeds to dodge the angel with ludicrous machinations for months. There are plenty of these comical texts.

Q: As far as that goes, could you just read it [Hebrew literature] all that way?
A: Reading the Bible laughing? [laughs] No.

Q: The *Book of Tobit* images are so distinctive—bird and eye, liver, heart: could they have to do with finding a soul?

A: I hadn't thought about a metaphorical sense. I don't see it, but it may be there. Lots of people have more somber interpretations, and compare [these plot elements] to ancient remedies. We might find it ridiculous, but maybe they did smear fish liver on injuries. Others might see calling up angels to exorcise demons as a resort to magic—not comedy, just what people would do. If it were just that one scene that might be a possible interpretation, but the rest of the text has so many comedic features.

Q: Your lecture reminds me of Mark Twain's parody of the *Book of Genesis,* which is so hysterical. Are you familiar with it, and do you agree with the comparison?
A: I haven't read it in a long time but it's definitely similarly hysterical.

Q: These are received universal aspects of humor: two guys bumping into each other—it's classic. Humor is used to get people to *keep on paying attention*—just like the way we use humor in our classrooms to keep people's attention. I think that's part of it.
A: I'm sure it is. Many of these texts were delivered orally, with the first versions starting to circulate and small groups of friends reading their works. So humor could be used to keep people's attention, like you keep your students' attention: it's a genuine parallel. But humor also needs to be recognized [in its own right], not dismissed. This doesn't mean this is nothing but stand-up comedy—there *are* moral lessons and ideological principles, which the humor can reinforce . . . and yes, quite plausibly keep people's attention, so they don't drift off during the preaching.

Q: I'm struck by the idea of exile, the way Raphael exiles the demon—I've noticed that when people are telling stories, there's the idea of exile "from whence they came," or specifically where people think bad things are (e.g., "go back to hell"). So, why was the demon sent back to Upper Egypt?
A: It was the demon's choice.
Q: *Why* was it the demon's choice?
A: I think it was as far as you could go, in biblical terms—the ends of the earth.
Q: I was thinking more of a post-Exodus vilification of Egypt.
A: Hmmm.

Q: All these examples are pre-Christian; when under Christian rule, were there similar examples of humor, or is it unique to being under pre-Christian authority?
A: Good question. The problem is that we can't always date these things. The Abraham text could have come from various periods; it's not clear. It's an important question: can the Jews still be smiling after 70 AD, when the temple and homeland were destroyed? There are enough of these texts that could very well have been written after 70. I don't see a *break* after 70—"No more jokes, please." They certainly continued writing: tragedy in the Greek style, poetry, history, philosophy. . . . We might think that after the destruction of the temple *everything* changed, but I don't think the evidence suggests that. For one thing, lots of people think that the Jewish diaspora occurred after 70: that's not the case. There was a Jewish diaspora at least 200 years before the fall of the temple. They did not have to lose Jerusalem to go abroad: they'd lived abroad—living, writing, participating in foreign communities—for a very long time. For Jews in Israel/Palestine, the loss of the temple was a complete disaster, but for Jews in the diaspora it might not be

like that. Romans destroyed the temple, but Jews were living in Rome at the time and continued to live in Rome.

Q: I think humor plays a cultural role as well: we teach ourselves to laugh in order to have hope and joy in our lives under oppression. It releases stress; it's a safe means of mocking, laughing at those in power. Lucy's a ditzy woman, but when she gets it over others we laugh.
A: I would not for a moment dismiss that aspect—that aspect largely dominates the interpretation of Jewish texts: "smiling through tears." I don't dismiss the element of humor being a response to oppression. But to some extent that robs humor of its innate impact, saying it's a calculated way of making us feel better: women are subordinate to men so for half an hour we can laugh at that. Laughing at oneself is different from laughing at an oppressor. The Romans did this; for example, every year they had a major festival, the Saturnalia: for one day, slaves became masters and vice versa, servants ordered their superiors around and put them in chains, made them do the dishes and the floors—a real release. Whether it was funny or not I don't know, or how people reacted, but it was exactly what you're talking about—a brief inversion of the status quo, then everything back in place. I think the texts I'm talking about do more than that. That's part of the message of the tale of Susanna: the Jews have got to clean up *their* act.

Michele Delattre: This was a great beginning for the institute: we were talking about study abroad and travel, and one thing about that is you often learn more about your own culture than you do about the one you are visiting.