Why Did the Widow Have a Goat in Her Bed? Jewish Humor and Its Roots in the Talmud and Midrash

David Brodsky

In the 1930 movie *Animal Crackers*, Captain Spaulding, played by Groucho Marx, regales the audience with his adventures in Africa:

The principal animals inhabiting the African jungle are moose, elks, and Knights of Pythias. Of course, you all know what a moose is. That's big game. The first day, I shot two bucks. That was the biggest game we had. As I say, you all know what a moose is? A moose runs around on the floor, and eats cheese, and is chased by the cats. The Elks, on the other hand live up in the hills, and in the spring they come down for their annual convention. It is very interesting to watch them come to the water hole. And you should see them run when they find it is only a water hole. What they're looking for is an Elk-o-hole. One morning, I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got into my pajamas I'll never know. Then we tried to remove the tusks . . . but they were embedded in so firmly that we couldn't budge them. Of course, in Alabama, the Tusk-a-loosa. But, uh, that's entirely irrelephant to what I was talking about. We took some pictures of the native girls, but they weren't developed, but we're going back again in a couple of weeks . . . [at this point Mrs. Rittenhouse interrupts him nervously, afraid of where this is headed].

The language play in which Groucho engages in this routine is often associated with Jewish humor. Many of these elements can be found in Jewish humor stretching as far back as the *talmudim* and midrashic literature some 1,500 years earlier. This is not to suggest that the Marx Brothers' humor comes from any direct study of rabbinic literature. Nor is it to suggest that such humor is unique to the Jewish people. Such “forced reinterpretation jokes,” as Graeme Ritchie calls them, are quite common across cultural divides. Nevertheless, to the extent that Jewish culture has been steeped in classical rabbinic texts, it has been steeped in midrashic hermeneutics, which themselves are closely related to the forced reinterpretation joke. My claim is that because midrash focuses on the multiple interpretations latent in every statement, it is inherently related to forced reinterpretation jokes. In a sense, midrash is the first step in the forced reinterpretation joke. It is the reinterpretation, but without the second step: the timing, the intent to be humorous through reinterpretation.
Because midrash is so focused on playing with language, finding the multiple ways of reading words and sentences, those rabbinic and Jewish societies that were steeped in midrash were ripe for humor to develop and take root. Rabbinic humor is particularly playful with language in ways that are grounded in midrashic hermeneutics, and modern Jewish humor often follows suit. This correlation between classical Jewish humor of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the classical rabbinic texts in which many modern Eastern European Jews were steeped deserves some exploration. This essay focuses on the humor of the Talmudic period, although it frames that discussion by relating it to modern Jewish humor.

Let us begin by examining the kinds of language play found in Groucho’s monologue. One of the main elements is the double entendre. When Groucho tells us of the moose, which he refers to as “big game,” and says he shot two bucks, we assume he means that he shot a rifle and killed two male moose. But when he tells us it was the biggest game he had, we begin to realize that the “bucks” he “shot” were dollars that he lost in a dice or card game. In this same way, Groucho plays with the word “elk,” which at first we assume refers to the animals, but then come to realize that he intends the fraternal order.

In addition to such wordplay, Groucho also plays with modifying phrases and clauses. When he delivers the famous line “One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas,” we first picture that he was still in his pajamas that morning, only to find out that it was the elephant that was in his pajamas. Here, it is an entire phrase that can be understood in more than one way in the sentence.

Similarly, when Groucho tells us, “We took some pictures of the native girls, but they weren’t developed,” we assume the pronoun “they” refers back to the pictures they took. But, when he says that he is going back again in a couple of weeks, we begin to suspect along with Mrs. Rittenhouse that he may have had a different antecedent in mind. Incidentally, the objectification of women—or girls, in this case—inherent in this and other jokes is a problem we shall encounter in several passages, though it is a subject for a different essay.

This basic hermeneutic of reading the multiple meanings in words, phrases, and clauses is the central aspect of the midrashic hermeneutic and emerges as a key aspect of rabbinic humor as well.

In this essay, I will first stake a claim for the value the rabbis of the Talmudic period placed on humor. I will then offer a few examples of precisely how the rabbis play with language in their biblical exegesis (a.k.a. midrash). Third, I will show how this midrashic hermeneutic became a central element of rabbinic and later Jewish humor.
THE VALUE OF HUMOR

The rabbis express little patience for mockery (BT Megillah 25b), on the one hand, even as they maintain a rich sense of humor, on the other hand. Similarly, merriment is at times perceived by the rabbis to lead to sexual impropriety, while enjoyment of the mitzvot is nevertheless considered a desideratum. As a result, the rabbis encourage humor within the confines of Torah study even as they denigrate non-Torah-related humor. Thus, in Genesis Rabbah 22, R. Simon is quoted as saying, “If your inclination comes to incite you to merriment, make it merry with Torah.” Rather than fight the evil inclination, R. Simon has his listeners redirect it to a permitted, and even laudable, outlet.

In the Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 30b), the anonymous editors of the Talmud note just such an attitude towards levity in the book of Ecclesiastes, which affords them the opportunity to contrast the dangers of levity in the absence of mitzvot with the benefits of levity found through mitzvot. The passage reads:

“The sages wanted to hide the book of Ecclesiastes because its statements contradict one another. . . .” And how do its statements contradict one another? . . . It is written, “And I praised joy” (Eccl 8:15), and it is written, “And regarding joy, what does it accomplish?” (Eccl 2:2). There is no difficulty. . . . “And I praised joy” refers to the joy of a mitzvah. “And regarding joy, what does it accomplish?” refers to joy that is not from a mitzvah. . . . Thus, Rava, before he began his classes for the rabbis, would say something humorous [bedihuta]. Then he would sit in seriousness and recite a teaching.

After defining appropriate joy as that which comes from mitzvot, the Talmud concludes by modeling for us that when teaching Torah, we should begin with something humorous and then turn to serious matters. The fact that humor was integrated into Torah study shows that the boundaries between Torah study and humor were not stark. This essay will show examples of rabbinic humor both in midrashim on Torah and using midrashic exegetical tropes whether or not connected to Torah.

THE NATURE OF MIDRASH

First, we should begin by laying out the midrashic hermeneutic and its theological basis. Rabbinic midrashic exegesis of the Bible assumes that the Bible’s author, being God Godself, was a perfect author. It therefore assumes that no contradictions, redundancies, or superfluous language exist in the Bible. Yet, as every biblical scholar knows, the Bible is full of all three. As just one quick example of a redundancy, the Bible states three times, “Do not cook a kid in its mother’s milk,” and, for the rabbis, each utterance required a separate teach-
ing. One resolution of this redundancy was the legal declaration that milk and meat are forbidden for a Jew (1) to cook together, (2) to eat together, or (3) to derive any benefit from them.\textsuperscript{13}

This form of omnisignificance—the insistence that every word, every anomaly must come to teach something—became so strong that, according to Genesis Rabbah 22, R. Akiva made sure that every occurrence of the word “\textit{et}” in the Torah came to teach something beyond itself.\textsuperscript{14}

\textit{Genesis 27:18–19 and Genesis Rabbah 65:18}

We now turn to the midrashic methodology itself: how words and sentences were mined for multiple readings. An excellent example can be found in Genesis Rabbah 65 on Genesis 27:18–19. In Genesis 27, at Rebecca’s prodding, Jacob dresses up like Esau and attempts to trick his blind father, Isaac, into giving him the birthright that Isaac intends to give to Jacob’s elder brother, Esau. Genesis 27:18–19 reads, “[Isaac] said, ‘. . . Who are you, my son?’ Jacob said to his father, ‘I am Esau, your firstborn. . . .’”

Jacob’s blatant lie to his own father was morally problematic to the rabbis and begged some kind of midrashic reworking, which is precisely what Genesis Rabbah provides: “[\textit{Jacob came to his father}. . . \textit{and said to his father, ‘I am Esau, your firstborn. . . ’}.” R. Levi said, “I am to receive the Ten Commandments, but \textit{Esau is your firstborn.”} While the midrash is reading more than one point into the verse, at its core, the midrash rests upon the midrashic tool of repunctuation. Since punctuation is not native to the Torah, repunctuation does not require the kind of redrafting that it does in translation. In Hebrew, the difference between Jacob saying, “I am Esau, your firstborn” and “It is I. Esau is your firstborn,” is simply a matter of punctuation: “\textit{Anokhi Esav, bek-korekha},” or “\textit{Anokhi. Esav bekhekrekha}.”\textsuperscript{15}

The hermeneutic of repunctuation can be found in the modern Jewish joke about Josef Stalin’s telegram from Leon Trotsky:

During a gigantic celebration in Red Square, after Trotsky had been exiled, Stalin, on Lenin’s great tomb, excitedly raised his hand to still the acclamations: “Comrades! A most historic event! A cablegram—of congratulations—from Trotsky!” The hordes cheered, and Stalin read the historic cable aloud:

\textbf{STALIN}

\textbf{YOU WERE RIGHT AND I WAS WRONG. YOU ARE THE TRUE HEIR OF LENIN. I SHOULD APOLOGIZE.}

\textbf{TROTSKY}
A roar of triumph erupted. But in the front row, a little tailor called, “Pst, Comrade Stalin. A message for the ages! But you didn’t read it with the right feeling!”

Whereupon, Stalin stilled the throng once more. “Comrades! Here is a simple worker, a loyal communist, who says I haven’t read the message with enough feeling. Come, Comrade, read the historic communication!”

The little tailor went up to the podium, took the telegram, and read:

“Stalin, You were right, and I was wrong? You are the true heir of Lenin?! I should apologize?! Trotsky!”

Both the written Torah and telegrams lack punctuation, and this absence frees the reader to punctuate various ways. Repunctuation is a key tool of midrashic interpretation, and it plays a role in Jewish humor of both the modern and Talmudic periods.

**Leviticus 20, Psalm 89, and Pirke R. Eliezer 21**

The first few chapters of the book of Genesis leave the reader with a logistical problem: from what sexual relation(s) does the third human generation derive? In the second generation, we are told only of Adam and Eve’s three sons: Cain, Abel, and Seth. We are never told of any daughters being born in this generation. Who did each of the sons marry? Even if we are to assume that daughters were born to Adam and Eve that the text failed to mention, Leviticus 18 and 20 make clear that siblings may not have sexual intercourse with one another. Nor, of course may a son have sex with his mother, as is proscribed by Leviticus 18:7 and 20:11. This leaves no legally viable marriage for this second generation. Pirke R. Eliezer 21 attempts to solve this problem by an innovative midrashic reading of Leviticus 20:17 and Psalm 89:3. It offers us an excellent example of the kinds of midrashic hermeneutics that play a key role in Jewish humor of the Talmudic and modern periods.

Leviticus 20:17 states, “And the man who takes his sister . . . and sees her nakedness . . . this is despicable [hesed], and they shall be cut off from . . . their people . . . he shall bear his iniquity.” The use of the word hesed in Leviticus 20 is unusual. Generally, its meaning is more like that found in Psalm 89, which reads, “Forever shall grace be established [olam hesed yibbaneh].” Baruch Levine has argued that the word hesed in these two instances is homonymous. That is, although they share the same three-letter root, they are actually not the same word.

Pirke R. Eliezer plays with this homonym by redefining the word hesed
in Psalm 89 with the homonymous meaning found in Leviticus 20. Pirke R. Eliezer 21 reads:

R. Miasha said, “Cain was born with his wife as his twin with him.”

R. Shimeon said to him, “But is it not written, And the man who takes his sister . . . and sees her nakedness . . . [this is despicable (hesed)]? But rather, the facts should tell you that they did not have other women to marry, so [their twins] were permitted to them, as it is said, The world shall be built through incest [’olam hesed yibbaneh]. Through incest [hesed] the world was built until the Torah was given.”

Pirke R. Eliezer plays on the double entendre of the first three words of Psalm 89:3. The Hebrew word ’olam can mean “forever,” but it also can mean “the world”; hesed we have already seen generally means “grace,” but in Leviticus 20 it is used to describe sibling incest; and the word yibbaneh can mean “to be established”—that is, “to exist”—but, literally, it means “to be built.” While the psalmist likely intended to say “grace will always exist,” in the hands of the midrashist, the verse is made to say, “The world will be built upon incest.” While Leviticus 18 and 20 forbade siblings to have sexual intercourse with one another, Psalm 89 is now read as acknowledging the necessity of such relations in the foundational second generation.

As we shall presently see, rabbinic humor plays with language in many of these same ways. In fact, if humor is generally created by pointing out a new interpretation of a previous text, offering a reinterpretation in the punch line of a hitherto-offered text that the audience (erroneously) thought they had understood correctly, then midrashic hermeneutics are particularly well suited to this task. It should not surprise us, therefore, if rabbinic and modern Jews steeped in such hermeneutics developed a rich genre of humor utilizing these hermeneutics.

MIDRASH AS HUMOR: THE FORCED REINTERPRETATION JOKE

Rabbinic humor is difficult to identify with certainty. Many scholars (I am among them) believe that the rabbis incorporated humor into their literature quite frequently. This general supposition is supported by the Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 30b, which we saw above. Nevertheless, which passages are to be categorized as humorous is a very subjective process. For this reason, I have decided to select only those passages that have a clear and definite punch line and that I believe are therefore fairly indisputably intended to be humorous.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD 66B

Rabbinic humor plays with the double entendres of words in ways that are
Why Did the Widow Have a Goat in Her Bed? 19

A certain man said to his wife, “May I derive no benefit from you unless you are able to show some attractive aspect [mum yafeh] of yourself to R. Ishmael b. R. Yose. [(According to rabbinic law, once such a pronouncement has been decreed, the couple must divorce unless the vow can be fulfilled or annulled).] R. Ishmael b. R. Yose] said to them, “Perhaps her head is nice.” They said to him, “It’s fat.” “Perhaps her hair is nice,” [he suggested. To which they responded:] “It’s like stalks of flax that have been beaten and baked dry.” “Perhaps her eyes are nice.” “They’re bleary and dim.” “Perhaps her ears are nice.” “They’re doubled over.” “Perhaps her nose is nice.” “It’s swollen.” “Perhaps her lips are nice.” “They’re fat.” “Perhaps her neck is nice.” “It’s stubby.” “Perhaps her belly is nice.” “It’s swollen.” [R. Ishmael thought for a moment and said:] “Perhaps her feet are nice.” “They’re wide as a goose’s feet.” [R. Ishmael thought long and hard, and then, suddenly, an idea came to him]: . . “Perhaps her name is nice.” [but even here he was foiled.] “Her name is Soiled [likhlukhit]” [they told him]. [But then, in his darkest moment, his eyes lit up and] He said to them, “yafeh qorin ‘otah likhlukhit, she-hi melukhlekhet ba-mumin” [She is appropriately called Soiled, for she is soiled with blemishes]. And he permitted him [to remain married to her].

Granted, the humor objectifies women’s bodies, but that is a topic for a different discussion. What is of interest for this essay is the clear punch line at the end. The joke hinges on the double meaning of the words yafeh and mum. Yafeh generally means “attractive” but can also mean “fitting” or “appropriate.” Mum can mean an “aspect” or a “thing,” but it can also mean a “blemish” or a “defect.” After failing to find even a single attractive part of this woman’s body, R. Ishmael turns to her name. As long as her parents gave her a nice name, even if she is physically revolting, he will have succeeded in finding a mum yafeh, an attractive aspect, of hers. Yet, even in this attempt, he is foiled. Her name is Likhlukhit, meaning “soiled.” Even her name is literally disgusting. She is disgusting through and through. Yet, it is this last failure that ultimately allows R. Ishmael to fulfill the vow and to allow her to remain married to her husband. Using the alternative meanings of yafeh and mum, R. Ishmael is able to find a “fitting” aspect about her. She is appropriately named Likhlukhit, Soiled, since her body is soiled with blemishes, mumim. It is because she is thoroughly revolting in both form and name that R. Ishmael is able to foil her husband’s attempt to force a divorce upon his ugly wife.

The second humorous story is also found in the Babylonian Talmud,
Nedarim 66b. In fact, it directly follows the story about the unattractive woman. The fact that the two stories are told together helps to support the view that they are likely both intended to be humorous. The story is a typical marital comedy sketch compounded by the comic effects of their dialectical differences. While Aramaic was spoken in both Palestine and Babylonia at the time the story was told, the dialects were different, and in this story those differences lead to comic effect. The story reads:

A certain Babylonian man who moved to the land of Israel married a woman. He said to her, “Cook me two hooves [tulfei].” She cooked him two lentils [telofhei]. He became angry with her. The next day, he told her, “Cook me a neck [geriva].” She cooked him a geriva-measure of grain [approximately eight liters]. He said to her, “Go bring me two gourds [botzinai].” She brought him two lamps [botzinai]. He said to her, “Go break them over the top of the gate [reisha de-bava]!” Bava ben Buta was sitting on the gate and judging.

She went and broke them on his head. He said to her, “Why did you do that?” [She responded] “Thus my husband commanded me.” He said, “[Since] you did the will of your husband, God will bring out from you two sons like Bava ben Buta.”

Once again, this story is rife with gendered implications. While the story is full of humorous double entendres, it is the last pair of double entendres that forms the punch line. After we have been well introduced to the wife’s tendency to follow her husband’s precise command, no matter how ridiculous his directive sounds to her, the comic moment comes with his last command. This time he tries to speak in her dialect. The Babylonian audience would appreciate his efforts to use the foreign-sounding Palestinian form yat-hon in place of the more familiar leho. He even avoids the Babylonian form ‘a-reisha de-bava, using the more universal form ‘al, instead, hoping this time he can avoid any further mishap. Yet he cannot quite manage it. He still slips up by using the Babylonian Aramaic word bava, a word his wife would not understand. While the Babylonian husband intends for his wife to smash the candles over the gate, his excessively obedient Palestinian wife has no way of understanding the directive other than as referring to the head of a person named Bava, whom she soon encounters. His command ends with the words reisha de-bava, and the narrative picks up by telling us that “Bava ben Buta was sitting at the gate. . . .” We need hear no more.

Our next example of midrashic humor comes from Genesis Rabbah 91, which
in turn is a midrashic commentary on Genesis 42. Genesis 42 recounts the first reunion of Joseph with his brothers. All of his brothers except Benjamin, the youngest, have come down to Egypt to bring back food. Joseph, who has become an important Egyptian minister, recognizes his brothers, but they do not recognize him.

Joseph’s vow of what he is about to do, stated in verses 15–16, seems to conflict with what he subsequently vows to do and then does in verses 18–19. In verses 15–16, Joseph promises upon Pharaoh’s life to lock up all of the brothers except one who is to go back to get the youngest brother. But then in verses 18–19, he says that he will imprison only one brother, and the rest are to go back. Verse 20 tells us that it is the latter promise that is kept. This latter statement is made under the formula of “God I fear,” whereas the first vow, the one that was not kept, was made under the formula, “by Pharaoh’s life.”

As we have already seen in the story of Jacob’s lie to his father Isaac, the authors of Genesis Rabbah are troubled by patriarchs lying and generally try to read the lie out of existence. They are particularly troubled by this passage, which contains not only a lie but also a false vow. Genesis Rabbah 91 interprets:

“With this you shall be assured, by Pharaoh’s life” (Gen 42:15). When Joseph wished to swear upon a falsehood, he would say, “by Pharaoh’s life.” R. Levi said, “It is like the case of a goat that fleed from the shepherd, and came upon a widow. What did she do? She slaughtered it, flayed it, put it in the bed, and covered it with a sheet. They came inquiring about it from her. She said, ‘May I tear from the flesh of that one and eat, if I know anything about it.’ Thus, ‘by Pharaoh’s life’!”

In the analogy, the men assume that the widow’s husband is lying in the bed and that she is swearing by the life of her husband that she does not know where the goat is. While the implied claim that she does not know the whereabouts of the goat is false, her statement, “may I eat of the flesh of that one if I know anything about it,” is not false. The widow does indeed wish to “eat of the flesh of that one.” Only she knows that “that one” is actually the goat. Using the analogy to inform us about Joseph, it is true that Joseph’s statement, “Send one from among you; and he shall bring your brother, and [the rest of] you shall be imprisoned,” is false, since in the end he does not actually do this. Nevertheless, the vow as a whole is not false. Joseph is vowing: may Pharaoh die if I do not fulfill my word. Since Joseph is an important Egyptian minister, his audience would assume that he wishes Pharaoh to live and therefore that he intends to fulfill his statement. The rabbinic audience, however, knows that, contrary to the literal meaning of the biblical tale, in rabbinic midrash
the Pharaoh that would later enslave the Israelite people is interpreted to be this same Pharaoh of Joseph’s time. Thus, at the hands of the midrashists, Joseph is happy to have Pharaoh die, and therefore he is not swearing falsely at all. On the contrary, he is swearing truthfully over something he does not intend to do: May Pharaoh die (and I hope he does!) if I do not do X, Y, and Z (and I do not intend to do X, Y, or Z!).

This kind of double message, with a public transcript and a hidden transcript, has been well documented by James Scott as an important trope within oppressed cultures, and Beth Berkowitz, Daniel Boyarin, and Joshua Levinson have shown its applicability to rabbinic literature. In fact, I suspect that there is yet another hidden transcript that lies behind the one revealed by the midrash. While the midrash is ostensibly about Pharaoh, the evil Egyptian ruler of ancient times whom Joseph could not openly curse, it may also be about the emperor, the Roman ruler of their own time and place, whom they wish to curse but cannot do so openly.

A modern Jewish joke uses this same trope of public and hidden transcripts:

Two brothers, Shmulik and Yosl, living in communist Russia, were attempting to emigrate to America. One day, Shmulik received permission to leave, but Yosl had to stay behind. At their tearful goodbye, they were concerned how they would be able to communicate freely in spite of the fact that the Soviet government would undoubtedly be reading their mail.

“I have an idea,” said Yosl, “If I write you in black ink, it will be the truth. If I use red ink, it will be false.”

Shmulik emigrated, and months passed with no word from Yosl. Finally, a letter arrived in black ink:

My dear brother, life here in communist Russia is wonderful. We enjoy freedom and prosperity like never before. We have everything we could want. There are no food lines or shortages. We have a new TV, and household appliances. In fact, the only thing we’re lacking in all of Russia is red ink.

Like its late antique counterpart, this modern Jewish joke is about transmitting a hidden transcript. But also, like its midrashic counterparts, it is about the multiple possibilities of interpretation. The humor hinges on the double entendre. At first, we assume along with Shmulik that we should read the letter be-nihuta, as a statement of fact. Only when we get to the last statement of the letter do we discover together with Shmulik that we have been reading the letter entirely reversed from its intended meaning.

Of course, Jews are not the only people to use the humor of the oppressed, nor are they the only ones to use humor that plays with double
entendres. Thus, I do not wish to claim that playing with double entendres is unique to Jewish or rabbinic humor. Nor do I wish to suggest that modern Jewish humor should be viewed exclusively in relation to rabbinic humor. I do suggest, however, that there is a link between modern Jewish humor and the midrashic hermeneutics in which many Eastern European Jews of a century ago were steeped. Modern Jewish humor is particularly playful with language and often uses double entendres to create the joke, as can be seen from the Marx Brothers skit presented at the beginning of this essay. This focus on language and the multiple interpretations that can come from it is a central facet of the midrashic hermeneutic, of rabbinic humor, and even of modern Jewish humor.

**Genesis Rabbah 26**

This next example is quite instructive. It contains two forced reinterpretations. The first has all of the structural elements of the forced reinterpretation joke, except that the punch line is more sweet than funny. The second has a forced reinterpretation that leads to a punch line with some bite. It can help us to see what extra steps are needed to turn rabbinic midrashic exegesis into humor. The passage reads:

Rabban Gamaliel married off his daughter. She said to him, “Father, bless me.” He said, “May you never come back here.” She gave birth to a son. She said to him, “Father, bless me.” He said to her, “May ‘Oy vey!’ never cease from your mouth.” She said to him, “Father, two happy occasions have come to me, and you have cursed me [on both]!”

He said to her, “Both are blessings. Since you have peace in your house, you won’t return here. And since your son will survive [infancy], ‘Oy vey!’ will never cease from your mouth: ‘Oy vey that my son didn’t eat!’ ‘Oy vey that he didn’t drink!’ ‘Oy vey that he didn’t go to shul!’”

The first forced reinterpretation is Rabban Gamaliel’s statement “May you never come back here.” Along with his daughter, we initially assume it to be a curse. It is only through his explanation near the end of the story that we discover that it really was a blessing: May your home life be so happy that you never need to run home to me. While this is a double entendre, it isn’t quite humor. It effects a sigh of appreciation rather than a laugh (more of an “aww” than a guffaw). This is because the direction of the revelation is reversed from those of the humorous stories we saw prior to this one. Instead of leading to an embarrassing admonition of pettiness, this example moves in the opposite direction. We begin by assuming that Rabban Gamaliel is being petty, only to find through the forced reinterpretation that he is actually being quite nice.
Thus, what made the prior stories funny was that we were forced to reinterpret the initial statement in a much worse light than we originally had, which led to a somewhat embarrassing shock. In the story of the rabbi charged to find some attractive characteristic [mum yafeh] about the man’s wife, the only mum yafeh he can find is an appropriate blemish: her ugly name, which befits her ugly features! In the case of the widow with the goat in her bed, we are forced to reinterpret her curse, “may I eat of the flesh of this one if I know the whereabouts of the goat,” as indicating that she does indeed wish to eat of the flesh of this one; she is not nearly as innocent as she appears to the goat’s owners. This in turn forces us to recognize that Joseph, too, is not nearly as innocent as he first appeared when he swore “by Pharoah’s life.” We begin to recognize that what had seemed like an innocent vow is really a blatant curse of his despised superior in disguise.

Returning to Genesis Rabbah 26, the second forced reinterpretation—that “oy vey” should not cease from her lips—itself has two factors: one that moves from nasty to nice, but the other that moves in the opposite direction. It is the latter that creates the humor: it is the embarrassment of the unexpected edginess that leads to the laughter. The first element of this second forced reinterpretation is that Rabban Gamaliel’s statement that “Oy vey” should not cease from her mouth was not a curse but a blessing, a blessing that her child should be healthy and vibrant. This aspect of the forced reinterpretation, though quite pleasing, fails to yield laughter because the movement is from a previously assumed nastiness to a revealed nicety. The humor comes from the move from our previously assumed interpretation that having a child was itself a purely positive event for the daughter to our forced reinterpretation that having children carries with it many woes. The fact that this is said to her by her own father carries the potential second innuendo that perhaps she herself had brought woes upon her own parents. This passage demonstrates quite well the importance of the direction of the forced reinterpretation (from something nice to something less nice) for the forced reinterpretation to be humorous.

**Babylonian Talmud 7B**

Just as I do not wish to imply that rabbinic humor and modern Jewish humor are alone in playing with language, I do not mean to imply that their humor solely derives from playing with language. An example of rabbinic humor that does not derive from midrashic hermeneutics, per se, can perhaps be found in the Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 7b:

Rava said, “A person is obligated to become drunk on Purim until he does not know the difference between ‘Cursed is Haman’ and ‘Blessed

Here, reinterpretation does not seem to play a part in the joke. Instead, the humor seems to rest on our image of poor R. Zeira nervously trying to get out of this potentially unpleasant invitation. While midrashic hermeneutics may not have played a role in every instance of rabbinic humor, they played an important role in rabbinic society, including rabbinic humor, and this legacy was passed on to modern Jewish comics as well.37

CONCLUSION

The rabbis of the Talmudic period were trained to think of the multiple ways in which words, phrases, clauses, and even whole sentences could be read and understood. It was this hermeneutic that formed the mainstay of their exegetical enterprise. The forced reinterpretation joke plays with language in many of the same ways that rabbinic midrashic hermeneutics do. It should not surprise us, then, to find the rabbis of the Talmudic period themselves engaging in forced reinterpretation jokes. It should similarly not surprise us to find later Jewish cultures (parts of which in each period remained grounded in the study of Talmud and midrash) engaging in humor that plays with language and, particularly, with the forced reinterpretation joke.

NOTES

1 This genre of humor has been studied in Graeme Ritchie, “Reinterpretation and Viewpoints,” Humor 19 (2006): 251-70. Marlene Dolitsky defines humor as follows: “The humorous effect comes from the listener’s realization and acceptance that s/he has been led down the garden path. . . . In humour, listeners are lured into accepting presuppositions that are later disclosed as unfounded”; Marlene Dolitsky, “Aspects of the Unsaid in Humor,” Humor: International Journal of Humor Research 5 (1992): 35; as cited in Ritchie, “Reinterpretation and Viewpoints,” 252. Ritchie explains, “The proposal is that humor is caused by the stimulus (e.g., a text) having more than one interpretation in its initial stages (the set-up), but only one interpretation being perceived by the audience. The final part of the stimulus (the punch line) then forces the audience to notice an alternative, hitherto less obvious, interpretation”; Ritchie, “Reinterpretation and Viewpoints,” 253. See also, Victor Raskin, Semantic Mechanisms of Humor (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985); Daniel Perlmutter, “Tracing the Origin of Humor,” Humor 13 (2002): 457–68; Salvatore Attardo, Christian Hempelmann, and Sara Di Maio, “Script Oppositions and Logical Mechanisms: Modeling Incongruities and Their Resolutions,” Humor 15 (2002): 15–16.
The correlation between rabbinic humor and the multiplicity of interpretation has already been noted by Binyamin Engelman, “Humor mutzhar, galui ve-samui ba-talmud bavli,” Be-khol derakhkha da’ehu: ketav-et le-inyane torah u-madah 8 (1999): 5-28, an article I encountered after preparing my paper for the symposium. While we share the same general thesis, our papers differ significantly. Engelman covers a broad range of humorous examples from puns to plays on words to anecdotes. His paper is of great value for delineating the ways in which the rabbis have fun playing with language in their everyday exegetical activities. In the present study, I limit myself to cases that I believe an Aramaic speaker would hear as a joke, complete with a punch line, whereas Engelman has cast a very wide net including wordplay more generally.


Many of the above articles focus particularly on farce, parody, and satire. For analyses of double entendres in rabbinic humor, see Koslofsky, “Humor ve-tafqudav,” 334; Zellentin “Late Antiquity,” 84; and Levinson, “olam hafukh,” 11.


4 Much has been written on the Marx Brothers’ humor in general and on their word-play in particular. See, for example, C. P. Lee, “‘Yeah, and I Used to Be a Hunchback’: Immigrants, Humour and the Marx Brothers,” in Because I Tell a Joke or Two: Comedy, Politics and Social Difference (ed. S. Wang; London: Routledge, 1998), esp. 172–75; Riv-Ellen Prell, Fighting to Become Americans: Assimilation and the Trouble Between Jewish Women and Jewish Men (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 286 n37; Ted Merwin, In Their Own Image: New York Jews in Jazz Age Popular Culture (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 18; Lucy Fischer, “1929—Movies, Crashes, and Finales,” in American Cinema of the 1920s: Themes and Variations (ed. Lucy Fischer; Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 251.

5 Tal Ilan addresses this issue in her article, “The Joke in Rabbinic Literature.”

6 See also Avot 3:13; Karff, “Laughter and Merriment,” 75–85.

7 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

8 I am here following the manuscripts (Munich, Oxford, Vatican, and Cambridge). The printed edition has Rabbah. See also Diqduqi Soferim, ad. loc.; and Engelman, “Humor mutzhar,” 11 n15.

9 The printed edition and MS Cambridge T-S F2 (2) 18 add “and the rabbis would be cheerful [qa badhi].” The Aramaic word bedihuta and its corresponding verb badah are difficult to translate. Michael Sokoloff, A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic (Ramat Gan and Baltimore: Bar Ilan and Johns Hopkins University Presses, 2002), 186, s.v. bedihuta and 185, s.v. badah, translates them as “mirthful” and “be cheerful,” respectively. See also Engelman, “Humor mutzhar,” 11–13.

10 See also Boyarin, Socrates, 9–10.


13 That is, once they have been cooked together. See PT Avodah Zarah 5:12 (45b), BT Qiddushin 57b, and BT Hullin 115b. For other exegetical readings of the redundancy, see Mishnah Hullin 8:4; Mechilta de-R. Ishmael, Mishpatim, Masekhta de-Kaspa, parashah 20; Mechilta de-Rashbi, 23:19; Sifre Deut, piska 104; and Pesiqta de-Rav Kehana, parasha 10.

14 The passage reads:

[“With God [‘et ‘adonai” (Gen 4:1)]. R. Ishmael asked R. Akiva. He said to him, since you served Nahum Gam Zu for twenty-two years, [you know from him that the words] ‘but’ and ‘only’ [in the Torah are limiters [i.e., they come to limit the scope of the law in which they are found], [and the words] ‘et and ‘also’ [in the Torah] are expansionist [i.e., they come to add to the law in which they are found]. [But the word] ‘et found here [in Gen 4:1], what is its function? [R. Akiva] said to him, “if it had said ‘I acquired man God’ [without the word ‘et between ‘man’ and ‘God’], the verse would have been unclear. Therefore, [it says] ‘with God [‘et ‘adonai].’ Previously, Adam was created from the earth, and Eve from Adam. From here on, ‘in our image, in our likeness’ (Gen 1:26). Neither man without woman, nor woman without man, and not the two of them without the divine presence.”

15 In addition to repunctuation, Genesis Rabbah takes the midrash a step further by using the word ‘anokhi in Jacob’s statement in Genesis 27:19 to hyperlink to the ‘anokhi of the first of the Ten Commandments. In a sense, this is playing on the multiple meanings latent in the word ‘anokhi. In biblical Hebrew, both the words ‘anokhi and ‘ani were used for the first-person singular pronoun, “I,” though ‘ani was somewhat more common than ‘anokhi. In Rabbinic Hebrew, however, ‘anokhi had fallen out of use. It therefore stood out to the rabbinic listener, facilitating the hyperlink to the most famous verse containing the word ‘anokhi.


17 This kind of joke is also analyzed in Attardo, Hempelmann, and Di Maio, “Script Oppositions,” 16.


19 A student’s father once told me a story of the first time he learned about homonyms from his rebbe in yeshivah. In his thick Yiddish accent, the rebbe explained to his class, “You hef homonyms in English, too. Fer exemple, you can write a letter, or you can climb a ledder.”

20 This same midrash can also be found in the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 58b). I have selected the version in Pirke R. Eliezer because it spells out the exegetical basis for the midrash more clearly than its Talmudic counterpart. Pirke R. Eliezer is somewhat stylistically distinct from classical rabbinic literature, but this does not affect the outcome in this case. On Pirke R. Eliezer in general and its genre and relationship to earlier rabbinic sources in particular, two recent studies are worth mention: Rachel Adel-


22 Literally, round. From the fact that the attribute is not considered attractive, I presume that “fat” is intended. Unfortunately, most of the descriptive words in this passage are fairly rare, leaving the precise description unclear. What is clear from the context, however, is that each descriptor is meant to indicate what the author considered an unattractive feature.

23 I am reading *mum* as equivalent to *me’um*. See Rabbeinu Asher (Rosh) and R. Samuel Eliezer b. R. Judah Ha-Levi Edels (Maharsha) on this passage. See also Shulamit Valler, “Domestic Strife and Domestic Harmony in the Literature of the Sages” (Hebrew), in *Peace and War in Jewish Culture* (ed. A. Levav; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2006), 21.


26 On the one hand, it ends by praising and even rewarding the woman for her unthinking obedience to what she understood her husband’s command to be. On the other hand, this reward may not be so wonderful, since Bava ben Buta is known in the Babylonian Talmud to have had his eyes put out by Herod (Bava Batra 3b–4a). Even in this story in Nedarim, he does not come out unscathed. If the reward is said somewhat tongue in cheek, then the praise may be as well. Does the Talmudic author believe that women should adhere to the letter of their husband’s commands without thinking through whether the directive even makes sense? Or is this author attempting to offer a subtle critique of such an ideology? For an analysis of these gendered implications, see Brodsky, *Bride without a Blessing*, 111–12, esp. n. 65; Ilan, “The Joke in Rabbinic Literature,” 74–75; and Valler, “Domestic Strife,” 22–24 and 31. See also William Chomsky, “What Was the Jewish Vernacular during the Second Commonwealth?,” *Jew-
Why Did the Widow Have a Goat in Her Bed?


27 In Babylonian Aramaic, a bava is a gate; see Michael Sokoloff, Babylonian Aramaic, 183–84, s.v. bava. Palestinian Aramaic lacks the term altogether; see Michael Sokoloff, A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002). Reisha means the top of something, but, of course, most commonly refers to someone’s head.

28 In many ways, this story has much in common with the type of chreia described by Henry Fischel in his article “Studies in Cynicism and the Ancient Near East: The Transformation of a Chria,” in Religions in Antiquity (ed. J. Neusner; Leiden: Brill, 1968), 372–411. In both, the wife ruins the husband’s meal, and both use double entendres and have something of a punch line, as Fischel notes regarding the chreia; “Studies in Cynicism,” 373. It is especially closely related to the version in Vita Aesopi 39–46, in Aesopica (ed. B. E. Perry; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1952), 49–51, in which the preparer (in that case, the servant, Aesop) is overly literal in his interpretation of the master’s request to have the servant cook him a “lentil”; Vita, 41; Fischel, “Studies in Cynicism,” 380. Ultimately, Aesop serves his master pigs’ feet (similar to the hooves that the husband requests in the Talmudic version) and is then commanded to give the dish to the master’s beloved, by which he means his wife. Through Aesop’s overly literal interpretation, he gives the food to the master’s dog (his beloved), inciting the wife against the master. This last part perhaps corresponds to the request to break the lamps over the head of the gate in the Talmudic version: in both, the wife/servant is sent out with the “meal” to “give” it to a third party/thing, which, through overly literal interpretation, leads to great mishap. Of course, the pun between lentils and hooves works too well in Aramaic for the Talmudic story likely to have been borrowed directly from the Greek, but the many parallels between the stories do speak to an overall relationship.

29 For the same concern, though a different solution, see Jubilees 42:5–6.

30 At least, this is one midrashic position. See BT Eruvin 53a and Sotah 11a.


33 An Indian joke, for example, contains both elements:

A British officer climbed to the top of a mountain in the Himalayas upon which he found a swami sitting, overlooking a cliff with a breathtaking view, and chanting, “34, 34, 34, 34.”
“Why are you chanting the number 34?” asked the British officer.
At which point, the swami pushed him over the cliff and chanted, “35, 35, 35, 35.”

In the joke, at first, we, along with the British officer, assume that the swami is chanting the number 34 for some mystical reason, as the image of a swami sitting on a mountaintop and chanting conjures up certain stereotypical images of Indian meditation. It is only when the swami pushes the British officer off the cliff and changes the number he is chanting that we, though possibly not the officer, come to realize what the number 34 represented.


See footnote 2 above for articles that address aspects of rabbinic humor that are not particularly rooted in midrashic hermeneutics.

Here and throughout this story, the printed edition and MS Munich 95 have Rabbah. I am following the rest of the manuscripts (Göttingen, London, Munich 140, Columbia, Oxford, and Vatican), which have Rava.

This too can perhaps be seen as a forced reinterpretation joke: what was proffered as a pleasant invitation to a meal is exposed in the punch line for the dangers that underlie it. In this sense, then, midrashic hermeneutics may perhaps be seen at work even in this example, although not every example of rabbinic humor can be read as midrashic. On this passage, see Barry Wimpfheimer, *Narrating the Law: A Poetics of Talmudic Legal Stories* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, forthcoming). While I did not have access to Wimpfheimer’s forthcoming book, Boyarin, *Socrates*, 162–66, discusses it and Megillah 7b at some length.