But Is it Funny? Identifying Humor, Satire, and Parody in Rabbinic Literature

Eliezer Diamond

The following joke is told in some Jewish circles:

Moses is standing at Sinai and God says to him, “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.”

Moses asks, “So are You saying that we shouldn’t eat milk and meat together?”

God replies a little impatiently, “I said: You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.”

Moses, still puzzled, says, “Do you want us to wait six hours after a meat meal before eating dairy foods? Is that what you mean?”

God, a bit more impatiently this time, reiterates, “I said: You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.”

Moses asks again, “Wait. You want us to use separate table cloths for meat meals and dairy meals?”

God replies with resignation, “You know what? Have it your way.”

Is this joke funny? That depends on what you know about Judaism and where you stand theologically because the joke is an insider joke that is also tendentious. Let’s unpack these two terms.

An insider joke is one that assumes specialized knowledge on the part of the listener. Without this knowledge, the joke is incomprehensible and therefore not humorous. In the present case you need to know three things if you are going to understand the joke. First, you need to have a general knowledge of kashrut laws and customs, thereby understanding that the joke refers to actual Jewish practice. Second, you must know that much of traditional Jewish practice is based not on explicit biblical commands but rather on rabbinic interpretations and extensions thereof. Third, it is important to be aware that many contemporary Jews, even those who are careful to observe halakhah [Jewish law], often feel that by adding ever more stringencies to halakhic observance one can lose one’s way spiritually, focusing on minute details of practice at the expense of engaging the larger significance of the commandments.

One who understands all of the above will also perceive that our joke employs a type of humor that Sigmund Freud labels as tendenzios, tendentious.1 Tendentious humor is adversative, using wit rather than logic to undermine the authority of a person or an idea.2 This is certainly true of the joke that we are analyzing at present. It may be told to offer a critique of the
increasing stringency of contemporary halakhic observance. Alternatively, it may reflect the teller’s ambivalence about the traditional claim that the rulings and interpretations found in the Talmud reflect faithfully God’s intentions as expressed in the Torah. In the first instance the jest cloaks anger at and frustration with what are perceived as the excesses of contemporary Jewish religious practice. In the second case the joke provides a safe means of expressing anxiety and doubt about the legitimacy and meaningfulness of the religious practices that one observes.³

One of the characteristics of tendentious humor is, as Freud points out, that it generally requires three participants to be effective: a joke teller, someone who or something that is the target of the joke, and a third party who is the audience. Because tendentious humor is adversative, its objective is best achieved when there is a third party to appreciate the jest and share the joke teller’s dismissal of his adversary.⁴ In the present case the joke teller invites us, the hearers, to share his frustration with and/or skepticism toward his antagonists, those who interpret rabbinic tradition stringently and those who engage that tradition uncritically.

I have begun with a relatively accessible contemporary joke in order to illustrate some of the basic characteristics of rabbinic humor and humor in general. Let us now turn to rabbinic humor proper, which is to be found in the Mishnah, the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, and other works of the rabbinic period (first–sixth centuries CE).

Two caveats need to be stated before we begin. The first is that my intention in this article is not to interpret rabbinic humor in light of its sociocultural context. This is certainly an important project, one that is presently being pursued in particular by Holger Zellentin and Daniel Boyarin.⁵ However, my own agenda is to analyze rabbinic humor from a technical and sociopsychological perspective. By “technical” I mean an exploration of the means used to construct a joke—in other words, an examination of what makes a joke funny. With the term “sociopsychological” I refer to the psychological significance of jokes for those who tell them as well as their role in shifting the balance of power between the joke teller and his adversary. My analysis draws heavily upon Freud’s classic work, Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious.

My second caveat is a corollary of the first. Freud categorizes jokes as being either innocent humor, which is intended only to amuse its hearers, and tendentious humor, which, as stated above, has an antagonistic role as well. Because my focus is on humor that is adversarial, only the second genre of humor will be discussed.
RABBINIC ATTITUDES TOWARD HUMOR

It is only recently that rabbinic humor has begun to be taken seriously, as it were, by the academic community. Undoubtedly, as has been suggested, this has a great deal to do with the austere image of rabbinic literature. As a consequence, scholars have assumed that it contains little or no humor and have not sought to identify and study it. Furthermore, it is not always easy or even possible to know whether something in rabbinic literature that strikes us as being humorous was in fact meant as such. As Yehuda Radday notes in his discussion of the difficulty of confidently identifying instances of humor in the Bible, “there lurks the methodological dilemma of veering between textual intentionality and reader’s reception/response.”

In fact, the Sages themselves are ambivalent about the use of humor. Among the terms they use to refer to humor are lešanut (a Hebrew term) and lešanuta (in Aramaic). These terms generally refer to the sarcasm, cynicism, and mockery that are seen as the antithesis of wisdom. In comparing the words of Torah to olive oil, the Sages state, “Just as if a full container of oil were in your hand and a drop of water fell into it an equal amount of oil would spill over, so too for every word of Torah that enters one’s heart a word of lešanut leaves it; and for every word of lešanut that enters one’s heart a word of Torah leaves it.” The Sages strongly denounced lešanut, approving its use only for polemical purposes, to denigrate idolatry, scholars of ill repute, sinners, and heretics.

Two factors would account for the negative rabbinic attitude toward lešanut. In rabbinic study circles, disciples were expected to serve their master in addition to studying Torah. This was an expression of obedience and respect as well as an opportunity to learn how to live a life of Torah by the master’s daily practices. Lešanut had the potential to undermine the master/disciple relationship by subjecting the master and/or his teachings to ridicule.

Even more radically, lešanut could lead to questioning the authority and validity of the rabbinic enterprise itself. As Freud points out, mockery in the form of cynical humor is often used to attack not only people but also institutions and dogmas. Such humor is used particularly when the authority of the institution or belief is so great that it can be attacked only under the guise of a joke.

The Sages also described attendance at stadiums, theaters, and circuses as lešanuṭ. Besides their disapproval of the entertainments that took place there, they were aware that Jews and Judaism were sometimes mocked in the context of theatrical presentations.
The term *sehoq* refers to milder, more benevolent forms of humor: joviality and levity. Nonetheless, these types of humor are also regarded with some concern and suspicion. *Sehoq* is an impediment to Torah study, and it may lead to promiscuity. Moreover in light of the Temple’s destruction, it was considered inappropriate for one to “fill one’s mouth with levity.” *Sehoq* serves as a foil for *simbah* or joy, especially joy that is the result of fulfilling a mitzvah.

_Bediḥuta_, the Aramaic equivalent of *sehoq*, is the term generally used to describe humor that the Sages consider appropriate. We are told that the fourth century Babylonian Sage Raba’ would begin his teaching with “a word of humor [bediḥuta],” and we encounter him using _bediḥuta_ in self-deprecation in a halakhic discussion. Even joviality, however, was inappropriate if it was excessive, as when some Sages were “exceedingly jovial [badhe tuva]” at the weddings of R. Ashi’s and Mar B. Ravina’s sons or if it proved to be hurtful. When R. Aḥdehoi bar Ami speaks to R. Sheshet _be-vediḥuta_, R. Sheshet is insulted and consequently R. Aḥdeboi is divinely punished.

Nonetheless, humor is a component of rabbinic discourse. This is almost inevitable because of the dialogical and disputational nature of rabbinic discourse. As Binyamin Engelman puts it, “[The atmosphere of the Talmud] is one of intellectual tension, of mutual disputatiousness and competitiveness together with mutual achievement and normative obligation.” Wit is a powerful weapon in a debater’s arsenal; it can sometimes carry weight that cannot be borne by the argument it seeks to buttress. Moreover, the atmosphere of the Babylonian Talmud (hereafter: Bavli) in particular is one of verbal violence, one that lends itself to witty repartee that is often meant to wound more than to amuse—in effect, a form of _lešanut._

We now turn to four representative instances of tendentious humor in the Bavli. In each case we will, first of all, read the narrative in conjunction with a biblical verse or verses (in the first and second cases) or another rabbinic text (in the third and fourth cases) in order to make evident the presence of a humorous element. Second, we will identify the techniques being used to create a humorous effect. Finally, in each instance we will focus on the tendentious nature of the humor and consider its psychosocial function.

**PARANOMASIA: THE PROPHETIC RODENT (b. Pes. 9b)**

Paronomasia, or wordplay, is used quite commonly in both the Bible and rabbinic literature. Jonah Fraenkel suggests that its frequent use by the Sages manifests sensitivity to wordplay resulting from their constant engagement in midrashic interpretation and the consequent attention paid to grammar and
It may be used simply as a literary entertainment, but it often has a didactic or polemical function. In the passage about to be discussed, paronomasia is used by one to enliven his objection to a view of a colleague.

One of the obligations connected with Passover is the obligation to search one’s home for ḥameṣ [leaven] on the night of the thirteenth of Nisan, which is considered by the Sages to be the beginning of the fourteenth, and then destroying it the following morning. The Mishnah advises that one should cover any ḥameṣ that one has found in the night of the thirteenth lest it be dragged away by a rodent, requiring the householder to initiate a second search.

What if someone fails to follow the Mishnah’s advice and indeed the mound of ḥameṣ that he has found disappears? The Mishnah seems to express two conflicting views on this matter. It says initially that “we do not concern ourselves with the possibility that a rodent has dragged off [the ḥameṣ].” Yet later, when recommending that one cover any ḥameṣ that has been found, it explains that this is to be done so that one will not have to search for this ḥameṣ if it disappears.

The Bavli records two approaches to resolving this apparent contradiction.

The fourth century Babylonian Sage ‘Abbaye proposes that the mishnah indicating that further search is required refers to the fourteenth day of Nisan, the eve of Passover, while the other mishnah deals with the night of the thirteenth. On the night of the thirteenth, when one has not yet removed the ḥameṣ from one’s possession, a rat would assume that there was plenty more ḥameṣ in the house and consequently would probably consume any ḥameṣ it found. On the fourteenth, when the house has already been almost entirely rid of ḥameṣ, the rat would be more likely to store the ḥameṣ because there would be few crumbs available.

His contemporary Raba’ offers an alternative solution: the mishnah that requires subsequent search refers to a case where one actually saw a rodent dragging away the ḥameṣ; the other mishnah refers to an instance in which the ḥameṣ disappeared for reasons unknown. In the second case, in addition to the possibility that a rat has taken the ḥameṣ and consumed it, there is a chance that a person took the ḥameṣ and ate it; the existence of two possible scenarios that would exempt one from further search leads to a more lenient ruling.

Raba’, however, does not simply offer an alternative view. Initially he attacks ‘Abbaye’s position, saying, “Is a rat a prophet?!” Not satisfied with taking issue with ‘Abbaye, Raba’ wishes to expose the absurdity of ‘Abbaye’s proposed solution. He points out that ‘Abbaye assumes a rat’s ability to assess how much ḥameṣ is and will be present in the house on the thirteenth and
fourteenth days of Nisan. To this Raba’ responds that only a rat gifted with
prophetic powers, who therefore knew on the morning of the fourteenth that
no more baking would be taking place until slightly before nightfall—it was
the practice to bake the matzah for the Seder immediately before the advent of
the holiday—would be capable of making this distinction.

Crucial to a full appreciation of Raba’s riposte, however, is the knowl-
edge that he is employing a sophisticated pun. The words translated above
as “Is the rat a prophet” are in the original Hebrew, “Ve-khi ḥuldah nevi’ah
bi’?” Now it so happens that the word for rat, ḥuldah, is also the name of a
biblical prophetess, a nevi’ah, who is mentioned in Second Kings and Second
Chronicles. Therefore, when Raba’ is quoted as retorting, “Is the rat, ḥuldah,
a prophetess?” he is saying to ‘Abbaye, in effect: it is true that the Bible speaks
of ḥuldah ha- nevi’ah, ḥuldah the prophetess, but it is hard to imagine that it
had an actual rat in mind.

Drawing on Freud’s discussion of techniques of humor, one can say that
at least two other factors contribute to the humorous effect of Raba’s retort.
The first is what Freud describes as “the use of the same or similar word from
one circle of ideas to another, remote one,” about which Freud says, “the plea-
sure . . . seems to be the greater the more alien the two circles of ideas that are
brought together by the same word.” It is hard to think of two realms more
alien to each other than women prophesying and rats dragging and consuming
ḥameṣ, yet a two-word phrase used by Raba’ links them in memorable fashion.

A second source of pleasure and amusement is what Freud speaks of as
the rediscovery of what is familiar; it is a particularly pleasurable source of
humor, says Freud, when it is unexpected. Raba’ is in effect winking at the
biblically knowledgeable reader, alluding in a totally unlikely context to a bibli-
cal character known to them.

The Bavli presents the dispute between Raba’ and ‘Abbaye in dialogical
form, suggesting that this discussion took place face to face. It is only reason-
able to assume that at least some of the disciples of the Sages were present at
this debate; presumably it was one of them who preserved the exchange. We
mentioned previously Freud’s observation that tendentious humor requires the
presence of at least one person beside the joke teller and his target to be fully
effective. Presumably, the disciples would serve that function here. If so, part of
Raba’s motivation for incorporating a pun into his response would presumably
have been to dazzle and entertain the students, in part by affording them the
forbidden pleasure of laughing, even if silently, at one of their teachers.

There is of course another third party present here—namely, we who are
reading the narrative. The willingness of the editors of the Bavli to preserve
Raba’s jest as part of the narrative may be said simply to be the result of an unwillingness to tamper with received traditions, but this is a difficult case to make; the Bavli frequently reworks earlier traditions. Rather, the retention of Raba’s *bon mot* in the Bavli indicates an appreciation of humor by its editors and a willingness to share that humor with its readers even when it takes the form of a disparaging remark. This is consistent with the generally disputatious character of the Bavli mentioned previously.\(^\text{38}\)

**REPRESENTATION BY THE OPPOSITE; PURIM PARSIMONY (*b. Meg.* 7a-b)**

In Tractate Megillah, the Bavli delineates the parameters of two of the commandments relating to Purim—namely, *mishloah manot*, sending gifts of food to a fellow Jew, and *matanot la-‘evyonim*, sending gifts to the poor. These commandments are based on two verses in the book of Esther, 9:19 and 9:22. Immediately after a brief passage in which the Bavli establishes the parameters of these obligations, the following narrative appears:

R.\(^39\) Judah Nesi’ah sent R. ‘Osh’aya’ the flank of a calf and a barrel of wine.

R. ‘Osh’aya’ sent [R. Judah] the following message, “By means of the gift he has sent me our master has fulfilled the obligation of giving gifts to the poor.”

[R. Judah] then sent R. ‘Osh’aya’ a third-grown calf\(^40\) and three barrels of wine.

R. ‘Osh’aya’ sent a message to R. Judah saying, “[Now] our master has fulfilled the obligation of sending gifts to one’s fellow Jew.”\(^41\)

The first message sent by R. ‘Osh’aya’ is an example of what Freud labels “representation by the opposite.”\(^42\) On the face of it R. ‘Osh’aya’’s message is a positive one, assuring R. Judah that he has fulfilled one of the obligations of Purim. In fact, he is informing R. Judah that although the latter intended his gift as a substantial contribution to R. ‘Osh’aya’’s Purim feast, R. ‘Osh’aya’ regards the gift as being so meager upon receiving it that he felt as though R. Judah was treating him like a pauper. The chastened R. Judah then sends R. ‘Osh’aya’ a more substantial gift, to which R. ‘Osh’aya’ replies, in effect, “Ah! That’s more like it.”

As in the case of Raba’s retort to ‘Abbaye, the particular phrasing of R. ‘Osh’aya’’s responses yields even more delight to the reader familiar with rabbinic literature. R. ‘Osh’aya’ begins each response with the phrase *qiyyamta banu*, best translated as “you have fulfilled for us.” First, this phrase alludes to a linguistic expression found elsewhere in rabbinic parlance. For example, the
following interpretation is offered for the verse “Tell now [na’] the people to borrow, each man from his neighbor and each woman from hers, objects of silver and gold” (Exod 11:2), based on the use of na’ in its petitionary sense:

In the study house of R. Yannai they said: The word na’ signifies entreaty. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Moses, “I entreat you, tell the people of Israel: I beg of you, ask the Egyptians to give you silver and gold vessels, lest that righteous one [Abraham] say ‘And they shall be enslaved and oppress them’ (Gen 15:13) God fulfilled for them (qiyyem ba-hem) [but] ‘and they shall go free with great wealth’ (Gen 15:14) He did not fulfill for them (lo qiyyem ba-hem).”

Similarly in his dispute with R. Me’ir concerning the proper interpretation of Exodus 21:35, the second century Palestinian Sage R. Judah objects to R. Me’ir’s view saying, “You have fulfilled (qiyyamta) ‘they shall sell the live ox and divide its price’ but you have not fulfilled (ve-lo qiyyamta) ‘they shall also divide the dead animal.’” Thus the reader who knows that “fulfilled” is sometimes followed by a qualifying “not fulfilled” hears the unspoken reprimand, “but you have not fulfilled the commandment of mishloah manot,” in R. Osh’aya’s “assurance” that R. Judah Nesi’ah has fulfilled the commandment of matanot la-’evyonim.

Here again, then, the full entertainment value of the narrative is received only by someone who is well-versed in the style and content of rabbinic discourse. This story is meant to humor members of the rabbinic circle.

PARODY AND SATIRE: BIRDS ON THE BORDERINE AND BOVINE BABIES (b. B. Bat. 23b and b. Nid. 23a)

Satire and parody are closely related in that they both involve mimicry for the purpose of ridicule, and there has been some uncertainty among scholars as to how to distinguish between them. Holger Zellintin has recently proposed that we define satire as “comical criticism” and parody as “imitative comical criticism.” In other words, satire is humor that mocks, through allusion, an earlier text or idea, while parody involves crafting a text or narrative that subversively mimics an earlier one. Showing that one text imitates another while reworking it is, however, not sufficient basis for concluding that it is intended as parody. As Gilbert Hight puts it, “Parody is not merely distortion; and mere distortion is not satire.” Therefore, says Zellentin, even after one has shown that one text imitates another, the “central question” is, “when are the retellings critical and meant to be understood in a humorous way?” One of the crucial elements, in Zellentin’s view, is “their way of imitating a known target text,” a target text being the narrative that is reworked in parodic fashion.

In the first of two instances discussed below, a question raised by the
Sage R. Yirmiyah is clearly considered to be satiric by his colleagues, even though on the face of it his question is no different from many others in the Bavli. The reason for this will become self-evident once we locate the target text that R. Yirmiyah is imitating and then examine the relationship between the two.

In the second case, R. Yirmiyah asks a question that the Bavli identifies as being facetious. A comparison between it and remarks made by R. Yirmiyah’s colleagues that are similar but not satirical will demonstrate how it is the rhetorical strategy chosen by R. Yirmiyah in contradistinction to his colleagues that gives his question its satirical shading.

The second chapter of Tractate Bava Qamma is devoted to a discussion of zoning law. In this context, the Mishnah addresses the question of a domesticated dove or pigeon that is found near but not on the property of someone owning a dovecote. The Mishnah states that if a young dove is found within fifty cubits of a dovecote, it is presumed to belong to the dovecot’s owner. If, on the other hand, the bird is found more than fifty cubits away, the finder is entitled to take the bird for himself. The Bavli appends the following enigmatic narrative to this mishnah: “R. Yirmiyah asked: What if one of the bird’s feet is within fifty cubits [of the dovecote] and one is more than fifty cubits? For this reason [i.e., because he raised this question] they expelled him from the bet midrash [house of study].” The Talmud does not explain why R. Yirmiyah’s query was grounds for his expulsion from the bet midrash, and at first glance this response seems strange and unreasonable. On the face of it, R. Yirmiyah’s question is no more arcane and unlikely than many others found in rabbinic literature. In fact, however, a comparison of R. Yirmiyah’s question with another raised elsewhere in the Bavli makes it clear that R. Yirmiyah intended his question to serve as parody.

Before turning to the aforementioned question, however, we need to note the structure of the full passage in Baba Batra (of which only part is cited above). At the outset, the Bavli cites a view of R. Ḥanina’ that may or may not have been stated in connection with the mishnah summarized previously. This is followed by an objection to R. Ḥanina’s view by R. Zeira, a colleague and mentor of R. Yirmiyah. This is followed by another objection to R. Ḥanina’—the Bavli does not specify who raises it—from the aforementioned mishnah. The passage closes with R. Yirmiyah’s question and the report of his consequent expulsion.

Elsewhere in the Bavli the same R. Ḥanina’ whose view begins the passage in Baba Batra is recorded as asking whether someone with one foot inside of and one foot outside of the teḥum Shabbat, the 2,000-cubit boundary that
marks the maximum distance one may walk from one’s home in Shabbat, may
return to his home on Shabbat. While chronological considerations preclude
that possibility that R. Yirmiyah addressed R. Ḥanina’ himself, a comparison
of his question with R. Ḥanina’ s, as well as R. Ḥanina’ s presence in the Baba
Batra passage, strongly suggest that R. Yirmiyah’s query was intended as a
parody of R. Ḥanina’ s Shabbat-boundary inquiry.

Whereas the image of someone with one foot on either side of a bound-
ary is plausible, the image of a bird, that most peripatetic of creatures, being
found with its two feet firmly planted precisely on both sides of the fifty-cubit
limit is comical. In asking his absurd question, R. Yirmiyah is implicitly ridi-
culing the question raised by R. Ḥanina’. Although R. Ḥanina’ s query is not
ridiculous to the same extent as R. Yirmiyah’s question, they are so similar
that the potentially risible aspects of R. Ḥanina’ s question are foregrounded,
and he is made to look foolish for asking it. It is this kind of tour de force
that Gilbert Hight has in mind when he notes, “Some of the best material parodies
are those which might, by the unwaried, be accepted as genuine work of the
author or style parodied.”

R. Yirmiyah uses a similar satirical technique in another context. In the
context of delineating the laws of ritual purity of the parturient, the Mishnah
discusses whether various types of births require a woman to observe these
laws. One case is when a woman gives birth to a fetus that has the appearance
and form of an animal. The majority of Sages rule that the purity laws of the
parturient do not apply in this instance, while R. Me’ir treats it as a normal
birth. The Bavli reports the following query of R. Yirmiyah regarding R.
Me’ir’s view:

R. Yirmiyah asked R. Zeira: According to R. Me’ir, who says that
an animal [formed] in a woman’s womb is [considered] a genuine
[human] embryo, what is the law if her [i.e., the fetus’] father accepted
[money for] betrothal on her behalf [i.e., has a valid betrothal been
contracted]?−What difference does it make? To forbid [the husband]
to [the fetus’] sister.−Do you mean that this fetus is viable? Did not
R. Judah say in the name of Rab: R. Me’ir stated his view only because
there are members of its species that are viable [implying that this
fetus is not viable and therefore not subject to betrothal]!−R. ‘Aḥa’ b.
Ya’aqob said: To this degree did R. Yirmiyah attempt to bring R. Zeira
to laughter, but he did not laugh.

R. ‘Aḥa’ b. Ya’aqob, a late third and early fourth generation Sage, reports that
R. Yirmiyah’s question was asked in jest. Once again, however, it is not clear
why this is so. Of course this might have been obvious from the manner in
which the question was asked, but there is no indication of this in R. ‘Aḥa’ s
Moreover, it is highly unlikely that R. ‘Aḥa’ himself was present when R. Yirmiyah raised his question.59

One hint that R. Yirmiyah is being satirical is the image portrayed by his question. The idea of a man seeking to betroth a monstrous creature as his bride is certainly absurd. This insight, in turn, makes it clear that R. Yirmiyah’s question is actually a thinly disguised attack on R. Me’ir. If R. Me’ir treats an aborted animal-like fetus as having human status in that its mother is subject to the purity laws of the parturient, the implication is that, if it were possible for such a creature to survive, we would treat it like a human being in every respect, including viewing it as a potential marriage partner. The idea that Jewish law would regard such a betrothal as having legal validity and, as noted previously, the notion that anyone would be interested in betrothing such a creature are prima facie ridiculous. Since R. Yirmiyah’s question is premised upon these far-fetched assumptions, it is clear that his question is facetious.60

However, saying that R. Yirmiyah’s question is facetious is not the same as saying that it is satirical. In the passages analyzed above, Raba’ and R. ‘Osh’aṭa utilized sarcasm, yet no one would label their remarks as satire. To isolate the satiric element in R. Yirmiyah’s question, we need to compare the passage in Bavli Niddah with a section of the Jerusalem Talmud (henceforth: Yerushalmi) in which R. Yirmiyah’s objection is raised in similar but yet significantly different fashion:

R. Ḥaggai said: R. Ḥananyah, the colleague of our masters, raised the following objection regarding R. Me’ir’s teaching: If a woman miscarries, [producing] a creature in the form of a raven, [and it is] standing at the top of the palm tree, do we say to it [if its “brother” has died leaving his wife childless], “Come and perform ḥaliṣah or yibbum [i.e., release or marry your sister-in-law]”? R. Mana’ replied: If you are going to raise such an objection to R. Me’ir’s view, raise it regarding the view of the sages [as well]! For R. Yassa’ said in the name of R. Yoḥanan: [When the abortion is] entirely in human form but with the face of an animal it is not [considered] a human child; if [it is] entirely in animal form but with a human face it is [considered] a human child. [Now] if it is in human form but with the face of an animal and it is standing and reading the Torah do we say to it, “Come and we will slaughter you”? And if it as animal form but a human face and it is plowing the field, do we say to it, “Come and perform ḥaliṣah or yibbum”?62

R. Ḥananyah’s argument is identical to the one implicit in R. Yirmiyah’s question: to apply the laws of the parturient to a woman who aborts a fetus in animal form is to imply that the fetus has human status. Following this assump-
tion to its logical conclusion, in the hypothetical and presumably impossible situation that the fetus had survived, it would be considered the “brother” of the woman’s other children and could thereby affect his “brother’s” widow’s ability to remarry. As in the case of R. Yirmiyah’s proposed scenario, its implausibility is surpassed only by its absurdity, which is driven home with the image of the “brother-bird” perching on a palm tree as it being asked to perform a religious rite.

R. Mana’ objects in similar fashion to the view that the facial configuration of the aborted fetus determines whether or not the laws of the parturient apply. While his intent is not entirely clear, his point apparently is that facial configuration is an inadequate and unreliable guide to whether one is an animal or a human being and therefore should not be the standard for the purity laws. We can imagine a person with a bovine appearance and a cow with a human one; no one would ever consider the first an animal or the second a human being. Again, like R. Yirmiyah and R. Ḥananyah, R. Mana’ uses vivid and jarring imagery, the Torah reader being called to be slaughtered and the plowing ox being summoned to perform ḥaliṣah, to make his case.

And yet there is a crucial distinction between R. Yirmiyah’s rhetorical strategy and the one employed by his colleagues. R. Ḥananyah and R. Mana’ use the language and methods of open debate. Their words may contain ridicule, but the two Sages make their intentions clear and leave open for their adversaries the possibility of a riposte. Not so R. Yirmiyah. His weapons are satire and parody; thus his attack is oblique. R. Yirmiyah does not give R. Me’ir or his supporters the opportunity to respond to his critique because his use of the interrogative masks his true intentions. Moreover, he undermines R. Me’ir’s view by linking it with a question that, in the guise of taking that view seriously, mocks and derides it. Because satire and parody employ co-optation rather than negation, their targets are left with the impossible task of restoring dignity to a view or a literary or artistic creation that has been indelibly tarred with the brush of ridicule.

Before we leave our analysis of R. Yirmiyah’s questions, let us return to the episode recounted in Baba Batra. I explained that R. Yirmiyah’s intention was to ridicule a question asked by R. Ḥanina’ by asking a parodic version. It may be, however, that this was not the only reason for expelling R. Yirmiyah. As Yitzhak Isaac Halevy perceptively notes, elsewhere in the Bavli, R. Yirmiyah is found questioning the arbitrary nature of rabbinic standards of measurement. In one instance he is skeptical that the Sages could accurately assess when grain had reached one third of its final growth. Elsewhere he questions how a standard amount of water, a revi’it, can be used in all cases of the mešora’
ceremony of slaughtering a bird over a bowl of water, given that the amount of blood that drips into the water may vary greatly and the obligation is for both the water and the blood to be distinctly visible. In both instances his mentor and colleague R. Zeira cautions him, “Do not remove yourself from [the bounds of] the halakhah.”

R. Yirmiyah’s question in Baba Batra, therefore, besides being a denigrating parody of R. Ḥanina’s Shabbat-boundary inquiry, may also be an implicit expression of R. Yirmiyah’s disdain for the rabbinic system of measurement as a whole. He posits a case that is inherently ridiculous and that exposes the inadequacies of the rabbinic system. If the measurements to be used are absolute and inflexible, they will not be able to respond effectively to instances that are borderline cases literally, like the one posed by R. Yirmiyah, and/or figuratively. Presumably R. Yirmiyah’s own approach would be to apply measurements more loosely such that a question like his would never arise.

In short, R. Yirmiyah may have been doing more than ridiculing R. Ḥanina’s question. He may have been thumbing his nose at R. Zeira and at the rabbinic establishment as a whole. This would certainly be a compelling reason to discipline and silence him by excluding him from the circle of study.

One last observation is in order. There seems to be a joke embedded in the Baba Batra passage that may encompass the passages in Rosh Hashanah and Soṭah as well. R. Yirmiyah raises a question of boundaries: is a bird on the borderline inside or outside of the fifty cubit limit? Although there is no direct response to his question, his colleagues offer an implicit one. We may not be sure whether or not the bird is within the boundary line, they say, but there is no question that you are out of bounds; you must leave the study house at once. This sanction, moreover, is but a physical expression of what R. Yirmiyah was guilty of doing, according to R. Zeira: removing himself from the constraints of halakhah.

SCHNORRER HUMOR: BARREL-BUNGLING BEGGARS (b. B. Mes. 83a)

In numerous instances the same or similar narratives appear in both the Bavli and in the Yerushalmi. It has long been assumed that the version in the Bavli is almost always later than that in the Yerushalmi. A related observation is that the Bavli’s versions of these narratives are generally more highly developed than those of the Yerushalmi. In the case of the narrative below, it can be shown that the elements appearing in the Bavli’s version that are not in the Yerushalmi add humorous elements to the narrative.
The following narrative appears in the Bavli at the end of the sixth chapter of Baba Meši’a, which deals extensively with employer-employee relations:

Some porters broke Rabbah b. b. Hanah’s barrels [in the process of transporting them]. He seized their cloaks [as surety for his barrels].

They came to Rab and told him. He [=Rab] said to him [=Rabbah b. b. Hanah], “Return their garments to them.” He responded, “Is this the law?!”. He [Rab] responded in turn, “Yes. [Scripture states,] ‘So follow the way of the good’ (Prov 2:20).” He returned their garments to them.

They [then] said to him [Rab], “We are poor, we have worked the whole day, we are hungry and we have nothing.” He said [to Rabbah b. b. Hanah], “Go and give them their wages.” He said to him, “Is this the law?!”. He replied, “Yes. [Scripture states,] ‘And observe the paths of the righteous’ (Prov loc. cit.).”

The primary purpose of this narrative is exhortatory. The Talmud has been discussing at length the mutual legal obligations of workers and employers. At the conclusion of this discussion the Talmud reminds us that what is legal is not always what is ideal. To use the language of Lon Fuller, the chapter in the Talmud has been delineating a morality of duty; its final narrative espouses a morality of aspiration. Toward that end it tells of a Sage who is compelled by a colleague to pay wages to workers who not only did not do the work for which they were hired but actually caused damage to their employer’s property. Clearly the letter of the law requires R. Rabbah b. b. Hanah’s employees to pay him the value of the barrels that were broken if the damage occurred through their negligence. Instead, however, a different “law” is invoked—namely, Proverbs’ imperative to “walk in the ways of the righteous.”

Nonetheless, there is an element in this narrative that strikes the reader as being humorous. This element, of course, is the second claim of the porters; these gentlemen, who not only had not succeeded in transporting the barrels to the desired location but also had shattered every one, are asking, based on their poverty, that they be paid for this fine piece of work. The porters seem oblivious to the damage that they have caused their employer; their only concern is to be paid for services rendered, as it were. They feel entitled to this payment because of their status as unfortunates.

Our sense that this element of the narrative is intended to be humorous is strengthened by a comparison of this story with its parallel in the Yerushalmi. The Yerushalmi’s version reads as follows:

A tanna taught: R. Nehemiah the porter entrusted his barrels to someone who broke them. Nehemiah seized his cloak. The man came before R. Yose b.
Hanina’. He said to him, “Go tell [R. Nehemiah that Scripture states],” ‘And keep to the paths of the just’ (Prov 3:20).’ He went and told [R. Nehemiah] who returned his cloak.

R. Yose b. Hanina’ then asked him, “Did R. [Nehemiah] pay you your wages?” The man replied, “No.” He said to him, “Go tell him [that Scripture states],” ‘And keep to the paths of the just’ (Prov 3:20).’ He went and told [R. Nehemiah] and he paid him his wages.

There are several differences between the two versions, besides the fact that the rabbi before whom the case is brought is a second generation Palestinian Sage in the Yerushalmi and a first generation Babylonian Sage in the Bavli. The following chart highlights the dissimilarities between the two narratives:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>y. Bava Mezia 6:6, 11a</th>
<th>b. Bava Mezia 83a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R. Nehemiah the porter entrusted his barrels to someone, who broke them.</td>
<td>Some porters broke Rabbah b. b. Hanah’s barrels [in the process of transporting them].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R. Nehemiah seized the man’s cloak.</td>
<td>He seized their cloaks [as surety for his barrels].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The man came before R. Yose b. R. Hanina’.</td>
<td>They came to Rab and told him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>He</strong> [=R. Yose b. R. Hanina’] <strong>told the man</strong>, “Go tell him [that Scripture states], ‘So follow the way of the good’ (Proverbs 2:20).”</td>
<td><strong>He</strong> [=Rab] <strong>said to him</strong> [=Rabbah b. b. Hanah], “Return their garments to them.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>He</strong> [=Rabbah b. b. Hanah], <strong>responded</strong>, “Is this the law?!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>He [Rab] responded in turn, “Yes. [Scripture states.] ‘So follow the way of the good’ (Proverbs 2:20).”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The man went and told R. Nehemiah and he returned his cloak to him.</td>
<td>He returned their garments to them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>[R. Yose b. R. Hanina’] then asked the man, “Did he pay you your wages?” He replied, “No.”</strong></td>
<td><strong>They</strong> [then] <strong>said to him</strong> [Rab], “We are poor, we have worked the whole day, we are hungry and we have nothing.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
He said, “Go tell him [that Scripture states], ” 'And observe the paths of the righteous' (Proverbs 3:20).” The man told R. Neḥemiah and he paid him his wages.

He said [to Rabbah b. b. Ḥanah], “Go and give them their wages.”

He said to him, “Is this the law?!”

He replied, “Yes. [Scripture states,] “And observe the paths of the righteous.”

In the Yerushalmi the porter appeals to R. Yose b. R. Ḥanina’, who instructs the porter to tell Neḥemiah, or R. Neḥemiah, that he ought to return the porter’s cloak and pay him his wages. However, the “ought” here is not phrased in terms of obligation but rather as an appeal to follow the path of righteousness prescribed by Proverbs. The porter himself never thinks of asking for his wages, presumably because he considers such a request unreasonable if not laughable. It is R. Yose b. R. Ḥanina’ who informs R. Neḥemiah that only if he pays the porter his wages will he fully realize the ideal of righteousness.

In the Bavli, however, we have a courtroom scene. The plaintiffs (the porters) bring the defendant (Rabbah b. b. Ḥanah) before a magistrate (Rab), who twice rules in favor of the plaintiffs. The courtroom setting necessitates that both the return of the cloaks and the payment of wages result from a claim by the porters and that Rab’s determination be phrased as a ruling. This latter point is clear from Rabbah b. b. Ḥanah’s response. As a consequence, we are confronted with porters who, having broken the barrels they were supposed to transport, are not content with having been exempted from liability; they claim as well that they ought to be paid their wages. This claim is based in part on their impoverished state, but they also point out that they deserve recompense for their arduous toil: “We have worked the whole day.”

At this point in the narrative we have no choice but to laugh. The porters have been hard at work dropping and smashing all of their employer’s barrels, and it is this heavy labor, they claim, that entitles them to receive their wages. There is only one word to describe this plea, and that word is *chutzpah*. Put this element of the narrative together with the fact of their impoverished state and you have an example of schnorrer humor. A schnorrer is someone who depends on others for his daily bread, often with a sense
of entitlement. It is this latter trait that is the basis for this genre of humor, and it is the attitude of the indigent porters that they are entitled to recompense that is the source of the humor in the Bavli. Had they simply pled poverty, we would be at least somewhat sympathetic to their plight. Once they base their claim on being owed wages for having destroyed their employer’s goods they become figures of ridicule.

Freud makes the following observation regarding schnorrer humor: “The truth that lies behind [schnorrer jokes] is that the schnorrer, who in his thoughts treats the rich man’s money as his own, has actually, according to the sacred ordinances of the Jews, almost a right to make this confusion. The indignation raised by this joke is of course directed against a [religious] law which is highly oppressive even to pious people.” In other words, schnorrer humor reflects a rueful acceptance of the claims that the poor have upon the religiously conscientious Jew at the same time as they express annoyance with the burden created by this obligation.

Applying this insight to the Bavli’s version of the story of the porters, one could say that the Bavli is employing the schnorrer motif here in the manner suggested by Freud. The narrative is intended to be morally uplifting and inspirational, asserting that helping the poor is indeed the law, superseding, at least aspirationally, the specifics of labor law delineated at great length in the preceding chapter of the Bavli. However, that does not mean that one cannot have some humor at the same time—humor, moreover, that provides an outlet for the resentment sometimes felt toward those requesting or even demanding financial assistance. “Yes,” the narrator is saying, “of course the ideal is to go beyond the letter of the law, particularly in the service of the needy, but let’s face it: the poor who ask for our help can often be extremely presumptuous and annoying.”

It could be argued that the humor here is not rabbinic humor in the sense that I have used that term; one need not be a rabbinic scholar to “get” a schnorrer joke. While this is so, the context of this humor—namely, a judgment concerning a matter of *halakhah*—gives it a particularly rabbinic flavor. Moreover, part of the humor is the result of Rab ruling in accordance with the claim made by the porters. As Rabbah b. b. Ḥana’s outraged response to this ruling implies, the ruling seems to make a mockery of fundamentals of tort law and common sense. Consequently, the appeal to Proverbs notwithstanding, this narrative has a destabilizing effect on all of the rulings that precede it. When are judges allowed or even supposed to use aspirational standards rather than jurisprudential ones, for whom, and to what degree? The story of the porters raises these questions without answering them.
SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

We have seen that humor is very much a presence in rabbinic discourse and narrative in general and in the Bavli in particular. Much work remains to be done before we can answer Zellintin’s question: how do we know that a phrase or narrative in rabbinic literature is intended to be humorous? However, establishing that a narrative is recounted with humorous intent leads to another equally important question to be addressed: what is its function? I have addressed that question in each of the texts that were analyzed, but the question of humor’s larger function or functions in rabbinic literature remains.

Daniel Boyarin has pointed us in a fruitful direction through his use of the model of Menippean satire to analyze rabbinic tales. Satire and parody of this genre, sometimes referred to as *spoudogeloios* [serious laughing, or the seriocomic], is “produced by and for intellectuals in which their own practices are both mocked and asserted at the same time.” In the case of rabbinic narrative, argues Boyarin, this means that at the same time the Sages who teach and transmit Torah and who are generally depicted in heroic terms, are sometimes implicated in situations that are carnivalesque or sordid. These satiric narratives have the potential to undermine not only the Sages but also the Torah they teach. In the end, however, they are intended as problemization rather than rejection of the rabbinic enterprise.

There is much left to be done in the identification and analysis of the humorous elements in rabbinic literature. My study of four representative cases demonstrates some of the tools that can be helpful in this work and suggests some promising directions for further research. It is a project to which I hope to make future contributions.

NOTES

2 Ibid., 103.
3 Ibid., 104.
4 Ibid., 100.
Topos, Meaning” (Hebrew), in Mehqere Talmud 3 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2005), vol. I, 403-30, is almost identical with Yassif, Sippur.


9 Throughout this essay this term will be used to refer to the rabbinic scholars of the first to sixth centuries CE.

10 Both of these terms derive from the root ḫṣ, from which the biblical terms leš and lašon are derived. The precise meaning of this root and how it comes to take on the meaning of mockery is beyond the scope of this article.

11 Song of Songs Rabbah 1.2


13 b. Meg. 25b.

14 Ibid.

15 b. Qidd. 81a.

16 See, for example, b. Ber. 10a.


18 t. Abod. Zar. 2.6 and elsewhere. Interestingly, a carnival atmosphere prevailed at the simhat bet ha-sho’evah, the Festival of the Place of Water-drawing (or, possibly, the Festival of the Place of Fire), which took place on the evening following the first day of Sukkot; see m. Suk. 5.4. Precisely because of this, however, the Sages insisted on separating the sexes by constructing a balcony for the women in the Courtyard of the Women; see b. Suk. 51b.


20 m. Abot 6.5.

21 m. Abot 3.13; see t. Sot. 6.6.

22 b. Ber. 31.a.

23 Ibid.

24 b. Shab. 30a.

25 b. B. Qam. 17.a.

26 b. Ber. 30b-31a.

27 b. B. Bat. 9b.


32 *m. Pes.* 1.3.
33 *m. Pes.* 1.2.
34 *m. Pes.* 1.3.
35 2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chronicles 34:22.
36 Freud, *Jokes and the Unconscious*, 120.
37 Ibid., 120-22.
38 I hope to show elsewhere that on occasion the Bavli supplements narratives in which one or more of the Sages are the butt of a joke with glosses intended to lessen the damage to the reputation(s) of the Sage(s) in question.
39 An abbreviation of “Rabbi.”
40 ‘eglah tilta’. The exact meaning of this phrase is unclear.
41 Bavli Megillah 7a-b, according to many manuscript versions. The version found in the Vilna edition makes no sense as a narrative; moreover, the version presented here is substantially the one found in the Jerusalem Talmud as well (*y. Meg.* 1.4, 70d).
43 b. Ber. 9b.
44 *m. B. Qam.* 3.9.
46 Zellentin, “Rabbinic Parodies,” 1, n. 1.
49 Zellentin, “Rabbinic Parodies,” 2.
50 *m. B. Bat.* 2.5.
51 b. B. Bat. 23b.
52 This observation is made by a number of medieval commentators on the Bavli. See, for example, Tosafot *B. Bat* 23b s.v. *ve-al da*. Isaac Hirsch Weiss, *Dor dor ve-dorshav* (Vilna: Romm, 1904), 3.96, suggests that it was R. Yirmiyah’s sarcastic facial expression that was objectionable, but there is no evidence for this. Concerning Yitzḥaq Isaac Halevy’s proposal see further on.
53 B. ‘Erub. 52b. This is noted by Ritba ad. loc. s.v. ‘al da.
55 *m. Nid.* 3.2.
56 A man is forbidden to marry his wife’s sister during his wife’s lifetime; see Leviticus 18:18.
57 b. Nid. 23a
58 See n. 51.
59 Although R. Aḥa was a contemporary of R. Zeira and R. Yirmiyah, the event in question seems to have taken place in the Land of Israel, and there is no indication that R. Aḥa ever left Babylonia.
60 In understanding R. Yirmiyah in this way I am implying that the reason that R. Yirmiyah’s question was regarded as facetious and was reported as such by R. Aḥa is not
the one suggested by the anonymous Bavli in the section interposed between R. Yirmiyah's question and R. Aḥa's remark—namely, that R. Yirmiyah was asking about a case that could not possibly arise.

61 Following Pnei Moshe s.v. havrein de-rabbanan.
62 y. Nid. 3.1, 50c.
63 Yitzḥaq Isaac Halevy, Dorot ha-rishonim (Frankfurt au Main: Slobotsky Printers, 1901), 2.364–65.
64 b. Rosh Hash. 13a.
65 b. Soṭah 16b.
66 b. B. Meṣ 83a.
68 y. B. Meṣ, 6.6, 11a.
69 Freud, Jokes and the Unconscious, 113.
71 Boyarin, “Patron Saint,” 526.