

Rabbi Arielle Stein  
Congregation Rodeph Sholom  
High Holy Days 5785

## Psychomagic, Humor and Yom Kippur

I'm not great at sleeping. To this day, I struggle. The monsters of the day invade the night. As a child, I was plagued by night terrors. From ages 2 to 4, I would sit up in the middle of the night, eyes wide open, shrieking, in abject horror. Nothing seemed to stop it. My parents, in their early forties and stuck with a child who seemed possessed by demons, tried everything. When they exhausted their options and the night terrors still had not ceased, they called in an expert. My grandmother, an early childhood educator, mother of 5 and rebbetzin, was there for them in their moment of desperation. Never one to dismiss the alternative, Savta Sar called in a favor from a beloved old friend, a psychoanalyst, who had a surprising suggestion.

*Video her! Video her? Video her! And when she's awake, maybe before bedtime, show her the video! It might work...* And so, they did. The next night, video camera in hand, my father recorded my open-eyed shrieks. A day later, he sat me down to watch the tape. Seeing my own terror displayed on screen while awake, somehow defanged

my fear. As I watched the video, I laughed. The night terrors disappeared and did not return. Effective, immediately.

Exactly how this worked remains a mystery. Nevertheless, the imagination and creativity that inspired the tactic, along with my parents' willingness to try it, set me up for a life in which I welcomed the power of Psychomagic; the use of imagination and creativity to treat a human, emotional, problem.<sup>1</sup>

Later, I returned to Psychomagic. In those days, I was obsessed with the Holocaust. The Farhud. The Spanish Inquisition. The Pogroms...The delightfully myriad horrors of Jewish history! I had also developed a wry sense of humor. As an art student, I painted it all in the form of monsters. Monsters with human faces, a million hands, limbs in absurd places. Monsters that evoked terror and humor at the same time.

Through facing the grotesque and abhorrent through my artmaking, I found the ability to reshape those things into something that stole fear away from the terrible. In the process, the darkest moments in history felt more accessible. Their power, diminished.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Alejandro Jodorowsky." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica, inc., 22 Aug. 2024, [www.britannica.com/biography/Alejandro-Jodorowsky#ref1206052](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alejandro-Jodorowsky#ref1206052).

Wry humor depicted on paper and canvas painted the possibility that humanity could also reshape itself, with the potential to move in a different direction.

With the guidance of my art professor, Delia Gonzalez, I arrived at the books and films of Alejandro Jodorowsky; healer, magician, artist, Jewish renegade *and* coiner of the term Psychomagic. This arrival helped me name what I was doing with my art.

I was neutralizing horror.

Jodorowsky's influence extended beyond my days as an art student. Discussing Judaism, Jodorowsky joked about the first word of the Torah, Bereishit (in the beginning). He said: *That mysterious word at the beginning, mentioned in the Bible, is a divine guffaw. Bereishit-a divine guffaw.*<sup>2</sup>

To me, this idea of Torah opening with a guffaw a loud, boisterous peal of laughter is neither blasphemous nor dismissive. Instead, it is the discovery of a powerful, spiritual technology embedded in our most sacred text. To imagine a *divine guffaw* as the opening word of Torah enables us to imagine God refusing a universe that is solely

---

<sup>2</sup> Alejandro Jodorowsky in conversation

chaos and darkness and laughing in delighted triumph that there is more to be created.

Although individual Jewish lives and historic periods have been punctuated with levity, humor has been a tool we have cultivated and deployed in response to the fear, hatred, destruction and sorrow we have faced for millennia as a people. This is *not* the humor of dancing on graves!

In rabbinic times, we mocked oppressive leaders through debates in text. During the Inquisition and expulsion, we wrote racy, hilarious poems. For centuries, all over the world, we have made our arch-enemy- Haman-into a laughingstock on Purim. We have used humor, particularly biting, wry and painful humor to reclaim power and possibility in the face of evil. We have done this so effectively that in the 1970s, 80% of American comedians were Jews! This year, during a time that has felt so serious, grievous and heavy, it's critical that we find the well of wisdom that can re-empower us, giving us agency and joy.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Jansezian, Nicole. "Why Are Jews so Funny? Exploring Jewish Humor and Comedians." *The Jerusalem Post* | *JPost.Com*, 2023, [www.jpost.com/j-spot/article-748155](http://www.jpost.com/j-spot/article-748155).

Today, on Yom Kippur, a holiday that can feel so sad and scary, we come face to face with our own mortality. We are asked to imagine our lives hanging in the balance of divine judgment. All this, against the backdrop of a year in which our sense of safety and security have been shaken, shattered. It is precisely now that our long arc of history might help us defang our monsters. We need our well of humor to do this, even and especially, on this day.

But first, let's understand what's on the table. Picture this: You are in ancient times. It's the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. In Jerusalem, the high priest, decked out in white, is preparing to meet God's presence in the inner sanctum of the ancient temple, in the holy of holies. Before entering that inner sanctum, the high priest's colleagues, sons, loved ones, would tie a rope around his waist, leaving a long coil trailing behind, all the way to where they waited outside, hoping they would not have to touch it. That rope, the high priest's only tether to the living world, was there just in case he dropped dead encountering God, leaving a way for his corpse to be dragged out from the inner sanctum.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Mishnah Yoma 5:1

In rather extreme terms, this shows us what's on the table on Yom Kippur. On a holiday when the highest of the high might die horrifically, the idea of the dread we are so familiar with being juxtaposed with humor and joy is poignant. Even jarring. What and where is the joy? For all the pomp and circumstance, the high priest as intermediary between the heavens and earth, we are presented with a basic rope as an existential guffaw! It's almost an offensive reminder! For me, here in my white robe and composed appearance, it reminds me that no one and no thing is saved from uncertainty...

Our well of humor is sewn throughout our sacred texts, revealing another, Jodorowsky-esque approach to Yom Kippur. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said:

*...There were no days as joyous for the Jewish people as the fifteenth of Av and as Yom Kippur...Yom Kippur is a day of joy, because it is a day of pardon and forgiveness...What?! No day **AS JOYOUS** as Yom Kippur? Huh. According to Rabban*

Gamliel, in ancient days, Yom Kippur was a time of happiness and celebration!

Contradicting our modern experience, this text places joy where we tend to find sorrow. It provides an alternative to what we think we know.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Ta'anit 26b:4

And there's more! In medieval Spain, the Zohar taught that Yom Kippur is **like** Purim. Yom Kippur, which has many names, is sometimes called *Yom HaKippurim*-the day of atonement(s.) When the "Ki" in Yom HaKippurim functions as a prefix, the meaning of the name of this holiday becomes a day like Purim. What does it mean for Yom Kippur to be *like Purim*? For many of us, Purim is a time of festivity, chaos, celebration. But that isn't all it is. Purim also functions as a reminder of the intentional and accidental horror that lurks around us and the surprising moments of humor woven in.<sup>6</sup>

Talmud teaches: *Raba said: It is a man's duty on Purim to drink until he cannot tell the difference between cursed be Haman and blessed be Mordecai. Raba and Zera joined together in a Purim feast. They got drunk and Raba arose and cut Zera's throat. On the next day he prayed on Zera's behalf and revived him. Raba said: A miracle may not occur every time...*What is humorous about this horrific story? Perhaps it is the crudeness of its warning that taking the directive to blur the lines between cursed and blessed too literally can go terribly awry. Or, the humor is found in the unlikely simplicity of the story's solution. A miracle. A desperate wish that we know too well does not occur in life.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Tikkunei Zohar 57b:4

<sup>7</sup> Megillah 7B:7-8

Purim, although we tend to think of it as a holiday of fun, is also home to depth, darkness and twisted humor. Yom Kippur which we associate with solemnity, atonement and renewal, is also home to celebration and joy. The duality found within the name Yom HaKippurim-the day of atonement-and the day *like Purim* presents the two as spiritual twins. One twin encourages us to impersonate the monsters, mocking the shadows of our history. The other twin tries to excise our distractions and throws us into the vulnerable depths of our own mortality.

But neither are viable pathways for life. Both push us towards a deeper sense of humanity by temporarily robbing us of our own humanity. As Jews, we find humor in moments of rupture. Think about the humor that has emerged from our tragic communal experiences. In Czarist Russia, A joke was told: *A Jew in Russia falls into a lake. Not knowing how to swim, he frantically screams, "Help, save me!" But his calls are totally ignored by all present, including a number of soldiers standing nearby. In desperation, the Jew yells out, "Down with the czar!". Then the soldiers immediately jump in, yank the Jew out of the water, and haul him off to prison.* This joke sharply relays the fear and helplessness of what it meant to be a Jew then and there. And it draws out a laugh at the unlikely moment of a life being saved only to rot, perhaps forever in 19th century Russian prison. The humor that has and continues to



emerge is not always palatable, yet it does something powerful.<sup>8</sup>

And, some of us know too well that humor in the face of heartbreak is simply a distraction. A deflection. But it can also be an act of defiance, a way of suggesting that when we laugh in the face of our terror, we become the divine guffaw, the light shining in the darkness. As we mock our monsters, we rob them of their lasting, psychic power over us. In *Laughter After: Humor and the Holocaust*, Terrence Des Pres writes, *Laughter revolts. It is the comic, and the act of displacement that laughter offers, that allows us to move forward in the world.* Des Pres explores laughter as an active verb rather than a passive response. Here, laughter is an act of creation.

Like God in the beginning of it all, laughter rejects shadow and chaos, and imagines another possibility. We have experienced these moments; the ruptures themselves and the laughter that can ensue. Yom Kippur and Purim are both expressions of humor from rupture. Revolt against the world as it is, using humor as the weapon of choice.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Lipman, Steve. "Finding Light in the Darkness: The Art of Jewish Humor." *Jewish Action*, The Magazine of the Orthodox Union, 30 Sept. 2020, [jewishaction.com/religion/jewish-culture/finding-light-in-the-darkness-the-art-of-jewish-humor/](http://jewishaction.com/religion/jewish-culture/finding-light-in-the-darkness-the-art-of-jewish-humor/).

<sup>9</sup> Slucki, David, et al. "To Tell Jokes After Auschwitz Is Barbaric, Isn't It?" *Wayne State University Press*, Detroit, Michigan, 2020.

Recognizing the presence and function of humor in Yom Kippur is important, but that alone is not enough. In this new year, we desperately need to seek our own acts of comic revolt and displacement. We need to find our humor in order to reclaim our laughter and levity and move ahead. Even if that feels absurd. Especially when that feels absurd. While most of us cannot shift geopolitics, nor do we alone have the power to end suffering and war, we can shrink the monsters of this world by laughing in their faces and transforming our horror through humor.

As we claim humor, we reclaim our humanity, our own expanse of feeling. As the globe is swept up by inhumanity and the hardening of human hearts, we can choose to soften our own hearts and reject inhumanity. As we sit here with our liturgy, thinking about the loved ones we have lost, the circles of belonging that have been fractured as we are present with our fears for our family, friends, children and future generations, it is imperative that we don't only fixate on the image of the book of life as it closes. On Yom HaKippurim this day that is like Purim, we learn to look Haman in the face and we make a mockery of him once again.

On Yom HaKippurim, this day of atonement, we can choose to tie the rope gently and lovingly around each other's waists, refusing to let anyone get stuck alone in the inner

sanctum. We can insist on drawing one another back to the world of the living with a smile.

Richard Alpert, the great spiritual teacher, a Brooklyn Jewish boy turned HInJew, aka Ram Dass taught: *Humor puts things in perspective. There are many levels of humor. There is a humor of survival, a humor of gratification, a humor connected with power. Beyond all these there is a humor that is filled with compassion. We deserve all these humors but perhaps what we need most is humor filled with compassion. For ourselves and others.*<sup>10</sup>

I think Jodorowsky's interpretation is right. That first word in the Torah, Bereishit, is a divine guffaw. Perhaps the humor that we find in this first line of Jewish text is the salve we have had from the beginning that we must continue to apply as the next chapters unfold. The joy of Yom Kippur is not only that we are still here alive but that we still have the ability to laugh at the things that frighten us most; we may laugh with our grief, our diagnoses, our crushing defeats, our loneliness.

As we laugh, we transform. If today we are in the calendar's inner sanctum, alone together with God's presence, may we do all that we can to inspire our own and God's divine guffaw, the sound that connects us with the world. Humor helps us to

---

<sup>10</sup>Dass, Ram. "How Can We Find Humor through Meditation? - Ram Dass - 2019." *Ramdass.Org*, Love Serve Remember Foundation, 5 Apr. 2021, [www.ramdass.org/finding-humor-through-meditation/](http://www.ramdass.org/finding-humor-through-meditation/).

chase the monsters out of our dreams and to remake our world in God's divine,  
laughing, image.

May we be written into the Book of Life, to the sound of a divine guffaw. But first, may  
our laughter be our triumphant reminder of what humanity and life are all about.