

Learning to Laugh

BY SHIMON BEN NOACH

Comedians like Danny Kaye, Woody Allen and Marty Feldman have made Jews famous the world over for their rich sense of humor. But Israel has produced no internationally acclaimed comics. According to Prof. Avner Ziv of the School of Education at Tel Aviv University, the reason is that Israelis take life too seriously and have a poor sense of humor.

"Anxiety frequently underlies humor," Ziv explains. "This is why adolescents are always joking about sex. Jews within their own State feel very secure, unfortunately to the point of arrogance. They have not only lost the anxieties and fears of the Diaspora, but also their ability to laugh at themselves and the world. If they were less serious they would relax and be less aggressive."

Starting in November, Ziv hopes to increase not only the level of humor in Israel but also the level of intelligence, by killing two birds with one stone. Because of his research the teacher-training course at Tel Aviv University will be the first in the world to include the importance of humor in its curriculum. Teachers will be encouraged to tell jokes in the classroom and use humorous aids such as cartoons. For example, a cartoon drawn to teach statistics shows an explorer unaware that there is a large alligator behind him and about to devour him. "Don't worry," he blindly tells a group of anxious natives, "the average length of an alligator in these parts is only two feet long." The story acts as an appetizing introduction to the intricacies of the law of averages.

A group of students which was taught for four months with this approach scored far better in standardized tests than another group taught in the conventional way. All the students agreed that the ingredient of humor made it easier to pay attention and more interesting to learn. It was also found that students have more respect for a teacher with a good sense of humor. Ziv also stresses the creative nature of humor

which he sees as the putting together of two seemingly unconnected ideas. "Encouraging humor encourages initiative in every subject," he says. "Billions of apples fell from billions of trees, but it took Newton to find the gravity connection."

In the future, Ziv hopes to study Arab and Oriental Jewish humor. "I am told the Arabs tell many jokes about the Jews," he says, "I am interested to find out about them and I think it will help us understand how the Arabs feel about us." Within Israel itself, many jokes deride ethnic groups. The Romanians are characterized as thieves:

Q. What's the Romanian recipe for chicken soup?

A. First you steal a chicken.

Chillingly, Ziv recalls from his war experiences that when in the front line under fire, straight-faced Israelis suddenly acquire a sense of humor, with death being the butt of most jokes. Ziv gives a sick example, "Mommy, mommy, why does daddy look so gray? Shut up and keep on digging!"

Ziv's favorite Israeli humorist is Ephraim Kishon, the newspaper columnist syndicated through "Ma'ariv," and widely translated. He recalls the story of a lion who stalked a large office in Tel Aviv and every so often ate a clerk. Nobody noticed that any of the clerks were missing until one day the lion ate the clerk responsible for distributing tea to the rest of the clerks. But Ziv points out that Kishon was born in Hungary and he asks where the new generation of Israeli comics are going to come from.

He hopes that his teaching methods will be adopted not only in Israel but throughout the world. He sees himself as a nonserious person who is seriously studying a subject which is not taken seriously enough. His recent book published in French, *The Psychology of Humor*, has made a stir in Paris. It is one of the few psychological works ever written on humor. Why has the subject been ignored when it is a basic human trait. "Frankly, psychologists take themselves too seriously and have no sense of humor themselves," Ziv says. "It would not be bad therapy if every patient laid on the couch and

told his favorite joke. That would reveal many hopes and fears."

Ziv's favorite joke? "The passengers are seated on the first - ever fully automatic flight. The plane is about to take off. The automatic pilots are ready, and the automatic hostesses are busy soothing the passengers, when an announcement comes over the speaker: 'Ladies and gentlemen, welcome aboard the first - ever fully automatic flight. Sit back and relax, for nothing can go wrong. nothing can go wrong, nothing can go wrong....'"

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