

Jewish Humor: Reflections on What Some of the Best Jewish Jokes Say About the Jews...and Us.

By William Bjoraker, Ph.D.

Introduction:

Basic communication theory holds that we must understand the people whom we want to reach. Though all Americans share much common culture, Gentiles communicating with Jews is cross-cultural. Jewish people, being a minority, already understand the mainstream culture quite well and are part of it. Non-Jews, however, must make the effort to learn Jewish culture.

Jewish humor is revealing of the ethnic/national character of the Jewish people, of the meaning of the long historical saga of the Jewish people (their national narrative, or the Jewish experience), and how that experience has shaped their values and culture, their identity as a peoplehood (or "the Jewish mind"). The better Jewish jokes give us insights into the Jewish people and into life in general. Jewish humor is also notoriously witty and funny.

I post here a few good, tasteful Jewish jokes that are revealing of Jewish national character. After all, jokes are simply stories, and the Master Teacher/Rabbi used stories (parables) as a major teaching method. I intend each joke to evoke the questions—What does this say about the Jewish national experience, or Jewish values and worldview? What might it say about us, and to us?

It is understood these are generalizations about Jewish character, true in most cases but not all. They affirm generally positive characteristics. Some of the jokes are self-critical and honest appraisals by Jewish people of their own flaws, and often less-than-noble adaptations to life's hardships.

These jokes are told by Jewish people among themselves, so as long as we get their intent—reflecting the Jewish people's own ability to laugh at themselves—we can laugh with them, and as the famous play has it... we can learn to "fiddle on the roof" as it were (keeping one's balance in the face of life's adversities).

Below is a sample of eight good Jewish jokes with my added reflective comments following each:

Joke # 1 - Late Modern Jewish Lostness Highlights the Call to Jewish Evangelism

“ In the late 1960s, an middle-aged Jewish woman sets out from her home in Brooklyn for India. She travels long hours in an Indian bus to reach the foothills of the Himalayas. She travels by foot over hilltops and mountains. He crosses valleys and streams, and finally she arrives at a small rural village alongside a steep mountain. At the top of the mountain is an ashram, the seat of a great spiritual leader, the guru Baba Ganesh. It takes all the woman's determination, and many long hours, to reach the mountaintop. There she announces that she has come to see the guru. ‘Oh that is impossible,’ the guru's assistant tells her. ‘Nobody is allowed to see the great guru for the next six months. He is in deep meditation.’ ‘I must see him!’ the woman cries. And she sits at the doorstep of the ashram without food and water for three days.

The keeper of the gate is desperate to avoid a scene that could get him in big trouble, so finally makes her an offer: ‘OK. You can go in to see our leader, but you must promise to say no more than three words.’

The woman promises, and the man lead her down a long marble walkway. Tapestries and flowing fabrics cover the walls. They turn into a room at the end of the hall and enter through the archway. There a young man is sitting on a bamboo mat in the yoga lotus position, chanting, ‘Ohm Chanti.’

The woman steps in front of him and pleads: ‘Come home Mordy!’ “

*** Reflection:** It was Mordecai, young “Mordy,” the nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn, who had gone to India seeking enlightenment and had become a great Hindu guru. Though funny, this joke reminds us of the lostness of modern/postmodern Jewish people. Currently, thousands of young Israeli Jews travel to India, many hanging out in the West coast Indian city of Goa, searching for Eastern enlightenment via gurus, meditation, trance experiences, rave music and drugs. There have been annual New Age festival held in the State of Israel now for at least a decade, the biggest one is called “Boombamela” (after the large Hindu religious festival in India called “Kumbh Mela”), held annually on Chol HaMoed Pesach (Intermediate Days of Passover) described by its organizers as “a place for meeting, experiencing, crossing borders and transcending social limitations through music, creation, and connection with nature.” Jewish Buddhists (“Ju-bus”), and other Jewish people who seek fulfillment in materialism, New Age philosophy, and anything other than the God of Israel through the Jewish Messiah Yeshua have lost their way, and are in danger of being lost eternally. They need to embrace the Messiah for salvation.

This is a sad and tragic situation; that Jewish people, who have been given the greatest revelation of God, and who have much advantage in every way, so turn away from their heritage to false religion. Yeshua said to his contemporary Jewish people,

“Unless you believe that I AM He, you will die in your sins”
(John 8: 24).

Thus, the church that is apathetic about Jewish evangelism—when the great Apostle calls us to “provoke them to envy” by what we have through trusting in their own Jewish Messiah— is not in step with the heart of God. As the apostle Paul so passionately said,

“I am speaking the truth in Messiah—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit— 2 that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. 3 For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Messiah for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. 4 They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. 5 To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Messiah who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.” (Romans 9: 1-5).

Do our hearts ache and break for the salvation of the Jewish people?

As Moishe Rosen said, “If God’s people do not bring the Gospel to the Jews, it must be that they EITHER think the Gospel is unworthy of the Jews...OR the Jews are unworthy of the Gospel. The former in ethnolatry, and the latter is anti-Semitic.

Thus, as the church was birthed out of Israel in the first century A.D., so the church must in these last centuries AD, go back across the divide to the Jewish people with the message of the new birth.

Joke #2- A Lesson From Anti-Semitism on Spiritual Pilgrimage

"In 1939 a Viennese Jew enters a travel agent's office and says. "I want to buy a steamship ticket."

"Where to?" the clerk asks.

"Let me look at your globe, please."

The Jew starts examining the globe. Every time he suggested a country, the clerk raised an objection. "This one requires a visa. ... This one is not admitting any more Jews. ... The waiting list to get into that one is ten years."

Finally the Jew looks up and says, "Pardon me, do you have another globe?"

*** Reflection:** This joke reflects the tragic anti-Semitism of the Nazi era, which was but a culmination of centuries of anti-Semitism in European Christendom. A point we should note is that the Jewish experience has been one of sojourning, and never being able to fully feel at home in any nation other than in the Land of Israel (and even there, they are still not fully home from the exile until they are back in relationship with God through the Messiah). Though the Jewish people have been able to feel at home in the USA better than in any nation in their long history, many have the subsidiary awareness (back-burner of consciousness) that conditions could swiftly turn anti-Semitic here too (as they did in Germany in the 1930s). They know deep down that they are a people marked (by their chosenness), and that the fallen world will never fully accept and integrate them. Rather than trying to erase the reality of their special identity, they need to embrace its real meaning, by affirming relationship with God through Messiah.

An application to all believers in Yeshua (Jesus) the Messiah is as follows— we must embrace the pilgrim ideal. We are never to drive our tent pegs down too deeply into the soil of this world's system, because it is passing away and we are part of a Kingdom not of this world. As the old Pentecostals used to sing, "This world is not my home, I'm just passin' through." Though, as believers, we should be fully involved, active citizens both of the Kingdom of God, and of our country of origin, as "salt and light," we must always prioritize our citizenship in the Kingdom of God, and be longing for its consummation when Yeshua the Messiah returns in the Second Coming (Philippians 3:20-21).

Joke # 3- True or False Motives for the Obedience of Faith

“Some friends asked Professor Chwolson why he had become a Christian.

‘Out of conviction, Chwolson answered.

‘Out of conviction?!’ he was asked.

‘Yes, out of conviction that it is better to be a professor in St. Petersburg than to be a melamed in Shklop’”

*** Reflection:** A “melamed” is Hebrew schoolteacher; and “Shklop” is the name of a “shtetl,” a small Russian village. This joke comes from the late 18th century Russian Jewish experience, and reflects the phenomenon of “social conversion,” quite common among Jewish people in Europe through the 19th and into the 20th centuries. Even though “emancipation” (the granting of full citizenship privileges to Jews) had progressed since the 18th century Enlightenment era, many Jews were still not allowed to integrate fully into Gentile society. Europe was “Christendom,” so Jews still found full integration and social acceptance difficult in many fields. A course of action that could remove the barriers was to convert to Christianity. The motives for such a “conversion” were not out of genuine faith in Yeshua and the New Testament, but were rather to get ahead socially and economically.

An application to all believers in Yeshua is as follows—an examination of our motives for following the Lord Yeshua, and for the faith decisions we make. We are commanded to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. God spoke firmly through the Hebrew prophets, such as Isaiah, that a mere going-through-the-motions kind of ritual religion was not acceptable to him

“The LORD Says, ‘This people draws near with their mouth and they honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me amounts to nothing more than human laws learned by rote.’” (Isaiah 29:13).

Our hearts are our greatest stewardship. So Scripture exhorts,

“Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.”
(Proverbs 4:23 ESV)

“Above all else, guard your heart, for it affects everything you do.”
(Proverbs 4:23 NLT)

And so, God says, “My son, give me your heart.”
(Proverbs 23:26)

The natural fallen human condition is to have a divided heart, to be torn between the competing desires in our lives. This conflict continues in the life of the believer, the internal battle between the flesh and the spirit (Galatians 5:17), but we also face a conflict between the good and the best in our lives.

So, as to the question Chwolson was asked, “Out of conviction?” ... May our answer be, “Yes, LORD, I will love and serve you out of whole-hearted conviction!” Our prayer should be - “Unite my heart to fear your name....” (Psalm 86: 11c).

Joke # 4- Circumcision and the Mark of the True Believer

“A young Jewish scholar left Russia and went to America. After many years he returned to the old country. His old mother could hardly recognize him. He was dressed in the very latest fashion.

“Where is your beard?” his mother asked, troubled.

“Nobody wears a beard in America,” he said.

“But at least you keep the Sabbath?”

“In America almost everybody works on the Sabbath.”

The old mother sighed.

“And how is it with the food?” she asked hopefully.

“Ah, mama,” answered the son, apologetically, “it is too much trouble to be kosher (keep the Jewish food laws) in America.”

The old mother hesitated. Then, in a quiet voice, she whispered,

“Tell your old mother, son— are you still circumcised?”

***Reflection:** this story/joke shows the eroding effects of modernity on Jewish identity to the dominant Gentile environment, a challenge that all Jewish people experience, especially in the West. This young scholar left the Jewish community, and was also abandoning his Jewish identity, assimilating into modern American culture, down to the core of his identity, beyond the cultural to the physical (or at least so feared his mother).

Circumcision is the core and ineradicable mark of the covenant, enduring and personal, for every Jewish man. This was part of God's intention in the covenant of circumcision—to impart an indelible mark of the covenant on His covenant people, to preserve Jewish identity throughout time. It is the first rite of passage in the Jewish life cycle, a fundamental practice of Judaism, functioning to transmit the heritage of election and covenant over the generations.

The Apostle Paul had to warn Jewish believers that since the coming of the Messiah, there is no salvation or salvific merit in circumcision (Galatians 5:1-12). Nevertheless, Paul took Timothy and had him circumcised to demonstrate faithfulness to the covenant with Abraham (Acts 16:1-3). Messianic Jews today

demonstrate their continuity with the Abrahamic covenant and their solidarity with the Jewish peoplehood by continuing the 4000 year old celebration of the rite of passage of “Brit Milah”/”Bris”- circumcision on the eighth day of the male child’s life.

An application to all believers in Yeshua is as follows— If you are a non-Jewish follower of Yeshua, Is there a mark upon your life, for life? one that is indelible, that cannot be taken away? ...one that will be proof you are one of the covenant people of God?

In the New Covenant Scriptures (New Testament), water baptism is given as a sign of the New Covenant, and is called a “**circumcision of the heart,**”

*“In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the **circumcision of Messiah**, having been buried with him in baptism,...”* (Colossians 2:11-13). This was what the Hebrew prophets also preached, *“Circumcise yourselves to the Lord; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem;”* (Jeremiah 4:4).

The cutting instrument is not finally the circumcision knife, but the cross, removing not merely the foreskin, but the whole of “the flesh”(Romans 6:6; 8:6-10). The outward sign was to express the inward reality. So, water Baptism is the outward symbol of a heart that is surrendered to the Lordship of Messiah Yeshua, embraced death to the sinful nature and the life in the Spirit. Yeshua taught that such a total surrender to him would bring true life,

“For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? (Mark 8:35-37).

One who has surrendered to Yeshua, is transformed and enabled to a live a life of *agape* love. This quality of life is the mark of one who has experienced the circumcision of the heart. Francis Schaeffer wrote a little book in the 1970s entitled, *“Mark of the Christian”* in which he stated,

“Through the centuries men have displayed many different symbols to show that they are Christians. They have worn marks in the lapels of their coats, hung chains about their necks, even had special haircuts.” ...

“At the close of his ministry, Yeshua looks forward to his death on the cross, the open tomb and the ascension. Knowing that he is about to leave, Yeshua prepares his disciples for what is to come. It is here that he makes clear what will be the distinguishing mark of the Christian:

‘My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you

cannot come. A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. **By this** all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.’ (John 13:33-35). The mark of the true follower of Jesus is genuine *agape* (self-sacrificial) love.”

Thus, Messianic Jews (who bear both the circumcision in the flesh as all Jews as the mark of the Abrahamic covenant, and also the circumcision of the heart in Messiah Yeshua) and **Gentile Christians from the nations** (who bear only the circumcision of the heart) are one in Body of Messiah. We are together the people of **the circumcision of the heart**. Though there is diversity within the unity of the People of God, we are finally a unity, one in Messiah through **the circumcision of Messiah, evidenced in His love in us**.

Joke # 5- A Lesson in Family and Community Values from the Jewish Jesus

“ How do we know Jesus was Jewish?

- 1. He was thirty, unmarried, and still living with his mother.*
- 2. He went into his father’s business.*
- 3. He thought his mother was a virgin.*
- 4. And his mother thought he was God.”*

* **Reflection:** Though this joke could be taken as irreverent, when you interpret it as I will here, one actually finds lessons from the life of Yeshua often missed by individualistic Americans. Let’s look at the four characteristics of Jesus listed in the joke:

1. **“He was thirty, unmarried, and still living with his mother.”** Today, in the USA and the West, we think of a single man who remains unmarried and lives at home to the age of 30 to be some kind of misfit or a loser, suffering from prolonged adolescence, an irresponsible, immature kind of mama’s boy. Yet Yeshua did just this, and he was none of those things. And often, traditionally this would be the practice in Jewish families. The cultural values here are strikingly different from those in the postmodern West.

Modern American culture is highly individualistic. The modern individual is likely to move toward increasing degrees of detachment. “Nuclear families,” rather than extended families or clans are the basic social unit. And even the nuclear family seldom stays intact, given the high divorce rates and the alienated children of those divorces. Young people are expected to leave home at age 18, choose a career of their own, and often choose their own set of values separate from their family. Marriage is viewed as two individuated

people falling in love and deciding to marry, regardless of what their parents or extended family may think; marriage is about their love alone, without reference to the community, or to any higher calling or purpose.

In contrast to this, the Jewish kinship and “*mishpachah*” (family) structure was and is a strong social unit (though there has been erosion in the Jewish family also here in the late modern West, i.e. post-1960s). Note the structure reflected in Joshua 7:1, “*But the people of Israel broke faith in regard to the devoted things, for Achan the son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of the devoted things. And the anger of the Lord burned against the people of Israel.*” Here Achan, the son of Carmi belonged to the clan (“*mishpachah*”) of Zabdi, who belonged to the clan of Zerah, a clan of the tribe of Judah. There were no “rugged individualists” or “unencumbered selves” who stood alone. One’s identity was constituted in relationship to one’s community and family. The modern notion of the autonomous self was unknown.

Biblically, the self is constituted within an authoritative community, Israel, or the church. And for community to exist and endure it must have constituting authority. The fifth through the tenth of the Ten Commandments (obedience to parents, murder, adultery, theft, false witness, coveting) are community-based ethics. Breaking them destroys community, and in fact they have no application and hence no meaning outside of community. In turn, their authority, when embraced, creates community. And the self is constituted in orientation to them.

As Samuel said to Saul, “*And on whom is all the desire of Israel? Is it not on you and on all your father’s house?*” (I Sam. 9:20). In ancient Israel, the “*beth av*” (father’s house) was a multi-generational unit that included all the descendents of a single living ancestor in a single lineage, often including male and female servants and their families. Married daughters were excluded because they entered the “*beth av*” of their husbands, along with their families. David’s *mishpachah* held a family reunion in Bethlehem each year. It was clearly for his whole clan, but the Hebrew text used the word “*mishpachah*” in I Sam. 20:6, 29. Family was surely more than the modern American “nuclear family,” a man and woman and one, two or three children, or the ideal 2.2 children.

In Yeshua’s time, and through much of Jewish history until modern times, marriage was at a quite early age, especially for women. The onset of puberty and age of marriage were much closer together than they are in the late modern West (thus avoiding the long period of adolescence with its accompanying sexual temptations). Usually when the young couple married, they would remain a part of the larger extended family, clan and tribe. The new wife of a young man would join the extended household of his father and mother. Economic responsibility was closer also to the age of marriage

However, if there was a reason for a young person to delay marriage, or forego marriage, there was no shame in the young person remaining a functioning part of the family household of his/her parents. Jesus had a calling that prevented him from marrying, so he remained at home, until his ministry calling propelled him out to the public, the people of Israel.

Restoring multi-generational households of this sort would be a wise move to alleviate some of the consequences of the isolated individualism of our times.

2. ***“He went into his father’s business.”*** And the adult members of younger generations would share economic responsibilities in the family. Yeshua learned the trade of his father-guardian Joseph, which was carpentry. As long as he was part of the household, he shared in the economic responsibilities of the household. Additionally there has been a long Jewish tradition of respect for the family business. Part of this was a respect for the father, the head of the household. His children respected his trade or calling. It was often very good business for a son to go into the father’s or the family business. It was often the most financially prudent thing to do. Late modern American young people often feel like they must choose some career different from their parents, just to be individualized, or just for the experience or adventure. Unless the call of God leads one differently, there is no shame in taking up the family business, or taking after one’s father it is a noble trade or calling.

3. ***“He thought his mother was a virgin”*** - This is of course hyperbole, and irony. Hyperbole in that Jewish young men, even if they may idolize their Jewish mother as a paragon of purity and virtue, know she is not a virgin. It is ironic because Miriam the mother of Yeshua *actually was* a virgin when he was conceived by the Holy Spirit. But to traditional Jewish people, this is a humorous and exaggerated way of expressing this oft penchant of Jewish sons to idolize their mothers.

An application for modern Americans is one of the need for respect and honor for our mothers (and fathers). The Apostle Paul said, *“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.”* (Ephesians 6:1-3). This “first commandment with a promise” means it is especially significant in that a feature of a good social order is respect for the older generations. Americans often think, *“The newer the truer,”* and *“the latest is the greatest.”* Respect and honor for the elderly is often neglected in late modern American society. The elderly are shoved off into nursing homes, neglected by their adult children, while a cult of youth prevails, an idolization of youth in which the dignity and wisdom of the elders is despised.

4. ***“And his mother thought he was God.”*** When applied to Jewish culture this is again hyperbole. This expresses the traditional “Jewish mother”

stereotype. The Jewish mother is oh-so protective of her children, so concerned about their health, whether or not they have enough food, their well-being, and of course her pride in her son's giftedness and talents, his accomplishments, success. She believes his moral character is so high as to be over the top— "his mother thought he was God." The irony of course here is that Yeshua actually is God Incarnate.

Joke # 6- True Human Worth and Achievement

"According to the Catholics, a fetus becomes a full human being at the moment of conception. According to the Jews, a fetus remains a fetus until it graduates from medical school."

*** Reflection:** Using hyperbole this joke captures the strong Jewish value of high achievement. Its point of departure is the conservative Catholic (and Biblical) view that human life begins at conception. But in the Jewish experience, life does not begin until you finish medical school...or law school, or get your PhD..., or be the CEO who leads your company to Fortune 500 status. Jewish are talented, motivated people who generally exhibit great energy and high standards of achievement. Their minority status, and often persecution and discrimination, in the Diaspora often required them to achieve to survive, or at least ensure they would not fail. This in part explains this strong drive for personal accomplishment. But in a self-critical poke at themselves, Jewish people who tell this joke highlight the question of exactly wherein lies true human worth? Does human worth acquired by achievement?... that is in *doing*? ... Or is high value and worth intrinsic to our *being*? The Psalmist asked, "*What is man that you should note of him, the human creature, that you should pay him heed?*" (Psalm 8: 4-5).

Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great Jewish theologian of the middle 20th century wrote,

"The truth of a theory about man is either creative or irrelevant, but never merely descriptive. A theory about the stars never becomes a part of the being of the stars. A theory about man enters his consciousness, determines his self-understanding, and modifies his very existence. The image of a man affects the nature of man... We become what we think of ourselves." (A. J. Heschel, *Who is Man?* 1965).

In this age of self-creation, and of biotechnology that can manipulate the seeming plasticity of nature, we need to recover the Biblical view of the human, and of a fixed, given human nature. *Genesis* teaches that humans are created in the image and likeness of God, male and female, both express His Image (1:26-27). There is nothing a person has to do to earn, or achieve worth.

Human worth is intrinsic, because humans are created *sui generis* (one of a kind), in our likeness to God. The great fact of the incarnation of the Creator in the flesh as a human being in the person of Yeshua of Nazareth, the Jewish Messiah, forever affirms the superior worth of human *qua* human.

If we think of ourselves as less than the Biblical view of the human, we will ultimately act less than human. That downward trajectory reached a nadir in the Nazi regime of the middle 20th century, where “useless eaters” and whole classes of people were deemed less than human and were “exterminated.” Every human life is inherently precious and worthy to be lived.

Thus a *sanctity of life* ethic, where human life from conception to natural death is cherished and protected; not succumbing to a *quality of life* ethic that justifies abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia, human cloning, and utilitarian use of human embryos.

True human achievement—where a person cooperates in synergy with the resources given him or her to reach their maximum level of life development and achievement— is best attained if pursued on the basis of this intrinsic human worth. Then one’s achievement is not motivated by the need to acquire or secure self-worth, but rather is a healthy expression of that given worth, and will glorify the One who gave it. God loves us not because we have achieved; rather we can achieve best *because*, and *when* we know that we are first loved.

Joke # 7 - Jewish Intelligence and Wisdom for Life

“A medieval Jewish court astrologer prophesied to a king that his favorite mistress would soon die. Sure enough the woman died a short time later. The king was outraged at the astrologer, certain that his prophecy had brought about the woman's death. He summoned the astrologer and commanded him: ‘Prophecy to me when *you* will die, Jew!’

The astrologer realized that the king was planning to kill him immediately, no matter what answer he gave. ‘I do not know when I will die,’ he answered finally. ‘I only know that whenever I die, the king will die three days later.’ ”

* **Reflection:** This story reflects the Jewish experience in medieval Europe and the Muslim world. Jews, being talented and educated people were often tapped by the ruling kings for court service as physicians, counselors and advisors. For example, Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), the foremost intellectual figure of medieval Judaism, was the court physician to the sultan Saladin, the famous Muslim military leader, in Egypt. Jewish

intelligence is renowned. According to anthropologist Raphael Patai, Jewish people make up .04% percent of humanity but have received 15% of Nobel prizes. He states that wherever I.Q. tests have been administered, Jewish people always, as a group, get higher scores (*The Jewish Mind*, 1977).

This joke highlights the quick wit and applied intelligence needed to survive in hostile circumstances, which has often been part of the Jewish experience. There is a difference between high I.Q., or intellectual gifting, and wisdom. The Hebrew Wisdom tradition (Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Koheleth [Ecclesiastes]) emphasizes this kind of wisdom. It is a moral wisdom, that views life from God's point of view.

In the Greek tradition, the intellect was the path to the good life. In some Eastern religious traditions it is mystical knowledge. There is the revelatory, predictive-prophetic tradition in Hebraic tradition, and even the gift of interpreting divinely given dreams (cf. Joseph, and Daniel). But in the Hebrew Wisdom tradition, wisdom is never merely intellectual ability or cognitive information. It is a holistic knowledge (mind, will, values and actions) of how to live life before God. It is fundamentally moral and motivates toward righteous living. It is never merely the amassing of factual *information*, but results in character *formation*. It is knowledge of reality applied to daily, practical living and in human relationships. The phrase, "*The Fear of the LORD*," is used over 130 times in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is used 14 times in the Book of Proverbs alone. The overall message of Proverbs is that "*the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom*" (e.g. 1:7; 9:10). And the "fool" often described in Proverbs is not a person who is intellectually deficient, but a moral fool, one who does not fear the LORD.

The king in the joke above perceived that this Jewish astrologer had a mystical, revelatory wisdom, and evidently he did. But he also had an astute ability to judge human character, and to plan wisely how to live and to succeed in thwarting human evil. The king certainly did not exhibit the fear of God, but this Jewish court counselor indeed found a source of wisdom that allowed him not to fear man, to overcome human evil, and to continue on in living his life.

Says the Talmud, "*All is in the hands of Heaven but the fear of Heaven.*"

Says Koheleth, "*The conclusion when all has been heard, is: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.*" (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

Joke # 8 - The Great Jewish-Christian Debate (or the Rabbi and the Pope)

Historical Background: *In Medieval Europe it became a somewhat frequent practice to hold Jewish-Christian "Disputations" (as they were called). The presence of Jews in Christian society challenged the existing Christianity. So public debates were held (virtually always at the initiative of Christian leaders) between Jewish and Christian scholars about which was the true religion. They were a sort of theological gladiatorial contest. About sixty years after Maimonides' death, King James I of Aragon, who was friendly to the Jews, staged the most famous one in Barcelona from July 20-31, 1263. The Jewish community put forth their best scholar, Nahmanides, a brilliant and skilled debater. As the debate proceeded, the Christians felt it was going against them. Each side has a different account as to how the debate went and who won. Overall these debates were bad for the Jews. It was like putting Judaism on trial. Sometimes riots ensued and lives were lost. Do you think that these disputations could have been unfair or even rigged? HERE IS THIS COURSE'S 8th of EIGHT JOKES:*

Several centuries ago in Europe, the Pope decided that all the Jews had to leave a ghetto where they were living at the edge of the Vatican city state. Naturally there was great anxiety in the Jewish community. They sent their best representative to the Vatican palace and asked for clemency. So the Pope made a deal. He would have a religious debate with a member of the Jewish community. If the Jew won, Judaism was the superior religion and the Jews could stay. If the Pope won, Christianity was the superior religion and the Jews would have to leave.

The Jews realized that they had no choice. So they picked an elderly man named Moishe to represent them. Actually, he was sort of the "village idiot," you know. He had only had street sweeping jobs most of his life. They realized they would likely lose the debate no matter what, so why risk their best rabbi in the match. Moishe spoke no Latin (in fact his Yiddish was pretty bad!). So they told the Pope their man did not speak Latin, just to test how austere the Pope would be. The Pope, surprisingly, informed them that it could be a silent debate. No words needed. What could be easier than a silent debate?

Well, the day of the Great Debate arrived. The Pope and his entourage came to the Jewish village. Moishe and the Pope sat opposite each other for a full minute before the Pope raised his hand and showed three fingers. In

reply, Moishe looked back at him and raised one finger. The Pope seemed surprised and a bit sobered.

Then the Pope moved his arm in a big circle around himself, pointing upward with his finger. In response, Moishe pointed to the ground where he sat. The Pope seemed, well, almost stunned. Deer in the headlights, you know.

So then, the Pope pulled out a wafer and a chalice of wine. In response, Moishe pulled out an apple.

The Pope was visibly shaken...and finally stood up and said, *"I give up. This man is too good. The Jews can stay."*

An hour later, the cardinals and the papal legates gathered around the Pope on their way back to his palace. They were asking him what happened. *"How could you lose!? How could the Jew be that good?!"*

The Pope said: *"First I held up three fingers to represent the Trinity. He responded by holding up one finger to remind me that there was still one God common to both our religions, that Monotheism is still the primary Biblical doctrine. He was right. What could I say!?"*

Then I moved my arm in a big circle around myself, pointing with my finger to show that God is all around us, Omnipresent. He responded by pointing to the ground and showing that God was also right here with us, right here at this point in space and time; He is Immanent, Immanuel, you know... and that of course expresses the doctrine of the Incarnation, and the presence of the Holy Spirit, the great wonder of our faith. How the Jew knew that, I will never know! I had to admit he bettered me.

Well, then I pulled out the Chalice of Wine and the Wafer to show that God absolves us from our sins in the Mass, the Holy Eucharist. He pulled out an Apple to remind me of Original Sin. I simply had to concede that Original Sin was the very cause and need for the Mass, and that Original Sin is the most well-attested, most empirical of all theological doctrines...visible everywhere. He had an answer for everything! What could I do?... I had to concede the debate."

Meanwhile, the Jewish community had crowded around Moishe. *"What happened?"* they asked, *"Baruch ha Shem! You won!"* ...*"How could you*

defeat the Pope!? What superior wisdom did you use? Deep secrets of the Kabbalah?"

"Well," said Moishe, "First he said to me that the Jews had three days to get out of here. I told him that not one of us was leaving.

"Then he told me that this whole city, all around, would be cleared of Jews.

" I let him know that we were staying right here."

"And then?"... asked a woman, with bated breath. ... what about the last round...the most important, about the Mass?...

"I don't know," said Moishe. ...

"He took out his lunch and I took out mine."

*** Reflection:** This is hilarious, no? ... Enough humor to satisfy without further analysis, thank you very much! The joke does, however, highlight some serious cultural anthropology and cross-cultural communications issues. First, note the power of non-verbal communication, or "body language." Gestures and actions communicate, but the very diverse religious and cultural worldviews between the two debaters meant that the gestures were understood very differently from what each source intended. Consider the basic *Source>Message>Receptor* (S-M-R) model of communication:

- **The Basic S-M-R Model**

- **Source >>>> Message >>>> Receptor**
- Source - giver of message (encodes message in a medium, verbal or non-verbal)
- Message - the greater the common experience
- Receptor - the one who hears the message and decodes it through his/her grid or lenses, or mental schemata.
- Successful Communication happens - when the Receptor (decoder) hears and interprets the message with the same meaning the Source (encoder) intended when he/she sent it.
- Unsuccessful communication happens (communication breakdown) - when the message M is garbled by "noise" or interference, or barriers between S and R. The "noise" can come from cultural, religious, spiritual, linguistic factors and more.

Using the S-M-R model, the message intended by the source did not communicate to the receptor what the source intended it to! Meaning is created in the mind of the receptor, it does not reside in the intent or symbolic

coding of the source. There were no shared religious symbols between them. Each participant (whether the Pope or Moishe) read into the gestures the meaning he created out of his own worldview (lens, or grid of religious beliefs). Also, the Pope projected his meanings onto Moishe, rather than thinking hard about what alternative meanings Moishe may have intended by his gestures. Breakdowns in communications between differing religious and cultures have caused much violence and sorrow throughout history. In our increasingly multicultural world, we need to learn how to best eliminate communication barriers and build bridges of successful communication cross-culturally. What are ways we can do this? Here are a few— **Be a Receptor-Oriented or (Audience-Sensitive) Communicator:**

1. Study the language, culture and worldview of the people with whom you will communicate cross-culturally. Know what the “noise” or barriers might be between you as S and the R you want to reach.
2. Maximize the common ground of experience when you communicate. “Humans differ widely, but not wildly.” Find common human experience about which to relate. Use these to build bridges and trust.
3. Don’t use idioms in verbal communication (they are known within your culture but usually do not translate to the receptor culture).
4. Don’t project your meanings as a source (S) onto your receptor (R) as the Pope did to Moishe. Don’t presume your meanings are the same as his or hers.
5. Use multiple means or media to communicate, to reinforce and to clarify meaning. There are many “signal systems” in the human sensorium: *verbal*, *written*, *visual-pictorial* (light and color, “a picture is worth a thousand words”, charts, diagrams), *aural-audio* (tone of voice, volume, music), *tactile* (touch), *spatial* (how you use space, distance, arrangement of chairs, etc.), *temporal* (the timing of communication), *kinetic* (body and eye movements), even *olfactory* (smells communicate). Use any (or all) of these systems or media that are available and seem appropriate and effective.
6. The more personally you can communicate, the better the chances of successful communication (e.g a phone call is better than email. A personal face-to-face meeting is better than a phone call)

There may be further observations you can draw out of this story-joke about Jewish and Christian (Catholic) worldviews. Can you think of any? One I note is the very earthy, concrete nature of Moishe’s gestures and meanings (this is quite Hebraic) as opposed to the highly philosophical and abstract nature of the Pope’s meanings.

Except for Joke #8, the jokes are referenced from:

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say About the Jews*, New York, William Morrow and Company, Inc. 1992.