

Parshat Behar  
May 14, 2011  
Cynicism vs. Optimism  
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

Definition of a Jew #152: A Jew is someone who sees a cloud to ever silver lining.

Do you think that is too harsh? Well maybe a bit. But there is a clear tendency amongst we Jews to be more than a little cynical. From Lenny Bruce to the Marx Brothers; from Woody Allen to Jerry Seinfeld, Larry David and Sarah Silverman - there is an edge to Jewish humor that is hard to deny. But the relationship of optimism and cynicism is a complicated one in the context of Jewish history. To have experienced what we have experienced over our long and difficult history - it is hard not to be cynical. And yet, there is a fundamental sense of optimism that circulates in the blood of the most hardened of us that is also difficult to explain. Cynicism and hope – they don't seem to go together but they are one of our great contributions – not only to the world of comedy, but also to the world of faith. One without the other will not get us where we need to go – but one without the other is what we seem to be offered in great abundance by the leaders of our day. We are at an important juncture in history – where now more than ever it is important to get it right and perhaps, we Jews, through our long and difficult history have something important to offer. There is so much happening in the world and we just don't know what to make of it – we killed bin Laden and the cynics say – it means nothing and Al Queda will not be deterred. But the optimists say the war on terror has been won – declare victory and let's go home. And I ask you which is it? The revolutions of the people across the Middle East – what is being called the Arab Spring – as nation after nation – from Egypt to Libya, from Tunisia to Syria – sees its citizens rise up demanding democracy – optimists tell us it is the beginning of democracy in the middle east, a better day. The cynics tell us it is merely an opening for radical Islam to take over, a terrible day. And I ask you– which is it? Hamas makes a deal with Fatah – the optimists tell us this is a good thing as Fatah will now be a moderating influence on Hamas and real peace will be possible. Cynics tell us just the opposite – that now Hamas will control Fatah and peace has lost all hope. And I ask you which is it? This past week we celebrated the 63<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Modern State of Israel – and if I were to poll us here today and ask – is this the best of times or the worst of times in the short history of our independence – I wonder what most of you would say. If we follow my opening definition of what it means to be a Jew – it is hard not to see a cloud in each and every one of these silver linings. It is hard not to worry for the future. Late night comedians are flourishing – and we are struggling to make sense of it all.

Allow me to introduce you to one of the earliest Jewish comedians in recorded history. He lived 2500 years ago - his name was Jeremiah, the son of *Hilkijahu* of the Priests of *Anatot*, a city near Jerusalem. And some of his best comedic material is preserved in the Biblical book that bears his name and from which Erica so beautifully chanted her Haftarah this morning. Now, Erica will probably protest - after her long hours of study and preparation of her Haftarah - that she didn't realize that she was chanting one of Judaism's earliest stand-up comedy routines - but, than as today - the key to good comedy is timing - and in order to understand the material you have to understand the times in which Jeremiah lived.

Now, at first blush the time in which Jeremiah lived, six centuries before the year 1 – hardly

seems to be the golden age of stand-up comedy. It was a time of crisis and disaster and political turmoil. Hmm - sounds a lot like today. In fact, Jeremiah is very close to us in temperament and situation.

We learn a lot about Jeremiah through his writings, like the Haftarah, which Erica chanted this morning. We meet a man who greatly loved his people. In his writings, there are expressions of tender sentiments of affection for his homeland as well as his people. But, because Jeremiah had a compulsion to speak the truth, this messenger of God became known as a man of strife and controversy. The neighbors who had known him since he was a child, associates and relatives, who were on very close terms with him, all turned their backs on him. In the village of his birth he was spurned and scorned and humiliated. And he describes himself as a helpless lamb led to the slaughter.

Jeremiah is very different than other great figures in the Bible. Moses is a grand figure. Isaiah is a dignified figure. Jeremiah is not like that. He, by his own admission, "gets no respect!" He is harassed, he is distraught; he wrestles with himself. He hates what he is doing, and yet he feels compelled to do it. He is an unwilling prophet, but then again, who wants to be a prophet? He saw in advance the disaster that was to befall the Jewish people. When Babylonian troops entered to destroy the Holy Land and put an end to Jewish sovereignty and the Temple they would leave nothing - they would kill the flower of Jerusalem's youth and to lead off the rest of the population into exile, and Jeremiah was there. He saw it all. He saw the long night of exile begin and had a front row seat to one of the greatest tragedies in all of Jewish history. If any man should have been broken, if any man should have finally surrendered to his own personal tragedy, and to the tragedies of the people he loved, it should have been Jeremiah. Jeremiah's life, like ours, is a struggle between cynicism and optimism and guess which one, wins out?

This is an important question for us. We live many centuries after Jeremiah, but we too live in a world of anxiety and fear, where cynicism struggles with hope. Ours is an age of uncertainty and we are no strangers to crisis. And there are moments when we become aware of the dangerous brink upon which we all live. We turn to the news and see that two men were arrested with plans to blow up a synagogue here in New York. They hate Jews – and want to destroy us. What did we do to these men? It makes no sense to us.

We see Jeremiah struggling with his cynicism. What a joker he was. The false prophets of his day were all running around trying to calm the people in their moment of crisis - and they were all declaring: "Shalom, shalom, there is going to be peace, don't worry!" Jeremiah mimicked them sarcastically. He said: "*Shalom, shalom, v'ain shalom!*" "You say there will be peace but there will not be peace!"

One of the earliest "comedians" in Jewish history - used his cynicism to mock the complacency of his day. "Get real!" Jeremiah was saying. We need to be honest. We need to see that the world we live in is in the midst of ongoing crisis. Jeremiah begins here - not to depress, but because he understands that nothing can be built on a foundation of lies. Our politicians also cry - *shalom, shalom* - things are not so bad. We have defeated Al Qaida, the Middle East is all better. The Republicans tell us – if we just do *this* – all will be well. The Democrats tell us if we just do *that* all will be well. The whole world tells Israel if they just trust the Palestinians all will be well! Yet, if Jeremiah were here, I believe he would mock our politicians much as he

mocked those in his own time: *Shalom, shalom, v'ein shalom*. I do not believe that all will be well if we just do this or that. I do not believe that all will be well if the Israelis just do this or that. I do not believe that there is a simple solution to the problems that confront us. And I too say this not to depress you, but on the contrary, to help us all achieve a certain perspective. Peace and progress today - no less than 2500 years ago - must be built on a foundation of truth. Illusions, dreams, hopes and wishes may get politicians elected but they are not the stuff out of which to build a firm foundation for the future.

But if Jeremiah was a comedic genius who used his cynicism to debunk the rosy optimists of his day – he was much more than that. And he is remembered for a “comedy” routine that is about much more than cynicism. Today's Haftarah comes from the 32nd Chapter of the book that bears Jeremiah's name. And it is in this chapter where Jeremiah's comedic talents reach their pinnacle. I have to provide a bit of background. Jeremiah's ranting and raving about the injustices of his day, his mockery of the powers that be has landed him in jail. He summons his cousin Chanamel to the prison and he says to his cousin, I want you to make a real estate investment for me. We don't have Chanamel's reaction to this request but knowing of Jeremiah's style it certainly must have been something to the effect: - “Surly you are joking!”

It was a very strange request - but it is destined to become one of the most famous real estate transactions in all recorded history - and Jeremiah was never more serious in his life. Jeremiah tells his cousin, that there is a certain piece of land, a plot of ground in Anatot that is for sale. And Jeremiah, being a priest of Anatot, by right of his heritage had the option on that piece of land as part of his ancestral inheritance. Now, please remember the moment, not only was Jeremiah in jail because he was perceived as a threat by the political leaders of his country, but at the gates of Jerusalem was a much bigger threat than Jeremiah - at the gates of Jerusalem were the invading armies of Babylonia. And the Babylonians had already doubled their troops at Anatot. It was only a matter of time before the walls of Jerusalem would be smashed. It was only a matter of time before the entire countryside would be in the hands of the invaders and the Jewish state would fall *as Jeremiah had predicted*, in those same mocking predictions that landed him in jail in the first place. We would have thought that at this moment of impending destruction - Jeremiah would be sitting back in his prison cell, lighting up a cigar, smiling to himself and saying: “I told you so!” It was after all, a moment he had predicted and anticipated and suffered for. But Jeremiah does not sit back and gloat, he acts and he acts in a way nobody could have predicted. At the critical moment in his life and in the life of his nation, the mocking prophet of doom becomes an inspiring prophet of hope. In jail, surrounded by the enemy, he buys a piece of land. Now think Andy Kaufman here. He too reached a point in his life when no one knew if what he was doing was serious or cynical. Here too, people must have thought Jeremiah was joking. “Here he goes again. That Jeremiah - always the joker, always making a mockery of our leaders and our times.” But, this time, Jeremiah was deadly serious. He continues with his purchase. And he buys it with meticulous care. He weighs out 17 shekels of silver, and he signs the deed and he has witnesses signing the deed, and he has the deed sealed in a clay jar, so that it would be preserved. He turns it over to Baruch, his friend and his disciple for safekeeping. Why does he do this strange thing? Why does he buy a piece of land? Is he mad? Has his imprisonment affected his sanity? Was he just putting us on in one last outrageous feat of mockery? No, not at all. Jeremiah, through his purchase of that field 2500 years ago left us a legacy that we rediscover every time we read the Haftarah that bears his name. Jeremiah has taught us once again as he does every year on Shabbat *Behar*, how to remain sane in an insane world. Jeremiah bought that field

because he wanted to teach his contemporaries a lesson and in doing so has taught us a lesson as well. In the moment of failure, in the moment when everything seemed lost, he was able to see tomorrow and to plan for a better day. He bought a field. Why? He knew that they were about to be exiled from their land, taken into captivity to a foreign country. But someday, he was saying, someday the children of Israel will come back from Babylonia. They are going to go back to those fields and farms. God will restore the people. He wanted his people to know that the prophet of mockery and doom - who had predicted the night, could also be a prophet of hope and inspiration and share with them a vision of a new tomorrow. And Jeremiah insisted that piece of land be in his name, and he wanted his name to be on the act that would begin the process of redemption that would bring that day of hope closer.

Like Jeremiah, we too live in a world of cynics and cockeyed optimists. We have more than our share of comedians who would mock any vision of progress, or offer us false hopes and simplistic solutions. To them we need to say – as Jeremiah did so long ago: “*shalom, shalom v’ein shalom.*” Your promises are empty and meaningless.

But to those who see *only* gloom and doom, to the politicians and religious leaders who are afraid and to those small minded leaders who play to our fears - be warned that your days are numbered. Where is the Jeremiah for our day?

If I opened with Definition of a Jew #152: A Jew is someone who sees a cloud to every silver lining, I would like to end with what must surely be definition #153: Jews: the people who were massacred and decimated by the holocaust, castigated and censured by the world - the people who established a homeland in the face of incredible odds and have defended it for 63 years despite the scorn and animosity of all of its neighbors - these are the people who chose for their national anthem - a song that is built around a single theme - captured in its one word title: *Hatikvah- The Hope!*” That, my friends, is my definition of a Jew!

Can you hear Jeremiah speaking to us? I do. “Don’t flinch from the truth,” he says, “don’t be deceived. Reject the cynicism and reject the optimism. Understand the dangers of a world that has not yet overcome the deceitfulness of the human heart, but don’t be paralyzed by what you see. In the choice between hope and fear - choose hope. Affirm your faith in the future - for the work of righteousness shall be peace, and the result of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever.” *Keyn Yehi Ratzon*, So may it be His will, Amen.