

Introduction

by Elisheva Schoenfeld

The writer and public servant Alter Druyanov was born in 1870 in Druja, a district of Vilna. After serving as a secretary of the Va'ad le-Yishuv Erets-Yisrael [Committee for the Settlement of the Land of Israel] for five years in Odessa, he migrated to Palestine in 1906. Unable to earn a living there, he returned to Russia in 1909 and became editor of the Hebrew-language newspaper *HaOlam*, a position he filled until 1914. In 1921, he settled in Erets-Yisrael and joined Khayim Bialik and Y.-Kh. Ravnitski in editing the first four volumes of *Reshumot* (1919-1926), a Hebrew journal devoted to Jewish folklore. Druyanov's own writing covered many genres, including feuilletons, critical essays, and journalistic articles on subjects of public interest.

Druyanov is chiefly remembered today for his three-volume anthology of Jewish humor, *Sefer HaBedikha ve-HaKhidud* [Book of Jokes and Wit]. This work appeared at a time when other notable Jewish folklore collections were published: *Die Sagen der Juden* (1913-1927) and *Der Born Judas* (1916-1922) by M.J. bin Gorion (Berditshevski), *Sefer Ha-Aggadah* by Khayim Nakhman Bialik and Y.-Kh. Ravnitski (1924), and *The Exempla of the Rabbis* by Moses Gaster (1924). Innumerable anthologies of Jewish jokes have been published, but Druyanov's *Book of Jokes and Wit*, first published in 1922, remains unparalleled. The much enlarged 1951 edition (of which the familiar 1963 Dvir edition is a reprint) with its more than 3000 entries reflects Eastern European Jewish life in the 19th and the first quarter of the 20th century and to some extent also encompasses Jewish life in Nazi Germany and in the nascent Land of Israel.

Prior to the 19th century the Jews were "God-fearing and faithful" and presumably avoided jesting -- homiletic and ethical writings abound in commands warning the pious to avoid laughter and levity. However, the Haskalah [Enlightenment] severely criticized the social condition of Jewish communities and their prevailing religious institutions and practices. The joke appeared together with the criticism.

The situation of the Jews produced a distinct kind of humor, one that subsequently came to occupy a special place in world humor. "It is the result of particular religious, historical and social tendencies and therefore also a key to Jewish history," writes Lutz Roehrich. (Lutz Roehrich, *Der Witz, seine Formen und Funktionen*, Munich, 1977, p. 275). Druyanov claims

that Jewish humor "enables the Jew to escape from reality, to take the measure of all things and, for a moment, to drink deeply from the intoxicating cup of freedom. At the same time, it enables him to raise and exalt his 'simple ego' above everything" (Druyanov, vol. 1, p. 10).

More narrowly, Jewish humor, including the joke, is a key to the way Jews in Eastern Europe lived in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, their occupations, institutions and relationships with their surroundings. The 1951 [and later] *Book of Jokes and Wit*, fuller than the 1922 edition, treats its subjects in considerable detail and sharply reflects conflict with conventions, with the surroundings, differences between various Jewish groups, between youth and age, between the urban and the rural Jew. Highly varied though they are, the subjects of the anthology can be divided conveniently into six major groups, each of which can again be subdivided:

A) Jewish trades and occupations: merchants, peddlers, bankers, hotel and restaurant owners, tax-gatherers, craftsmen, clerks, doctors, lawyers, teachers (of small children), rabbis, cantors, public servants, beggars and writers.

B) The life-cycle: birth (legitimate and illegitimate), circumcision, kheder, yeshiva, kindergartens, schools, match-making, wedding, married life, family, old age, death.

C) Holidays and Sabbath: faith and reason.

D) Groups: hasidim and mitnagdim, Karaites, maskilim (intellectuals), Zionists, urban and rural Jews, small-town Jews, heretics, renegades, various ethnic groups.

E) Types: fools, illiterates, ignoramuses, wise people, clever people, gluttons, drunks, thieves, liars, misers, profiteers, idlers.

F) The larger world: Jews and non-Jews, clergy and rabbis, war and revolution, renaissance of the Land of Israel.

The anthology entries show a diversity of settings: street, restaurant, inn, synagogue, kheder, yeshiva, law court, war front, kibbutz. Since locales such as the legendary town of Chelm [also spelled Khelm], inn, restaurant and railway are necessary backgrounds to many jokes, I have assembled related texts under rubrics of place within the framework of the general index. They appear under the headings: "Chelm and Its Simpletons", "The Inn and Its Guests", "The Restaurant and Its Customers", and "The Railway and Its Passengers". A separate index of geographical places is added.

Apart from ideal types specified by a single quality or trait (such as "the glutton," "the

drunk," "the miser", "the thief," "the liar", "the rich man," "the pauper," "the scholar," "the illiterate," "the gentile," "the priest," "the wag," "the wit"), Druyanov gives us individuals who are identified by their nicknames (such as: "Benny Simpleton", "Gimpel Naif," "Meir Yozi" [thief], Khoyzek Simpleton, Motke Thief [cf. Shalom Asch's novel *Motke Ganef*] Shmaye Idler, Yeke Fool and others. For the most part they are not historical persons and are often stereotypes. Historical persons are alluded to in many entries dealing with wedding jesters, preachers, rabbis, writers, artists, scientists and politicians. Many of these historical figures express themselves by a humorous tale, a parable, an aphorism or a pun, but their principal medium is apt quotation from a sacred text -- principally Bible, Talmud, Passover Haggadah or Prayer Book.

Foremost among the historical personages is Hershele Ostropoler, the court jester of the melancholic Rabbi Barukh of Mezbizh (d. 1811). Many sayings and jests relate to Hershele himself, but there are also those that are associated with him because of the similarity of his personality to that of other wise fools such as the Flemish Til Eulenspiegel and the Turkish Nasreddin Hodja. Druyanov has 30 entries on Hershele, about a third of which are variants of internationally known tales (e.g. no. 2145). There are also unique sayings of jesters who were well known in their communities, such as Leybele of Fiorda (no. 2127), Hersh-Lev the Jester (no. 2129), the writer Ayzik-Meyer Dick (no. 2453) and Kalev the Joker (no. 2166). A partial list of historical persons is included at the end of the third volume of "The Book of Jokes and Wit" (1951).

The greater part of Druyanov's Chapter XXI, "Between Man and His Maker," deals with unbelievers whom we would today call "secular." Among the non-religious who smoke on the Sabbath, eat on fast days and are apprehended in non-kosher restaurants, Shmerl Shnitkaver fills a prominent place, appearing in no fewer than 30 entries (e.g. nos. 1792, 1833, 2154).

Rabbi Ayzel the Sharp-Witted, immortalized in 18 entries, seems to have been a well-known and venerated person. According to the texts, this sharp-tongued individual (see nos. 570, 571) was authorized to give imprimaturs to young writers for printing and distributing their books. The preacher of Raytsa used to spice his sermons with parables (e.g. no. 463). From a notebook of the unusual personality, Yeshaya "the doctor" (he seems to have been a popular healer), we learn how to treat toothache, stomach ache, and aches and pains in general (nos. 893, 896). Ignorance of Jewish scriptures and customs turns the president of a Jewish religious school [Talmud-Torah] in the United States into a comical figure (nos. 3090, 3094).

Druyanov introduced a variety of genres into his collection. He recorded jokes told to him or written out for him, used books of jokes, memoirs, quotations, biographies, proverbs, parables and aphorisms as well as the collections of stories on Chelm and on Hershele Ostropoler.

Druyanov followed a chronological order as far as possible in his entries on famous personalities. Many of the anecdotes and sayings are no longer intelligible to us, their time and place being outside our consciousness (e.g. nos. 2384, 2393, 2405).

The difference between the joke and the short humorous tale is not only in their shape but also in their historical and sociological background (see Roehrich, pp. 8-10). The humorous short story appears at the end of the Middle Ages, whereas the joke is much younger. Before the 19th century, the humorous tale was didactic, which the joke has not been. Didacticism is found in Druyanov's anthology in the parables of the preachers (e.g. no. 485), beggars and rabbis. The humorous story may involve comic situations, foolish actions (e.g. tales of the "wise" people of Chelm), lies and exaggerations of travelers, as well as parables and satires styled according to "pilpul" and "Aggadah" (e.g. nos. 2197, 2646).

Roehrich claims that the joke, unlike the humorous tale, is spiritual. The joke is built up and sharpened towards its clearly marked point. The humorous tale is based on the material side of life. The joke shows no respect for anyone or anything, not for old age, sickness, ideals, morals, high-ranking officials, rabbis, scientists. It juxtaposes those who are socially and educationally unequal: the soldier and the officer, the teacher and the pupil, the judge and the culprit, gentile and Jew, hasid and mitnaged, urban Jew and shtetl Jew. Comic conflict between two persons may be expressed by aggression or by illogical repartee. Repartee is a quick and unexpected means of defeating the aggressor. The collision between different norms is seen in jokes of conflict between Jews and gentiles (e.g. no. 1960), rabbis and priests (e.g. no. 1954), a despotic community head and a simple citizen (e.g. no. 363).

Another type of joke is a "competition" between two or more contenders where the winner finally loses. Hasidim compete on the holiness or magic power of their respective rabbis (no. 607), or they compete with a strong-minded mitnaged (no. 613).

Apart from some practical jokes (nos. 1958, 365), there are many other jokes depending on verbal play:

A) a comparison two things that have no common denominator (e.g. nos. 1493, 1585, 1578, 3048).

B) play on words, or their spelling, or on abbreviations. (The punsters are often known persons). Four subdivisions may be recognized:

- 1) The point of the joke is based on a word that has different meanings in different contexts (e.g. nos. 670, 500).
- 2) A customary abbreviation is "interpreted" according to a specific situation (no. 398).
- 3) One letter is changed in a word of a well-known saying, obtaining thereby a new and surprising meaning, (e.g. nos. 427, 1793).
- 4) A letter is changed in a single word, and the "error" (usually by an new immigrant) results in a comic situation, (e.g. nos. 2905, 2960, 2640).

The joke often appears as a comic question that can only be answered by the questioning person himself. Comic questions are plentiful in Druyanov, particularly when the answers are a phrase from the Bible or other sacred texts. It seems that questions and answers have been formulated by men well versed in Jewish studies and particularly by skilled jesters, (e.g. nos. 211, 859). As a whole, phrases from the Talmud, the siddur [prayer book] and the Passover Haggadah are abundant. There are almost no changes in the texts themselves because of their sacred status. They only appear to be comic in the context, the elevated language of the text juxtaposed with a prosaic account of an ordinary event. The differences in the two levels of language are a source of humor. The very few changes and faults in the venerable texts appear in the speeches of thieves and liars (e.g. nos. 1273, 1336). Phrases from sacred texts are used as a biting reply (no. 1117), as an answer to a stupid question (no. 1157), and as help to a man who can't decide which of two girls to marry (no. 1495).

Druyanov's Chapter XXXIII presents sayings of children from village, kibbutz and town. 43 of its entries seem to be authentic (the child's age is given and in a number of entries the occasion, e.g. nos. 2922, 2925, 2933). 25 additional entries deal with children learning in a kheder or with their fathers. These children reveal keen minds and lack of respect for adults on the one hand, and on the other, naivete and inexperience. It seems that some of these remarks were uttered by adults for adults and were assigned to children to hide their own contempt towards certain teachers and rabbis.

Political jokes abound in the anthology. They are directed against despotic leaders, and the underdog usually defeats the man of power. Druyanov recorded several jokes dealing with the Russian Revolution as well as with the Nazi period in Germany. World War I items mock the

Russian czar and his army. The political joke is bound to time and place: Russian Revolution period jokes deal with famine, shortages of supplies, a population fed up with government promises (no. 2826). Druyanov also gives us in-group jokes that play on the perception of a largely Jewish Bolshevik leadership (no. 2799). During World War I, the Jews in Russia admired the German army and ridiculed the Russians and their czar (2763). The jokes dealing with the Nazi regime (nos. 3062, 3063) were apparently created before the full truth of the Holocaust was known.

Druyanov was puritanical and included almost no jokes centered on sexual themes in his anthology. He wrote: "It [i.e. sex] is the subject of an immense number of jokes told by all peoples and in all languages, particularly by the Jews.... Sometimes our joke is so keen and biting as to 'hurt the ear'. In its special language, it reveals what is hidden in the innermost heart. However, I do not want to hurt anybody's ear and therefore specialists of the Jewish joke will find my selection of the sexual jokes diluted and pale." And, as though to save his reputation as a folklorist, he adds: "I have gathered a great number of Jewish jokes in that field, but only a few of them could be published in *The Book of Jokes and Wit*. However, it must be admitted that they are of special value from the folkloristic point of view." [Druyanov. vol. 1, p. 16]. In fact, the few sexual jokes in the collection deal with an adulterous husband called to the rabbi, a pregnancy out of wedlock, a birth "too early" after the wedding, and a mishap during circumcision.

While many of Druyanov's entries have lost their meaning to the modern reader, many more continue to speak to us. Ayzik-Meyer Dick's observation on the similarity between an official and a headless nail has not lost its point: "once lodged in place, it cannot be moved" (no. 361).