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Cover Page Footnote

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Why Were There No Jokes After the 2021 Meron Crowd Crush? On Israeli “Joking Relationships”

TSAFI SEBBA-ELRAN

The vast research literature on disaster jokes demonstrates that no calamity is too horrific to be followed by jokes that typically recontextualize traumatic events and channel the threatening voices that these events provoke. Why, then, did no jokes circulate after the deadliest civil disaster in Israel's history, which occurred on Mount Meron during the Lag Ba'Omer celebrations in April 2021? Drawing upon the ethnographic concept of “joking relationships,” this essay documents representations of ultra-Orthodox Jews (*Haredim*) in contemporary Israeli memes and explains the restraint that Israeli society shows toward this group with whom the Meron disaster is associated. The absence of jokes is employed here as a prism through which one can gain insight not only into prevalent Israeli beliefs, emotions, and perceptions but also into the function of jokes in delineating internal social boundaries.

“It is necessary not only to examine against whom he [the joke's narrator] directs his humorous remarks, but also whom does he avoid criticizing.”
(Ben-Amos 1973, 131)

The vast scholarship on disaster jokes demonstrates that no calamity is too horrific to be the subject of humor, including armed conflict and war, accidents and plagues, and anything else that can be perceived as a collective trauma. Jokes appear in such contexts (though often with some delay) as a socio-psychological mechanism for regulating

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emotions, expressing non-conformist opinion, maintaining social cohesion and recontextualizing traumatic events to offer a measure of solace or comfort (see Blank 2013, 38–56; Bronner 1988; Chovanec and Tsakona 2023; Davies 2003; Ellis 2003; Fialkova 2001; Frank 2004; James 2014; Kuipers 2002, 2011; Kürti 1988; Oring 1992, 29–40; Sebba-Elran 2021; Smyth 1986). Why, then, did no jokes circulate after the disaster on Mount Meron during the Lag Ba’Omer celebration in April 2021?

Not every disaster begets jokes. Two of Israel’s most devastating national tragedies—the 1997 helicopter disaster, in which 73 Israeli military personnel lost their lives, and the 2018 Tzafit stream disaster, which claimed the lives of ten youngsters caught in a flash flood—did not stimulate jokes, at least as far as I am aware. One can assume that joking about the loss of young lives, especially in a country where a foundational myth is the story of Isaac’s binding, would constitute a social taboo or be a subject too painful to ridicule. But I intend to show that in the Israeli-Haredi context, one *could* have expected jokes, and their absence is somehow surprising and requires explanation.

To understand this absence or avoidance, I will first present jokes that are being told in Israeli media about the Haredi public. I will then consider the responses these jokes elicit, by employing the ethnographic concept of “joking relationships.” This concept emphasizes the function of humor as institutionalized communication meant to manage and alleviate social tensions and conflicts. Laughter and “unlaughter,” or rather “unjoking” (a concept that itself garnered some research attention, as I will demonstrate), indicate, therefore, the boundaries of public discourse. They suggest the existence of a certain social structure and may expose prevalent beliefs, emotions, and perceptions.

The Role of Jokes in Delineating and Maintaining Social Order

The concept of joking relationships was developed about a century ago by anthropologist A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. It was described as structured and at times even institutionalized relationships between individuals or groups. In these relationships one is permitted or even encouraged to tease or ridicule the other person,

who in turn is expected not to take offense.¹ Such relationships typically exist among certain age and gender groups and are characterized by a combination of familial or tribal kinship, on the one hand, and separateness, on the other. In the words of sociologist Pamela Cotterill, they exhibit “a peculiar combination of pretended hostility and genuine friendliness associated with relations of conjunction and disjunction” (Cotterill 1994, 91). These relationships are manifested in verbal or action-based behavior, such as joking, teasing, insulting, or horseplay, and allow the regulation of antagonisms borne by social conflict, especially within groups. The purpose of such behaviors is to preserve the stability of the group and such alliances as are produced within it, or between it and different groups. Consequently, it has also been described in research as communication with therapeutic or cathartic qualities (Mechling and Mechling 1985, 342; Radcliffe-Brown 1961, 114). This perspective aligns with other research, which presents joking (either spontaneous or structured) as a discursive framework that allows participants to voice resistance or criticism without risking punishment. This is where the term “license to joke” (Handelman and Kapferer 1972) comes from, reflecting the social need to regulate humorous communication and utilize it to sustain social order.

The alternative to relationships of this kind is marked by respect and restraint. According to anthropologist Mahadev Apte (1985, 38), avoiding jokes signifies submission to, dependence on, or acknowledgment of authority in situations where playful space is limited and relationships cannot accommodate displays of hostility or disdain. Thus, the expression of separateness allowed by joking relationships (for example, between grandparents and grandchildren) is avoided where they are prohibited (for example, between nuclear family members). In such cases they are often replaced by other social gestures, such as gift giving.

Although this theoretical paradigm was formulated about a hundred years ago in the studies of African clans, it aligns with sociological and folkloristic perspectives regarding humor as a form of communication employed to convey resistance and delineate social boundaries (see Apte 1985, 108–148; Ben-Amos 1973; Kuipers 2015; Meyer 2000). In fact, right after writing his monumental paper “Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context” (1971), Dan Ben-Amos wrote his article “The ‘Myth’ of Jewish Humor” (1973; it was published in Hebrew in

1970), in which he claimed that joke telling is a social-communicative process that must be understood in the immediate empirical context in which it appears (or is avoided). Delineating and understanding this context make it possible to reveal and characterize social interactions between groups that are not always easy to identify through other means of expression (see also Ben-Amos 2020).

Moreover, since around the 1950s, scholars have explored joking relationships in more intricate and industrial societies, such as work teams and task forces, age and gender cohorts, as well as ethnic communities, rather than solely within the context of family relations. These studies have centered on both sanctioned and unsanctioned occasions for telling jokes or using conversational humor, as well as on the functions that humor fulfills in diverse familial, occupational, and national settings (see Apte 1985, 51–56; Cotterill 1994; Fiadotava 2020; Gundelach 2000; Hagberg 2006; Mechling and Mechling 1985; Palmer 1994, 19–23; Spradley and Mann 1975, 87–100).

Other pertinent studies for this discussion are those dealing with “unlaughter.” While this is a distinct phenomenon characterized by refraining from laughter in response to humor, it bears similarities to the Israeli situation; for unlaughter too is a response rooted in alienation from the joking group due to a profound, frequently religious, affiliation with the subject or value being mocked in the joke.² An infamous example in this context is the extreme anger and violence that erupted during the Muhammad cartoons controversy (see Davies, Kuipers, Lewis, Martin, Oring, and Raskin 2008). Unlaughter can thus mark “the limits of the permissible,” to use historian Peter Burke’s phrase (2016, 62), and thus account for the avoidance of joking relationships not solely in relation to dependence and authority, but also in the context of belief and the sense of respect and reverence for particular subjects and situations (Burke 2016, 61–75).

Another explanation for the absence of jokes is suggested in sociologist Christie Davies’s comparative study “The Dog that Didn’t Bark in the Night” (1998). In his comparison of joke repertoires among different ethnic groups, he suggests that some jokes readily cross cultural boundaries, while others do not. Davies attributes this phenomenon to the influence of local rationales and norms. He claims that “joke-telling consists of playing with the forbidden” (Davies 1998, 298). But where

nothing is forbidden there is also nothing to mock. In other words, the absence of jokes in some cases does not stem from either significant social tension or great restraint. Instead, in most of the cases that Davies studied, this absence is the result of indifference. This is clearly not the case when looking at the portrayal of Haredi communities in Israeli society as evidenced in Israeli humor, and more generally in popular culture. In fact, the Haredi community's position within Israeli society is among the most contentious and sensitive topics in public discourse.

Israeli Anti-Haredi Jokes: "Dehumanization of the Lowest Kind"?

Most of Israel's Jewish society is connected to Haredi communities not only as their neighbors but also by historical, religious, and national ties. Judaism existed through most of its history as a religion, and its institutions were subject to religious rationales and rabbinical leadership.³ Moreover, despite the secular foundations of Israel, its symbols and some of its laws and institutions have always been subject to the influence of Haredi political parties and representatives. According to the Israel Democracy Institute's annual statistical report on the ultra-Orthodox society in Israel, Israel's Haredi community, which accounted for about 13.3 percent of Israel's population at the end of 2022, has grown over the last decade and a half by about 4 percent annually, due to its high birthrate ("Shnatot hahevra haharedit" ["Yearbook of the Ultra-Orthodox Society"] 2022). The political sway of the Haredi community has also been getting stronger, as reflected in the composition of the Israel's 37th government, whose policies have sparked extensive, protracted, and highly publicized protests, with the status of the Haredi community playing a prominent role in the events ("Israeli Judicial Reform Protests" 2023). Public criticism of the Haredi population, as reflected in Israeli media, predominantly focuses on the significant political influence that this community exerts in Israel, along with the substantial rights and privileges it enjoys. This criticism arises from the fact that the Haredi public largely avoids the responsibilities of employment, taxation, and military service, with these burdens primarily shouldered by the secular and national-religious segments of Israeli society. Autonomous educational and legal establishments and separate media outlets not only perpetuate the

disparities in belief systems, values, and lifestyles between Haredi and non-Haredi communities in Israel but also underscore the limited and unequal participation of Haredim in civic life (see Brown 2017; Cahaner, Yozgof-Orbach, and Soffer 2012, 83–94; Eitan 2022). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the portrayal of the Haredi population in Israeli media often relies on stereotypical generalizations. It is depicted as a threat, primarily due to its size, distinctiveness, and perceived rejection of national norms and civic responsibilities, despite the substantial state support it receives.⁴

These longstanding tensions that have marked Israeli society could have been a fertile ground for jokes. As in clan kinships that spawn joking relationships, one cannot deny the strangeness of Haredi society within Israeli society. At the same time, and due to an array of historical, religious, national, and likely political, and cultural factors, the broader Israeli public is also unable to dissociate itself from its Haredi co-religionists. Consequently, the Haredi population stirs up antagonism and hostility that jokes can help alleviate and regulate. So why are such jokes uncommon in Israeli society, and why are they marked by a tendency toward self-censorship? I will present a number of examples from the last three years.

In a separate study, addressing the extensive repertoire of Israeli COVID-19 memes, I noted that jokes about the Haredi society represented by the city of Bnei Brak, the majority of whom are Haredi Jews, were all text-based and included no images (see Sebba-Elran 2021, 9–10):

- Due to COVID, we request that residents of Bnei-Brak not report for work, university, or military service (11/3/2020)
- [in the context of daylight saving time:] Residents of Bnei Brak, Kiryat Sefer, and Mea She'arim: tomorrow please move your clocks forward 2000 years (29/3/2020)
- Who would've thought . . . they wanted Bnei Brak to serve in the IDF [Israel Defense Forces], and now the IDF is serving in Bnei Brak (5/4/2020)

These textual memes emerged following the discovery of COVID-19 hotspots in Haredi communities, and the subsequent deployment of military units to enforce



Figures 1–3: Memes featuring Yaakov Litzman, former Israeli Minister of Health, circulating in Israel during the period of the worldwide spread of coronavirus; posted March to May 2020.

the Ministry of Health's guidelines and regulations. But the jokes address various controversial themes that are not directly related to the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast to the memes, which were primarily text-based (typically featuring a black background), political memes targeting Haredi Minister of Health Yaakov Litzman were image-based (figures 1, 2, 3).

The Hebrew language serves in jokes about Haredim as a unifying cultural tool, limiting their target audience. On the other hand, the target audience for political, image-based jokes is not as constrained. Jokes of this type, which humiliate the Orthodox leader, can be easily distributed outside of the Israeli and Hebrew context. In other words, the artistic means at the disposal of meme generators have helped them, in this context, to distinguish between internal social criticism and political criticism. And while social criticism remains within the confines of Israeli society, a choice that reflects a measure of cultural cohesion, political criticism is exhibited "outside" as well, which may be interpreted as another level of estrangement.⁵ A significant development, which sheds some more light on the subject, occurred in early January 2021, when a new meme about Haredim started circulating (figure 4). This time it was image-based.

The meme comparing the gathering of Haredim at a funeral and a poppy seed cake circulated widely on social media, garnering tens of thousands of views and hundreds of interactions.⁶ Two of the images it featured were photographs taken at the funeral of Brisk yeshiva head Rabbi Meshulam Dovid Soloveitchik. The funeral was attended by thousands of people "in defiance of COVID lockdown directives," as reported by the media (Adamker, Horodniceanu, Levi and Cohen 2021). The

ברוכים הבאים לשעשועון "עוגת פרג או חרדים בירושלים?"



Figure 4. Images on the top right and bottom left depict the Haredi gathering at the mass funeral of Rabbi Meshulam Dovid Soloveitchik and are compared to photos of a poppy seed cake. The Hebrew caption translates to "Welcome to Our Game Show: Poppy Seed Cake or Ultra-Orthodox in Jerusalem?" Posted January 31, 2021.

meme provoked strong criticism in an editorial authored by Ishay Rosen-Zvi in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*. In his column, subtitled "Politics of Hate," Rosen-Zvi identified in this joke "a dehumanization of the lowest kind." The characterization reflected not merely stereotypical attitudes but also a genuinely antisemitic sentiment within certain parts of the Israeli public towards Haredim (Rosen-Zvi 2021). Indeed, among thousands of other jokes that I collected around the same period, I could not find a single other example of what Rosen-Zvi perceived as an illegitimate violation of social and cultural norms (Radcliffe-Brown would call it disrespectful). The joke elicited similar reactions on platforms such as Facebook,

Twitter, and Reddit, with comments ranging from “antisemitic” and “racist” to comparisons with “Nazi Germany caricatures.”⁷

Ambivalence and reservation similarly characterized reactions to the memes I collected from various WhatsApp and Facebook groups during Israel’s elections at the close of 2022, as well as throughout the wide protests against the judicial overhaul that started in early January 2023. My collection centered on dedicated WhatsApp groups that I opened over the past five years (with participants from diverse demographics, including age, gender, religious, political, and geographical groups different than my own), on Facebook pages, on Twitter and joke subreddits, and on various collections of jokes in digital media. Recent political events have spawned few jokes about the Haredim, and not necessarily fresh ones. They all concerned Haredi politicians, a group that, as previously mentioned, is freely criticized by the Israeli public and perhaps even by non-Israeli groups as well. The rare jokes that I was able to find invariably elicited similar responses to the ones I read following the poppy seed cake meme, with friends finding them antisemitic or racist.

Examples of such jokes about Haredi politicians include a meme based on a popular children’s book, *The Lion that Loved Strawberries* by Tirza Atar (2003). The meme mocks the ultra-orthodox politician Aryeh Deri, who served approximately two years in prison following his conviction on charges of bribery, fraud,



Figure 5. A parodic meme about the ultra-orthodox politician Aryeh Deri based on an Israeli children’s book, *The Lion that Loved Strawberries* by Tirtza Atar (2003). The Hebrew phrase in the meme translates to “The Lion [Aryeh] that Loved Corruption.” Posted January 5, 2023.

and breach of trust (slightly reduced on appeal) (figure 5). It circulated online since at least March 2016, and resurfaced on Facebook pages and in WhatsApp groups when protests erupted in January 2023.

The incongruity in the meme between the lion, protagonist of the illustrated children's book, and politician Aryeh Deri (*Aryeh* meaning "lion" in Hebrew), and between the lion's passion for strawberries ("*tut*" in Hebrew) and Deri's love of corruption (*shchitut* in Hebrew) serves to emphasize the hypocrisy of the Haredi politician. Over the years, Deri complained of political persecution stemming from his Mizrahi origins and appealed his initial bribery conviction with only partial success.

In a related example, a meme juxtaposes an image of Haredi rabbis gathered around a festive table with a text listing various secret police and military positions that require concealment of the identities of the pictured individuals. It alludes to the Haredi community's shirking of essential national duties. Although both examples incorporate images, only Israeli audiences would find them funny, because they understand the Hebrew and the intertextual references embedded within the memes.

Another meme that circulated in 2023 on social media was not explicitly labeled as humorous but rather as the "picture of the year." It depicted an escalator in the train station in Jerusalem on one of the biggest protest days against the government's plan to alter the judiciary (figure 6). A throng is headed up the escalator but only one person in Haredi dress is on the downward stairs. As with the other memes it contained a discernible element of incongruity, condescension, and symbolic retribution.

Despite the growing antagonism that has developed in the early twenty-first century against Haredi communities, there are a relatively limited number of jokes targeting them (aside from mockery directed at Haredi politicians). And even these scarce memes tend to evoke discomfort and are marked by self-censorship, as evident in the strong reactions they provoke and in the effort to encode them in a manner that would restrict and manage their audiences.⁸ It can be argued that digital texts such as memes do not reflect social interaction to the same extent as direct communication. They are created in an individual and anonymous



Figure 6. The train station in Jerusalem on one of the largest protest days against the Israeli government's plan for change in the judicial system. In front of the constant stream of protesters going up the stairs, the Haredi young man goes down alone; posted February 14, 2023.

context, do not necessarily stimulate reactions, and their adaptations are different because of their virtual setting and visual means of expression (see Frank 2009; Oring 2012). However, numerous studies published about humoristic memes have demonstrated that the digital medium allows for social interaction as much as any other communication platform. The spontaneity, immediacy, and anonymity of the genre, along with the reactions it evokes, allow it to establish a participatory digital culture involving dialogic practices and to cultivate community consciousness (see, for example, Blank 2009; Blank 2013, 15–25, 99–113; Bronner 2009; Ellis

2003; Frank 2004; Sebba-Elran 2021). In other words, even though memes are distributed in mass media, they are usually rooted in a local context, characterized by intertextual language based on shared memories and traditions, and they reflect relationships between and within groups as well as foster social cohesion (see Börzsei 2013; Chlopicki and Brzozowska 2021; Laineste and Voolaid 2016; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2018). They can therefore provide insights about social relationships just as effectively as direct teasing and joking.

Academic research as well as journalistic articles exploring the portrayal of Haredim in Israeli popular culture provide additional insights into the observations that emerge from the memes and their reception. These perspectives, primarily centered on television series such as *Shtisel* (2013–2020), *Shababnikim* (2017–2021), and *Unorthodox* (2020), but also encompassing feature films, musicals, and exhibitions, suggest that the Haredi community stimulates in Israeli audiences such sentiments as curiosity, attraction, and respect. “We are more tolerant than it would seem,” noted Itzik Sudri (2018) following the series *Shababnikim*, which, like *Shtisel*, was not only popular but also received multiple awards from the Israeli Academy of Film and Television (see Lahav 2018; “Hakehila haharedit” 2019). Cultural critics also claim that Haredi society is presented in Israeli cinema as a diverse and dynamic group (El Or 2011) that elicits profound ambivalence in Israeli viewers, a mix of attraction and anxiety (Chyutin 2014).

Although the Jewish-American context differs significantly from the Israeli one, Nora Rubel (2010), who studies Haredi representations in the Jewish-American imagination, sheds more light on the subject. She claims that this group both symbolizes “authentic” Judaism and, simultaneously, is depicted as an obstacle to Jewish assimilation in the United States. Rubel’s research aligns with other studies concerning Haredi presentation in Holocaust museums in Israel as the emblematic figures of Jewish faith and victims of antisemitism (see Holtschneider 2011, 71–74; Krebs 2016). One explanation for this phenomenon is offered in Naomi Seidman’s podcast (2022) about Jews who have left the path of Orthodoxy (referred to as OTD, off-the-*derech*, Jews). In her podcast, in which she also discusses the Netflix miniseries *Unorthodox*, Seidman explains that the persistent fascination of Jewish audiences with narratives about heroic departures from

the Haredi community arises from their own profound connection to Orthodox Judaism. She claims that the Jewish public still seeks assurances that withdrawing from religious life is a legitimate and justifiable choice. A similar claim can be discerned in Rosen-Zvi's aforementioned editorial (2021): "The exilic Haredi, with his beard and long frock coat (*kapota*), whom the new Israeliness seeks to replace, persistently returns to remind us where we came from" (see also Magid 2020).

Representations of Haredim in Israeli television and cinema, as well as their role in Jewish collective memory, especially in the 2010s and 2020s, thus reveal a strong kinship to Judaism. They often evoke feelings of attraction and fascination, typically associated with comedy and drama rather than satire (see Thorpe 1971). This connection may help explain the relative scarcity of Haredi memes in Israel, as well as the criticism they provoke. It is within this context that I interpret the public reaction to the Meron disaster on Lag Ba'Omer 2021, and particularly the absence of joking in its aftermath.

Behind the Silence of April 2021

The disaster that occurred at Meron in April 2021 was the deadliest civil disaster in Israel's history. The death count was 45 men and boys who were crushed or asphyxiated, and more than 100 persons were injured. The Israeli government declared a national day of mourning, and later appointed a three-member commission led by former Chief Justice Miriam Naor to investigate the disaster. After the announcement, the commission issued interim recommendations and had also sent warning letters to a number of senior officials implicated in the incident ("Meron Crowd Crush 2021" 2023). The findings indicated that, while the site and festivities were meant to be supervised by the Ministry of Religious Services along with several other governmental entities, there were significant deviations from the original plan. At the time of the disaster, illegal structures existed at the site, and with approximately 100,000 participants, the size of the crowd far exceeded expectations. Furthermore, the sequence of lighting the bonfires at the site was disrupted, and the organization of entry and exit routes became altered ("Meron Crowd Crush 2021" 2023).

Institutional efforts to manage the site and event, following repeated criticism and warning by such bodies as the State Comptroller, failed to control the exuberant masses. The celebrants were also probably driven by a desire to compensate for the previous year's disappointment, a result of stringent COVID-related restrictions. The disaster had something to do, then, with the unresolved struggle for sovereignty, control, and leadership between Haredi and non-Haredi Jews in Israel. But this ongoing struggle, so familiar to every Israeli, did not leave a mark in the form of jokes. The absence of jokes about the topic was evident not only in various WhatsApp groups but also on Facebook pages, news websites, and comment threads that referred to the disaster. With the help of research assistants, I was able to locate a mere two memes, posted on the anti-religious Facebook page "Memim Bli Orla Ledor HaGeulah" (Memos without Foreskin for the Generation of Redemption). These memes were likely published shortly after the disaster, but it was not until November 2022, approximately a year and a half later, that they reached me. Unfortunately, by that time, the source of these memes could not be traced, because the contents of the page had been blocked or removed.

One of the memes utilized an iconic image of Yoram Lass, a physician and former Director-General of the Ministry of Health (figure 7). A prominent critic of the Israeli government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Lass had argued that the measures taken by the government were overly severe and opposed its lockdown policies. Long before the Meron disaster, most memes featuring this image had emphasized the incongruity between the grave nature of the pandemic and Yoram Lass's seemingly casual response. He insisted that most pandemic-related fatalities who had tested positive for COVID had actually died of different causes and, therefore, had died "with" rather than "of" COVID. In this meme, Lass was depicted wearing a Hasidic hat, and appeared to suggest that the Meron victims had died "with"—presumably rather than "because of"—Rashbi (R. Shimon bar Yochai), the second-century tannaitic sage whose tomb is the focus of the Meron annual celebrations. The meme is therefore a joke at Lass's expense, portraying him as someone who does not recognize the severity and consequence of the event.



Figure 7. Wearing a Hasidic hat, Yoram Lass suggests that the Meron victims had died with Rashbi (R. Shimon bar Yochai), a second-century tannaitic sage in ancient Judea. The Hebrew translates to “They died with Rashbi.” The exact posting date is unknown; accessed by author on November 16, 2022.

The second meme relies on an alliteration between the Hebrew words for “press” or “push” (*lilhots*) and “outside” (*bahuts*). The text is formatted as if it appeared as correspondence on WhatsApp:

- What’s up, Levi Yitzhak, are you at Meron?
- Yes, bro, where are you?
- Come outside [written with a typographical error: *lilhots*, and read as “come press”], I’m there
- Cool bro
- Outside*****
- Levi Yitzhak???
- Doesn’t matter, it’s all the same anyway. . .

The memes recontextualized the disaster but did not actually target the Haredi community, in contrast to some criticism voiced in the press at the time (e.g., Zalberg Block 2021). In fact, shortly after the disaster, an article was published about the popular satirical show *Erets Nehederet*. According to the critic, “the satire fell rather flat against the horrible disaster.” The show, he noted, used the same familiar jokes about well-known politicians and failed to introduce even a single Haredi figure into its comedic repertoire (see Menuhin 2021).

Additional jokes about the disaster emerged about a year later (May 2022) on the Haredi news site *Behadrei Haredim* (“in Haredi close quarters”). Seven textual jokes and one cartoon were published as part of a “selection of funnies” (Levin 2022). Five of the jokes (along with the cartoon) focused on the police assuming control at the Meron site, while the remaining two were about politicians involved in overseeing the celebrations. Here are three of them:

- Senior police respond to allegations of police violence at Meron: “We were only trying to ensure the safety of those who got beaten.”
- A guy called the police on Lag Ba’Omer this year, asking if he could send names to Meron for prayer [on their behalf], because he had heard that the mount was mainly accessible to police!
- Prison talk among some serious offenders: this one’s imprisoned for murder, the other one for robbery, and a third for violence. They spot a Haredi guy and ask him, “Hey man, what are you in for?” “Ah,” he replies, with lowered eyes, “I delayed an extra 20 minutes at Meron after my time slot had expired” . . .

The jokes emerged a long time after the disaster, and they all centered around (excessive) police control of the site the following year. That is, these jokes did not break the conspicuous silence that prevailed after the event, which is reminiscent of the excessive caution and restraint that mark contemporary Israeli humor about Haredim.

Silence was also the chosen response of Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef, the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel and President of the Chief Rabbinate, when he quoted the

verse from the Book of Amos (5:13): “Hamaskil ba’et Hahie yidom” (“At such a time the prudent keep silent”) (Ezra 2021). The importance of silence was further emphasized in the words of the well-known Israeli Rabbi Yosef Zvi Rimon, who, following the disaster, asked the Israeli public to rise above all controversy and devote itself to mourning (Rimon 2021). Another attempt to explain the meaning of the disaster and the responses to it from a Haredi perspective were made by Haredi sociologist Racheli Ibenboim, who spoke in a panel discussion convened by the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute only a couple of months after the disaster, under the title “Who’s in Charge in Meron?” (<https://www.vanleer.org.il/en/events/on-campus-online-whos-in-charge-in-meron/>, “Mi Haribon Bemeron?” 2021). According to Ibenboim, the significance of the tragedy is not owed simply to Mount Meron’s being one of the most important holy sites in Israel. Rather, she asserted, participation in the Meron celebrations, marking the holiday of Lag Ba’Omer, which is steeped in mystical traditions, produces in the consciousness of the pilgrim a unique and exalting unity of place and time, of a kind that cannot be experienced anywhere else in Israel.

According to historian Elchanan Reiner, who also participated in the Van Leer panel, stories of miracles and salvation have always been associated with Meron, a site that seems to conjure foundational Galilean myths (see Bar-Itzhak 2006; Reiner 2012; 2021). Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that unlike other holy sites around the country, such as the Western Wall, Israel does not seem to be able—or even willing—to take charge of the annual mass celebrations at Meron (see also Bar 2014).⁹ This suggests that the holy site has no sovereign but God, and perhaps the holy man representing Him on earth. According to Ibenboim, the disaster has proven that “the principle of communicating vessels does not work for us” (“Mi Haribon Bemeron?” 2021). Her words convey a sense of incongruity between, on the one hand, the religious faith or expectation that at such a site and at such a holy time, the massive outpouring of people would ultimately find a place and a vessel to channel it; and on the other hand, the sobering reality that the laws of nature eventually determined the fate of the victims who came to participate in the ritual.

A similar sense of incongruity can result from contrasting the disaster with the Chazalic principle that “those on the path to perform a mitzva are not susceptible

to harm throughout the process of performing the mitzva” (BT Psahim 8a). That is, if Jews perform a religious duty, they should expect to enjoy providential protection. The Israeli silence after the Meron disaster may convey, then, not simply an identification with or empathy for its victims (“We want a hug!” as Rabbi Yosef Zvi Rimon put it) but also a collective dispelling of illusions: a hope for providence and salvation has been dashed, and people cannot fathom why. Be that as it may, this silence reflects an affinity with those harmed and an identification with their faith.¹⁰

The magnitude of the Meron disaster, as well as its extensive media coverage, with the political tensions it exposed between religion and state—tensions that have stirred the Israeli public almost daily in recent years—should have provided fertile ground for jokes. Previous disasters have demonstrated that jokes can convey the structural incongruity inherent in the Haredi lifestyle in Israel, alternating, as it does, between participating in public life and eschewing it, or between the delights of celebration and the expectations for miracles, to the tragic outcome of the event and its deathly silent conclusion. The incongruity also manifests itself in the failure of the state to manage the holy site: in the extraterritorial nature of Meron as a place that falls under the state’s jurisdiction but escapes its control, as exemplified in the handful of Haredi jokes published a year later.

Other universal elements of incongruity or disruption of order and norms, so typical of jokes about disasters, involve juxtapositions of innocence and sobriety, fiction and reality, past and present, or routine and emergency. But such elements, which are abundant in Israeli public life, did not produce jokes in the aftermath of the Meron disaster. Instead, the Israeli public embraced Haredi silence, with all of its meanings. But then again, this silence was not entirely surprising. In the last decade, Israeli public discourse has been marked with caution, reservation, and often a simple avoidance of making jokes about Haredim. A factor in this avoidance is the presentation of Orthodox Judaism in Israeli popular culture as an authentic and even holy remnant of a traumatic past (Jewish history both before and during the Holocaust). As such, it elicits both attraction and fascination, despite its distinctive manners and the ideological and deeply political conflicts that Haredi lifestyles provoke.¹¹

According to Radcliffe-Brown and other social functionalists, this kind of situation between two people or groups, in which humor is not a legitimate part of social interaction, is evidence of either a direct kinship or a repressed separateness. In the Israeli context, the public mostly respects Haredi communities or feels enough affinity and commitment towards them that it can view them from a different perspective through humor and thus challenge the beliefs and norms that mark them. Research suggests that “the license to joke”—permission and legitimation to make fun of other people, as well as the boundaries of such mockery—is not arbitrary. It is rooted in the social structure as well as in the cultural order to which both the joke teller and his audience belong and which both aim to preserve (Handelman and Kapferer 1972; Mechling and Mechling 1985; Palmer 1994, 11–23). Avoiding jokes about Haredim in the Israeli context, or the self-restraint shown by this discourse, may attest, then, to the rigidity of the social or even political order that binds secular and Haredi Jews in Israel, the modern and orthodox. It may also suggest that the former is subordinate to the latter, at least to some extent and in particular contexts.

Can these patterns of discourse, or the feelings and beliefs they convey, teach something about the unity and resilience of Israeli society? Anthropologists might claim otherwise. Humor has a liberating, regulative power, and joking relationships are a crucial and cathartic mechanism for relieving tension and conflict and preserving social stability. This is especially true in a country such as Israel, whose national ethos and politics have always been influenced and determined by Jewish religion, and in an uncertain political climate such as the one Israel has experienced especially since the early 2020s.

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Notes

1. The concept of the joking relationship was first formulated by anthropologist Robert H. Lowie (1912, 204–206) and in French by Marcel Mauss (2013 [1928]), but is commonly attributed to Radcliffe-Brown (1940; 1961 [1952], 90–116), who expanded and developed its application. See Apte 1985, 29–66; Cotterill 1994, 91–98; Palmer 1994, 11–23; Norrick 2014. Live examples are shown in the following video on behalf of An Ka Taa—an initiative to develop resources for the study and dissemination of African languages. Accessed July 31, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lpjd_zV0IY&t=2s.

2. The term “unlaughter” was coined by Michael Billig (2005, 158–179), who claimed that to accurately assess the functions of a humorous expression, one must consider audience reactions to it, as well as the context and medium in which it appears. Unlaughter does not necessarily indicate protest; rather, it can be silence with a “rhetorical presence” that may be interpreted as reservation and rejection. See also Smith 2009; Schmidt 2013.

3. On the relationship between religion and the state in Israel, see Luz 1988; Statman and Sapir 2019.

4. Pnina Shukrun-Nagar asserts that the media often ascribes separatist and extremist behaviors, which are only representative of a small faction within the ultra-Orthodox community, to all Haredim (Shukrun-Nagar 2013; 2014; see also Neuberger and Tamam 2014). In a study by Yaacov Yadgar (2004) the reading of the verdict in the trial of Aryeh Deri, one of Israel’s most famous ultra-Orthodox politicians, is presented as a ritual of ostracism and humiliation.

5. This distinction is also applicable to meme cycles centering on children that I collected around the same period. These memes were primarily based on Israeli children’s literature, films, and games that are often only familiar to Israeli parents (Sebba-Elran 2021, 14–15). It is consistently apparent that whenever Arab students bring Arab memes to predominantly Jewish and Israeli classrooms, they are typically text-based and require translation, explanation, and mediation by the student.

6. See, for example: <https://www.facebook.com/260689792175/posts/10159699387462176/>. Accessed July 31, 2023.

7. For some of the reactions, see the sources cited in note 6, and <https://twitter.com/uriweltmann/status/1355884982623997956/>. Accessed July 31, 2023.

8. A notable exception is a series of episodes aired between January and June 2012 as part of the Israeli satirical show *Erets Nehederet* (A Wonderful Country). In these episodes, actor Yuval Semo assumes the role of Eliezer Fox, a stuttering, comical ultra-Orthodox character, who appears to embody the stereotypical Haredi in distinctly secular Israeli settings, such as the city of Tel Aviv, the beach, or the local mall. The professedly pious Fox does not actually observe Shabbat, study Torah, or adhere to Jewish standards of modesty.

As a result, his overt racism and endorsement of discrimination against women, his tax evasion, and the shirking of conscription, provoke laughter rather than criticism. See, for example: https://www.mako.co.il/mako-vod-keshet/eretz_nehederet-s9/shorts?page=2. Accessed July 31; https://www.mako.co.il/mako-vod-keshet/eretz_nehederet-s9/shorts/Video-53943ef0eb8b731006.htm. Accessed November 15, 2023. Tal Laor and Yair Galily (2022) point to another rare example: representations of Haredim in satirical radio programs in Israel. However, it is worth noting that the satire predominantly targets political leaders or newly devout Breslover Hasidim, rather than the ultra-Orthodox society as a whole. As is the case with the 2012 *Erets Nehederet* episodes, Laor and Galily's examination centers on three older radio programs from 2015, rather than more recent content.

9. Israeli anthropologist Yoram Bilu (2021) offered a slightly different opinion following the disaster. He agreed that the ecstatic attraction of believers to Meron overpowered any attempt by the state to take charge of the place, a failure that also stemmed from the "disheartening" mixing of religion and politics. But at the same time, Bilu noted that the state invested much effort in its attempts to manage the worshippers at the site and suggested that the chaos that led to the disaster may actually have been the result of these efforts.

10. Ouzi Elyada (2021) reviewed the coverage of daily newspapers surrounding a comparable event (whose outcome was less disastrous): the collapse of a railing and the plunge of dozens of people during the Meron celebration in Lag Ba'Omer of 1911. Elyada pointed to the role of the sensational coverage of the tragedy in promoting the superiority of the new Jewish Yishuv over the old and Orthodox one. This kind of critical perspective is absent from the public response to the disaster at Meron in Lag Ba'Omer of 2021.

11. In an analysis of the political arena in Israel, Itzhak Benyamini poses the following question: "Could it be that the theological, which in Israel constantly couches at the door of the civic, stands repressed or rather denied, an obviousness long become too transparent, or rather too terrible to be mentioned in a purely civic context?" (Benyamini 2021, 153).

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