The Pious Fool: A Sometimes-Hermetic Jewish Humor Trope

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Abstract. Jewish humor is generally considered to be self-deprecating rather than mocking. This paper studies one Jewish humor trope in which disparagement is used – that of the pious fool. The Talmud presents the *chasid shoteh* (pious fool) as one who could destroy the world; his piety is a danger to society. Indeed, the Talmud warns us not to live in the vicinity of an *am-haaretz chasid* (pious ignoramus). Of the various types of pious fools portrayed in humor, some might actually be quite learned, others not; some are arrogant in their piety which, of course, serves to negate said piety; some are kind, warm, and quite humane while others wield their piety as an implacable weapon along with, sometimes, a literal weapon. In mocking the pious fools, we use humor to put them in their place and we come to understand that the core value of any true religion is caring for others, especially the outsider and the unfortunates of society.

Keywords: Religion; Judaism; Jewish humour; talmudic trope of the pious fool (*chasid shoteh*); talmudic trope of the pious ignoramus (*am-haaretz chasid*); pious fool jokes; hermetic humour; Jephthah; wise fool; sacred fool; holy fool; the Brisker type of pious fool in Jewish humour; Litvak character in jokes; "two-fer" (a joke that manages to mock two tropes at the same time); the Wise Men of Chelm trope; the scary sanctimonious type.

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1. Introduction

Much has been written on the subject of Jewish humor. The authors elsewhere (Friedman & Friedman, 2014: pp. 297–305) support the notion that not only is Jewish humor is a body of humor with its own identifiable character, but that it goes as far back as the ancient Jewish texts, even the Bible. Certainly, humor that references Jewish law (halacha), Jewish Scripture, esoteric Talmudic principles, or practices identifiable as specific to Jewish culture is inarguably Jewish. For example,

A very pious rabbi dies at a ripe old age and goes straight to Heaven. There, he finds a large table, surrounded by several learned men, all studying the Talmud. Many are his former teachers and students. The table is laden with all kinds of wonderful food—kishke, kugel, knaidlach and much more. The men noshed as they studied. One of his former students exclaims, "Rebbe, we're so happy you've finally joined us! Come, have something to eat!" The Rabbi surveys the scene, looks over the food and asks, "Who's the mashgiach here?" The man looks at the rabbi incredulously and replies, chuckling, "This is Heaven! God is the mashgiach!" The old man ponders this for a long, long time, stroking his beard, eyes closed, deep in thought. The others regard him with great anticipation, awaiting his learned words. At last, the rabbi speaks. "OK," he finally says, "I'll have some fruit. On a paper plate" (Friedman & Friedman, 2014: p. 52).

The individual in this joke does indeed sound very pious, even learned. One might be given to wonder, here, does Jewish law actually say anything about trusting God as a kosher supervisor (*mashgiach*)? As a matter of fact, according to the Talmud, meat that falls from Heaven may be eaten even if it resembles something non-kosher such as donkey meat. Anything edible, miraculously falling from Heaven, is assumed to be kosher (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 59b). Sadly, the Talmud is silent on the matter of Heavenly dishware.

Cohen (1999: pp. 12-32), defines *hermetic humor* as that which presumes particular knowledge or belief. Hermetic humor is meant only for true insiders and might not even seem funny unless one has the necessary knowledge or experience to understand it. This can be seen in tightly knit groups, and in groups that share similar experience or knowledge, for example, musicians, mathematicians, computer scientists and, even, families. This type of humor cannot be recycled with a few changes for use by other groups, as it depends on shared knowledge between the joke teller and the audience. The payoff for this sort of in-group humor, in fact, is in not needing to explain the joke. Both parties share the joke; they are both winners. Those who would not understand the joke—the presumed outsiders—are not relevant to this transaction; they are not even there. It is this unstated bond, this implied wink, this secret handshake that informs the transaction.

The rabbi featured in the joke above is indeed pious and even appears to be quite learned. And, yet, he gets it completely wrong. With all his learning and piety which, we observe, may actually be somewhat more arrogant than sincere, he is missing a critical type of intelligence that the others at the celestial table clearly have. Now we know that, normally, we would never condone mockery of someone whose intelligence is lacking. In that case, why do we feel that it is appropriate to mock this foolish individual who does not trust God to set a kosher table? Perhaps the Talmud has something to say about that.

2. The Pious Fool of the Talmud

The Talmud includes many warnings about individuals who attempt piety despite being ignorant of the true intent of the law; such an individual is referred to as either an *am ha-aretz chasid* or a *chasid shoteh*. The Talmud (Avot 2:5) cautions that an ignorant person (*am ha-aretz*) cannot be a *chasid* (pious person) and even cautions people not to live in the vicinity of an *am-haretz chasid* (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbos 63b). The Talmud describes this sort of individual using the example of a man who refuses to rescue an unclothed woman who is drowning because he does not want look at her and thereby have impure thoughts (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 21b). The Jerusalem Talmud (Sotah 3:4) provides additional examples: A *chasid shoteh* sees a child drowning and waits to rescue the child until after he has removed his phylacteries. While Jewish law requires that one kill a man who is attempting to rape a betrothed girl, if that is the only way to save her, the *chasid shoteh* refuses to save the girl because he does not want to commit murder (Jerusalem Talmud, Sotah 3:4).

The *chasid shoteh* (pious fool) is seen by the Talmud (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 20a) as a destructive force in the world; his piety is a danger to society. His stringencies (of course, a *chasid shoteh* can be male or female) can be dangerous to other people. This is why the Talmud asserts that it is so important to study first before going out and doing good deeds.

It is interesting to note that where the Talmud lists seven types of Pharisees of which they did not approve, several of these behave very much like pious fools (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 22b). For example,

The bruised Pharisee, who walks without lifting his feet from the ground in exaggerated piety and thereby knocks his feet against stones.

The bloodletting Pharisee, who is afraid to look at women and walks with his eyes shut and thereby bangs his head against the wall.

The pestle Pharisee, who walks so bent over, because of exaggerated humility, that he looks like a pestle [he walks with his head perpendicular to his body so that he looks like a hammer-shaped pestle].

3. Who was the world's first pious fool?

The first pious fool may have been Jephtach (in Hebrew, *Yiftach*, most often rendered into English as Jephtah). Jephtach's tragic vow is described in Scripture (Judges 11:30-31): "And Jephtach vowed a vow to the Lord: 'If you deliver the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites shall be the Lord's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering."

Tragically, Jephtach's daughter was the first to greet her victorious father. It is clear that Jewish law does not permit human sacrifice. But Jephtach was ignorant and either, depending on the interpretation, actually sacrificed her or carried out his vow by making her remain celibate and live alone isolated from people. The Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 6) asserts that Jephthah was arrogant and did not want to go to the Pinchas, the High Priest, who could have annulled the vow. (Actually, the vow had no validity since only certain kosher animals are permitted as sacrifices.) Jephtach, in his tragic arrogance, felt that he was an important leader of the people and so Pinchas should come to him.

An even earlier candidate for the title of the Bible's first pious fool may have been Lot, from the Biblical story about the evil city of Sodom. When the citizens of Sodom discovered that he had two guests in his home, they called to Lot: "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we may *know* (i.e., have sex with) them" (Genesis 19: 5). Lot's response: "Look, I have two daughters who have never known a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof" (Genesis 19:8). It is difficult to understand what Lot was thinking. Was he a pious fool?

4. What Kind of Pious Fool am I? (How many kinds are there?)

The two main requirements for a pious fool, piety and foolishness, may be manifested in different individuals in a variety of ways. Some might actually be quite learned, others not; some are arrogant in their piety which, of course, serves to negate said piety; some are kind, warm, and quite humane while others wield their piety as an implacable weapon along with, sometimes, a literal weapon. All these types may be found in the pious fools of humor. Since the relevant humor focuses on piety it is often quite hermetic, requiring a degree of explanation for outsiders. In this section we examine several archetypes of the pious fool as represented in humor. As we will see, these archetypes may be considered to be derived from the pious fool as described in the Talmud.

We can distinguish the pious fools described here from other humor tropes, some which may initially be considered to be relevant here but in reality are not. These include:

- *The wise fool*. This is the fool who is not educated but nevertheless turns out to be wiser than his "betters" who are learned.
- *The sacred fool*. This individual is a jester who does "God's work" by employing healing power of laughter.

- *The holy fool*. The holy fool in early Christian theology was an individual who outwardly behaved in a manner that defied conventions of the prevailing orthodoxy and inwardly pursued a religious or mystical truth.
- *The trickster*. The trickster is not at all pious and anything but a fool. He purposely and manipulatively exploits human frailty.

An essential feature of the Talmudic pious fool is that, due to his piety and the extremes to which he is willing to take it, he is a danger to himself, to others, to society at large. While the first three types listed above are called fools and may also possibly be pious, they tend not to appear as targets in humor. We do not mock them. The trickster, on the other hand, is a well-known trope in humor and folk tales of a variety of cultures; is indeed a potentially dangerous individual; but is neither pious nor a fool and so does not belong in the current investigation.

5. The Brisker Type

The Brisker trope in Jewish humor is not always clearly identified as such but is always recognizable as a true pious fool in the Talmudic tradition. He — the Brisker is almost always a male and, in fact, a Talmudic student / scholar — is actually extremely learned when it comes to his knowledge of the Talmud and Jewish law (*halacha*). However, because of his great arrogance and obsession with the minutiae of the text, he may act in ways that are foolish.

The Brisk tradition in Judaism is an extreme version of the Lithuanian yeshiva tradition, stressing intellect over emotion and encouraging increasingly stringent halachic opinions. Rabbi Chaim Soloveichik of Brisk (1853–1918) changed the focus of Talmud study from practical to theoretical. His approach, known as the Brisk approach to learning (Wikipedia, 2018b), does not concern itself with how *halacha* (Jewish law) works out in a real-world setting, since the purpose of study is not to derive practical, everyday laws; Talmudic study becomes the end goal in itself. The Brisk approach was also not that concerned with the giveand-take (*shakla ve-tarya*) of the Talmud and cared more for the conclusions of the discussion. This is why they studied Rambam (Maimonides) who removed the discussions in his legal code and only provided the conclusions. Some Brisker today especially enjoy studying *kodshim* (literally, "holy things": laws dealing with sacrifices and the ancient religious service in the Temple) since those laws are purely theoretical and have no practical applications today and the law can then be studied without considering the real world of today.

The individual in these jokes may be variously identified as a Brisker student or a Litvak (follower of the Lithuanian style) or, more commonly today, simply as *yeshivish*. These jokes, as well as the others in this paper, are part of the modern verbal cultural lore of the Jewish people and may or may not have been compiled elsewhere.

A Brisker once came into shul [the synagogue] looking agitated. His friend questioned him about the long face, and he said that he was upset because he had a puzzling dream and did not know its meaning.

Upon further questioning from his friend, he finally revealed that he had dreamt about *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, the Holy One (God). His friend attempted to comfort him and said: "The sages teach us that dreams are a reflection of one's thoughts during the day. Perhaps this was merely a result of your thinking about Him during the daytime?"

The Brisker responded: "Impossible! You know my schedule: I get up early to learn Talmud, then I pray; Then I return to my studies. Thus, my entire day is occupied with either learning or praying. When do I ever have time to think about *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*?

This sort of individual is reminiscent of one referred to in the Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 1): "Any scholar (*talmid chacham*) who lacks common sense (*da'at*) is worse than a putrid animal carcass." Indeed, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein (2012) emphasized this, saying: "Can we accept the words of a Torah genius lacking human and emotional sensitivity, who possesses no psychological insight?"

These pious fools are smart — perhaps, too smart for their own good. In this body of humor, their arrogance, while annoying and self-involved, tends mostly to backfire on them; at least others aren't being directly harmed. Mostly. Since they are well versed in the minutiae of halacha, and they are arrogant about their own halachic abilities, this particular trope of Jewish humor is the most hermetic. For example, to understand the next joke, one must know about the concept of a blessing made in vain, and how this "sin" – questionable, in this case — might be very upsetting to someone who has tried to always do what is *halachically* correct.

A very devout Brisker is praying at the Kotel (Western Wall) when, suddenly, an Islamic extremist grabs him from behind and puts a large knife to his throat. The Brisker quickly recites the blessing for someone who is about to die for his religion: "Baruch ata ... al kiddush Hashem!"

The terrorist, impressed with his victim's piety, stops what he is doing and turns to leave.

The Brisker, pointing to his throat, calls out impatiently to the terrorist: "Nu! Nu!"

Further explanation may be required for those who don't know that, in *halacha*, once a blessing is made on, say, a piece of food, one may not speak out before taking a bite of the food. Hence, this poor Brisker believed that, once the blessing was made, he could not speak until the action referred to in the blessing was carried out.

Here are some more examples of the Brisker trope in Jewish humor, with the requisite explanations.

A newly married Brisker comes home after the morning prayers on the Fast of Esther (*Taanis* Esther, a rabbinically-ordained fast day) and sees a bare dining room table. Turning to his wife, he asks, "Where's breakfast?"

"But it is *Taanis Esther*," she replies.

"I thought you knew that Briskers are *makpid* (religiously conscientious) to eat on *Taanis Esther*"

"Oh, I didn't realize," she says. "Why don't you go into the living room and learn a little while I make breakfast?"

Twenty minutes later the bride calls her husband for breakfast. Seeing the table set for two, the Brisker turns to his wife and asks "Why is the table set for two?"

"What do you mean? I made us breakfast."

"In Brisk we hold that the wives don't take on all the chumras (halachic stringencies)".

Supposedly, Briskers make a point to eat on certain fast days which are only rabbinical (d'rabbunun) because of the Torah law (d'orysah) of u'shmartem es nafshoseichem (Deuteronomy 4:9, 4:15). This Biblical commandment requires an individual to take care of his/her health and well-being. People are also obligated to avoid dangerous situations and not do anything that will harm themselves. Thus, according to many sages, an individual is not permitted to smoke.

Telephone rings in the Brisk Yeshiva in Israel. One of the yeshiva students picks up the phone. "Hello."

Caller: "May I please speak to Moshe Horowitz?"

Brisker: "Moshe is eating lunch now and according to the Talmud in Taanis 5b one is not supposed to talk during a meal since it is dangerous — the food could enter the windpipe and might cause the person to choke to death."

Caller: "OK. Would you please tell Moshe after he finishes eating to please call his father?"

Brisker: "I can't do that. After lunch, he is supposed to be learning *gemara*. If he calls you, it will be *bitul Torah* (wasting time that could be spent learning Torah)."

Caller: "OK, in that case, may I ask you one question?

Brisker: "Sure."

Caller: "Why did you pick up the phone!!"

No explanation needed here. It is very helpful that the Brisker explained himself within the confines of the joke itself.

A Brisker gets on a bus in Israel, gives his fare to the driver, who is female, and says: "Shelo leshem kiddushin."

The phrase *shelo leshem kiddushin* literally means 'not for the purpose of marriage.' The Brisker knows that if (1) one gives a woman money and (2) it is for the purpose of marriage and (3) this is done in front of witnesses and (4) she accepts, the marriage would be binding. Clearly, this Brisker is (1) very learned, (2) very worried about inadvertently marrying the bus driver and (3) very much a fool.

Question: Why did the Brisker eat soup with a fork?

Answer: Lavud.

Lavud is a Talmudic principle in which gaps in a wall may be ignored halachically as long as they are small enough. According to Jewish law, a wall may have a gap of up to three tefachim (handbreadths) and still be valid because of lavud. Using the principle of lavud, any gap in the wall of less than three tefachim does not count and the wall is seen as legally connected. This has implications when building the walls of a sukkah. And there is even a joke about that:

A thief once took advantage of a hole in a succah wall, to reach in and steal a silver Kiddush cup. When the incident came to the attention of Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky, he jokingly remarked that thief must have been an *am ha'aretz* (ignoramus): "A *talmid chocham* (Torah scholar) could never have done such a thing. Knowing the din [= law] of *lavud*, a *talmid chocham* would never have been able get his hand through the wall!"

Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky was a Lithuanian Talmudic scholar during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Question: Why did the Brisker walk down the aisle to his *chuppah* (marriage canopy) without his pants on?

Answer: Ke'sheim she'nichnas li'bris...

At a *bris* (circumcision), the following is recited: *Ke'sheim she'nichnas li'bris...* Full translation: "Just as he has entered into the covenant, so may he enter into the Torah, the marriage canopy, and good deeds."

They saw a Brisker committing suicide and asked, "What do you think you are doing?!" His response: "Safek zar'o shel Amalek."

This joke is hilarious if the audience has the requisite knowledge and, like all humor, becomes less funny as it is explained. But, here goes. There is a law in the Torah to eradicate the evil people of Amalek. The Brisker felt there was a chance (because there is always that small chance) that he might be a descendant of Amalek and thus should be killed. *Safek* means doubt. There is a general principle regarding when to be stringent with cases of doubt (*safek*). If the doubt is with a law based on the Torah, we are stringent; this is known as *safek deoraita le-chumra*. If, however, the doubt is regarding a rabbinic law, we are lenient; this is known as *safek de-rabbanan le-kula*. We see very clearly from this example that, unlike other types of humor involving pious fools, Briskers rarely hurt others, more often just themselves.

The chazzan (cantor) in my shul is such a Brisker, on Shabbos he doesn't even carry a tune.

An *eruv* is a symbolic fence that allows people to carry necessary items in public on the Sabbath. It often consists of a simple string mounted on poles, a kind of legal fiction that allows us to treat a public domain as a private domain. As we have seen Briskers are very strict, and they do not rely on an *eruv* on the Sabbath.

Two Briskers are studying in the *yeshiva shel maala* (yeshiva in Heaven), trying to understand a difficult passage in the Rambam, to no avail, when who should walk by, but the Rambam himself!

One of the Briskers asks the Rambam, "Please, can you explain this passage in the Mishne Torah (the Rambam's *magnum opus*)?"

The Rambam readily agrees, and astutely and clearly explains the meaning of the passage to the two Briskers, before carrying on his way.

One Brisker turns to the other and asks: "Was that helpful?"

The other shrugs and says: "What does a Sephardi know about learning Rambam?!" 1

Rambam, the acronym given to *Ra*bbi *M*oshe *B*en *M*aimon, known also as Maimonides, was a Sephardic Torah scholar and philosopher who lived during the Middle Ages. The idiots in this joke demonstrate a perfect combination of arrogance and scholarship.

Some very current manifestations of the Brisker type of pious fool in Jewish humor may be found in videos posted on the Internet, easily found via a Google or YouTube search. For example, see any of several videos featuring Danielle Jacobs in her incarnation as the Rebbetzin Rivka Leah Zelwig (e.g., Jacobs 2015). Want to know how a Brisker visits a *shiva* (mourner's) house? See Ifrah (2012). Brisker pious fools manage to say the most inappropriate things because in their arrogance they focus on their learning of *halachic* details rather than the larger picture which, in this case, is a visit to comfort the recently bereaved. In a lighthearted take on the extreme stringencies in the *yeshivish* tradition, "The Chumra Song," (Lev Aryeh 2013) by Dr. Dreizich (actually, Binyomin Miller who was studying at the time in Yeshivas Lev Aryeh) mocks the *halachic* stringencies taken on by this sort of arrogant, learned (and very foolish) pious fool, not really distinguishing among Brisker, Litvak, *yeshivish*, and *chassidish* folks.

Also mocking more than just the Brisker type is the following:

A Brisker and a Na Nach are roommates. Before going to sleep the Na Nach says with devotion "Naaaa." The Brisker says "sssshhhhh".

¹ [Editor's note: In the anthology of anecdotes about books, *Sefer, Sofer ve-Sippur*, by the Nobel Prize winning novelist S.Y. Agnon, a different version of this joke appears. A deceased rabbi is found wanting, and would not be let into heaven. He claims in defence that he was skilled at interpreting the writings of Maimonides / Rambam. Rambam is consulted, and states that this interpretation is wrong. The deceased retorts: "Ma kvar yodea rav frank?", i.e., "What does a Sephardi rabbi know?"]

The Na Nach then says "Naaaach". Again the Brisker says "ssshhh".

The Na Nach then says "Naaachmaaa" and again the Brisker says "ssshhh".

The Na Nach says "Naaachmaaan" and again the Brisker says "ssshhh".

The Na Nach finally says "Meumaaaan" and the Brisker finally says "ssshhheeemmmaaa".

"Na Nach Nachma Nachman Meuman" is a phrase sung and spread by members of the Na Nach movement, a subgroup group of Breslover Hasidim. More information about this chant can be found at: http://nanach.org/intro/nanach-intro-01.html. The Shema is a prayer typically said at bedtime. This is a wonderful example of a "two-fer," a joke that manages to mock two tropes at the same time.

Question: Why did the Brisker pour beer into a urinal?

Answer: Shibuda d'Rav Nosson

Shibuda d'Rav Nosson is a legal term described in the Talmud (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kamma 40b). Thus if A owes money to B, and B owes money to C, it is if A owes money to C. Thus the money may be taken by the court from the debtor's debtor (A) and given to the original creditor (C) thereby bypassing the second party (B). The word *shibuda* mean lien. This is actually a very clever transformation of a well-known joke that is not hermetic and, even, not necessarily Jewish:

Two drunks are on their way home after the bar finally closes, a little unsteady, each supporting the other.

Drunk One: I love you, man.

Drunk Two: No, I love you, man.

Drunk One: I love you so much. I'll do anything for you, you just have to ask and I'll do it.

Drunk Two: Well, there is something... After I'm dead, would you pour a fifth of Johnnie

Walker over my grave?

Drunk One: Sure. (Pause) Is it OK if I let it run through my system first?

The individuals in this joke, while reminiscent of the beer-in-the-urinal Briskers in the above tidbit, may actually have more in common with the lovable and wise fools of Chelm.

6. The Chelm Type

Much better known than the Brisker in the world of Jewish humor and lore is the "sage" of Chelm. These are pious fools who think they are very smart but, really, are not. They are quite simple, not very learned and, like the Briskers, they take things too literally. Unlike the Briskers, these individuals are sincere rather than arrogant. The folktales of the citizens of Chelm and their very "wise" elders fall into this category. Readers new to these wonderful wise men are referred to Ausubel (1948, pp. 320–321) and Knox (1980).²

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² [Editor's note: The Yiddish modern folk tradition of the wise men of Chelm is an equivalent of other European folk traditions about foolish towns, and Ruth von Bernuth has devoted an erudite book to the subject (von Bernuth 2016). On p. 89, she reproduced two woodcuts. Both of them show, to the right, several men riding hobbyhorses (of the latter, almost just the long sticks protruding behind between their legs are visible) and with whips in their right hands, whereas to the left the back of a man sitting with a bare backside can be seen in the disatance. The two woodcuts look very similar. The captions von Bernuth gave the first woodcut is as follows: "Greeting the emperor, woodcut from the German Filzhut edition of the *Schildbürgerbuch*, British Library". That book first appeared in 1598 with great success, and its expected audience being non-Jewish German: the Emperor of Utopia is about to visit the town, whose elected mayor is a swineheard, and he and his staff,

For example,

An impoverished *melamed* (teacher) visits a pupil's house, and is offered a slice of strudel, a delicacy he has never before tasted. The *melamed* goes home and gives his wife enough money to buy the ingredients to make their own strudel. The wife (perhaps not a native Chelmite) instead uses the money to buy a pair of shoes for their child.

To make a long story short, the awful row that ensues over this betrayal ends up with the couple in question in a storage chest on wheels which is, yes, you guessed it, moving on its own and rolling down the hill towards the marketplace. The wise men of Chelm are terribly frightened by this driverless apparition and they close all the shops, run into the safety of the synagogue and blow the shofar, praying to God for deliverance.

Thankfully, this seems to have worked. The chest stops rolling the elders open it up cautiously to investigate, and out come the *melamed* and his wife.

And that is how the wise elders of the town of Chelm decided to enact three critical *takonos* (religious amendments):

- 1. Teachers may not live on a hill
- 2. Teachers may not own a chest with wheels
- 3. Teachers may not eat strudel

And a more modern manifestation of this type:

Abe and Izzy are strolling home from shul one Shabbos morning. Suddenly a cab speeds past, and their friend, Seymour, is running frantically behind it, flailing his arms wildly.

"Well," said Izzy, "I never imagined our good friend was a Shabbos violator! Look at him running for that taxi."

"Wait a minute," Abe replied. "Didn't you hear the rabbi's lecture about the *mitzvah* of judging other people favorably? I'll bet we can think of hundreds of reasons for Seymour's behavior."

- "Yeah, like what?"
- "Maybe he's sick and needs to go to the hospital."
- "Come on! He was running 60 miles an hour after that cab."
- "Well, maybe his wife's having a baby."
- "She had one last week."
- "Well, maybe he needs to visit her in the hospital."
- "She's home."
- "Maybe he's running to the hospital to get a doctor."
- "He is a doctor."
- "Maybe he need supplies from the hospital."
- "The hospital is a five-minute walk in the opposite direction."
- "Well, then, maybe he forgot that it's Shabbos!"
- "Of course he knows it's Shabbos. Didn't you see his tie. It was his paisley beige 100% silk Ralph Lauren tie from Italy. He never wears it during the week."
 - "Wow, you're really observant! I didn't even notice he was wearing a tie."
 - "How could you not notice? Didn't you see how it was caught on the back fender of the taxi?"³

uncertain whether it would be more correct to receive the sovereign on foot or on horseback, adopt a compromise, going out to meet the Emperor astride hobbyhorses. A modernised *Schildbürgerbuch*, with updated vocabulary, signed by "Pomponius Filzhut", appeared in the late 17th century.]

³ [Editor's note: Distinguish between a situation when a garment of the runner is caught in a running car, so the runner cannot avoid running or then would fall and would be dragged behind the vehicle (the dancer Isadora Duncan, b. 1878, d. 1927), died when her scarf was caught in a starting car and she was strangled), and a situation when the runner was holding to the vehicle when is was standing, and then had to run because the vehicle began to run and releasing the grip would cause the runner grievous harm. Once in central London, while

As we can see, the Chelm type of pious fool is well meaning and does what he can as far as he understands the situation. This type of humor might be mocking but it is a warm, gentle sort of mocking done with love for someone who is recognizable as one of the family (or, perhaps, tribe).

In this same vein, there is a classic speech in the annals of Jewish humor, given by Hillel Gross at the Tenth Anniversary Celebration, in 1986, of the Lincoln Square Synagogue (New York City) Beginners Service. This speech may appear to be mocking the baal teshuvah (a returnee, i.e., a formerly secular Jew who has returned to observant Judaism), but is actually filled with obvious warmth and love. Baalei teshuvah are not really pious fools but sometimes may appear so because in their wish to perform the observances they have assumed, they take everything extremely literally. Thus the baal teshuvah is quite a bit like the Chelm type with one important distinction: the baal teshuvah is not truly foolish, but is continuing with his/her ongoing education in this difficult and complex arena. Gross's speech may be found on YouTube and the video and full text are available at NJOP (1986). Since this is such a priceless artifact we reproduce the full text here (read with a very dry tone, please):

I am here tonight on what I fear is a totally vain effort to restore some perspective to this orgy of self-congratulations that you have staged for yourselves this evening. Because I think that somehow it's important that you beginners, B.T.s, leave tonight with at least a sense of how we, the F.F.B.s, as you call us, the frum-from-births [strictly practising since childhood], the "lifers," dayby-day Lincoln Square everyday congregants, feel about you — we don't like you!! And if you'll just indulge me for two to three minutes, I will tell you why it is that we don't like you — aside from the fact that you won't talk to us during davening! [praying]

For ten years now, you have been coming to my house on Shabbasim [Sabbaths] and Yomim Tovim [festivals]; just this once try to see it from my perspective. I am what the sociologists and the demographics experts would call the "tired Jewish businessman." My fantasy of the ideal Friday night is to daven [pray] as fast as I can, eat as fast as I can, jump under the covers, assume a pre-fetal position, and conk out until Shacharis [the morning prayer].

So, I come to shul Friday night and invariably Rabbi Buchwald approaches and says: would I mind taking three or four of his beginners home for Shabbat dinner? Since Rabbi Buchwald insists on posing this question in front of the people involved, it makes it very difficult to say no! Fine, I'll take them.

Introductions are made and we begin to make our way home. Invariably, one of you will screech, "Wait!! Don't go on Broadway — that's the goyish way, go through Lincoln Towers, that's the Shabbos way." Fine, Lincoln Towers.

We get home, and again one of you is screeching, "Stop!! Don't go in the elevator. Take the stairs, like Effie⁴ does." Effie lives on the third floor! . . . Ten flights later, we arrive home... breathlessly, introductions are made and we take our places around the Shabbat table. You want to sing Shalom Aleichem [Welcome for the Sabbath] — each verse three times, because it says so in the siddur [prayer book]. Fine, Shalom Aleichem three times. Then, you want Ayshes Chayil [praise for the active wife, from the biblical Book of Proverbs] read in English — because it's more meaningful. Fine.⁵ Then one of you has a question — "We just made kiddush [blessing on wine] in shul, why are we making kiddush a second time?" Well, to paraphrase Renee Leicht, "How the hell do I know why we're making kiddush a second time?" After kiddush, one of you decides you'd like to make your own kiddush, because you forgot to ask me before my kiddush if I had you in mind.6 Fine, make your own Kiddush — at the rate of three Hebrew words a minute!

on a typical bus with no closed doors, I was horrified to see that my old mother, who was gripping a pole while about to climb into the bus, had to run and run because the bus started running.]

⁴ [Editor's note: *Effie* is an endearing for of the first name *Ephrain*.]

⁵ [Editor's note: Remarkably, nobody present opposed the traditional reading of that scriptural passage to be in English, rather than in Hebrew.]

⁶ [Editor's note: This is the foolish scruple.]

Then, after washing, we sit down, and during the course of conversation, usually mine, one of you will interrupt with undeniable sincerity and politeness and say: "Excuse me, but isn't what you're saying Loshon Hara?" Yeah, I suppose you could say it's Loshon Hara. Fine, no more Loshon Hara! Then you want to sing Zmiros, the ones with eight verses — all of them! Fine. Then you want to do D'var Torahs [sermons]; every D'var Torah you ever heard up there you want to do. Fine. Then you want to bentch, singing each verse, "cause that's the way Effie does it."

Fine. At this point, I bleary-eyed excuse myself and again, with unfailing politeness you say, "Thank you for having us, we'd love to come back next Shabbos!!" You'll be back next Shabbos all right, over

But you see, it's not that we dislike you, Chas V'shalom (G-d forbid), it's that you make us uncomfortable. We're uncomfortable because after 20-30-40 years of saying Shemoneh Esrei [the standing silent prayer] three times a day, when we're with you we sense that perhaps our Shemoneh Esrei has become flat, routine, mechanical, while yours is vital and exuberant. We're uncomfortable because in the solitude of our souls we ask ourselves (and don't believe for a second that we don't ask ourselves), we ask ourselves if we could do in our 20's and 30's and 40's what you've done. Could we uproot the habits of a lifetime, the occupations, change our jobs if necessary, confuse our friends, antagonize our families, just to commit ourselves to our Judaism? And if we articulate this question, few of us dare to answer it.

So, I suppose in the last analysis, we're uncomfortable because you practice what we preach. By your enthusiasm, by your embrace of everything that's Jewish, you challenge us. By your insatiable thirst for knowledge, you provoke us. And by your open-hearted love affair with Judaism and everything about it, you ultimately shame us.

We pray that under the inspired leadership of Rabbi Buchwald you will continue to shame us, to provoke us, to challenge us, to lead us, until the coming of the Redeemer, Moshiach, speedily in our days,

Amen (NJOP, 1986).

Some explanations for the uninitiated could probably be used here regarding religious practices of a Sabbath observer but the warmth, in this seemingly critical narrative, is impossible to miss.

7. The Scary Sanctimonious Type

We have seen that the first two types of pious fool often end up causing difficulties — for themselves. We know, however, that foolish piety sometimes has truly tragic consequences (e.g., Wikipedia, 2018a). The arrogance of religious hypocrisy is not limited to Jews — we have only to consider the importance to the Inquisition of killing without "spilling blood" (what the Bible *literally* opposed) and the more recent sex slaves of ISIS — but Jews do have

⁷ [Editor's note: Gossiping, which is frowned upon in Judaism. The "evil tongue" (לשוֹן הַרַע lashán hará', spread

name מפלץ הפין Chafets Chavvim. after the title of his book (this is a widespread onomastic pattern for rabbinic

of truthful information, damaging for somebody, when other than in clearly delimited warranted situations, as opposed to "evil name", שַׁם רָע shem ra', i.e., libel, spreading false information, harmful for somebody) is an important subject in Jewish ethics and Jewish law. There are more strictures than in present-day Western ethics, let alone law. The classic handbook of the Jewish norms concerning the "evil tongue" and רְּכִילֹּוּת (talebearing) is the book חָבֶיץ הַיִּים Chafets Chayyim ('One Desirous of Life', after Psalms 34:13, where such a person is mentioned with that wording, the next verse advising "Preserve thy tongue from evil"), published in 1873. Its sequel, published in 1876, is a regimen vitae book (i.e., a conduct book) of homilies specialised in the subject, entitled שֵׁמִירָת הַלְּשׁׁנִי Shmirat haLashon ('Guarding of the Tongue'). Their author is commonly known by the

authors). His actual name was rabbi Israel Meir Cohen of Radin, and he also authored מֵשְׁנָה מֵשְׁנָה מִשְׁנָה מִשְׁנָה מִשְׁנָה בְּרוֹרָה Mishnah Brurah, a book of Jewish law (a commentary to Orach Chayyim). Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan (Cohen) — his surname used in administrative contexts was Poupko, as the Wikipedia entry points out, but this is very little known — was born in 1838 in Dziatłava (called in Yiddish Zhetl), in the tsarist province (Gubernya) of Hrodno in what is now Belarus. He died in 1933 in Raduń, a village in what had meanwhile become Wilno Voivodship, Poland (whereas Vilnius is now in Lithuania, Raduń is in Belarus).]

a tradition of mocking sanctimonious individuals who consider themselves devoutly pious, and this tradition goes all the way back to the Talmud (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 22b). It is hard to imagine creating humor out of a type of individual that takes piety to villainous extremes, but there is indeed a body of humor mocking this sort of dangerous individual. The following joke seems at first to be very Jewish but it could just as easily be transformed for use by any other group.

An American basketball player had a tournament in Belfast. After one of his games he stepped outside for a breath of fresh air when he felt a gun pressed to his back. The gunman growled, "What is your religion?"

Now, the player had no real religion but he knew if he said he was Catholic and this guy was a Protestant he would kill him and if he said he was Protestant and the guy was Catholic he would kill him. What to do?

Thinking quickly, he said "I'm Jewish!"

The gunman exclaimed "Oh, Allah! I must be the luckiest Arab in all of Ireland."

The following Emo Philips joke was listed in 44th place in GQ Magazine's (June 1999) "The 75 Funniest Jokes of All Time." It's not Jewish, but it certainly could be:

Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!"

He said, "Nobody loves me."

I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

He said, "Yes."

I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?"

He said, "A Christian."

I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?"

He said, "Protestant."

I said, "Me, too! What franchise?"

He said, "Baptist."

I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Baptist."

I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist."

I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region."

I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912.

I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over.

These jokes are not completely hermetic and, indeed, may easily be used to mock religious hypocrisy of all religions and denominations. It should be noted however, that pious fools of this sort truly are frightening. They do not believe that the constraints of civilization apply to then and will therefore go so far as to murder, maim, and generally, terrorize their targets. Whereas the pious fool of the Talmud often caused (or, at least did not prevent) someone's death, he did not do so out of pious villainy but from a wrongheaded, misguided, ignorant view of his *halachic* obligations.

8. Summary and Overview

Much like the Scary Sanctimonious type, the pious fool of the Talmud is so smug in his own knowledge of *halacha* that he is willing to let people die rather than debase his own piety. He is certainly arrogant and learned, but his learning is worth little since he misses the larger picture — the reason we need to learn how to live a good life, to be a good person. It is easy to see why the Talmud considered him a danger — to those in his immediate proximity and to society at large. Table 1 summarizes our findings regarding the various types of pious fool found in humor, and particularly in Jewish humor. The Talmudic pious fool and the Brisker type are both quite learned while the Chelmite, while he has a certain amount of knowledge gained from his teachers, is quite simple. The Scary Sanctimonious type has just enough learning to give his arrogant piety free reign and allow it to emerge into the nastiness and villainy he desires. The Brisker type, even in his arrogance, is mainly a danger to himself, while the Talmudic pious fool and the Scary Sanctimonious pious fool are both dangerous to those around them, for different reasons, as we have seen.

Pious Fool Type	Pious	Foolish	Learned	Arrogant	Bully	Dangerous to others
Talmudic Pious Fool	1	√	V	V	1	V
Brisk Type	1	V	V	V	1	
Chelm Type	1	$\sqrt{}$				
Scary Sanctimonious Type	1	1		V	1	V

Table 1. The Pious Fool Types and Their Attributes

It is interesting, although not terribly surprising that, like any individual with a passionate agenda, these pious fools are themselves devoid of wit. They have no sense of humor and are certainly not self-deprecating in any way, whether humorous or not. (See, e.g., Friedman & Friedman 2017 for examples of Jewish self-deprecating humor.)

9. Conclusion

When humor is mocking — i.e., deprecating rather than self-deprecating — can there be a higher purpose? The Talmud, which generally promotes respect for all human beings (e.g., Avot 4:3), would certainly never condone or encourage creating humor in disparagement of those unfortunates among us who lack intelligence, learning or wisdom. Why then does it present the pious fool in a mocking manner, as well as an object of scorn and a danger to society? In fact, it is specifically because the Talmud feels that the pious fool is a danger that it encourages this sort of disparaging humor, this pointing of fingers not at an innocent disability but rather at these fools' ridiculous pretensions to piety.

The pious fool may be seen as one who adheres strictly to the letter of the law even when this goes against an important value that the law is supposed to serve. The following argument regarding what song to sing before a bride — one praising her beauty or, um, not so much – sheds light on a key difference between the academies of Hillel and Shammai and also demonstrates the danger of not considering human psychology when deciding on a law. The Talmud (Babylonian Talmud, Kethuboth 16b-17a) asks: "What does one chant while dancing before a bride?" The School of Shammai does not permit any exaggerating or lying in praising the bride. Their opinion is "the bride as she is." The School of Hillel, on the other

hand, was more concerned with getting along nicely with people and said: "beautiful and graceful bride." The Shammaites asked the Hillelites: "If the bride is lame or blind can one say 'beautiful and graceful bride'?" Their argument was that the Torah (Exodus 23:7) tells us to: "Distance yourself from a false matter."

The law is not in accordance with the School of Shammai. One can imagine how nervous a bride would be before the wedding not knowing which song would be sung for her. Even worse, imagine how the bride and groom would feel if they should hear people arguing in an adjoining room whether the bride was attractive enough to meet the standard of the "beautiful and graceful bride" song.

Sometimes the danger can be far worse than insulting a less-than-beautiful bride. During the time of the Inquisition, the Church was concerned about "spilling blood" because the Bible states: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God he made man" (Genesis 9:6). Despite this, the Inquisition had no problem with butchering innocent people as long as no actual blood was spilled: "However, endless and inventive tortures, drowning, strangulation, burial alive, roasting to death, and burning at the stake, were quite acceptable" (Erickson, 2003: p. 99). In our time, ISIS has used theological arguments to promote sexual violence against innocent women (e.g., Yazidis) and to allow human trafficking. This is a way of "attracting, retaining, mobilizing and rewarding fighters as well as punishing kaffir, or disbelievers" (Townsend, 2017). In 2002, Saudi Arabia's religious police (the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice) beat schoolgirls rather than allow them to exit a burning building because they were not dressed in accordance with strict interpretation of Islamic modesty rules.⁸ Fifteen girls died in that fire (Wikipedia 2018a). In 2018, women were barred from administering CPR to a male politician who collapsed during a speech in the sumo wrestling ring — simply because women may never enter a sumo ring (Rich, 2018).

Ultra-Orthodox Jewish men who refuse to sit next to women on airplanes may, thereby, not only irreparably insult another human being but also cause flight delays of several hours for everyone on board the airplane as well as possible repercussions to other flights, airport staff scheduling, etc. They are the pious fools of today. Each and every religion and religious denomination has its own particular, homegrown brand of pious fool.

Why do we mock these fools in our humor? Why does the Talmud not only allow this mockery but engages in it enthusiastically itself? The Talmud, like the Torah itself, often uses mocking humor to teach us a lesson and certainly, when the sages of the Talmud encourage us to mock our pious fools, they give us the means by which to reduce the arrogance of individuals who have learned a little but not enough; who have mastered the details of the laws but not why we should follow them. Religion is supposed to answer the question "Why?" Those individuals who feel superior because they have mastered the "what" without even a rudimentary understanding of the "why" or even that there is indeed anything lacking, are indeed fools. No qualifying adjective is needed. Let us mock.

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⁸ [Editor's note: During the terror days (directed by Khalkhali at the sham judicial level) that followed the clerical revolution in Iran, a woman walking in the street was attacked and her lips were cut off, because of her lipstick. I am aware of one such case.]

⁹ [Editor's note: But perhaps inflicting brings a psychological reward, and therefore malice is not absent. If such is the case in a given instance of behaviour, can we still talk of a *pious* fool?]

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