

PURIM, PARODY AND POLITICS

David G. Roskies

Tomorrow is Purim, the holiday in which Jews are commanded to do some pretty hard drinking. These people, noted for their sobriety, are enjoined to drink until they can no longer distinguish between "blessed be Mordecai" and "cursed be Haman." This people, so careful to distinguish between the sacred and profane, milk and meat, linen and wool, must now celebrate its miraculous defeat of Haman so many centuries ago by breaking down the barriers of status, sex and age. The laity is licensed to lampoon the scholars and rabbis; men are allowed to dress up as women; grown-ups are permitted to imitate their children.

As with many other Jewish festivals, the special foods and folk customs attending the celebration of Purim have greatly expanded its original design. In addition to the requirement that every Jew, male or female, hear the Scroll of Esther recited in the synagogue (for what would a Jewish festival be without its sacred text?), and beyond the prescribed custom of exchanging gifts of food with one's friends and neighbors, the Jewish imagination let loose with varied forms of parody. Everything was grist for the parodic mill: Scripture, the Talmud, and especially the vast body of prayers and laments recited throughout the rest of the year.

Among Ashkenazic Jews (those who trace their lineage back to Germany and France), the most creative outlet for bufoonery was the Purim-shpil. On this one-day-a-year theater season, the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah, Isaac on Mount Moriah, Joseph and his Brothers, David and Goliath, King Solomon and Ashmedai (King of the Devils), Esther and Ahasuerus, as well as a more contemporary folk repertoire, were played strictly for laughs. Of course all the parts were played by men, and no play was complete without a clown. To top it all off, the rowdy dialogue was chanted to drinking and marching songs, mixed with liturgical snippets.

It was the Jews' ability, then, to parody that which they held most sacred, to break down the very boundaries that sustained them, that actually strengthened their covenantal relationship to God. For Jewish life in exile was a tricky business, and without a creative outlet for sacrilege one could simply go mad.

In modern times, Jewish parody received a new impetus when many Jews, rather than depend on divine providence, decided to take history into their own hands. On both sides of the Atlantic, secular writers in Hebrew and Yiddish discovered that parody was the best way to argue for cultural revolution. While in Eastern Europe, where Jews lived under tsarist tyranny, writers used parody to lash out against