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Laughter in a Time of Tragedy: Examining Humor during the Holocaust

Whitney Carpenter

“The secret source of humor itself is not joy but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven.”⁴

-Mark Twain

Throughout history, Jews have encountered violence unparalleled to any other religious group. Anti-Semitic groups have often used humor to undermine Jews by making fun of them. Ultimately, these groups were laughing at Jews, not with them. In spite of this oppression and tragedy, many Jews found a way to smile in light of their troubles. The ability to laugh in the face of evil is the subject of incredible fascination. It seems so much easier to suffer in anger than to suffer in joy. Perhaps Mark Twain had revealed humanity’s greatest secret for overcoming sorrow. However, this raises the question, if comedic relief does not exist in heaven, is there laughter in hell? It seems that we may find an answer in light of the Holocaust.

The Holocaust provided proof that the world is an unstable place, and it revealed that human beings hold the capacity for real evil.⁵ Survivors of the Holocaust face a difficult challenge when putting their torture into words. The very thought of the Holocaust consumes most with feelings of sadness or compassion for the victims. It seems inappropriate to associate humor with such a tragic event. Laughing about massive human destruction betrays every rule of etiquette. Nevertheless, laughter is the response to many of life’s toughest questions and situations. When someone is at a loss for words, s/he laughs. Laughter is biblical, which is evident in the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac. Sometimes laughter is a reaction to nervousness, or an uncomfortable situation. Ironically, there have been several comedic responses to the Holocaust, but why? It is my contention that laughter was useful in response to the Holocaust’s tragedy because it provided an alternative way of internalizing abnormality, it was a defense mechanism and established a type of revolt, and for many of the prisoners, it provided a link for sustaining their faith tradition.

⁴ John Morreall, “Humor in the Holocaust: Its Critical, Cohesive, and Coping Functions,” *Holocaust Teacher Resource Center*, <http://www.holocaust-trc.org/holocaust_humor.htm>

⁵ Cynthia Moskowitz Brody, “Preface,” in *Bittersweet Legacy: Creative Responses to the Holocaust: Art, Poetry, Stories*, edited by Cynthia Moskowitz Brody, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), xiii.

I do not intend for this project to seem disrespectful in any way. I do not want to undermine the evil rooted in anti-Semitism, because I believe it is a serious issue. I have learned that this problem persists even in today's world, and even the most open-minded religious leaders struggle with reconciliation. However, I am curious about the role of laughter in the midst of immense pain and suffering, particularly concerning Jews during the Holocaust.⁶ It is a difficult concept to understand because it goes against common rules of etiquette and violates the notion of a proper response to tragedy. I believe laughter provides relief from tragedy while still maintaining the intensity of the situation. Laughter does not change a situation, but it changes the way the victim internalizes the situation. There have been several research studies suggesting the psychological benefits of humor.⁷ By examining the contributions of several texts and accounts of Holocaust survivors, I hope to learn more about the role of humor as a response to despair, and laughter as a form of resistance and praise.

As the Nazi party took over Germany in the 1930s, their quest for dominion became increasingly evident to surrounding nations. Their acquisition of power allowed them to establish prison camps initially designated for enemies of the state, including prisoners of war and political activists that opposed Nazi ideologies. As the Second World War progressed, the prison camps became concentration camps for not only those who wronged the Nazis, but also gypsies, homosexuals, and Jews. By 1941, it became clear that Jews were the primary target for Nazi discrimination. The nature of the camps was uncertain and the Nazis succeeded in taking Jews from all over Eastern Europe by using discretion. Bystanders remained confused about the occurrences inside these camps, but for the prisoners, life looked grim while trapped behind the barbed wire. There was very little to laugh about.

Once inside the camps, there was hardly any hope for escape, and release from the camps was a distant dream for the future. Death became the closest form of escape for most. In their entrapment, prisoners resorted to surviving through any means necessary. The struggle to survive was extraordinarily heroic, particularly because Nazis were known for their strategic combined use of terror, brutality, and deception.⁸ Humor played a large role in mental survival and stability. It counteracted the deception and lies, because it was real. The atmosphere in most of the concentration camps was stagnant and foul. Scholars have explored how laughter is a response to the question, "Why and how does one survive in

⁶ Although I recognize that other groups suffered oppression during the Holocaust, I will focus on Jewish suffering.

⁷ Donald Capps, *A Time to Laugh: The Religion of Humor*, (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005), 5.

⁸ Jacqueline A. Bussie, *The Laughter of the Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Wiesel, Morrison, and Endo*, (New York, NY: T & T Clark International, 2007), 44.

a universe which negates you?"⁹ The concentration camps did everything to negate and dehumanize the prisoner, which I will explore through examples below. However, now I wish to examine how prisoners used laughter as momentary relief from the reality of the Holocaust.

I. Laughter as an Alternative Hermeneutic

A strange dichotomy lies in maintaining a solemn reaction to tragedy. "If you try to add humor to the situation you run the risk of looking inconsiderate, uncaring, or thoughtless. At the same time if you don't laugh, you run the risk of drowning in severity."¹⁰ The following is an anecdote of how one woman managed to stay afloat:

When they cut our hair in Auschwitz, that was something terrible.... After they cut my hair off... suddenly I saw some girlfriends of mine that I've known for a very long time.... Many cried. They cried after long hair and then I started laughing and they asked, "What, are you out of your mind, what are you laughing about?" I said: "This I never had before, a hairdo for free? Never in my whole life," ... And I still remember, they looked at me as if I was crazy. I started asking them: "Who did your hair?" I was used to Misha, he was my hairdresser back home.¹¹

Cutting the prisoners' hair was one way the Nazis sought to dehumanize their victims in their first moments at the concentration camps. It stripped them of any sort of former identity and forced them into uniformity losing all visible uniqueness. However, this incident illustrates one survivor's rejection of such dehumanization. She turned the loss of her femininity into praise for a free haircut. In the midst of the despair surrounding her, she found humor. Perhaps she was acting crazy, but she was not ignoring the severity of the situation. In fact, her laughter may have seemed absurd at the time, but she was employing one of the best survival techniques for herself and her friends.

As the *Führer*, which means "Leader" in German, Adolf Hitler was the head of the Nazi party. Anyone who knew anything of Hitler could probably guess that he was not a very funny man; one who often observed the Führer noted that he "had no humor; he liked laughing, but it was always at the expense of others."¹² This is not much of a surprise since dictators do not usually embody comedy, and in addition, there is considerable proof that Hitler had "a horror of being laughed

⁹ Alvin H. Rosenfeld and Irving Greenberg, eds, *Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1978), 84.

¹⁰ Bussie, 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 50-1.

¹² Steve Lipman, *Laughter in Hell: The Use of Humor during the Holocaust* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1991), 39.

at,"¹³ and so he disallowed any anti-Nazi jokes. Under a law he enacted called the "Law against treacherous attacks on the state and party and for the protection for the party uniform,"¹⁴ such jokes were considered acts of treason, and the restrictions of this law even extended to petty instances where people were put on trial for naming their animals "Adolf."¹⁵ The rigidity of these laws even affected the cabaret shows, which were part political commentary and part musical satire.¹⁶ The Nazis initially tried censorship, but over time, they gradually closed down the shows as they swept through Eastern Europe. "Many performers went into exile; some committed suicide; some were put into jail or concentration camps, where a small number died."¹⁷

The result of their presence in the camps became more or less a transfer of the cabaret from the stage to the camps. "Poets, actors, and musicians entertained the camp with songs, skits, and music, doing special performances for the sick."¹⁸ A spiritual leader for the prisoners at Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia, Rabbi Erich Weiner, observed that the cabaret "strengthened their will to survive as well as infused their power to resist."¹⁹ There are several accounts that praise the presence of the cabarets in the camps. "Of all the diversions... none pleased the inmates more than the cabarets,"²⁰ noted one of the survivors. They encouraged people to be optimistic about the future.

"The Night of Blood on the Rock of Horrors or Knight Adolar's Maiden Voyage and Its Gruesome End or That Is Not the True Love" was a play written by Rudolf Kalmar and performed within the camps. Kalmar wrote the play on discarded scraps of paper found around the camp, and he said that his play was "a parable of the small spirit of the great Reich."²¹ It was a play designed to cheer the inmates through anti-Nazi jokes and impersonations of Hitler. The play closed with the following words:

It is the old song,
That you see here in this play.
But always keep a word in mind:
Everything is hell,
Soon it will get well

¹³ Robert Waite, *The Psychopathic God: Adolf Hitler* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1977), 13.

¹⁴ Bussie, 39.

¹⁵ Morreall, 3.

¹⁶ Lipman, 114.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁸ Morreall, 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁰ Lipman, 71.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

Through this magic word: humor, humor!²²

The last line illustrates that the prisoners recognized the power that humor had over them, and Kalmar's use of the word "magic" implies it carried a mystical power to transform attitudes. Kalmar not only survived his incarceration at the concentration camp, but he also promoted a spirit of survival for others.

Entertainment encouraged the prisoners to press on in spite of their oppression. The humor ranged from caricatures of the guards, to poking fun at the cruelties of the everyday and sharing amusing dreams about their future lives. They even mocked the rigidity of the Nazi party, in a sense, to undermine their imprisonment by mocking those that put them in their shackles. In reference to the play, one participant said, "I know with certainty that the few hours of laughter, not just during the play, inhibited every thought of suicide."²³ In their laughter, they found strength to press on.

The Nazis wanted to ensure that they had the last laugh. Yet, they failed. The German occupation in Eastern Europe sought to make conditions in the concentration camps so miserable that there would be no room for laughter. Several accounts have sustained witness to the contrary though. Their effort to make the prisoners into lifeless robots was met with tragicomedy.

Tragicomedy is a term studied by comics and humorists. They describe it as, "That which provokes laughter through tears... above all, it consoles."²⁴ It does not replace or absorb the tragedy, but just suspends it through comic relief. In fact, it allows the victim to embrace the situation and address it through a form of emotional release. Elie Wiesel, a well-known survivor of the Holocaust's most notably gruesome camp, Auschwitz, suggests that there was not anything categorically funny about their situations. In fact, they were tragic, but to survive, prisoners had to look at their circumstance through a different lens. One survivor recalls that her laughter helped her survive because it helped her "not to take things the way we were living but to dress them up different."²⁵

The day-to-day activities within the camps were far from normal. Even life in Eastern Europe grew increasingly abnormal. This was due to the disappearance of several European citizens from the every day, and a general tension brought on by the threatening Nazis. Everyone under their rule walked on thin ice for fear that at any moment they could be shipped away to a prison camp, and an uncertain future. The ghettos were devastating; they were essentially holding areas for people

²² Ibid, 72.

²³ Ibid, 73.

²⁴ Peter Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (New York, NY: Walter De Gruyter and Co., 1997), 117.

²⁵ Bussie, 43.

awaiting deportation to the various camps. The abnormality of these situations consumed many. However, laughter helped counteract the mind-numbing reality.

Laughter prevented the victims from internalizing their grim situations. They used humor to float amidst a sea of death and destruction. The Holocaust and the Second World War made for horrible circumstances that could swallow any human being and consume them with despair. Laughter provided a momentary mental escape. One prisoner recalls, "In spite of all our agony and pain we never lost our ability to laugh at ourselves and our miserable situation. We had to make jokes to survive and save ourselves from deep depression."²⁶ It allowed the suffering to dissipate briefly while the prisoner engaged in mind-altering therapy.

Mixing the abnormalities of the camp with the routines of every day made laughter a challenge. One survivor remembers showering at the camps. The balding and naked bodies of several prisoners filled the showers, which was extraordinarily odd. The unusual circumstance of their uniformity converged with the reality of water cleansing their bodies, as it had so many times before, ultimately creating an ironic situation. The collision of the two worlds, abnormal new with the ordinary routine of showering, beckoned a reaction of some sort. This particular prisoner laughed at his circumstance, and he found that a sense of humor allowed him to detach himself from the grim reality, yet recognize it simultaneously. "We knew that we had nothing to lose except our so ridiculously naked lives. When the showers started to run, we all tried very hard to make fun, both about ourselves and about each other."²⁷ It is important to note that he says that they "tried very hard," alluding to laughter as a challenge. Humor did not come naturally given the situation, but they had to wrestle within to find their laughter. Their struggle to find humor makes their survival efforts admirable in light of the hell in which they were laughing.

Laughter did not allow the prisoner an easy escape. However, it provided another perspective on their world. Then it became a matter of making a conscious choice to live in the other perspective. Each day that they woke up, they had to make the decision to laugh at their imprisonment, or become consumed by it. "We were looking underground for things to laugh at, even when there weren't any."²⁸ Their search for comedy was not in vain. This kind of attitude was restorative for the prisoners.²⁹

²⁶ Lipman, 10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁸ Bussie, 43.

²⁹ Barry Sanders, *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), 157.

II. Laughter as a Weapon of Resistance

Laughter was clearly a survival mechanism for prisoners. It had an uplifting quality that re-energized the downtrodden. In addition, laughter was used as defense against the Nazi party, and all who oppressed the Jews.

In an unprecedented research project done in Israel in the year 2000, Chaya Ostrower interviewed fifty-five Holocaust survivors and asked them to describe “humor in the Holocaust,” with humor being defined as anything that made the person laugh or smile during the Holocaust. Shockingly, all of the survivors testified that they experienced Jewish humor and laughter as playing a valuable role during the Holocaust, with a majority agreeing it functioned as defense mechanism.³⁰

I mentioned earlier that Hitler did everything in his power to prevent political humor against him or his Nazi party. “The oppressors have no defense against it. If they try to fight back they appear only more ridiculous.”³¹ Every citizen under the Nazi regime lived under the ever-present threat of deportation to a concentration camp, yet the jokes and mockery continued in spite of their efforts. Despite the intimidations of the Nazi party, Hitler’s Germany became the subject of several political jokes. In fact, it is one of history’s most notable periods of political humor.³²

Why were the Nazis so terrified of laughter? I already mentioned that they had no defense against it. They were powerless to stop it. Even killing the one who laughs does not stop the laughter’s echo. “The laughter of the oppressed testifies to the existence of an autonomous self who not only exists but also makes choices independent of social authorities and thinks outside their ideological framework.”³³ Humor illustrated the victims’ capabilities for free thought, and to an oppressor, what could be more terrifying? It meant that their oppression was not succeeding in dehumanizing their victim.

Earlier I referred to an account of a woman who laughed at her new “hairdo” given to her upon arrival at the camps. She did not allow the Nazis to strip her of her identity—she was still a feisty woman underneath her baldhead. Her laughter mocked the universal haircut given to all. This laughter was rebellious, because she embraced a different kind of reaction to her misfortune. Does this make her crazy? Perhaps a little, but I think it is safe to assume that she caught her oppressors off-guard with her ability to dress up the situation and relate it to the normality of a haircut. She subverted their power over her, and transformed the situation to make it seem like the oppressor was working for her.

³⁰ Bussie, 30.

³¹ Lipman, 27.

³² Ibid, 17.

³³ Bussie, 39-40.

Her story raises the issue of alterity. The Nazis oppressed the Jews through any means necessary, but that did not silence their laughter. In fact, their laughter mocked the torture that the Nazis sought to inflict. Countless anti-Semitic jokes circulated during the Holocaust. Rather than suffer under the jokes, Jews began to tell the jokes themselves. Alterity is the ability to destabilize an oppressive situation by laughing at the expense of one's own humiliation, and that is exactly what the Jews did.³⁴ By implementing self-mockery, they subverted the power that the jokes once had over them. The jokes were no longer a weapon used to oppress the Jews, but rather, they could use the jokes to laugh at themselves. If they could laugh at themselves, then they overruled the offending power of others.

Finding humor in oppression is the most important step to overcoming fear of the oppressor. If one can laugh at the tragedy that consumes so many, s/he can begin to undertake other forms of resistance. Wiesel explores laughter through his novel, *Gates of the Forest*. His main character, Gregor is orphaned by the Holocaust. He is hiding in a cave when he encounters Gavriel, a Jew who teaches Gregor how to employ his only weapon, laughter, to offset his oppressors. "Gavriel's laughter interrupts the emotional psychological state of oppression by empowering him to transcend the debilitating state of fear bred by oppression."³⁵ He overcomes his fear, rises above it, and is able to confront hostile anti-Semitism with clarity because of his laughter. The subject of the humor during the Holocaust was the feared oppressor, and to laugh in the face of that fear allows it to dissipate. "Armed with laughter like a concealed dagger, Gavriel overcomes fear's paralysis."³⁶ The symbolism of that statement is so powerful, and helps us realize just how crucial laughter was as a defense mechanism for those living under oppression during the Holocaust.

In addition, notable of unexpected laughter is the shock value behind it. Imagine beating a helpless individual, until suddenly they begin to laugh. Are they laughing at you? Why are they laughing? While pondering the root of the laughter, the victim builds up resistance to fight the oppression against her/him. One woman remembers, "One day they were hitting us black and blue, and then they were laughing while we made fun of them."³⁷ In this case, their oppressors could not help but join in the laughter. Her ability to laugh at her abuse made her a survivor of the concentration camps.

The laughter of the suffering Jews sustained their will to press on. It disallowed the perpetrators to defeat their spirit. "Wit does not stop Nazi bullets, but

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.

³⁵ Bussie, 41.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

³⁷ Lipman, 10.

the victims' abandonment of humor would be a concession of moral defeat."³⁸ Perhaps the Nazis got the last shot, but the victims got the final word, or the last laugh. They did what they could to gain a moral victory in light of physical defeat. The final words of one victim conclude perfectly. She said, "Today you laugh, tomorrow you will be laughed at!"³⁹

III. Laughter as Sustaining Faith in God

Humor is a common characteristic of the Jewish tradition. Many readers of holy books tend to deny comedy in religion, when in fact, Judaism has strong roots in comedy. "According to a tale in the Talmud, the prophet Elijah said that there will be reward in the next world for those who bring laughter to others in this one."⁴⁰ It seems that laughter invoked God's presence, even when God seemed most distant. Throughout history, Jews have wrestled with God, engaging in perpetual struggle and questioning. Wiesel believes this kind of relationship of protest is affirmation that there is communication between the divine and humanity.⁴¹ It acknowledges God's presence, even if it doubts God's will.

The story of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac provides evidence for the foundation of laughter in the Hebrew Bible. The narrative in Genesis 18 describes Abraham and Sarah as two people, "advanced in age." Therefore, when three visitors say to Abram that she will bear a son, Sarah overhears and laughs at their seemingly far-fetched prediction. "The Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?'"⁴² Sarah goes on to deny her laughter, but she cannot fool an omniscient God. In Chapter 21, "The Lord did for Sarah as he had promised,"⁴³ and she gives birth to Isaac. Isaac's name resonates with her initial surprise because it means "He who laughs."⁴⁴ Sarah then proclaims, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me."⁴⁵ The original word that the author uses in this verse "acknowledges the laughter generated by the absurdity of having a child so late in life."⁴⁶ It also foreshadows future irony and comedy for Isaac's life.

Unfortunately, Isaac's life is ironically tragic. For Wiesel and many other Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, Isaac is a paradigm for the Jewish people because he survived a prior Holocaust. In Chapter 22, in an episode known as the

³⁸ Ibid, 21.

³⁹ Eliezer Berkowitz, *Faith after the Holocaust* (New York, NY: Ktav Publishing House, 1973), 34.

⁴⁰ Morreall, 5.

⁴¹ Bussie, 69.

⁴² Genesis 18:13.

⁴³ Genesis 21:1.

⁴⁴ Berger, 197.

⁴⁵ Genesis 21:6.

⁴⁶ Joel S. Kaminsky, "Humor and the Theology of Hope: Isaac as a Humorous Figure," *Interpretation* 54 (4): 2000, 366.

Akeda, God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as a testament to his trust in God.⁴⁷ As Abraham is about to sacrifice his son, God stops him. Was Isaac bitter and angry after this incident? The text is unclear; however we do know that he goes on to have a family. Wiesel offered his interpretation:

Isaac, after this horrible experience... should have committed suicide. Isaac, the survivor of the Holocaust, always remembers having seen his father, knife in hand, and the voice of God ordering his father to commence killing his son.... And in spite of everything, Isaac was capable of laughter.⁴⁸

Not only is laughter implicit in Isaac's name, but a narrative in Genesis 26 provides textual evidence that Isaac did in fact laugh again with his wife, Rebecca.⁴⁹ It is clear that Wiesel finds strength and identity in Isaac's character. It seems that his father and God turned their backs on him at the Akeda, yet he remains faithful. Isaac's laughter represents defiance and perseverance.

Another example, perhaps even stronger than the previous example, illustrates irony and comedy through the reluctant prophet Jonah. The book of Jonah is the last Biblical reading on Yom Kippur,⁵⁰ the most sacred day in Judaism, and therefore it is a well-known narrative to Jews. In this short book, God asks Jonah to prophesy to non-Jews in Nineveh, but instead, Jonah responds by boarding a ship traveling in the opposite direction. His silent action is evidence of his reluctance to God's request. The ship encounters a violent storm, which threatens the safety of all of the passengers aboard. While everyone panics, Jonah remains in the belly of the ship fast asleep. The captain awakes him, "How is it that you are sleeping? Get up, call on your god. Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish."⁵¹ After playing a game of chance, the sailors decide that Jonah is to blame for their misfortune, and Jonah asks them to throw him overboard to calm the storm. This act seemingly satisfies God, because the storm passes.

At this point in the narrative, Jonah has already encountered quite a bit of action, yet only one chapter has passed. The end of chapter one reaches its climax when Jonah is thrown into the stormy sea. God responds to the situation unexpectedly. Chapter one concludes: "The LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights."⁵² This seems like a strange twist to the preceding ironic events. After all that Jonah has encountered, it is anti-climatic that a "great fish" comes along and swallows him

⁴⁷ Genesis 22:12.

⁴⁸ Bussie, 61.

⁴⁹ Genesis 26:8.

⁵⁰ Hershey H. Friedman, "Is There Humor in the Hebrew Bible? A Rejoinder," *Journal of Humor Research* 15 (2): 2002, 219.

⁵¹ Jonah 1:6.

⁵² Jonah 1:17.

whole. This detail has changed slightly over time, claiming that a whale instead swallowed Jonah. However, this is not an accurate translation of the original text.

Inside the fish, Jonah pleads with God to rescue him, and so God orders the fish to regurgitate Jonah onto the shores near Nineveh. Again, this is an odd scene to imagine, but at this point, God's unusual actions should come as no surprise. Finally, Jonah responds to God through obedience, and he travels to Nineveh proclaiming, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown."⁵³ His prophecy lacks eloquence, and despite its simplicity, it causes "a truly convulsive response from the king"⁵⁴ who replaces his royal robes with sackcloth, and orders an indefinite fast from food and water on all men and animals in his kingdom. Even the animals are to fast and dress in sackcloth, which is another outrageous element in this narrative because animals do not wear clothes.

God revokes the destruction of Nineveh, since the Ninevites turned from their evil,⁵⁵ "making Jonah the most successful, if not the only successful, prophet in [Jewish] history."⁵⁶ At this point in the narrative, Jonah expresses more passion than he has during the entire episode. Rather than rejoice over God's decision to spare the Ninevites from destruction, he is angry about God's inaction, and repeatedly wishes to die, which seems overly dramatic. The whole narrative is evidence of the absurdity of Jonah's priorities, and this event is perhaps the most revealing of his character. He seems no less evil than the Ninevites to whom he prophesied.

Several questions surround this particular narrative. How did Jonah remain sleeping in the midst of a storm? Of all possible solutions to calm the storm, why does he ask the sailors to throw him overboard? Why does Jonah include animals in his prophecies to the Ninevites? Moreover, perhaps most importantly, why does God choose Jonah as the prophet to save Nineveh? Readers identify with Jonah, and although his situation seems dramatic and extreme, he represents the reluctance of many believers towards God. Jews see themselves as chosen prophets, decreed by God to prophesy to the world about Judaism, and they see themselves reflected in Jonah's character. In addition, because this is the last Biblical reading on Yom Kippur, it is the apex of the gradual escalation from the day's readings.

Victims of the Holocaust's oppression also felt that God had turned Her/His back on them. In the midst of their depression and despair, it seemed that God was at best distant, at worst, dead. Wiesel openly admits to his frustrations

⁵³ Jonah 3:4.

⁵⁴ John R. Miles, "Laughing at the Bible: Jonah as Parody," in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, edited by Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner, (Sheffield, UK: Almond Press, 1990), 176.

⁵⁵ Jonah 3:10.

⁵⁶ Miles, 177.

with God and his faith. Yet he never turns his back on religion. So what does this say about the value of religion? For many, humor could have sufficed on its own. Alternatively, do humor and religion work together to provide comfort in times of tragedy?

Scholars debate the presence of humor in the Jewish tradition. Much of this disagreement takes root in inconsistent definitions of comedy: some feel that comedy is constituted only by laughter. Robert Benchley, an American comic, once said, "Defining and analyzing humor is a pastime of humorless people."⁵⁷ It may not be that the Jewish tradition exhibits "laugh out loud" humor, but its narratives encourage believers to relate Biblical characters to their own life.

Looking at the example of Wiesel, it is evident that he treasures his ability to laugh, and his faith in God. Could he have survived on religion alone? Perhaps, but it seems that religion without humor is inadequate to the faith tradition. "Religion itself is impoverished when it fails to manifest its own historical association with humor."⁵⁸ The fact that Judaism values narratives rooted in laughter suggests the importance of humor for the tradition. Therefore, laughter becomes an audible acknowledgment of God, and it beckons Her/His presence in the situation.

IV. Conclusion

"Comedy expresses a stubborn refusal to give tragedy the final say."⁵⁹

-Conrad Hyers

Laughter in tragedy is difficult to understand for those who have never experienced something as dreadful as the Holocaust. It also violates any perceived ethic of Holocaust etiquette. Yet it is increasingly evident that the Holocaust survivors owe their lives to the saving power of humor. Laughter was useful in the Holocaust because it provided an alternative way of internalizing abnormality, it was a defense mechanism and established a type of revolt, and for many of the prisoners, it provided a link for sustaining their faith tradition.

As an alternative hermeneutic, laughter provided a different lens for the victims' worldview. They were able to use their creativity to dress up tragedy and transform their perception of grim circumstances. It was a challenge to look at the absurdity of their lives and find humor in the humorless, but they encouraged themselves and others to carry on in the face of unimaginable evil.

As a weapon, humor critiqued the authority of their oppressors and mocked their abuse. It was a refusal to suffer silently, and asserted the victims' will to press

⁵⁷ Quoted in: Friedman, 216.

⁵⁸ Capps, 5.

⁵⁹ Morreall, 1.

on. "Masked in the guise of frivolity,"⁶⁰ it was not a blatant protest, but it was still a form of resistance.

As a reflection of the religious tradition, laughter resonated with the Biblical character Isaac. He met the tragedy in his life with laughter, and Wiesel modeled his fictional characters after him. The prophet Jonah also illustrates a comedic character, and his story is ripe with drama and irony. Religion seems most adequate when it is accompanied with humor. Together, they "compose the celebration of aliveness. Combined, they seem like a delicate blanket"⁶¹ shielding the disillusioned world.

Laughter illustrated passion for life and an active desire to press on in the face of evil. What does their laughter say? To the Nazis it says, "I resist your torture and I refuse to suffer under your hand." To God, "You say that you remember me, but my very life testifies against you."⁶² And to each other, "Hold on and keep laughing, because it is the best tool for survival that we have against all odds." Earlier I asked the question posed by many scholars, "How do you survive in a world that negates you?" It seems that the first, and only step for some, is finding humor in hell.

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⁶⁰ Bussie, 39.

⁶¹ Lipman, 21.

⁶² Bussie, 69.

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