

A story is told of Rabbi Baroka of Huza who went often to the marketplace near his home. One day he met the prophet Elijah there (as you do!) and he asked the prophet: "Is there anyone in the marketplace, who will have a share in the world to come?" Elijah answered that there was not. Later, two people entered the marketplace, and Elijah said to Rabbi Baroka, "Those two will have a share in the world to come!" Baroka, wanting to know what was so special about these two asked: "What do you do for a living?" "We are jesters," they replied. "When we see a person who is sad, we cheer them up. And when we see two people quarreling, we try to make peace between them."

The world is filled with difficult, sad, dangerous, and scary things, things that lead many of us to want to turn off the news because it's too much to bear. Many argue this all suggests our world is in a terrible shape. Many others argue, however, that this impression is distorted by the tendency of the news to focus on the worst parts of human experience for the sake of spectacle and ratings. Perhaps both positions have some truth and in a way they both lead to an interesting Jewish answer to facing such a difficult world.

The world can be a difficult and troubling place filled with dangers and sadness. It can also be a beautiful place filled with joy and laughter. The story of Rabbi Baroka and the jesters points to a very Jewish answer to these two realities – Recognize the things that are awful in world but be a person that brings joy and laughter to that world nevertheless.

One of my favorite books by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin is one on Jewish humor. Telushkin explains that while he enjoyed writing the book he initially thought of it as one of his less important work. But then he met a Jewish psychiatrist who told him that it was, in fact, his most important book. Why? The psychiatrist had a cousin who was dying. As Telushkin explains: "The psychiatrist used to speak to his cousin on a daily basis but found their talks were becoming increasingly depressing. So he challenged the man: 'I will continue to speak to you daily but every day I want us to tell each other a joke.' For the ill man searching each day for a joke helped him to realize that his life was more than just pain. The book became the source for the many jokes the psychiatrist told his cousin."

Yes, the world can be hard. And yes, it can be filled with much that is scary and sad, much that causes frustration, anxiety, and despair. But that makes it even more important that we be the bringers of joy and levity to the world. Each of us can, in our own way, be the source of joy for another human being, with a helping hand, a well-timed joke, or a simple smile. In the words of Rabbi Nachman of Breslav – "There are people who suffer terrible distress and are unable to tell what they feel in their hearts and they go their way and suffer and suffer. But if they meet one with a laughing face they can revive them with their joy. And to revive someone is no slight thing."

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